

Theatre against itself: performance, politics and the limits of theatricality¹

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Staging theatricality

With the world stage increasingly dominated by images and events which seem self-knowingly 'staged', artificial, or even 'fake', it would appear timely to return to the question of *theatricality* as a way of thinking about the relationship between politics and aesthetics. The term 'theatricality' might be understood to be operating here as both a discursive formation and a conceptual apparatus – as a problem to be thought through and a critical framework to enable such thinking. In common sense terms, when 'theatricality' is invoked as a description of a behaviour, an activity or an event – whether in an everyday social practice or in public political discourse – it is more often than not to account for a sense of contrivance or 'stagey-ness' – a certain 'mode of excess' (Brooks 1976: ix; cited in Davis and Postlewait 2003: 21) – which appears both calculated, deliberate and self-evidently 'over the top'. Here, 'theatricality' is used dismissively as an indication of a lack of credibility or seriousness, a mere extension of the 'theatrical' world of exaggeration, pretence and downright silliness associated with the theatre as such. In other words, the conventional deployment of the term 'theatricality' carries within it an implicit '*anti*-theatrical' sentiment – as being unworthy of further thought rather than requiring it.

A similar trajectory is evident in the development of theatricality as a critical concept, at least in art theory. Michael Fried, for example, both characterises theatricality as a fixed, over-determined relation antithetical to genuine aesthetic experience and as simply

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signifying ‘a nonthing, an emptiness, a void’. In the process he appears to reduce *theatre* – as the cultural form and practice directly associated with the production of theatricality – to ‘an empty term’ – a critical void and philosophical nothing – ‘whose role it is to set up a system founded on the opposition between itself and another term’ (Krauss 1987: 62—63; cited in McGillivray 2009: 105). Such a negative conception of theatricality – and of theatre as a negative construct – seems to pervade the *anti-theatrical* discourse of theatricality in its various forms.

But how then does *theatre* think through theatricality? Does it offer a material counterpoint to this logic or simply internalise its terms? Given that theatricality is a discourse arising from outside of the theatre – whether a common-sense anti-theatricality or from the elevated perspective of the visual arts – what would it mean to think theatricality from the point of view of theatre? If theatre and theatricality are always yoked together as seemingly coterminous or coextensive, how might they be thought as existing in tension with one another?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* asserts their co-dependency in defining ‘theatricality’ as ‘the quality or character of being theatrical’ whilst regarding ‘theatrical’ as ‘connected to the theatre or stage’. This ‘cluster of concepts’, as theatre historian Tracy C. Davis casts them (2003: 127), therefore appears to rely upon theatre as its foundational term. Whilst the dictionary definitions appear to move seamlessly from theatre, to the theatrical, to theatricality as an expanding field of terms, Davis is at pains to demonstrate that their historical emergence indicates that they mean rather different things. She argues that the terms should be prised apart in order to account for a ‘crucial distinction between *theatrical* and *theatricality*’ (128); a distinction which hinges not on staging or intention but

on spectatorship and reception. Put simply, Davis argues the spectator '*creates theatricality*' through the activity of looking (141); through the *theatricalization*, so to speak, of what they see as if it were a scene appearing before them, for them to see. This logic of active looking, she proposes, is integral to the appearance of theatricality, whether in the specifically designated space of the theatre or on the broader public stage of which it is part.

Before continuing with Davis's argument about theatricality's 'considerable importance for understanding public life' (131), it is worth pausing to acknowledge the introduction of my own term to this 'cluster of concepts': *theatricalization*. By this, I mean the process of turning people and actions into figures within a scene, whether or not they regard themselves as on display, performing or otherwise being there to be seen. As such, theatricalization operates through the framing or re-framing of material as 'theatrical' irrespective of its being explicitly staged as such, constituting a 'seeing as' mode of perception which produces 'theatricality' as its effect. As such, theatricalization serves as a key dynamic of power; a constitutive structure of representation rendering observable, knowable and controllable that which otherwise simply appears to be present. It turns presence into representation, into a formalised configuration of relations of power, knowledge and visibility. It is, in other words, a political and aesthetic apparatus which produces the idea of otherness and situates the spectator as its presumed subject.

Accordingly, to examine the relationship between theatricality and theatricalization is to open up a *political* question. It is to question the politics of representation, and to see theatricality as primarily a political operation. But what has any of this have to do with *theatre*? What is the relationship between theatre and theatricality when thought as a question of politics? How is theatre implicated in the dynamics of desire and the political

production of otherness? And how can theatre, rather than being a critical and aesthetic void, operate as a space in which the process of theatricalization and the production of theatricality can be explicated and challenged as well as reproduced? What are the grounds—and the limits—of its political claim? This chapter seeks to investigate these questions directly, arguing that theatre operates as a space in which the process of theatricalization and the production of theatricality can be explicated and challenged, as well as reproduced; with theatre functioning as the specific aesthetic form and political site through which the limits of theatricality may be examined and exposed.

The argument forwarded here thereby seeks to reverse—or at least to question—the logic of extension implied by the *OED* definition of theatricality as an emanating from theatre and the theatrical. It will suggest, rather, that the institution of theatre emerged as a site in which to limit and contain generalized theatricality, and might be seen to provide a way of knowing and showing the political effects of the aesthetic framing and visual construction of ‘otherness’. So the question isn’t really ‘chicken and egg’—‘which came first, theatre or theatricality?’—but rather one of critical position and investigation. To Gob Squad’s questioning of the theatrical dynamics of desire we might add: ‘how does theatre frame, expose and delimit theatricality?’; ‘how does theatre think through the problem of generalised theatricality, as well as think through theatricality’s visual production of alterity?’.

Such a shift in emphasis reflects an interdisciplinary commitment to interrogating performance as both a specific cultural *practice* (call it ‘theatre’, in this instance), and an important social *process* (here characterised as ‘theatricalization’). In this vein, cultural archaeologist Yann-Pierre Montelle argues that ‘theatricality’ should be regarded primarily

as the social process governing the construction of the gaze and the production of otherness, 'as the paradigm out of which the institution of the theatre emerged' (2009: 2). Theatre, for Montelle, operates as the site of the formalisation of theatricality, providing a structured and sanctioned space for its practice and regulation through the development of specific codes and conventions. Theatre, then, provides a way of knowing and regulating the modes of seeing and showing attendant on the production of theatricality as a form of appearing to one another.

For philosopher Samuel Weber, 'theatre and theatricality emerge as names for an alternative' way of knowing and understanding human beings and social behaviours to the Western conceptual tradition of thinking based on 'a certain notion of identity, reflexivity and subjectivity' (2004: 2). He suggests that theatre emerges as a practice which troubles the security of ontological categories and the distinctive boundaries of self and other, dislocating and disorienting 'the Western dream of self-identity' by always appearing only to disappear and re-appear somewhere else, often *as* something else. Theatre as such therefore needs to be thought of not only as a place and a taking place – an event explicitly 'staged' in a cave or *theatron* and directed towards assembled spectators – but as a *medium* whose slipperiness and irreducibility troubles conceptual clarity and any uniform definition of reality. Weber suggests that theatrical thinking 'haunts and taunts' the philosophical project of rendering transparent by offering a kind of dirty materialist resistance to its logic (7). Hence Plato sought to ostracize theatre from the domain of knowledge, characterising theatricality as an artificially constructed chimera designed to hold its spectators in thrall through a fixed relation of domination rather than as an investigative space designed to enable thinking and self-realisation. Platonic *anti-theatricality* seeks not only to reduce theatre to a primarily mimetic activity – a barely

credible game of play and imitation – but to tie theatre and theatricality together in order to constrain their operation, for Weber, theatre as medium will always seek to elude and escape this tethering, refusing to be fixed either ontologically (as a form or place) or ideologically (as a specific spectatorial relation or way of seeing). Yet, what the cultural historian Jonas Barish famously called ‘the anti-theatrical prejudice’ – ‘the ancient distrust of the stage’ as duplicitous and deforming (1981: 3) – continues to over-determine our thinking about theatre and performance.

In many ways, common-sense notions of theatricality as either frivolous fakery or dangerous excess rely upon the this tradition of diminishing the theatre’s claim to philosophical and political seriousness, and theatre itself has often been inclined to incorporate anti-theatricality into its aesthetic codes and historical conventions. Consider, for example, how the emergence of Naturalism and realism in the theatre of the late nineteenth century was predicated on the repudiation of the overtly ‘theatrical’ in order to appear authentically ‘real’, seeking in the process to produce an anti-theatrical theatre that attempted to ‘render the theatrical medium absolutely transparent’ and banish the stain of theatricality from the theatre as such (Williams 2001: 285). Contrastingly, the Renaissance re-animation of the theatre as a significant cultural form and social practice was connected to a renewed understanding of theatricality as ‘an organizing principle for society’. As theatre historian Thomas Postlewait has argued, playwrights ‘often used the theatre to attack the theatrical’ and to expose the ‘inherent theatricality’ of the ‘performance of power’ through critically re-directing and creatively re-imagining the power of performance (2003: 100—116). In this context, theatre emerges as specific, even specialized, way of knowing theatricality and questioning the process of theatricalization – and perhaps even of opening up ways of contesting its grip on the social formation.

We will return to these questions through a case-study investigation and contemporary theatrical reading of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606) in order to analyse further how theatre thinks through theatricality and attempts to differentiate itself from it politically. Before doing so, however, it is worth returning to Tracy C. Davis's conception of theatricality as being produced through critically engaged spectatorship. Drawing on an etymological understanding of the theatre as a 'seeing place' – *theatron* – where spectators gather together to engage in the 'emotional participation' of watching something take place as performance, Davis argues that the spectator's process of theatricalization is actively involved in the construction and formalization of the event they see (2003: 141).

Historicising this development of the concept of theatricality in the context of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, Davis suggests that the operation of national-popular 'democratic' society is dependent on a self-reflexive, 'volitional spectatorship' that enables the adoption of 'a critical stance toward an episode in the public sphere' (145).

Whilst this may include watching a theatre event, it is not limited to it, as theatricality is produced by the spectator choosing to see something as a scene taking place before them, through their participation in a practice of theatricalization. Davis is careful to point out that such a conception of theatricality might function as a highly racialized and 'masculinized form of viewing, a gender specific kind of participation in civil society' (146) which seeks to reassert the gaze of the spectator as the locus of power and arbiter of meaning. Yet at the same time, she argues that such spectators are aware 'of their own acting' – an awareness that might challenge their pre-existing 'sense of themselves' (148). In other words, the operation of theatricality might serve to disrupt and disturb the gaze as well as reaffirm it, destabilising the security of the subject position it otherwise brings into effect.

The question of whether theatricality necessarily operates as mode of transgression or a form of normalisation thereby appears as something of a false opposition. As Josette Féral points out, theatricality has ‘no autonomous existence’ or definite essence but is ‘graspable only as a process’ – as the continuous interplay between repetition and difference which both produces possibility and circumscribes its limits (2002: 12).

Theatricality appears, then, as both normative *and* transgressive. It appears in the moment of crossing a boundary which simultaneously reaffirms its presence; in the movement between the opening up of a question and its recuperation into the existing logics of representation. Whilst it might be seen to destabilise the boundaries of the subject it nonetheless continues to constitute them, reproducing relations of power as well as appearing to contest them. So, if theatricality is neither one thing nor the other, but rather a mode of recognition of their interpenetration, how might it be useful as a way of ‘understanding public life’, as Davis suggests, as well as the spectatorial dynamics of subject formation? How might it open up the theatre of politics as well as the frame of the political?

On populist theatricality; Or, Staging Donald Trump’s Hair

In his critical exposition of ‘The Populist Temptation’, Slavoj Žižek makes recourse to one of his signature jokes to explain the recent re-ascendance of the populist right in Western democratic societies. Commenting on that subject of much conjecture and speculation, Donald Trump’s hair, Žižek notes: ‘When a man wears a wig, he usually tries to make it look like his real hair. Trump achieved the opposite; he made his real hair look like a wig; and maybe this reversal provides a succinct formulation of the Trump phenomenon’ (2017: 260). The joke, like most good ones, is really rather familiar. In concert with the

characterization of populism it implies, it seems to trade on a certain anti-theatrical logic, re-inscribing the binary between the real/authentic and the mimetic/inauthentic through exposing the theatricality of the inversion of their terms. The fact that Trump's hair appears fake—even if, apparently, it is not—somehow indexes the fakery of his political showmanship, the self-evident 'inauthentic' stagey-ness of which must surely be seen to undermine itself. And yet it does not; and the various parodies that seek to draw attention to the lack of seriousness or credibility of Trump as a political figure fall foul of their own anti-theatrical, binary thinking. So for Žižek, performing his own critical reversal of the apparent priority of the real over the imaginary, the joke reveals the populist distortion of the boundary between them: 'At the most elementary level', he writes, Trump 'is not trying to sell us his crazy ideological fictions as a reality – what he is trying to sell us his own vulgar reality as a beautiful dream' (260). In this respect, it is not surprising that, following Alain Badiou's characterization of the emergence of Trump as 'symptom of global capitalism', Žižek sees right-wing populism as appealing to the rhetorical ground of working-class dispossession and disenchantment in order 'to prevent the dispossessed from defending themselves' (273). Žižek presents the populist 'slide into vulgar simplification and personalized aggressiveness' (241) embodied by Trump as a mask concealing yet revealing the true face of neo-liberal capitalism; but the very logic of mask and face, mimetic construct and theatrical falsehood is left in place. This effectively allows the populist turn to be derided as an *intentional* manipulation—a theatrical sleight of hand or ideological conjuring trick—which *pretends* in order to persuade its audience of its own claims to truthfulness.

Something important is missing from this analysis; something apparent in the misunderstanding of theatricality demonstrated in the discussion of Trump's hair as

real/fake. Populist theatricality is not a joke. If it is regarded simply as an attempt to deceive—as theatrical in the most directly ‘vulgar’ sense—we will continue miss its most important ideological operation: the capacity to play with indeterminacy, the variability of meaning, to disconnect and re-articulate ‘the multi-accentuality of signs in discourse’ (Hall 1988: 140) so that they can be combined differently in order to produce popular consent to an increasingly privatised, personalised and authoritarian mode of address. The point Žižek misses about Trump’s hair—and about the Trump phenomenon, by extension—is that any attempt to limit the consideration of its theatricality to inverting the binaries of real/fake, authentic/inauthentic does not go far enough in examining its operation and effects. Rather, it reproduces and sustains them. For if, as Volosinov argued, ‘everything that belongs to ideology has a semiotic value’ (cited in Hall, 140)—even the floating signifier of Trump’s hair—we need to understand how these signs are articulated to one another in constructing the populist project.

An important starting point would seem to be the recognition that theatricality, as Erika Fischer-Lichte has argued, destabilizes the hierarchal organization of signifier/signified by producing ‘a shift of dominance in the semiotic function’ in which particular signs appear as ‘signs of signs’ (1995: 88). At least partially emptied of their signifying value they become mobile, malleable, and ontologically ‘indistinct’. Whilst this ‘theatrical’ emptying of their referential ‘content’ might appear to render them ‘void’, and thereby also appears to void the concept of theatricality as having any explanatory purchase or critical power, it simultaneously makes visible the fundamental emptiness of the sign as only ever subject to the play of signification. The demonstrable theatricality of the sign thereby makes whatever it signifies appear as ‘empty’ or ‘void’, pointing to its apparently arbitrary, ideological construction. Hence the self-evident theatricality of Trump—and Trump’s hair—appears to

void any claim to authenticity even though it is actually real (isn't it, really?). Yet, as I've been trying to argue, it is important not to stop here. To do so would leave the concept of theatricality once again in the position primarily constructed by its anti-theatrical art critics, such as Fried, as simply signifying 'a nothing, and emptiness, a void'; rendering theatre 'an empty term whose role it is to set up a system founded upon the opposition between itself and another term' (Krauss 1987: 62—63). More importantly, it would be to leave the discussion of theatricality (and Trump, and of politics) at the level of what it is rather than what it *does*.

As Elisabeth Burns pointed out, theatricality is not an inherent property of quality of things, people, practices or objects; it is rather a historically and culturally constructed 'mode of perception' which serves to 'frame' these through specific 'rhetorical and authenticating conventions' and discursive practices (1972: 1). So as a 'mode of perception', theatricality requires and is produced by the activity of the spectator, albeit under historically and culturally constructed conditions of spectatorship. Accordingly, Josette Féral has argued that 'theatricality is the result of an act of recognition on the part of the spectator'—an act of seeing that opens the gaps in the current regime of representation and produces theatricality as the effect of 'making a disjunction in systems of signification' (2002: 10). In this respect, theatricality emerges as the result of perceptual and critical operation which disturbs the distinction between reality and representation by recognising their interpenetration and co-constitution. As such, its appearance might be seen to offer the spectator a 'critical lens' through which to gain a purchase on 'how, and why, we act' (Nield 2014: 556); and an optic through which to interrogate our own ideological production as a desiring subject. Although Féral, like Davis, tends to assume the subject as pre-existing the theatrical relation rather than being constituted by it, she usefully makes the connection

between spectatorship and the construction of alterity. In her succinct formulation, 'theatricality cannot be, it must be for someone. In other words, it is for the Other' (1982: 178).

The relation between the theatricality produced by the performer yet addressed to the Other—remembering that, in Lacanian terms, desire is often manifested theatrically as desire for the Other, as desire for the Other's desire—is crucial in attempting to understand the populist political claim. As we have seen, it is insufficient to attempt to essentialize theatricality as a critical operation that opens up a 'cleavage' in the ideological social formation and enables us to see its disjunction, as Féral suggests. For theatricality is also in play in covering over this gap, by, as Michael Taussig puts it, suturing 'the real and the really made-up' (1993: 86). Theatricality, as such, is not necessarily resistive or contestatory; it is as much inscribed in the construction of the regime of representation as in any apparent moment of its destabilisation. Put simply, theatricality, as Trump shows and knows all too well, is as much a space of ideological investment and semiotic volatility as it is anything else; and, in being addressed to the desire of the Other, it effectively resides in the construction of a range of subject-spectator positions rather than in the credibility of its address. Accordingly, the examination of the populist political project should not be reduced to questions of intentionality, in/authenticity and the 'voiding' of affect; it must return to the dynamics of spectatorship as the site of the political production of the subject.

In order to move this analysis forward, I want to give critical consideration to how theatre as the specific space dedicated to the task of making theatricality appear, and as the specific historical practice developed to produce a way of knowing theatricality and understanding its effects, might be approached as offering a useful mode of critique of the

generalized theatricality and ‘vulgar’ theatricalizations of the emergent authoritarian populist moment. In order to do this, I want to turn to philosopher Stanley Cavell’s reading of *King Lear* (1967); and specifically to his argument that theatre, in its materiality as a place and practice, offers a limit to theatricality as an otherwise apparently transparent and ‘diaphanous’ medium by forcing its revelation as a political operation (Weber 2004: 7). In particular, I want to examine Cavell’s claim that, with *King Lear*, theatre offers an invitation to its audience to try to stop theatricalizing. In other words, I want to see if this argument might be reanimated and deployed in order to turn theatre against itself—or more precisely, against the theatre that has apparently already separated itself from the specificities of theatre as such: generalized theatricality. Can theatre offer resistance to theatricality? Or is it indelibly implicated in its construction and operation? How might theatre be thought of as exposing the dynamics of theatricalization, and serving as a limit point to generalised theatricality? What are the limits of its political claim?

Staging theatricality: Trump/Lear

But what has *King Lear* got to do with populist politics, or, for that matter, with Donald Trump’s hair? Some of the connections might already be found ghosting the brief commentary on the conceptualisation of theatricality offered already, not least the idea that theatricality constitutes a void space, a semiotic emptiness: a ‘nothing’. ‘Nothing? Nothing. Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.’ Cordelia’s famous refusal to engage Lear’s self-regarding question, ‘Which of you, my daughters, shall we say, does love us most?’ effectively operates as a refusal to enter the theatricality of the ‘love test’ set-up in Act 1

Scene 1 as an overtly performed display of obedience to his all-encompassing patriarchal, authoritarian power. Sam Mendes's 2014 production of the play for the Royal National Theatre makes this point very clearly. Antony Ward's stage design demonstrates how Lear, played as an ageing autocrat by Simon Russell Beale, constructs a theatre of his own within the theatre in which the play takes place – a meta-theatrical court theatre in which everyone and everything appears before him as subject to his gaze, and acts in accordance with his desire. Cordelia's 'Nothing, my Lord' in response to his attenuation of the obligations of intergenerational exchange to the dynamics of a property transaction – 'what can you say to gain a third more opulent than your sisters?' – is a refusal to *pretend*; a refusal to act according to the conventions of the theatre set-up and staged for Lear's spectatorial pleasure entirely from his own perspective. Her refusal to adhere to his authorial direction – 'mend thy speech a little lest you mar your fortunes' – is both a refusal to play the game and a refusal to act the part: a refusal to appear to him as he would have her appear, a refusal of his *theatricalization*. Cordelia's 'Nothing' empties Lear's drama of succession of its manifest content in order to draw attention to its theatrical construction, exposing 'the utter emptiness of the ceremony and his demand for love' (Phelan 2005: 25). Her refusal to pretend is, as Cavell points out, itself already doubled – she refuses to pretend to love him because she actually does, whereas her sisters can pretend because they know how to act as if they do, even if they do not. In other words, she refuses to 'act'. Cordelia protests 'I cannot heave her heart into my mouth' not only because this would void her love and turn it into an empty signifier but because to do so would be to accept Lear's theatricalization of her as Other than herself, as only existing for him in his imaginary relation, not in her specificity. In Mendes's staging the dynamics of this scene are explicitly sexualized: Regan's (Anna Maxwell Martin) coquettish acting-up to Lear's demands earns

her a slap on the behind from her over-excited, boundary-crossing father; the demonstrable inappropriateness of which situates Cordelia's (Olivia Vinall) subsequent refusal to perform as a rejection of the sexualization of their relation at the very moment of her selecting a husband. It is clear from this that Lear's theatricalizations serve to maintain his sense of retaining ownership of his possessions – including his daughters, and his kingdom – even after he has given them away, effectively reducing his view of inter-personal relations to relations of property and power that sustain his subjective sovereignty.

There are some obvious points of comparison between Lear's court theatrics and descent into the role of player King and Trump's highly personalised and increasingly privatised approach to government and the construction of authoritarian populism. Of course there has been the uncomfortably nepotistic promotion of immediate family members, notably of Trump's daughter, Ivanka, and her husband, Jared Kushner, to positions of delegated responsibility; the awkward resonance of the inaugural cabinet meeting in which the newly appointed office-holders were required to attest their love for, and acquiescence to, the President alongside their willingness to serve; and the impetuous banishments and exclusions directed at those that fail to please. But more importantly, what Žižek euphemistically calls Trump's 'vulgarity' – his racism, homophobia, misogyny and unbounded objectification of women, including his daughter – which might otherwise be termed his consistent *theatricalization of otherness*, so it only appears within a property relation and a logic of self-extension, seem straight out of the Learean repertoire of reduction and misrecognition in order to render otherness obedient, observable and owned. In this respect, the 'mode of excess' of authoritarian populist theatricality might not only be its 'vulgarity' but its construction of 'a closed field, a theatrical stage' already tied to a specific mode of cultural production (Said 1978: 63). And perhaps that mode of cultural

production is inimical to the construction and operation of racist, sexist, and proprietorial discourses and power relations. For Edward Said, accordingly, 'the notion of theatricality designates a particularly Western style of thought' whose operation is coextensive with a colonial regime of representation which delimits and circumscribes the appearance of the Other within the logic of the stage. Theatricality, in other words, plays an integral part of the perceptual production and configuration of an apparatus of alterity rather than simply providing the grounds of its recognition.

Returning to *King Lear* for the moment, or at least to Cavell's reading of it – the complexity of which there is insufficient space to do justice to here – it is worth recalling that the play demonstrates how the theatricalization of others produces a 'refusal to acknowledge' what is in plain sight: the reality of other people existing in and for themselves and not only within the perceptual economy and epistemic violence of the construction of Otherness. For Cavell, theatricalization serves as an avoidance of recognition, of mutuality; the avoidance of being seen as well as seeing. It is, in other words, subjectivation without relation, without *love*; without the encumbrance of having to appear to other people as another person and without the need to recognise the specificity of their personhood. As such, Cavell suggests, theatricalization has to stop; and it is theatre, as the material space of seeing and being seen by other people – on stage and in the auditorium – which 'gives us the chance to stop' (1967: 334). In other words, the specific conditions of theatre enable the manifestation of the material relations of seeing through which we come to recognise the dynamics of theatricality and acknowledge alterity as the concrete reality of other people. As such, theatre's exposition and exposure of theatricality can be seen to limit and critique theatricalization more generally. As performance theorist Peggy Phelan points out, theatre 'exploits theatricality in order to defeat', delimit and deconstruct its

operation (2005: 23). Accordingly, for Cavell, *King Lear* represents theatre against itself – or against the over-extension of theatricality as a way of seeing – and presents a way of knowing its effects: ‘Tragedy has moved into the world, and with it the world becomes theatrical’ (1967: 344).

Re-staging *King Lear*: She She Pop’s *Testament* (2010)

She She Pop’s Testament – itself a version of *King Lear* – might offer a contemporary, post-dramatic example of theatre working against itself, or at least with an awareness of the apparatus of theatricality it seeks to both expose and exploit. The piece was made and performed by members of the experimental theatre company in conjunction with their real-life fathers, who, rather than being represented by trained actors as if they were ‘characters’, were very much present on stage themselves. Although clearly ‘playing a part’ – occupying performance personae demonstrably mediated by the stage environment and at least in part produced by the theatrical apparatus – they nonetheless appeared as themselves rather than as fictional figures. In other words, they performed as themselves rather than as actors ‘pretending’ to be someone else; and, as a result, they both presented and represented themselves whilst fully acknowledging the artificially constructed ‘reality’ of the theatrical staging and scene. Their awareness of themselves performing whilst performing as themselves is consistent with the work of the other performers in the company who likewise eschew pretence in favour of recognising their own and each other’s presence – as well as the presence of the audience. This dual emphasis on performing rather than acting and on recognising the specificity of the theatre event as engendering a self-aware mode of spectating is a hallmark of much post-dramatic theatre. As Hans-Thies

Lehmann has observed, the post-dramatic 'strategy of refusal' of pretending reverses the privileging of the 'fictive reality' of the world of the drama over the theatrical reality of the world of the stage in order to re-animate and re-envisage their inter-relation. In so doing, it tends to embrace overt theatricality as tacit acknowledgement of the reality of theatrical situation and formal disruption of the apparently 'illusionistic' conventions governing the construction of dramatic fiction. This enables the performers to inhabit the stage rather than simply inhabiting their role, thereby drawing attention to the reality of performing and the reality of performance over and above any fictional 'reality' being performed.

Accordingly, performers often address the audience directly – not as characters, as per the aside – but as people sharing the same space and time, co-present in the theatre event and therefore included in the process of its composition (Lehmann 2006: 90, 109).

[Fig 1. *Testament*, 2010, *She She Pop*. Photo: Doro Tuch]

In *Testament*, the performer's theatrical relation to the audience is first and foremost mediated through their material relation to one another. They are, after all, relatives: real fathers and daughters (and, in the version at the Barbican Centre, London, one son) occupying the stage in order to stage the grounds of their relation as a means of opening up the question of parental love, filial obligation, inter-generational exchange and the sustaining of personal dignity. Using the text of *King Lear* as a pretext, or perhaps an urtext underlying the construction of their own, the company seek to investigate the age-old problem of the shift in responsibility between parents and children as they become elderly and infirm; examining how the distribution of property and the dissipation of authority are subsidiary to the need for recognition and the renewal of respect above and beyond the bonds of 'duty'. In responding to Shakespeare's play rather than simply re-

staging it, She She Pop and their fathers make *Testament* an exploration of familial love and the ethics of care within as well as through a theatrical framework. The company members put themselves and their fathers on stage – under conditions of explicit theatricality – in order to interrogate their own theatricalization of (and by) the paternal relation. In other words, they use the theatre to both frame and challenge the theatricality of their lived experience, making it available to be seen under explicitly theatrical conditions so as to explicate its perceptual dynamics.

At the outset of the show, one by one the regular company performers enter stage left wearing faux Renaissance ruffs and approach stage centre to introduce their fathers to the audience by telling us how we might gain their respect. Behind them, stage left, a projector screen displays the title page Shakespeare's play, in German. Once the introductions are complete, the text scrolls down to make visible the stage direction 'Enter King Lear' which a performer highlights in red ink. A trumpet sound is indicated in the text and so a trumpet is indeed played to mark the entrance of each 'Lear'/father onto the stage. One by one they take up their positions on the row of three armchair 'thrones' aligned stage right and look at the performer-daughter/son who has announced them. The last is in fact the trumpeter, who, by announcing his own entrance as he had the others, destabilizes any sense of a formal, fixed signification of hierarchy. The fathers stand to switch on cameras in front of their chairs that then project their faces into cardboard picture frames hung at the back of the stage, behind their children. Although they appear in a dominant, central position, we see their seeing – they are both looked at and looking. Their presence there, on stage, is shown to be mediated – literally framed – by the theatricality of the performance taking place. In other words, even in this 'post-dramatic' performance presence is always cross-cut by representation; there is no 'authentic' presence without a form of mediation.

The theatrical set-up of this scene draws attention to the fact that the fathers are presented as much as simply present; they are visibly 'staged' and 'framed' by an apparatus drawn to the attention of the audience rather than rendered invisible. As a result we become aware of our own implication in the theatricalizing of these figures, how our looking at them in this context is part of their production in and as the *mise-en-scène*.

[Fig 2. Testament, 2010, She She Pop. Photo: Doro Tuch]

Not surprisingly, then, the theatricality of both the audience's encounter with these figures and the always-already mediated form of their relation to one another is underscored by the show's turn to popular song as the people on stage sing 'And so I stand in line until you think you have the time to spend an evening with me ...'. The concluding lyric is of course the key: 'And then I go and spoil it all by saying something stupid like I love you'. As the performers read from the text of Act 1 Scene 1, it becomes clear that Cordelia's 'nothing' is here rendered as that 'something stupid like I love you'. The theatricality of the post-dramatic performance is thereby used to explicate the theatrical context of the dramatic text without 'emptying' it of its resonance entirely. Accordingly, the text becomes the ground of negotiation between the fathers and their children, and the theatrical occasion an opportunity to investigate the dynamic of intergenerational exchange and the desire for mutual recognition. For example, one of the fathers offers a lecture-exposition deconstructing the false logic of Lear's seemingly self-interested reasoning; while one of the children responds with a calculation of care costs that questions the notion of 'inheritance' entirely. This is expounded further in a visual demonstration of the impossibility of moving the professor father's books from his three-storey house in Frankfurt to his daughter's two bedroom apartment in Berlin – showing that they would take up the totality of the floor

space and leave no room for living. Here Regan and Goneril's forced reduction of Lear's entourage of an hundred knights is given a contemporary manifestation, enabling us to understand the problem of 'accommodation' as an enduring, everyday phenomenon. Once again, the dramatic and the theatrical are shown to be inter-animating and mutually deconstructing, with the reality-effects of the performers' seemingly 'authentic' presence ghosting and being ghosted by the reality of representation.

Conclusion: Endlessly re-thinking theatricality

She She Pop and their fathers' *Testament* draws attention to the limits of attempting to separate 'reality' and 'theatricality' as if they were opposed terms. It exposes such logic as being overly reductive and simplistic, and counter to the knowledge that theatre itself makes available: that the real and the really made-up are always co-constituting and inter-dependent. Rather than see theatricality as artificial and 'inauthentic', as per the popular and critical anti-theatrical discourses that would dismiss it as having any significance as a way of knowing, seeing and thinking; or as necessarily politically disruptive and destabilising, showing the gap between the real and the represented (Féral) or exposing the unavoidable emptiness of signification (Fischer-Lichte) and the fictive processes of ideological construction (Žižek); theatre demonstrates the operation of theatricality as a medium – as consisting in neither one thing nor the other but as the mode of their co-appearance and inter-relation – which 'redefines' the boundaries between subject and object, self and other, presence and representation (Weber, 2004: 29). As such, theatre emerges as the material space in which the apparatus of theatricality is rendered tangible and distinct. Theatre thinks through theatricality in order to make its operation visible, to force its dynamics to

appear. Not simply as 'theatre', but as a mode of theatre-thinking that challenges and critiques the regime of representation which it nonetheless contributes to and sustains. In this respect, theatre which thinks through theatricality is also theatre which appears to think against itself. Yet in doing so it also thinks against the grain of the generalized theatricality and politics of theatricalization it renders visible, calls into question, and seeks to redress.

At the end of *Testament*, one of the father-daughter pairings reprise 'Somethin' Stupid' as a duet sung face to face rather than across the space of stage. Although it is tempting to see this as a concluding moment of recognition in which they acknowledge their love for one another as a 'relation without mediation' – without theatricality – it is important to acknowledge that this relation is as theatrically mediated as everything else on stage. How could it not be? If theatre makes theatricality appear, it also inevitably theatricalizes and re-theatricalizes the very grounds of its appearance. As the duet progresses, the other performers frame it for the audience through taking apart the set and unravelling the text, refracting the performance through its own dismantling. They end up forming a beautifully composed heap of bodies on the stage – an image, no less – which the duet singers join as the song fades along with lights. The show stops; the theatre ends, as it must. But does the logic of theatricality ever stop, as Cavell argues it too surely should? The final image suggests that whilst theatre might appear to produce this demand in itself, its very nature *as theatre* necessarily theatricalizes it all the same.

[Fig 3. *Testament*, 2010, *She She Pop*. Photo: Doro Tuch]

Performances discussed

* *King Lear*, dir. Sam Mendes, Royal National Theatre, London, UK, 23 January-28 May 2014.

For full production information and background materials, including cast list and programme, see: <http://ntlive.nationaltheatre.org.uk/productions/44084-king-lear>. For a clip of the scene discussed in the essay (part of Act 1, Scene 1), see:

https://youtu.be/L_womZ_BE0Q

** *Testament*, She She Pop and their Fathers, Barbican Centre, London, UK, 3 – 7 June 2014.

For full production and touring information and a video trailer of the work, see:

<http://www.sheshepop.de/en/productions/archive/testament.html>

Further reading

Glen McGillivray (2009) provides a good overview of the development of ‘theatricality’ as a discursive formation and critical construct. In many ways, the foundational theoretical text on theatricality emerges not from theatre theory but from art criticism – specifically Michael Fried’s ([1967] 1988) anti-theatrical characterisation of theatricality as antithetical to genuine aesthetic experience. The key attempts to think through theatricality from a theatre perspective have been curated by Josette Féral (1982, 2002), with a special issue of the journal *SubStance* dedicated to leading theatre scholars’ attempts to navigate, reclaim and reanimate the concept of theatricality in the context of theatrical performance. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait’s edited volume *Theatricality* (2003) is likewise dedicated to this task, which it extends by thinking about the development of the idea of theatricality in an historical as well as theoretical frame. Balme (2007) extends the cultural scope of

theatricality to account for its role in the construction and operation of colonial relations of power and ways of seeing. The delineation of theatricality as a philosophical (anti-)concept and auto-deconstructive procedure is demonstrated most persuasively by Weber (2004).

Stanley Cavell's (1967) reading of *King Lear* is usefully taken up and examined by performance theorist Peggy Phelan (2005) and literary scholar Emily Sun (2010) to think through the relationship between theatre, theatricality and politics. Hans-Thies Lehmann's seminal work on contemporary performance which goes beyond the limits of the literary by focusing on the materiality of the theatre event, *Post-dramatic Theatre* (2006), is investigated through a focus on the politics the spectatorial encounter in Jüres-Munby et al.'s *Post-dramatic Theatre and the Political* (2013). A good account of She She Pop's *Testament* as an example of post-dramatic theatre is given by Bredeson (2014); Massie (2015) usefully draws out the work's intertwining of the political, the personal and the performative in order to understand its affective appeal.

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