

Objects and Agents:
Women, Materiality, and the Making
of Contemporary Theatre



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Abstract

This thesis uses embedded research to inform understanding of the complex nature of agency in contemporary British theatre-making. The close observation of activities in the rehearsal rooms, workshops, and auditoria of two British theatres – The Theatre Chipping Norton in Oxfordshire and the Royal & Derngate in Northampton – highlights a collaborative creative agency that challenges the tendency to privilege the singular intention of director or playwright in theatre and performance studies. Drawing upon new materialist thinking, agency is conceived as a process enacted across a diverse assemblage of participants that includes the production team, backstage professionals, and performers, as well as the material resources of theatrical production such as costumes and props. Tracing expressions of material agency, I seek to uncover hidden narratives that have been marginalised within accounts of the theatre-making process. I argue, particularly, for methodological resonances between a new materialist turn to matter and feminist strategies for recovering women’s experiences. The materiality of the stage is taken up as a critical lens to unpack material processes engaged in the gendering of labour, performing bodies, and theatrical space.

Five productions staged at The Theatre Chipping Norton and the Royal & Derngate between 2017 and 2019 serve as case studies for my exploration of gendered material agency. Four chapters are divided into two parts. The first, *Gendering Bodies: Theatre-Makers and Objects*, encompasses Chapter One: *Costume* and Chapter Two: *Props and Puppets* which both examine embodied encounters that take place between practitioners and objects in the staging of gendered bodily experience. The second part, *Staging Gendered Experience: Theatre Apparatus and Character*, sustains the inquiry of the first two

chapters but considers how gendered experience is staged through the transformation of the staged environment, rather than through individual entanglements of bodies and stage objects: Chapter Three addresses the gendering of the material apparatus of form in contemporary realist theatre, and Chapter Four examines the how the gendered spatial dynamics of the staged home are reconfigured by contemporary theatre-makers. The local focus of this study, rooted in the observation of live practice, argues for the value of the specific in generating pertinent insights that introduce new perspectives to wider critical discussions; here, the complex question of collaborative agency and the gendering of practice that underpins contemporary theatre-making.

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List of Abbreviations

AHRC	Arts and Humanities Research Council
ANT	Actor-Network Theory
CITA	Costume in Theatre Association
CGI	Computer-Generated Imagery
COVID-19	Coronavirus 2019
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
OOF	Object-Oriented Feminism
RSC	Royal Shakespeare Company
NYT	National Youth Theatre
TDR:	The Drama Review
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union

Introduction

I became more and more uneasy with the authorial role being attributed to the director in relation to performance, which seemed as misleading and reductive as claiming the same for the playwright. The issue of creative agency remains a central concern [...] in attempting to describe how a group of artists with very different skills, working in a range of different media, come together for an intensive period and produce a single work of art.¹

This study uses embedded research to inform understanding of the complex nature of agency in contemporary English theatre-making. The epigraph to this introduction expresses performance scholar Gay McAuley's unease with an attribution of 'the authorial role' to a single individual – a perspective I share. Informed by ethnographic research methodologies, I examine how agency is enacted across a diverse assemblage of participants in the theatre-making process including the production team, performers, and the material resources of theatrical production. The close observation of activities in the rehearsal rooms, workshops, and auditoria of two English theatres – The Theatre Chipping Norton in Oxfordshire and the Royal & Derngate in Northampton – reveals expressions of collaborative creative agency that challenge the tendency to privilege the singular intention of director or playwright in theatre and performance studies. The activities distributed across the distinct spaces of the theatre buildings reflect the diverse contributions that facilitate the theatre-making process; from costume and prop making in backstage workrooms, the labour of lighting and sound technicians in the auditoria and wings of the performance space, to the embodied work of actors and director in the rehearsal room.

¹ Gay McAuley, *Not Magic but Work: An Ethnographic Account of a Rehearsal Process* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 3-4.

Relocating the research process from the scholar's desk to the actual spaces of theatrical production directs critical attention away from the textual primacy of the script that pervades theatre studies. Drawing upon new materialist theories of action and agency, I focus particularly on the role played by the material resources of theatrical production as active collaborators in the crafting of theatre – directing, shaping, and, at times, even thwarting the activities of practitioners. I trace expressions of material agency that have frequently been obfuscated by the critical focus on director and playwright to uncover narratives that have been marginalised within accounts of the theatre-making process. I argue, particularly, for methodological resonances between a new materialist turn to matter and feminist strategies for recovering women's experiences. Within the specific context of the material conditions of theatrical production, the interrelationships between gender, materiality, and agency are teased out to provide a fuller picture of theatre-making attentive to historical omissions. The materiality of the stage is taken up as a critical lens to foreground women's experiences as practitioners and to unpick material processes that gender labour, performing bodies, and theatrical space.

Five productions staged at The Theatre Chipping Norton and the Royal & Derngate between 2017 and 2019 serve as case studies for my exploration of women's material agency. They are discussed in four chapters which are grouped as pairs and divided into two parts; first, *Gendering Bodies: Theatre-Makers and Objects* and, second, *Staging Gendered Experience: Theatre Apparatus and Character*. The first part, *Gendering Bodies: Theatre-Makers and Objects*, brings together two chapters concerned with the gendering of bodies through the tactile encounters of makers, designers, and performers with theatrical objects. Chapter One: *Costume frames costuming as gendered practice that is facilitated by the creative labour of a female-dominated workforce. Observation of the activities of the*

costume workroom illuminates how the work of the costume team underpins the gendering of character in the course of rehearsals and, subsequently, performance. Chapter Two: Props and Puppets examines the interaction between performer and prop in the rehearsal room to argue for the role of the material in reconceptualising the representation of female bodily experiences. The second part of the study, *Staging Gendered Experience: Theatre Apparatus and Character*, is also comprised of two chapters. Here, attention shifts from individual instances of entanglement between theatre-makers and theatrical things to how the representational conventions of form are reimagined through the materiality of the stage to foreground the experiences of female characters. Chapter Three: *The Material Apparatus of Form* traces how the conventions of theatrical realism are taken up and reworked by theatre-makers to centralise female authority in performance. Through the experimentation of rehearsals, the material elements of representation employed in staging realist plays are characterised as an alternative site of women's agency beyond the linguistic remit of dialogue. Finally, Chapter Four: *The Staged Environment* addresses the gendering of theatrical space. The chapter examines how interventions in the staging of domestic settings by contemporary theatre-makers work to foreground the perspectives of female characters in the staged environment. The chapter concludes by considering the tension which emerges from considering the creative vision of theatre-makers within the wider argument of this study; that is, that theatre-making is the result of a collaborative assertion of agency in which the material resources of the stage are understood to be active participants.

The local focus of this study, rooted in the analysis of theatre-making processes at two regional theatres, argues for the value of the specific in generating pertinent insights to introduce new perspectives to wider critical discussions; here, the complex question of

collaborative agency and the gendering processes of theatrical production. The observation of live practice at the heart of this thesis also prompts reflection on the nature of embedded research – the complexities of which are addressed in a short methodology chapter following the introduction. Here, I characterise my role as that of the ‘participant-observer’.² I borrow the term from McAuley, who also uses it to describe her observation of the live-practices of theatre-making. For McAuley, primarily engaging with the activities of the rehearsal room, the term encapsulates the dynamics of ‘the ethnographic model of participant observation’ to describe how an embedded researcher is ‘constantly present in the rehearsal room, *in* it but not *of* it’.³ I, too, understand the act of observing live practice to be an inextricable part of the very process under observation. The participant-observer is thus understood to be another contributor to the collaborative creative agency evidenced in theatre-making.

Creative Agency in Theatre-Making

Debates concerning the attribution of creative agency in the theatre are longstanding. The early decades of the twentieth century saw a marked shift in the hierarchies of theatrical production. The rise of the figure of the director undermined the authority of the actor-manager who had previously dominated the production of theatre. The actor-management system is often understood to be one of self-promotion. Not only did they directly benefit from the financial success of a theatre, often underpinning play selection with a desire for commercial success, but the actor-manager also frequently

² McAuley, *Not Magic but Work*, p. 2.

³ Gay McAuley, ‘Towards an Ethnography of Rehearsal’, *NTQ: New Theatre Quarterly*, 54 (1998), 75-85 (p. 77).

assumed both the directorial and the principal acting role in the plays they produced.⁴ The rise of the director is entangled with the modernist project of 'rescuing theatre' from its supposed status as 'a corrupt and tarnished medium' entrenched in the self-advancement and commercial viability of the actor-manager system.⁵ This shift in creative authority in theatrical production is epitomised by Edward Gordon Craig's forceful argument for the role of the 'Stage-Director' in the constitution of a new 'Theatre of Art'.⁶ He placed interpretative agency with the director who unifies the diverse elements of stagecraft under their singular creative vision.

The hierarchical structure of nineteenth-century theatrical production was simultaneously being challenged by the increasing legal claim of the playwright to creative authority. Changes to copyright laws in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries newly recognised a play as the 'dramatist's personal property', leading to what Mary Luckhurst describes as 'the promotion of the playwright'.⁷ The resultant increase in the publication of plays contributed to the development of formal devices that might be understood to assert the interpretative agency of the writer. For instance, Luckhurst suggests that George Bernard Shaw's 'notorious use of [lengthy descriptive] stage directions' can be seen as a 'way of asserting his, the playwright's, authority over the leading actors' and actor-managers who previously guided the staging of a production.⁸

⁴ Mary Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 46.

⁵ Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, 'Modernism and Theatrical Performance', *Modernist Cultures*, 1 (2005), 59-68 (p. 63).

⁶ Edward Gordon Craig, 'The Art of the Theatre (1st Dialogue)', in *On the Art of the Theatre* (London: Heinemann, 1956 [1911]), pp. 137-181.

⁷ Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy*, pp. 62, 64.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 65.

The influence of these shifts in the hierarchy of theatrical production persists in the attribution of creative authority in twenty-first-century theatre-making. The director and playwright are frequently placed in a relationship of contentious aggravation by theatre criticism formulated as the ‘director’s versus playwright’s theatre’ debate.⁹ The debate centres on the question of whether creative agency – conceived as the overarching vision that steers the interpretation and decision-making processes involved in staging of a production – should lie with the originator of the script or the individual responsible for the production, the director. The dominance of ‘New Writing’ in accounts of twentieth- and twenty-first-century British theatre tends to foreground the authority of the playwright in the contemporary landscape of theatre criticism. Similarly, theatre and performance scholarship is traditionally primarily concerned with the playwright and the playwright’s domain, the dramatic rather than the material conditions of production.¹⁰ This tendency is also evident within theatre criticism. In his study of politics and British theatre, *State of the Nation* (2007), influential theatre critic Michael Billington asserts that ‘the future of the theatre rests with its playwrights’.¹¹ He critiques what he terms the ‘auteur-like director’ who he believes to be engaged in a self-centred process of ‘displaying their own dexterity’ or pandering to a popular taste for ‘flamboyantly sensory spectacles’.¹² He clarifies that he is

⁹ For instance, Michael Billington, *State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), pp. 404-411; and *Playwright Versus Director: Authorial Intentions and Performance Interpretations*, ed. by Jeane Luere (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994).

¹⁰ See Aleks Sierz’s conceptualisation of ‘New Writing Pure’ in *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), p. 4; *Modern British Playwriting, 2000-2009*, ed. by Dan Rebellato (London: Methuen, 2013); and Vicky Angelaki, *Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain: Staging Crisis* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017).

¹¹ Billington, *State of the Nation*, p. 411.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 406.

‘not remotely anti-director’ but that his ‘quarrel lies with directors who see themselves as creators rather than interpreters’.¹³ His comments position him as a champion of the ‘lonely eminence of the writer’ who he believes is under threat by ‘directorial power’ along with ‘the celebrity culture, the growth of group-devised and site-specific work and advances in new technology’.¹⁴ Certainly, Billington’s discussion reveals his own biases as a critic and preference for a particular kind of theatre; the ‘straight play’, notably situated within the tradition of English-imprinted realisms, in which the ‘ability to link our private hopes and fears to the state of the nation’ is best pursued through ‘linguistic richness’.¹⁵ However, his position is representative of wider discussions concerning the attribution of interpretative agency in theatrical production – an agency understood as the creative vision of the individual cast in an ‘authorial role’.

McAuley’s call to conceptualise a more collaborative model of theatrical production undercuts the dialectical terms of the ‘director’s versus playwright’s theatre’ debate. She deems the notion of a singular ‘authorial role’ unsuitable for the actual conditions of theatre-making. This unsuitability is emphasised by the association of the ‘authorial role’ with the authorship of text rather than the material conditions of production that structure theatre-making. However, while McAuley demands that the ‘different skills’ of ‘a group of artists’ should be recognised when analysing the staging of a production, her own observation of rehearsals privileges the collaboration between playwright, director, and performers.¹⁶ Her conception of collaborative practice does not extend to the creative

¹³ Michael Billington, ‘What I’ve Learned from 10,000 Nights at the Theatre’, *The Guardian*, 4th December 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/dec/04/what-ive-learned-from-10000-nights-at-the-theatre>> [accessed 20th January 2021].

¹⁴ Billington, *State of the Nation*, p. 404.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 410-11

¹⁶ McAuley, *Not Magic but Work*, pp. 3-4.

labour of other theatre-makers such as designers, makers, and technicians or the particular domain of their work: the materiality of theatrical production. This omission persists in other studies of collaboration in theatre-making. Duška Radosavijević's *The Contemporary Ensemble: Interviews with Theatre-Makers* (2013) offers a fascinating insight into the work of practitioners participating in ensembles. While the practices discussed in the volume undermine an assumption of the primary authority of the director, she too focusses solely on the contributions of performers, writers, directors, critics, and dramaturgs, notably omitting the contributions of designers and makers. Radosavijević's volume predominantly features interviews with practitioners working within ensemble-based companies that build their work through physical theatre techniques including The Wooster Group, Kneehigh Theatre, Cirque du Soleil, Complicité, and Unlimited Theatre.¹⁷ The resultant association of the ensemble with physical theatre implicitly ties collaborative practice in theatre-making with a meaning-making process centred on bodily performance. Thus, while the terms of the 'director versus playwright' debate are increasingly undercut by fuller considerations of alternative models of theatre-making, such as the ensemble, critical attention continues to be primarily focussed on the activities of performers. The active role played by the materiality of theatrical production in the collaborative processes of theatre-making is overlooked.

Placing the materiality of the stage at the centre of my engagement with the live practices of production therefore introduces a new perspective to debates concerning the distribution of agency in theatre-making. This is not to eclipse the hierarchies of decision-making in contemporary commercial British theatre encapsulated in the 'director's versus

¹⁷ Duška Radosavijević, *The Contemporary Ensemble: Interviews with Theatre-Makers* (London: Routledge, 2013).

playwright's theatre' debate. A series of demarcated roles and responsibilities structure the process of theatrical production. Artistic directors guide the programming of their theatres, deciding what kind of work is produced and by whom. Producers oversee the pragmatic elements of theatrical production, managing the budget, timeline, and team. In turn, directors guide the staging of a production; deciding the schedule, working culture, and content of rehearsals (drawing upon the expertise of the production team and performers). Whilst recognising the hierarchies that structure commercial theatre-making, I propose that refocussing attention on the material resources of the stage offers a distinct 'bottom-up' methodology that invites us to consider the agency of 'things' as well as people in theatrical production.

In this study the close observation of individual encounters between practitioners, objects, costumes, and their staged environments is used to build larger claims about collaborative agency in theatrical production. The material lens brings into focus activities, experiences, and practices frequently omitted from accounts of theatrical production, providing a critical framework for the study of theatre that is more inclusive of the diverse activities and practices that constitute theatre-making. The material register therefore becomes a site of recovery. What emerges in this process of recovery are the power-dynamics and epistemic hierarchies that work to gender practice in the theatre. Foregrounding the materiality of the stage here provides a methodology for accessing women's experiences that might otherwise be omitted from the logocentric nature of much theatre criticism, scholarship, and even the textual register of the script. This is not to suggest that the material conditions of production have been omitted from scholarship (as

is often claimed in studies that take the material resources of the stage as their subject).¹⁸

Rather, I argue for a particular understanding of collaborative practice that is inclusive of the active role played by the materiality of the stage alongside the work of directors, performers, designers, makers, and technicians.

Performing Props and Theatrical Things: The Object in Contemporary Theatre

Theatrical things loom large in twenty-first-century approaches to the stage. Props, in particular, have been the topic of several recent issues of journals, edited collections, and monographs.¹⁹ In the twentieth century, scholarly interest in the function of stage objects was primarily conceived within the critical framework of theatre semiotics. Epitomised by the theoretical writings of the Prague School (1928-1948), this semiotic approach pursued a systematisation of the ‘symbolic signifying role’ of the material elements of performance.²⁰ Partly as a result of the methodological legacy of this scholarship and the ‘spatial turn’ in performance studies emergent in the 1990s, contemporary accounts of stage objects claim that the material conditions of theatrical production have been largely omitted due to the textual primacy of dramatic criticism.²¹ Indeed, in his much-cited transhistorical study, *The*

¹⁸ For instance, Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. v.

¹⁹ Notable recent issues of theatre journals dedicated to objects include Rebecca Schneider, ed., ‘New Materialisms and Performance Studies’, *TDR: The Drama Review*, 59:4 (2015); Ric Knowles, ed., ‘Theatre and Material Culture’, *Theatre Journal*, 64:3 (2012); and Michael Peterson, ed., ‘On Objects’, *Performance Research*, 12:4 (2007). Notable recent books include Eleanor Margolies, *Props* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), Sophie Duncan, *Shakespeare’s Props: Memory and Cognition* (London: Routledge, 2019), and the edited collection *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things*, ed. by Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

²⁰ Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 8.

²¹ See Fiona Wilkie, ‘Performance and the Spatial Turn’, *Theatre Journal*, 67 (2015), 735-745. Director Peter Brook was one of the first to conceptualise theatre in terms of physical space

Stage Life of Props (2003), Andrew Sofer calls for a 'rematerializing of the prop' in theatre scholarship.²² He takes a series of specific objects utilised in various performance forms and genres (a Eucharist wafer, handkerchief, fan, skull, and gun) to argue for 'the power of stage objects to take on a life of their own in performance'.²³ Fundamental to his argument for the 'liveliness' of props is how they 'travel in concrete stage space and through linear stage time'.²⁴

Yet, despite his assertion that a prop must be considered within the spatio-temporal context of performance, Sofer's analysis rests primarily on textual documentation. He centralises the authorial role of the playwright in determining the function of props, omitting the interpretative intervention of theatre-makers who make and direct the material elements of production that are at the heart of his study: 'in the hands of skilled playwrights, the prop becomes a concrete vehicle for confronting dramatic convention and revitalizing theatrical practice'.²⁵ Props are thus understood as a material expression of the playwright's dramaturgical intention – a direct channel for their creative agency. The 'concrete stage space' referred to by Sofer refers, in actual fact, to a kind of 'ur-performance' imagined from the stage directions and the script. The methodology of Sofer's study suggests that the prevalence of props in studies of the materiality of the stage might, paradoxically, be precisely because these objects are often tracked in stage directions and characters' dialogue. These objects have a textual presence within the script and are therefore accessible, albeit in written form, without access to the ephemeral performance

in his influential book adapted from a series of four lectures, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin, 1972).

²² Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, p. 21.

²³ Ibid, p. 2.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 21.

²⁵ Ibid, p. vii.

event. John Bell argues that Sofer's approach therefore 'eschews the messiness of actual performance for the sureties of literary criticism'.²⁶ The textual presence of these stage objects provides a literary underpinning to the material investigation which situates it more comfortably within the methodologies of traditional disciplinary modes of criticism.

In an effort to reassert the material conditions of performance there has been a discernible '(re)turn to matter' in theatre and performance studies.²⁷ The turn to the material has been particularly influenced by the popularity of new materialist critical frameworks within the humanities. As with all '-isms', new materialism enfolds a number of interconnected ideas with diverse disciplinary approaches and foci.²⁸ In general terms, it is best conceived as a theory of agency or action that strives to dismantle anthropocentric primacy through an attention to the affective dynamics of the material world. Three interconnected ideas emerge from new materialism that particularly inform this study: first, an interest in the relational ties between the human and material world; second, a conceptually inclusive approach to the ontological and epistemological status of participants that might play an active role in generating action (particularly regarding the non-human); and third, the close examination of the efficacies and forces of these participants, particularly when untethered from anthropocentric ideas of linear causality or intentionality.²⁹ Such reconceptualisation of the collaborative relationship between the

²⁶ John Bell, *Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History* (Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2005), p. 161.

²⁷ Rebecca Schneider, 'New Materialisms and Performance Studies', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 59 (2015), 7-17 (p. 7).

²⁸ Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, 'Introducing the New Materialisms', in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1-43 (p. 4).

²⁹ See William E. Connolly, 'The "New Materialism" and the Fragility of Things', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 41 (2013), 399-412.

human and material necessarily foregrounds the question of agency at the heart of both new materialist thinking and the material focus of this study.

Assembling Agency: Reconceptualising Agency in Theatre-Making

The standard philosophical understanding of agency proposes that ‘an agent is a being with the capacity to act’.³⁰ In turn, “agency” denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity’.³¹ This capacity to act is broken down into ‘a standard conception’ and ‘a standard theory’ of action; the ‘former construes action in terms of intentionality, the latter explains the intentionality of action in terms of causation by the agent’s mental states and events’.³² The capacity to act with intention (defined as a cognitive process) is fundamental to the attribution of agency. Agency is therefore a phenomenon intimately entwined with anthropocentric ideas of subjectivity in Western philosophical traditions (traced through Aristotle, David Hume and Immanuel Kant and most commonly associated with the contemporary analytic philosophers G.E.M. Anscombe and Donald Davidson).³³ Such modelling of agency underpins an understanding of ‘the authorial’ role of director we have already seen challenged by McAuley in the context of theatrical production. Here, the creative vision of the director is asserted in their guidance of the theatre-making process, prompting a chain of causality in which their intention (agency) is disseminated and asserted through the meaning-making elements of performance.

³⁰ Markus Schlosser, ‘Agency’, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta <www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/agency/> [accessed 4th February 2020].

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957); and Donald Davidson, ‘Actions, Reasons, and Causes’, in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980 [1963]), pp. 3-20.

A new materialist understanding of action disrupts this standard conception of human agency. The singular intention of the individual is displaced by a collaborative model of action conceptualised as an assemblage. Developed by social and political theorists from the assemblage theory of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, assemblages are understood as the ‘ad hoc groupings of diverse elements’ that collaboratively enact processes of action, the effect of which ‘is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone’.³⁴ An assemblage refers not to the ‘diverse elements’ that constitute it (what Deleuze calls ‘singularities’) but the relational ties ‘between’ these elements.³⁵ These relational ties are understood as the enactment of affect (understood in Deleuzian terms ‘simply [as] the capacity to affect or be affected’).³⁶ In their consolidation of Deleuze and Guattari’s theorisation of assemblages, Nick J. Fox and Pam Alldred explain that an affect ‘represents a change of state of an entity and its capacities’, noting ‘this change may be physical, psychological, emotional, or social’.³⁷ Agency might then be perceived as the diverse dynamics of affect that emerge from the assemblage to give it meaning. Bennett helpfully conceives of this as ‘a theory of *distributive* agency’ which describes the collaborative enactment of agency amongst the participants of the assemblage – what she terms ‘the agency of assemblages’.³⁸ Such an understanding of agency unsettles the primacy of human intention foregrounded in standard conceptions of agency. I share this conviction in the value of assemblage thinking and a modelling of distributive agency.

³⁴ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 23-4.

³⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. viii.

³⁶ Nick J. Fox and Pam Alldred, ‘The Sexuality-Assemblage: Desire, Affect, Anti-Humanism’, *Sociological Review*, 61 (2013), 769-789 (pp.772-3).

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 773.

³⁸ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, pp. 21, 45.

Crucially, an assemblage ‘is not just a mixture of heterogeneous elements’ but is rather ‘a set of relations in which elements appear to be meaningfully related’.³⁹ The scope and scale of an assemblage are determined by the context in which they are identified and understood to function. It is this that renders it a particularly fruitful cross-disciplinary tool to consider collaborative modes of action. For instance, in *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Jane Bennett applies the assemblage model to a large-scale electrical blackout in North America to argue for the agency of ‘human-nonhuman assemblages’.⁴⁰ A political theorist, Bennett determines the scale of her inquiry through her interest in challenging given ideas about human action and moral responsibility. In contrast, the scope of the assemblage considered by performance scholar Paul Rae is scaled down to the material conditions of a performance. He argues that the application of assemblage thinking to a theatre context reveals the ‘scope, scale, and contribution of nonhuman entities, objects, and agency’ engaged in performance that have ‘conventionally not only been ignored but actively obscured in favour of self-conscious displays of human creativity and virtuosity’.⁴¹ He asserts that this is not a quantitative exercise. It is impossible, after all, to quantify all the diverse participants and affects in an assemblage, many of which reside ‘well below the usual threshold for human access’.⁴² Furthermore, assemblages are, themselves, constructed from and intersect with other assemblages – indeed Manuel DeLanda asserts that ‘at all times we are dealing with assemblages of assemblages’.⁴³ What the assemblage model

³⁹ Thomas Nail, ‘What is an Assemblage?’, *SubStance*, 46 (2017), 21-37 (p. 25).

⁴⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. xvii

⁴¹ Paul Rae, ‘Workshop of Filthy Creation: The Theatre Assembled’, *TDR: The Drama Review*, 50 (2015), 117-132 (p. 118).

⁴² Katherine Behar, ‘An Introduction to OOF’, in *Object-Oriented Feminism*, ed. by Katherine Behar (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), pp. 1-36 (p. 13).

⁴³ Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 3.

offers when employed in the theatrical context is, therefore, what Rae terms a ‘fuller appreciation’ of the diverse participants engaged in production.⁴⁴ However, while Rae argues that this is best used to ‘enhance performance analysis’, I redirect the focus to address the collaborative nature of theatre-making.⁴⁵

While initially conceived within the fields of social and political theory, a non-hierarchical understanding of the relationship between humans and objects promoted by new materialism is longstanding in the context of performance. The theatre provides a particularly productive context in which to renegotiate subject/object relations and, relatedly, to reconceptualise agency. It is a medium that encourages audiences and theatre-makers alike to think imaginatively and expansively about the world – to challenge their pre-conceived expectations within a cultural expression that accommodates the fantastic alongside the real. It is, perhaps, unsurprising then that the particular resonances between theatrical production and the reconceptualisation of agency have been recognized by new materialist thinkers. They frequently draw heavily upon the lexis of performance to express their ideas. In her introduction to a special issue of *The Drama Review* on new materialisms, Rebecca Schneider suggests that the borrowing of performance vocabulary in non-theatrical contexts resides in the new materialist understanding of the ‘animacy’ or ‘vibrancy’ of matter and the characterisation of performance as a ‘live art’.⁴⁶ In the fields of sociology and the political sciences, for instance, the ‘irreducible intermeshing(s) of human and nonhuman’ are described as ‘choreographies’ and ‘dances of agency’.⁴⁷ While the historian

⁴⁴ Rae, ‘Workshop of Filthy Creation’, p. 118.

⁴⁵ Ibid, pp. 119-120.

⁴⁶ Schneider, ‘New Materialisms and Performance Studies’, p. 9.

⁴⁷ Diana Coole, ‘Agentic Capacities and Capacious Historical Materialism: Thinking with New Materialisms in the Political Sciences’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 41 (2013), 451-469 (pp. 452, 457); and Andrew Pickering, ‘Material Culture and the Dance of

Robin Bernstein proposes the term 'scriptive' to describe the ways in which certain objects 'invit[e] a person to dance' as they 'prompt, structure, or choreograph behaviour'.⁴⁸ These ideas, in turn, are imported back into theatre studies in the application of new materialist ideas to the performance context.

A preoccupation with levelling the role of the human and nonhuman in new materialist theory has generated a need for a new critical vocabulary to replace that which references anthropocentric notions of agency. The related field of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) has proved a rich resource. ANT is a theoretical and methodological approach to social theory that emerged in the 1980s through the work of Michel Callon, John Law, and Bruno Latour. Here, the 'network' is used in place of the new materialist 'assemblage' to conceptualise the relational ties between diverse elements that collaboratively perform action. As in new materialist thinking, ANT theorises 'how action is distributed among agents, very few of whom look like humans'.⁴⁹ In his configuration of the theory, Latour proposes the term 'actant' to encapsulate the non-hierarchical status of the participants within a network.⁵⁰ In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett glosses an actant as something whose 'competence is deduced from performance' rather than 'posited in advance of the actions'.⁵¹ Latour's term is thus helpful in evading preconceived ontological distinctions between participants in action (e.g. human and nonhuman or subject and object) to instead focus on their emergent functions within the network (or assemblage).

Agency', in *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, ed. by Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 191-208 (p. 195).

⁴⁸ Robin Bernstein, 'Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race', *Social Text*, 27 (2009), 67-94 (p. 70).

⁴⁹ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 50.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 71.

⁵¹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. viii.

A non-hierarchical understanding of the relationship between humans and objects is well-established in critical approaches to theatre. This idea is proleptically explored by Jiří Veltruský, a prominent member of the Prague School, in his 1940 essay, 'Man and Object in the Theatre'. He argues that the dynamism of the semiotic unit is defined by its function rather than ontological status (i.e. actor or prop). The privileging of function over ontological categorization facilitates a fluidity between subject/object positions which, in turn, elides distinctions between human and non-human performers onstage.⁵² Veltruský works within a semiotic framework that derives meaning from the signification of a theatrical element rather than its material properties. However, his inquiry shares the new materialist interest in destabilizing preconceived relations between humans and objects.

Superseding Veltruský's interest in the semiotics of objects in performance, the new materialist attentiveness to the materiality of objects has influenced an emergent strand of twenty-first-century theatre and performance studies. In their edited collection *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things* (2004), Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy characterise stage objects as the 'key players' of their volume.⁵³ Theatrical things are understood as 'active agents performing alongside rather than behind or in service to human performers'.⁵⁴ The subjects of the collected essays are diverse and include 'technologies of the sacred' in thirteenth-century Iberia, the whip in nineteenth-century productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (c. 1852), dancer Maud Allan's early-twentieth-century Salomé costume as a 'choreographic thing', and the linguistic transformation of a prop skull in performances of *Hamlet* that

⁵² Jiří Veltruský, 'Man and Object in the Theater [1940]', in *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics [sp.], Literary Structure, and Style*, ed. and trans. by Paul L. Garvin (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2007), pp. 83-91.

⁵³ Marlis Schweitzer and Joanna Zerdy, 'Introduction: Object Lessons', in *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things*, pp. 1-17 (p. 6).

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 6.

destabilises subject/object positioning.⁵⁵ Together, the contributors to the volume model object-focussed approaches to performance in its broadest sense that disrupt conventional hierarchies of human agency. This is encapsulated in the title of Schweitzer and Zerdy's volume that foregrounds the notion of 'thingness' – a concept that has been particularly influential in approaches to materiality within the humanities.

Derived from bringing Martin Heidegger's phenomenological writings into dialogue with Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theories, 'the thing' is contextualised in literary criticism by Bill Brown and has subsequently been employed in new materialist approaches to theatre studies.⁵⁶ Brown explains that 'thingness' is the result of a transformative process in which an object becomes singular. He gives the example of when an object breaks, forcing the human subject to re-examine the newly conceived 'thing' on its own terms.⁵⁷ For Brown, then, 'thingness' describes 'a changed relation to the human subject' and 'really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation'.⁵⁸ It is here that the concept's relation to new materialist theory is made evident. 'Thingness' refers to the processual unfolding of relations between participants, such as those enacted across the assemblage. In *Shakespeare's Props: Memory and Cognition* (2019), Sophie Duncan observes that 'it's easy to see why "thing" is a more attractive word than "object" for props'.⁵⁹ She elucidates that 'onstage props are strikingly "things" in that their usual function has been suspended –

⁵⁵ Christopher Swift, 'Technology and Wonder in Thirteenth-Century Iberia and Beyond', pp. 21-35; Chandra Owenby Hopkins, 'Bodied Objects: An Analysis of the Whip in George Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Matthew Lopez's *The Whipping Man*', pp. 200-213; Marlis Schweitzer, "'Nothing but a string of beads": Maud Allan's Salomé Costume as a "Choreographic Thing"', pp. 36-48; Lezlie C. Cross, 'The Linguistic Animation of an American Yorick', pp. 63-75, all in *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things*.

⁵⁶ Bill Brown, *Other Things* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 291.

⁵⁷ Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2001), 1-22 (p. 4).

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 4.

⁵⁹ Duncan, *Shakespeare's Props*, p. 27.

or at least radically recontextualised by performance'.⁶⁰ Brown's description of the 'force' of the thing 'as a sensuous... or metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols and totems' speaks to the more-than-objectness of the 'theatrical things' discussed in Schweitzer and Zerdy's volume.⁶¹

While engaging with new materialist models of agency and related critical concepts, this study does not offer a reading of a specific theorist or theory. Rather, in my observation of live practice I embrace what Bennett describes as 'a certain anticipatory readiness' or 'perceptual style open to the appearance of thing-power'.⁶² Costumes, props, and other scenographic elements are understood as dynamic and vital actants in the theatre-making process; dynamic in their affective shaping of meaning and vital in their participation in the processes of theatrical production. I am particularly interested in the interaction between practitioners and the theatrical things that populate the workrooms, rehearsals, and auditoria of the theatres. Therefore, unlike many applications of new materialism, I do not seek to underplay the intentions of human actants – in this context, theatre-makers including directors, playwrights, performers, designers, makers, and stage technicians – nor the significant role they play in shaping the activities of theatrical production. After all, in his description of the theatre assemblage, Rae reminds the new materialist theorist that 'many aspects of a theatrical event are quite deliberately assembled'.⁶³ The theatrical conventions and the acquired experience of practitioners provide 'a significant hinterland of expertise and stabilized technologies' in which careful attention is 'paid to – and asserted by – the

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 27.

⁶¹ Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 5.

⁶² Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 5.

⁶³ Rae, 'Workshop of Filthy Creation', p. 120.

expressive qualities of materials and meanings alike' in the creation of theatre.⁶⁴ As Rae's observation asserts, it is near impossible (and I would argue undesirable) to omit human intention from accounts of the theatre-making process. In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett, too, makes room for the particular role of the human in her conceptualisation of the assemblage. She takes up the metaphor of a bicycle in motion:

Agency is, I believe, distributed across a mosaic, but it is also possible to say something about the kind of striving that may be exercised by a human within the assemblage. This exertion is perhaps best understood on the model of riding a bicycle on a gravel road. One can throw one's weight this way or that, inflect the bike in one direction or towards one trajectory of motion. But the rider is but one actant operative in the moving whole.⁶⁵

In Bennett's study, as in mine, human 'striving' – otherwise conceived as intention or creative agency – is treated as *one* element of the wider assemblage that contributes to its overarching affective properties and meaning. What is distinct about my understanding of theatrical production, then, is where I place the focus of my observation and subsequent analysis. Schneider notes in her introduction to the special issue of *The Drama Review*, 'New Materialisms and Performance Studies', that '[m]ost scholars consider living humans to be the only agents with their fingers on the puppet strings of otherwise inanimate objects'. Props, costumes, scenery, 'and other paraphernalia of (co)production... serve human artists, not the other way around'. Schneider suggests that it is precisely 'this other way around' perspective that new materialism is 'reevaluating'.⁶⁶ My conceptualisation of the assemblages of theatre-making is explicitly concerned with accessing the collaborative nature of such '(co)production' beginning with the material resources of the stage. Indeed, puppetry, here used as metaphor by Schneider, is taken up as one example of the

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 120.

⁶⁵ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 38.

⁶⁶ Schneider, 'New Materialisms and Performance Studies', p. 10.

entanglement between material things and human actants that structures the activities of rehearsals and co-produces meaning in performance in chapter two of this study. The value of the new materialist framework, as applied here, is thus to foreground the role of the material elements of theatre-making without excluding the affective impact of the practitioner's creative vision. In assuming a material lens to examine theatrical production, this study seeks to provide a new perspective on theatre-making processes that illuminates experiences, forms of labour, and practices frequently overlooked or marginalised in theatre and performance studies. This brings us to the second element of this study entwined with the new materialist framework outlined above: the relationship between women, materiality, and theatrical production.

Women and the Materiality of Theatre-Making

In *Objects and Agents: Women, Materiality, and the Making of Contemporary Theatre*, I address the relationship between gender and theatrical production in two distinct, yet interconnected, fashions. First, and most straightforwardly, attentiveness to the material register of the stage presents the opportunity to trace the activities of practitioners frequently overlooked in theatre and performance studies. Duncan makes the same claim in her study of cognition, memory, and the function of props in the early modern play. She uses memos, show reports, designs, and rehearsal notes from twentieth-century productions of Shakespeare to recover the 'cognitive engagements with prop corpses and babies' had by members of the stage management team.⁶⁷ Duncan champions the potential methodological value of the material resources of theatre-making in building a fuller

⁶⁷ Duncan, *Shakespeare's Props*, p. 22.

account of theatrical production and argues that ‘focussing on props allows us to rediscover the voices of technicians usually marginalised in performance criticism’.⁶⁸ I, too, argue for the value of recovering marginalised experiences through the materiality of theatre but, here, with particular emphasis on women’s and gendered practices in the context of contemporary theatrical production.

Gender and material culture studies are united by their shared critical interest and methodological approach to the recovery of ‘people and histories on the periphery of grand narratives’.⁶⁹ Both fields recognise that women are frequently less visible than men in textual records. The use of material culture to access the marginalised experiences of women has thus become a well-established methodological tactic in the humanities. It is, for instance, frequently employed by feminist historians who strive ‘to challenge and nuance the written record’.⁷⁰ The material domain offers ‘a means of subverting narrative preserved in, and privileged by, text’.⁷¹ Such an approach seeks not only to recover experiences absent from textual documentation but to construct alternative epistemological frameworks of knowledge production rooted in gendered material practices. Women’s meaning-making practices have been particularly explored in the material register of women’s textile production – a form of labour traditionally characterised as a feminine activity.⁷² I explore this in more detail in my discussion of costume work in the first chapter.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 22.

⁶⁹ Hannah Greig, Jane Hamlett, and Leonie Hannan, ‘Introduction: Gender and Material Culture’, in *Gender and Material Culture in Britain since 1600*, ed. by Hannah Greig, Jane Hamlett, and Leonie Hannan (London: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 1-15 (p. 11).

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 11.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 11.

⁷² See, Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women’s Press, 1984); *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and*

When scholarly attention *has* turned to women's theatrical labour, it is most commonly to situate gendered contributions to the stage in the wider socio-historical context of a specific period. For instance, in *Labours Lost* (2011), Natasha Korda considers 'the commercial playhouses within the broader economic landscape of early modern London'.⁷³ She traces the wider networks of craft and commerce established through diverse forms of women's labour that supported theatrical production. In turn, Tracy C. Davis addresses the gendering of theatrical work in the nineteenth-century theatre in *The Economics of the British Stage, 1800-1913* (2000).⁷⁴ In a comparable vein, Maggie B. Gale and Kate Dorney's edited collection *Stage Women, 1900-50: Female Theatre Workers and Professional Practice* (2019) details the diverse theatrical work of women as actors, producers, philanthropists, directors, and activists.⁷⁵ These studies, while insightful and necessary contributions that broaden the fields of theatre and performance studies, rest an historical focus on the encounter with material artefacts through documentary evidence or in the archive. A strength of the approach taken in my study lies in the opportunity offered to me as an embedded researcher. I am able to observe the relationship between the material resources of the stage and women's activities in the live practices of theatre-making, rather than through the subsequent piecing together of the partial remains of ephemeral performance. In so doing, the activities of theatre-making performed by

Textiles, 1750-1950, ed. by Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); and Ruth Geuter, 'Reconstructing the Context of Seventeenth-Century English Figurative Embroideries', in *Gender and Material Culture in Historical Perspective*, ed. by Moira Donald and Linda Hurcombe (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000), pp. 97-111.

⁷³ Natasha Korda, *Labours Lost: Women's Work and the Early Modern Stage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. 1.

⁷⁴ Tracy C. Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage, 1800-1913* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. pp. 320-328.

⁷⁵ Maggie B. Gale and Kate Dorney, eds., *Stage Women, 1900-50: Female Theatre Workers and Professional Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

individuals other than director and playwright, and less frequently recorded in textual documentation, are opened up for fuller consideration. I argue this provides the opportunity to consider a wider range of women's experiences.

The recovery of women's theatrical labour by scholars is most commonly undertaken within a framework of feminist materialism. However, this study contends that intersecting feminist thinking with new materialist models of action provides a valuable new critical perspective for readdressing the gendered hierarchies of production embedded in commercial theatre-making in contemporary English theatre (something I return to in the conclusion). The new materialist dismantling of established hierarchies between human/material and subject/object positions is brought into dialogue with related fields emergent from (old) materialist frameworks that challenge the primacy of the universal (white, male, Western) subject; for instance, feminist, gender, queer, and postcolonial studies.⁷⁶ This intersection has also given rise to new related critical positions that challenge anthropocentrism, including new animism, ecocriticism, and posthumanism. Feminist scholar Felicity J. Colman suggests that feminist new materialist practice 'points towards how matter and things can be imagined; in new forms, or in ways that are different to the patriarchal structures of the world, through a focus on the agency that engenders other ways of being'.⁷⁷ Colman's engagement with feminist new materialism is situated within the context of the high stakes of political revolution. However, attentiveness to the materiality of the stage similarly provides an opportunity to consider how 'matter and things can be

⁷⁶ For the relationship between (old) materialism and new materialism see Schweitzer and Zerdy, 'Introduction: Object Lessons', pp. 4-5.

⁷⁷ Felicity J. Colman, 'Agency', *New Materialism: How Matter Comes to Matter*, 17th May 2018, <<https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/a/agency.html>> [accessed 10th August 2020].

imagined' to access women's experiences – only, here, in the context of contemporary theatre-making.

It should be clear that in associating women with the materiality of the stage I do not intend to reduce them to objects and leave male agents in theatre-making with the privilege of cognitive authority. As I discuss in Chapter Two: Props and Puppets, in her introduction to the philosophical field of object-oriented feminism (OOF), Katherine Behar proposes how a conceptualisation of the self as an object among other objects might provide 'a welcome respite from theories of subjecthood that many feminist philosophers point out are fundamentally dependent on the logic of phallogentrism'.⁷⁸ Her own analysis resonates with certain strands of feminist new materialism. She points out that '[s]hifting focus from feminist subjects to feminist objects extends a classic tenet of feminism, the ethic of care, to promote sympathies and camaraderie with nonhuman neighbours'.⁷⁹ Such a reconceptualisation of the relational ties between the human and the material disrupts subject/object positions and 'criticizes the objectification of women on the basis that classing women as objects means that they are less-than-subjects'.⁸⁰ Foregrounding the material in the interrogation of gendered experience is thus one that might be used to empowering ends. A reassessment of the affective potential of the material liberates it from a mode of assumed passivity as it participates in relational networks actively engaged in processes of meaning-making. Despite this, Katherine Behar reminds us that 'all too many humans are well aware of being objects, without finding cause to celebrate in that reality'.⁸¹ This warning is echoed by many feminist scholars engaging with new materialist ideas that

⁷⁸ Behar, 'An Introduction to OOF', p. 5.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 8.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 21.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 5.

seek to flatten the status of humans and objects.⁸² Indeed, Behar notes that it is important that any levelling of humans and objects recognises 'how fraught that position is, always for all parties, as power articulates itself through each and every arrangement of objects'.⁸³ I am attentive to 'the complex tensions between feminism... objects, objectification, and material practices' in this study – particularly in my discussion of material female subjectivities in chapter two.⁸⁴

The second way in which this study addresses the relationship between women and the materiality of the stage lies in an examination of how the material resources of the stage are engaged in processes of gendering in theatrical production. The first chapter considers how costuming contributes to the gendering of embodied performance. In the second chapter, the relationship between prop and performer is shown to facilitate a feminist representation of women's bodily experience. The gendering of representational conventions is disrupted to avoid objectifying the female performer. The third chapter conceives the gendering of the material apparatus of theatrical representation as an alternative site of female agency within contemporary realist theatre. Finally, the last chapter analyses the gendering of theatrical space through the materialisation of the home onstage. The repetition of the gerund formation of gender (gendering) across each chapter summary is significant. It iterates the processual nature of gender as understood by Judith Butler and other third-wave feminist theorists: 'gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts'.⁸⁵ Butler's

⁸² As addressed by Schneider in 'New Materialisms and Performance Studies', p. 11.

⁸³ Behar, 'An Introduction to OOF', p. 19.

⁸⁴ Ibid, pp. 1-2.

⁸⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999 [1990]) p. 179.

definition highlights the structural resonances between the performativity of gender, models of action in assemblage theory, and the nature of theatrical production. All three are conceived as processes that unfold in spatio-temporal contexts. The meanings of these processes are emergent – rather than predetermined – and may therefore be disrupted or redirected by changes in the dynamics between actants in the respective assemblages. Just as Butler argues there is no ‘true’ or essential gender identity, so too is the meaning that emerges from the material elements of theatre-making unfixed.

Rehearsal is also a processual practice. Drawing upon her experience as an embedded observer of theatre-making, McAuley describes rehearsals as ‘the time when multiple material elements that will constitute a unique work of art are progressively brought together and when the process of reaction between them is in train’.⁸⁶ Her description characterises rehearsals as a linear process. Each individual theatrical component is introduced and cumulatively constitutes the finished product(ion). There is, certainly, a linearity to theatrical production – rehearsals are undertaken as part of a greater process that unfolds temporally to (conventionally) result in a period of performance. However, the structure of rehearsal itself is inherently unstable. Particularly in the early stages of theatrical production, experimentation is encouraged as a means of discovering how best to approach the task in hand, be it finding an appropriate gestural register for a character, choreographing a complex fight scene, or representing a challenging scenographic illusion using stagecraft. This experimentation disrupts the linear chronology of performance. In the practice of rehearsals, this linearity is replaced with a structure of repetition with variation. Different approaches to particular moments of a production are

⁸⁶ McAuley, *Not Magic but Work*, p. 5.

explored by repeating specific sequences and incorporating the variations proposed by director, performer, choreographer, movement director, and/or designer. Through repetition these variations are consolidated and stabilise as the sequence subsequently presented in performance. This is what might be colloquially termed the finished product(ion), although the liveness of the theatre event means that each performance is inevitably underpinned with variation – a unique and unrepeatable iteration of the rehearsed action. The variation in performance is most evident in examples of accidents that disrupt the playing-out of rehearsed action. However, it also manifests on a smaller scale in the ever-shifting dynamics enacted between the participants in performance, including the audience. It is for this reason that, in the bar following a performance, an actor might claim that they had a particularly good (or disastrous) show despite all the elements of the production unfolding as rehearsed. Observing the live practices of theatre-making as an embedded researcher offers the opportunity to observe these fluctuating relations between performers and the material resources of the stage with a particular attentiveness to the gendering of theatrical production.

Theatre Profiles: The Theatre Chipping Norton and the Royal & Derngate

The material aspects of stage production and women's contribution to, and entanglement with, the materiality of the stage is at the forefront of my engagement with contemporary theatrical production. However, my study attends to more than one marginalised element of theatre-making. My observation of the live practices of theatrical production taking place at The Theatre Chipping Norton and the Royal & Derngate addresses another instance of marginalisation: namely, the underrepresentation of work created by regional producing theatres in accounts of contemporary theatre.

The different assertions of collaborative theatre-making and practices of theatrical production examined in the course of this study are not specific to those employed in regional theatre. However, the fact that both The Theatre Chipping Norton and the Royal & Derngate are regional venues is significant to understanding the context in which the productions that serve as case studies in this thesis were created. In broad terms, contemporary definitions of regional theatre in England refer to venues and performance events that take place outside of London. Trade publications such as *The Stage* or the theatre section of *The Guardian* divide their journalism into that concerned with performance occurring within the capital city and that taking place outside. The term thus presupposes a London-centric attitude that, at times, has resulted in the devaluation of regional activities. In an article written for *The Stage* in 2019, for instance, the artistic director of award-winning physical theatre company Strictly Arts, Corey Campbell, relates the surprise he is met with by critics when they learn that his company is based in the Midlands: 'There was just an assumption that something of quality couldn't emerge from the regions'.⁸⁷

Theatre and performance scholarship also frequently overlooks regional activities in favour of the work created by London-based producing theatres such as the Royal Court and the National Theatre. The productions created by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) for their theatres in Stratford-upon-Avon stand as notable exceptions. The dominance of Shakespeare's work in the landscape of British culture and school curriculums, combined with the geographic association of the theatre's location with the playwright's place of birth

⁸⁷ Corey Campbell, "'Strictly Arts' Corey Campbell: For a Regional Theatre to Survive, its Communities Need to Be Part of the Story', *The Stage*, 6th December 2019, <www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/2019/strictly-arts-corey-campbell-regional-theatre/> [accessed 10th December 2019].

and the handsome government funding of the company, has positioned the RSC as a producing powerhouse in the Midlands. Otherwise, contemporary accounts of regional theatre are few in number. A handful of studies address the restructuring of theatrical production within regional theatre as a result of government-led arts spending cuts.⁸⁸ Of particular relevance to the study of theatre-making is the loss of the repertory model which used to underpin the production of theatre at many regional venues – the loss a result of ‘[f]inancial constraints and cultural fragmentation’.⁸⁹ In performance-oriented criticism, regionalism is most commonly a footnote to the work of a specific company or practitioner. Contemporary companies such as Birmingham-based Stan’s Cafe, Cornwall-based Kneehigh Theatre, and Glasgow-based Suspect Culture, are often treated as exceptional instances of theatrical production – their work presented as innovative or striking, rather than representative of the creative vitality of regional theatre.⁹⁰

Mary Luckhurst and Nadine Holdsworth’s edited collection of essays on contemporary British and Irish drama proactively challenges this marginalisation of regional activity. In their introduction to the volume they praise the contributing essays for foregrounding the work created in regional venues which asserts the ‘creative energy and invention... that exist way beyond London’.⁹¹ While their volume is not explicitly a study of regional theatre, the contributors recognise the rich diversity of work and audiences that

⁸⁸ See Olivia Turnbull, *Bringing Down the House: The Crisis in Britain’s Regional Theatres* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2008).

⁸⁹ Billington, ‘What I’ve Learned from 10,000 Nights at the Theatre’, *The Guardian*.

⁹⁰ See, for example, *British Theatre Companies 1995-2014*, ed. by Liz Tomlin (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015) which includes chapters from contributors on the Birmingham-based devised theatre company Stan’s Cafe, Cornwall-based physical theatre company Kneehigh Theatre, and the Glasgow-based theatre company Suspect Culture.

⁹¹ Nadine Holdsworth and Mary Luckhurst, ‘Introduction’, in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama*, ed. by Nadine Holdsworth and Mary Luckhurst (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 1-3 (p. 2).

constitute the landscape of contemporary British and Irish theatre – something this study contributes to in its engagement with the activities of The Theatre Chipping Norton and the Royal & Derngate.

The two theatres whose self-produced work is featured in this study – the Royal & Derngate in Northampton and The Theatre Chipping Norton in the Cotswolds, Oxfordshire – demonstrate the heterogeneous nature of performance venues categorised under the umbrella term of regional theatre. In his attempt to consolidate UK ticket sales data, David Brownlee observes the challenge such broad categorisation poses to the classification of diverse theatrical activities. He asks his readers:

how would you describe a UK regional theatre? Is it a large commercial presenting house that hosts touring West End musicals or a 100-seat studio space? Is it a mid-scale local authority-run venue putting on one-nighters, or the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon?⁹²

Brownlee's questions emphasise the diverse nature of venues and activities within the category of regional theatre. The category might be subdivided to reflect venue size, reputation, whether a theatre is a receiving or producing house (that is, whether it 'hosts' touring shows or produces its own), or the different modes of financing a theatre's activities; is a theatre's activities fully or partially funded through public sources or private donations, or are they supported solely through self-generated sources of income including ticket and bar sales? While the sales of production at the two theatres are distinct (as I detail below), there are broad similarities between The Theatre Chipping Norton and the Royal & Derngate. They are multi-arts venues that present diverse offerings to their local communities including live performance, cinema, food and drink provision, and gallery

⁹² David Brownlee, 'Crisis in Regional Theatre Ticket Sales? That's Not What the Data Says', *The Stage*, 16th August 2018 <www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/2018/david-brownlee-crisis-in-regional-theatre-ticket-sales-that-not-what-the-data-says> [accessed 10th December 2019].

spaces. The activities of the two theatres also both encompass producing and receiving components in their offering of live performance. My interest in collaborative modes of theatrical production foregrounds the former – the work commissioned, produced, created, and performed by the theatres themselves – as my primary site of interest. Both theatres have rehearsal rooms, offices, workshops, and auditoria populated by skilled teams of ‘in-house’ staff and utilised by external freelance practitioners which provide a rich research environment for the study of theatre-making. Below, I offer brief profiles of the two theatres before introducing the productions created at the theatres that I use as case studies in my investigation of the interrelationships between gender and materiality in contemporary theatre-making.

The Theatre Chipping Norton

The Theatre Chipping Norton is a 217-seat theatre located in a Cotswolds hill town that has been under the artistic direction of John Terry since 2008. The building – an ex-Salvation Army citadel built in 1888 – was acquired by two repertory actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company (Tamara and John Malcom) in the 1960s. They reclaimed the building from its use as a furniture warehouse and, following extensive renovations crowdfunded by the local community, The Theatre Chipping Norton opened in 1975.⁹³ Fortuitously, the designers of the citadel were also experienced builders of nineteenth-century music halls ‘leaving it perfectly proportioned for its future theatrical life’ as The Theatre Chipping Norton.⁹⁴ The long, narrow auditorium has a raised stage at one end and a small balcony at

⁹³ ‘Our History’, *The Theatre Chipping Norton website*, undated, <www.chippingnortontheatre.com/about-us/our-history> [accessed 10th January 2020].

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

the other. Rows of plush red velvet seats arranged in rows in the stalls provide the majority of the seating. In the course of the theatre's life, adjoining cottages have been acquired and transformed into a bar, gallery, a green room, offices, and a rehearsal space located directly above the stage.⁹⁵

The Theatre Chipping Norton (co-)produces a small number of shows annually under its 'Homegrown' banner. These are largely adaptations or new writing that take well-known titles or characters as their subject – a decision motivated by the knowledge that this is likely to appeal to the local theatre-going community and garner ticket sales.⁹⁶ Recent productions in this vein include Toby Hulse's play *Sherlock Holmes and the Crimson Cobbles* (2017) and a rural touring production of the Goodale Brothers', *Jeeves and Wooster in Perfect Nonsense* (2020) co-produced with The Barn Theatre, Cirencester. Reflecting the theatre's scales of production, these pieces are three-handers and, if touring following their run at The Theatre Chipping Norton, can be performed with the assistance of a single stage manager to keep production costs low. Terry directs the majority of these shows, often also playing a significant role in shaping the script and concept for the production ahead of rehearsals.

The theatre is perhaps best known for its annual 'traditional family pantomime' which is produced each year with an original script, music, and design. Pantomime is of particular interest to a study situated in the context of regional theatre. It is a form of theatrical entertainment that self-consciously foregrounds its 'regional and local identity' with the convention of pantomime writer, director, and designer interweaving local

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ John Terry, interview with author (Oxford, 3rd January 2020).

landmarks and up-to-date cultural references into the dialogue and set design.⁹⁷ Reflecting upon her experience as a director of pantomime, Millie Taylor argues that, by drawing upon the shared experiences of a local audience, the regional pantomime establishes a shared sense of ‘community’ between performers, theatre, and spectators – something I return to in the first chapter of this study.⁹⁸ The popularity of the pantomime also has significant financial implications for regional theatres. Frequently the income generated by ticket sales is critical in supporting the other activities of these venues. It is for this reason that the decision taken by many theatres across the country, including The Theatre Chipping Norton and the Royal & Derngate, to cancel their annual pantomime due to restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic was particularly devastating. As Amber Massie-Blomfield wrote for *The Guardian*: ‘For all their frivolity, pantomimes are serious business for the theatre sector... they generate nearly £63m in revenue annually’. Crucially, ‘[t]hat income can keep a venue afloat for the rest of the year, underwriting its wider programme – from new plays on stage to creative outreach in local communities’.⁹⁹ This study examines the theatre-making activities of The Theatre Chipping Norton and the Royal & Derngate using my experience as an embedded researcher between 2017 and 2019. However, recognising the importance of the pantomime for financially sustaining the work of theatres, highlighted by the pandemic in 2020-21, is a sobering reminder of the precarious nature of the commercial theatre industry in the twenty-first century and its reliance on this popular form

⁹⁷ Jill A. Sullivan, *The Politics of the Pantomime: Regional Identity in the Theatre, 1860-1900* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2011), p. 2.

⁹⁸ Millie Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance* (Bristol: Intellect, 2007), p. 136.

⁹⁹ Amber Massie-Blomfield, ‘Pantomime is Under Threat. This Key Part of British Culture Must Be Saved’, *The Guardian*, 12th July 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/12/pantomime-british-culture-save-opera-ballet>> [accessed 8th March 2021].

of festive entertainment. Indeed, at The Theatre Chipping Norton, the pantomime plays over one hundred performances every year, demonstrating both its popularity and the theatre's recognition of its financial contribution to its activities. The significance of the pantomime to the theatre (and regional theatre more broadly) is considered within the context of the agency of costume discussed in chapter one using the theatre's 2017-18 pantomime production of *Sleeping Beauty* as a case study.

Despite its rural location and 217-seat capacity, before pandemic-related restrictions The Theatre Chipping Norton welcomed over 55,000 theatre-goers annually, demonstrating the reach of the venue as an embedded feature of local life in the Cotswolds and surrounding areas.¹⁰⁰ The theatre was listed as one of 'Britain's 5 Best Small Theatres' by the Telegraph newspaper in March 2011 and was awarded the title of 'Most Welcoming Theatre' in 2012 at The Theatre Awards UK.¹⁰¹ The theatre is self-described as 'a rare example of a successful rural receiving and producing theatre, funded almost entirely by private supporters from the local community, councils and businesses'.¹⁰² Indeed, following the loss of their £40,000 grant from Arts Council England in 2008, the venue was praised for its self-sufficiency and resilience, being awarded the 'Special Achievement in Regional Theatre' award organised by *The Stage* in 2009.¹⁰³ At this time, the judges were 'impressed by the theatre's ability to increase its income' during the challenging economic period to

¹⁰⁰ 'About Us', *The Theatre Chipping Norton website*, undated, <www.chippingnortontheatre.com/about-us/> [accessed 10th January 2020].

¹⁰¹ 'The Theatre, Chipping Norton', *house*, undated, <www.housetheatre.org.uk/venues/the-theatre-chipping-norton/> [accessed 10th January 2020].

¹⁰² 'Our History', *The Theatre Chipping Norton website*.

¹⁰³ Matthew Hemley, 'The Stage Begins Hunt for Your Regional Theatre Champions', *The Stage*, 8th September 2010, <www.thestage.co.uk/features/2010/the-stage-begins-hunt-for-your-regional-theatre-champions/> [accessed 10th January 2020].

earn ‘approximately 75% of its income’ and selling ‘about 50,000 tickets a year’.¹⁰⁴ For Terry, this dependence on the income from their ticket sales to support the theatre’s activities (as opposed to Arts Council grants or government funding) is best expressed as navigating a balance between pragmatism and ambition – what he terms ‘liv[ing] with a contradiction’.¹⁰⁵ Their programming is subject to a financial imperative to programme performance that will appeal to their audiences (and translate into ticket sales) while building the ‘brand’ of The Theatre Chipping Norton by focussing ‘on two or three pieces we make each year and the impact that can have more widely’.¹⁰⁶ Under Terry’s leadership, The Theatre Chipping Norton stands as an example of the ambitious work undertaken by many small-scale regional theatres. The theatre carefully balances the pragmatics of economic viability with the desire to present engaging work that expresses the creative interests of the theatre’s team while meeting the expectations of its dedicated audiences and extending its reach to new visitors.

The Royal & Derngate

The origin of the Royal & Derngate also lies in nineteenth-century architecture although, unlike the Salvation Army citadel, it was purpose-built for theatrical entertainment. The venue is comprised of two main auditoria – the Royal and the Derngate – connected by a joint foyer built as part of an extensive redevelopment project in 2006. The Royal was built in 1884 as an opera house and concert hall. The designer was the renowned Victorian architect, C. J. Phipps, who specialised in theatres and also designed a

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Terry, interview with author (Oxford, 3rd January 2020).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

number of other regional venues still in use today including the Theatre Royal Bath and The Grand in Wolverhampton. The Grade II-listed building is intimate in scale while providing a sense of grandeur with its ornate gold plaster decoration and plush red velvet seating. The auditorium seating is divided into stalls, a circle, and a balcony (a space occupied today by lighting equipment rather than spectators). The Royal is particularly famous for its safety curtain, created by Northampton artist Henry Bird who also designed sets for the Old Vic and Sadler's Wells in London, that features diverse theatrical subjects including Hamlet's mirror and characters from the *commedia dell'arte*.¹⁰⁷ Situated next to the Royal auditorium, the Derngate is a more recent addition to the organisation's operations built in 1983 as a multi-purpose large-scale performance venue. The 2006 redevelopment also facilitated the creation of two additional studio-style performance spaces, several bars, a box office, and meeting rooms. In 2013, the Northampton Filmhouse was incorporated into the Royal & Derngate and proved so popular that a second screen was added in 2017.¹⁰⁸ The Royal & Derngate receive significant grants from Arts Council England and local subsidiaries corresponding to their size and ambitious activities. However, in 2019 the theatre generated around 90% of its £12 million turnover through its own income streams (including ticket sales, bars, café and fundraising).¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Ian Mayes, 'Obituary: Henry Bird', *The Guardian*, 11th May 2000, <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/may/11/guardianobituaries.ianmayes>> [accessed 5th March 2020].

¹⁰⁸ 'About Us', *Royal & Derngate website*, undated, <www.royalandderngate.co.uk/about-us/> [accessed 10th January 2020].

¹⁰⁹ James Dacre, 'The Government's Plan for UK Theatre is Vague and Demoralising – Here's What We Need', *The Guardian*, 30th June 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/jun/30/government-plan-uk-theatre-roadmap-james-dacre-royal-and-derngate>> [accessed 24th February 2021].

The different scale of the two main auditoria that constitute the Royal & Derngate is reflected in the distinct programming strategies for each space overseen by James Dacre who has served as the theatre's artistic director since 2013. The 1,500-seat Derngate is primarily used as a receiving house for large-scale touring musicals and live events such as concerts and stand-up comedy shows. In contrast, the Royal is a more intimate auditorium seating 460. It serves as a receiving house for mid-scale touring drama and is used to present the productions created 'in-house' under the banner Made in Northampton – a title introduced by Dacre for his inaugural season as artistic director when he succeeded Laurie Sansom in 2013. Dacre established this programme of 'in-house' work with the desire to foster a 'laboratory culture' of theatre-making 'that is that is driven by writers, composers and creatives' in tune with local audiences.¹¹⁰

The proactive engagement of a theatre with its local context is frequently considered to be a defining characteristic of regional theatre. Indeed, theatre critic Lyn Gardner suggests that one of the greatest markers of success for a regional venue is 'how embedded it is in its local community and how much it uses its own clout and resources in supporting the local cultural ecology'.¹¹¹ While, to some extent, '[e]very theatre is a community theatre', regional theatres are often expected to provide a far greater range of resources to support and engage their local community.¹¹² Terry describes The Theatre Chipping Norton

¹¹⁰ Nicola Merrifield, 'James Dacre Unveils Inaugural Season at Northampton's Royal and Derngate', *The Stage*, 29th November 2013, <www.thestage.co.uk/news/2013/james-dacre-unveils-inaugural-season-northamptons-royal-derngate/> [accessed 10th January 2020].

¹¹¹ Lyn Gardner, 'Regional Theatres Are Not a Training Ground for London', *The Stage*, 11th March 2019, <www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/2019/lyn-gardner-actors-stop-patronising-regional-theatres-and-start-working-in-them/> [accessed 10th December 2019].

¹¹² Alex Clifton quoted in Catherine Jones, 'Chester Storyhouse's Andrew Bentley and Alex Clifton: "The term 'regional theatre' is poisonous: every theatre's a community theatre"', *The Stage*, 7th May 2019, <www.thestage.co.uk/features/interviews/2019/chester-

as ‘a local-looking “all things for all people” arts centre’ that allocates significant resources to ‘putting on stand-up comedians and tribute bands and film, a cinema programme, and creative writing workshops and youth theatre, and all those things that any local art centre would do’.¹¹³ The diverse spaces and resources at the Royal & Derngate similarly support a wide range of community-focussed activities – a focus which also characterises Dacre’s approach to the theatre’s self-produced work. The two facets of the theatre’s activities are not treated distinctly. For instance, Dacre has introduced the convention of casting a community ensemble of local amateur performers to participate alongside the professional company in many of the Made in Northampton productions, including two featured in this study: his 2018 production of Katori Hall’s *Our Lady of Kibeho* (2014) and director Lucy Bailey’s 2018 production of Henrik Ibsen’s *Ghosts* (1882). Initiatives such as these are designed to provide a greater number of access points to the theatre’s professional activities to ensure that their activities are serving the Northampton community.

With theatre-making at the heart of this study, the work (co-)produced as part of the Made in Northampton programme and presented in the Royal auditorium is the subject of my embedded research undertaken at the Royal & Derngate. The Royal has a long tradition of presenting such self-produced work. From 1927 it was home to the Northampton Repertory Players – a legacy preserved in the adjoined cinema, the Errol Flynn Filmhouse, which was named after the Australian actor who appeared in more than 20 plays in the 1933-4 season.¹¹⁴ Although the theatre no longer supports a repertory company, the stage

storyhouses-andrew-bentley-and-alex-clifton-the-term-regional-theatre-is-poisonous-every-theatres-a-community-theatre/> [accessed 10th December 2019].

¹¹³ Terry, interview with author (Oxford, 3rd January 2020).

¹¹⁴ Mark Lawson, ‘James Dacre: Theatres Must Learn to Collaborate More’, *The Guardian*, 16th September 2014, <www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/sep/16/james-dacre-cat-on-a-hot-tin-toof-northampton-manchester-newcastle/> [accessed 10th January 2020].

continues to be used to present the theatre's self-produced work. The theatre created between 6 and 8 new productions annually in the duration of my primary research period (2017-2019).¹¹⁵ While Dacre directs a small number of these each year, the majority are directed by practitioners from outside of the Royal & Derngate who assemble their own creative teams for each production. The work produced is therefore diverse in nature but can be broadly categorised into three groups: new writing, adaptations of modern classic drama, and adaptations of well-known novels. Works from each of these categories are represented in the selection of case studies for this thesis as detailed below. In the 2018/19 season, ten productions and co-productions transferred to London widening the reach of the Royal & Derngate's activities. The mobilisation of the theatre's self-produced work undermines definitions of regional theatre that rest on a regional/metropolitan divide. One of these productions, *Our Lady of Kibeho* (which features in chapter three in my discussion of the material apparatus of form), was named as one of 'the best theatre shows of the 21st century' by *The Guardian* in 2019, demonstrating the critical clout of the theatre under Dacre's creative leadership.¹¹⁶

The Made in Northampton programme is supported by an in-house wardrobe department, a set construction workshop, a scenic painting frame, and a rehearsal room, while the resources and expertise of the 'in-house' staff are employed for the majority of

¹¹⁵ The Northampton Theatres Trust Limited, 'Report and Financial Statements for the Period Ended 25 March 2018', p. 9. Accessible via the Charity Commission website, <<https://beta.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-details?regid=1075741&subid=0>> [accessed 12th December 2019].

¹¹⁶ 'The 50 Best Theatre Shows of the 21st Century', *The Guardian*, 19th September 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/sep/17/the-50-best-theatre-shows-of-the-21st-century>> [accessed 11th March 2020].

the self-produced work.¹¹⁷ The proximity of the theatre technicians, makers, production team, and performers working in one building allows a continuous dialogue amongst all contributors to the theatre-making process and makes the Royal & Derngate a fruitful environment in which to pursue an inquiry into the materiality of the theatre-making processes. This is also true of The Theatre Chipping Norton's approach to their pantomime (featured in chapter one) which sees the creative team, technicians, and actors housed within the theatre in the lead-up to performance. These modes of production are elucidated in relation to the specific focus of each chapter as outlined below.

Chapter Outlines

Four chapters explore distinct entanglements of the materiality of the stage and theatre-makers enacted in the course of theatrical production. Five productions produced and performed at The Theatre Chipping Norton and the Royal & Derngate between 2017 and 2019 serve as case studies for this inquiry. The two parts of the study group the chapters into pairs, each set having a different focus. Part One, *Gendering Bodies: Theatre-Makers and Objects* focuses on interactions between theatrical things and practitioners that highlight the labour of female theatre-makers in contemporary theatrical production. Chapter One: *Costume* characterises costuming as a gendered practice that rests on the expertise of a female-dominated workforce. The activities of the costume workroom and observation of technical rehearsals for The Theatre Chipping Norton's 2017-18 pantomime production of *Sleeping Beauty* are the focus of the case study for this chapter. Embedded in the costume workroom during the preparations for performance, I observed the

¹¹⁷ The Northampton Theatres Trust Limited, 'Report and Financial Statements for the Period Ended 25 March 2018', p. 5.

entanglement of bodies, garments, and ideologies that participate in the gendering of character in the pantomime. Attention is paid, particularly, to the physical encounter of costume and body to show how embodied performance is gendered through the materiality of dress. The chapter argues that costume labour itself should be considered as a gendered practice – one that might be understood as a material expression of women’s creative vision within the theatre-making process.

Chapter Two: Props and Puppets also foregrounds the relationship between practitioner and theatrical object. Here, however, attention is turned from the labour of the costume workroom to the activities of the rehearsal room. This chapter examines how props and actors collaboratively perform the bodily experiences of female characters in a fashion that disrupts the representational conventions understood to objectify the female body in feminist criticism. My observations of the rehearsals of Melly Still’s production of *The Lovely Bones* staged at the Royal & Derngate in 2018, provide evidence for this chapter’s case study. The newly-commissioned adaptation of Alice Sebold’s 2002 best-selling novel undertaken by Bryony Lavery centres its action on the teenage female protagonist’s search for selfhood in the afterlife following her murder on earth. In the production, props and puppets become proxy bodies for the characters, distributing the representation of the female protagonist across material and human agents. Informed by new materialist models of distributive agency, I trace how experimentation with the relationship between prop and performer in rehearsals destabilise subject/object relationships to disrupt the objectification of the female body onstage. The chapter examines how such attentiveness to the signifying power of the material is reflected in the broader culture of theatre-making cultivated by Still in the rehearsal room, which I characterise as feminist working practice.

These first two chapters examine the embodied encounters that take place between practitioner and object (costume/prop/puppet) in the course of theatrical production. In part two, *Staging Gendered Experience: Theatre Apparatus and Character*, the second set of chapters sustains this interest in how the material elements of theatrical production participate in meaning-making process that constitute gendered practice. However, the scale of their focus shifts from these individual encounters to the transformation of the wider staged environment. Both chapters address questions relating to the relationship between realism, the material apparatus of the stage, and gendered experience. Specifically, I explore how the material elements of theatrical production are used by contemporary theatre-makers to foreground the perspectives of female characters.

Chapter Three: *The Material Apparatus of Form* addresses the gendering of the material representational apparatus of realism in contemporary theatre. The oft-cited feminist anti-realist arguments of the 1980s and 1990s assert that the conventions of theatrical realism exclude female experience and promote patriarchal modes of spectatorship. The twenty-first-century '(re)turn to realism' has prompted a reevaluation of these arguments.¹¹⁸ Contemporary theatre-makers demonstrate how realist conventions can be reworked to accommodate marginalised perspectives. Dacre's 2018 production of Hall's *Our Lady of Kibeho* rehearsed at the Royal & Derngate provides a case study to show how the conventions of realism might be used to stage alternative expressions of gendered authority. Specifically, Hall's play takes the historical events that took place in Kibeho in the 1980s, when three Catholic schoolgirls witnessed Marian apparitions that have since been

¹¹⁸ Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage, 'Introduction: What Happens Now', in *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now*, ed. by Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 1-13 (p. 4).

interpreted by the Vatican as premonitions of the forthcoming Rwandan genocide. The play presents the miraculous as an alternate site of female authority that challenges the patriarchal institutional authority of Kibeho College, the Catholic Church, and the state. In the production, the apparitions are staged using the material resources of the stage in tandem with the bodily performance of the actors cast as the Visionary Girls. Female authority is therefore aligned with the material, both in the play and the Royal & Derngate production. Observations of the rehearsal processes and interviews with Dacre elucidate the challenges faced by the production team when attempting to stage the miraculous (and thus foreground the experience of the female characters) within the mode of theatrical realism. This chapter traces the shifting approach taken to staging the Marian apparitions evidenced through observations of rehearsals for the Northampton production and performance of the London revival at Theatre Royal Stratford East in 2019. The difficulties encountered by the production team when materialising the miraculous are demonstrative of the challenges posed by the reconstitution of realist representational strategies undertaken to accommodate frequently marginalised perspectives: here, the spiritual authority of the Rwandan schoolgirls.

The final chapter also considers how the gendered conventions of theatrical representation are reworked to engage with twenty-first-century approaches to gender. Chapter Four: The Staged Environment examines the way that modern classics are being reimagined by theatre-makers for contemporary audiences – not through textual edits to the script, but through the materiality of the staged environment. Two domestic dramas directed by Lucy Bailey and designed by Mike Britton for the Royal & Derngate stand as case studies; Agatha Christie and Frank Vosper's *Love from a Stranger* (1936) staged in 2018 and a 2019 production of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881) in a version adapted from the original by

Mike Poulton in 2019. In both productions, non-naturalistic interventions in the depictions of the domestic settings are employed to foreground the experiences of female characters. I term this approach 'scenographic dramaturgy' to describe how the material apparatus of representation is employed to reconfigure the gendered-dynamics of domestic space. The tactic employed by contemporary theatre-makers allows classic plays to be performed without substantial textual revision, while accommodating shifting twenty-first-century attitudes to gender representation. The chapter concludes by addressing how the intention of the theatre-maker implicit in the notion of scenographic dramaturgy might be situated within a new materialist framework of distributive agency.

Taken together, the chapters argue for a new conceptual approach to the 'issue of creative agency' in theatrical production identified by McAuley. Feminist recovery of women's experiences is united with a new materialist model of collaborative agency that recognises the material resources of the stage as active participants in the processes of theatre-making. I recognise that employing innovative research perspectives has the potential to generate new narratives about theatrical production centred on overlooked experiences; in this case, those marginalised due to hierarchies of gendered labour in the theatre. Rejecting the notion of the 'authorial role' of the director or playwright, this study presents an inclusive model of collaboration enacted across the assemblage of 'a group of artists' and the material resources of the stage. The result is a fuller, and more inclusive, picture of theatre-making in contemporary theatre. My experience as an embedded researcher in the workshops, rehearsal rooms, and auditoria of the two theatres locates my study in the context of live practice – something I reflect on in the following methodology chapter. The nature of these case studies thus underpins the critical framework of feminist new materialism utilised in this study with the actual observation of the dynamic

interrelationships between materiality, gender, and theatrical production. In so doing, theory is brought to bear on practice. The local perspective offered to the embedded researcher is set in this study within the wider context of theatre and performance studies which, in turn, are enriched by the specificity of this methodological practice that has the potential to generate new critical accounts of live theatre-making.

Methodology

This study argues for the particular relationship between women's experiences and the materiality of the stage through the observation of live practice. The collaborative nature of theatrical production, and particularly an understanding of the active role played by the materiality of the stage, is explored using actual processes of theatre-making undertaken at The Theatre Chipping Norton and the Royal & Derngate. A particular value of this study, then, is to model a methodological approach to conceptualising contemporary theatre-making that draws upon the experiences of the embedded researcher. Working as an embedded researcher permits new insights into experiences, activities, and perspectives marginalised from necessarily distanced, post-production, textual accounts of theatre history. The methodology developed to support the inquiry of this study speaks to the 'new spirit of research' observed by Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson in contemporary approaches to theatre and performance studies.¹ They argue that 'revitalised' and innovative approaches to the study of theatre are necessary to meet the 'fresh research demands and opportunities' presented in this environment.² I intersect the new materialist and feminist concepts outlined in the Introduction with ethnographic research practices to provide the methodological framework for this study.

Reflecting on the observation of rehearsals undertaken as part of her research practice, McAuley also recognises that in 'opting for the specific and the local, performance

¹ Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson, 'Introduction: Doing Methods Creatively', in *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, ed. by Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 1-15 (p. 1).

² *Ibid*, p. 1.

studies is moving into the methodological terrain of ethnography'.³ Her claim recalls the innovative practice-based contribution to performance studies undertaken by the anthropologist Victor Turner and the American director and researcher Richard Schechner in the 1980s (which I return to in chapter three in relation to *Our Lady of Kibeho*). McAuley argues that, 'as the object of study shifts from text and virtual performance to actual performance... new relationships must be forged between academics and theatre practitioners'.⁴ As discussed in the Introduction, for this reason she understands her role as that of the 'participant-observer' who is 'constantly present in the rehearsal room, *in* it but *not of* it'.⁵ An engagement with ethnographic practices in research, such as the observation of live practice, thus demands a level of self-reflexivity from the embedded researcher.

In addition to my status as a theatre scholar, my experience working as a costume professional in the commercial sector of English theatre has undoubtedly shaped the focus of my study, both in terms of the subject of the inquiry (the material culture of the stage and theatre-making processes) and my practical engagement and interpretation of the theatrical activities I observed. At the age of 16 I secured a place in the costume department at the National Youth Theatre of Great Britain (NYT). During the five years I spent working within the organisation, I learnt a set of skills that allowed me to take on a variety of roles in the team. These included making, fitting, and altering costumes, undertaking costume maintenance (inclusive of repairs and laundry), dressing actors, and managing the wardrobes of several productions during the run of a show. After several years' experience working on diverse productions, including a repertory season at the Ambassador's Theatre

³ Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 12.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 12.

⁵ McAuley, 'Towards an Ethnography of Rehearsal', p. 77.

in London's West End, the opening ceremony of the London 2012 Paralympic Games, and a site-specific piece in the railway arches then-owned by the Old Vic theatre, I became Deputy-Head of the Costume Department. This allowed me to begin working as a costume freelancer, predominantly as a dresser, wig stylist, and/or wardrobe manager backstage in London theatres. My experience as a costume professional has not only shaped my interest in the material elements of theatrical production, but permitted me access to the costume workroom at The Theatre Chipping Norton as I assisted the team during the production period for the *Sleeping Beauty* pantomime. Here, the 'participant' element of McAuley's notion of the 'participant-observer' was particularly emphasised.

My professional experience means that I have practical understanding of the process of staging a production. I am familiar with the technical and colloquial terminology used amongst practitioners, the timeline of theatrical production, and the function of fittings, production meetings, technical rehearsals, and previews. I am also able to draw upon the experiential aspect of working within a production team to empathise with the experiences of the practitioners I observed in the course of my research; the challenges and stresses associated with creating a new piece of theatre, and the sense of community established between the individuals working collaboratively on a project. Perhaps most impactful when conducting research is that my experience in the industry has made me sensitive to the unspoken hierarchies and power dynamics of theatrical production. I was able to intuit when it was acceptable to speak up in rehearsals, whom to ask particular questions, and I was sensitive to the interpersonal relationships that played out in the across the theatre-making process. I believe that as a woman in my mid-twenties, my age and gender also made me a less conspicuous presence in the rehearsal room and, perhaps, reassured directors that my role as a participant-observer would not disrupt their work. It is common

for trainee directors in their twenties to observe more established practitioners at work. Therefore, I often found myself mistakenly cast in this role by creatives and members of the production team. This was accentuated by the fact that on three of the five productions I observed, the assistant directors were young women. My spatial positioning within the rehearsal room further confused my role as researcher-participant with that of practitioner. When observing rehearsals, I was invited to sit at the front of the room at a small desk set to the side of the director and assistant director. This positioning, while allowing me a good view of the rehearsal activities, spatially aligned me with the creative team. I found that when my position as an embedded researcher was clear, sharing my experience of working within the industry with practitioners often made them feel more comfortable with my presence as a participant-observer. It also made many individuals more willing to share their experiences with me; be it formally in interview, or informally in the course of the production process during lunchbreaks or in the theatre bar after a show. Our shared professional experience established a relationship built on mutual understanding which was particularly valuable when discussing sensitive issues such as the gendered dynamics of the industry. I consequently found myself both an insider and an outsider in the production processes I observed; an insider in the industry but set apart by my status as a participant-observer without a specific job in the staging of the production.

My status as a researcher with practical experience of the theatre industry is particularly significant in the observation of live practice. Rehearsal rooms conventionally function as closed spaces. Conventionally, only those directly involved in the activities are permitted inside. I am grateful to the artistic directors, directors, acting companies, and production teams based at the Royal & Derngate and The Theatre Chipping Norton for their generosity and openness in inviting me into these spaces. I felt a great responsibility to

conduct my research and present the work I observed with a similar generosity of spirit. Contemporary approaches to fieldwork teach the ethnographic researcher that their practice is 'absolutely embedded in issues of power and authority'.⁶ The anthropologist Dwight Conquergood explains that the conditions of collecting anthropological research, what he terms the 'practice of fieldwork', inevitably 'mediates a set of power relations that determines who is observing whom'.⁷ In the context of professional theatre work, the 'set of power relations' is perhaps more subtle than that involved in the process of observing potentially socially-vulnerable groups during ethnographic fieldwork. However, permitting me to observe, record, and analyse the rehearsal processes of productions created at the Royal & Derngate and The Theatre Chipping Norton was an act of trust on the part of the directors who allowed me into the rehearsal rooms. Accordingly, I have strived to be non-judgmental and have refrained from making evaluative judgements in my engagement with the case study productions – particularly in regard to the actions of practitioners. My role is not that of a theatre critic or reviewer, but of a participant-observer embedded in the spaces of theatrical production.

The responsibility of the researcher undertaking ethnographic work has been addressed by the autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis in her conceptualisation of 'relational ethics'.⁸ Unlike 'processual ethics', which are the institutionalised standards demanded by a research body, 'relational ethics' are closely related to 'an ethics of care'.⁹ The processual ethics of my project are enforced by the policies of The Central University Research Ethics

⁶ Dwight Conquergood, 'Poetics, Plays, Process, and Power: The Performative Turn in Anthropology', *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 1 (1989), 82-88 (p. 84).

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 84.

⁸ Carolyn Ellis, 'Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research with Intimate Others', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13 (2007), 3-29 (p. 4).

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 4.

Committee (CUREC) at the University of Oxford. The committee must approve the researcher's methodology before they undertake fieldwork (in my case the observation of rehearsals). The committee also dictates the necessary procedures for capturing the consent of the participants, namely, consent forms. In contrast, relational ethics are relevant to the power dynamics that play out on an interpersonal level between observer and observed and 'recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched'.¹⁰ The latter addresses more complex processes of capturing consent in the research experience. For instance, spending extended periods with the practitioners and performers led to the formation of personal relationships. I often spent time with the company outside of the rehearsal room during lunch breaks, at the bar after a long day of rehearsals, and some individuals have even become friends that I continue to have contact with even though the period of observation has concluded. During analysis of my observation of theatrical production, I had to make ongoing decisions about where to draw the boundaries of my research. Was it ethical to include something disclosed to me while we were eating lunch? Or something that I heard second-hand from another member of the company? My policy was, when in doubt, to ask directly whether the individuals involved were happy for me to include the information in my study. I did find that my interpersonal relationships with the practitioners presented some unexpected challenges in writing up the qualitative data I collected through embedded observation. Although it might seem a minor detail, one of the strangest adjustments I had to make was deciding how to refer to the practitioners. Should I use their first names as I had done throughout the rehearsal process, or their surnames as is conventional in academic study?

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 4.

While I have opted for the latter, I feel it masks the interpersonal nature of my relationships with the individuals whose work I write about.

The interpersonal nature of my research prompted me to embrace practices associated with capturing 'process consent'. The approach conceives of 'consent as dynamic and ongoing' and something that 'persists for the life of the project'.¹¹ In the context of collecting my research, this involved checking verbally at regular intervals throughout the process that everybody in the rehearsal room was comfortable with being observed. This consent was recorded using forms or via email as appropriate. The idea of process consent was particularly relevant when undertaking interviews with practitioners. As I quote from them directly in the study, I offered the practitioners the opportunity to read my typescript of our exchange before I incorporated the data in my analysis. While none of the practitioners asked to do this, I felt it was important to communicate that they were in control of what they had chosen to share with me – particularly if we were talking about their own professional experiences in the relation to issues of gender bias or discriminatory treatment. It was for this reason that I also provided interviewees with the opportunity to be quoted anonymously (again, an option that nobody requested, although occasionally during the interview some individuals asked for certain statements to be omitted or not attributed to them if included in the study).

Observing the Rehearsal Process

The nature of my engagement with the two theatres, and even with the five productions featured in the case studies, was vastly different. A new creative team and

¹¹ Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 57.

company was assembled to stage each play. Accordingly, the working culture of the rehearsal room and the level of engagement I had with the production team and acting company as a researcher varied from production to production. Furthermore, my precise engagement with each theatre-making process was dictated by my specific interest in a particular material aspect of the stage (costumes, props, staged environments) – this dictated whether I worked in the costume workroom, observed the activities of the rehearsal room, or watched technical rehearsals of a production from the auditorium. The specific nature of my activities as a participant-observer for each production is thus outlined at the start of each chapter.

Outlining her methodology for observing live practice, McAuley notes that '[i]n rehearsal analysis as in ethnographic description, the larger picture comes into view through the accumulation of minutiae' and, therefore, 'the task requires full time presence by the observer'. She argues that it 'cannot be done adequately by someone dropping in at intervals to view work in progress'.¹² In many respects I agree with McAuley's claim. Rehearsals are unpredictable in nature and it is impossible to anticipate when a moment that will offer significant insight of the process to the researcher might unfold. Yet, in pragmatic terms, even when welcomed by a director to observe the entire rehearsal process, it was not possible for me to be present every session. At the Royal & Derngate (where four of the five productions featured in this study were produced), rehearsals with the actors ran for around four weeks (working Monday to Saturday) with an additional week of technical rehearsals in the Royal before previews commenced. The working day conventionally began at 10am and concluded at 6pm with an hour break for lunch and two

¹² McAuley, *Not Magic but Work*, p. 10.

short tea-breaks on either side. On occasion, and particularly as opening night drew nearer, additional evening sessions would be added so that the working day concluded at 10pm. While I strove to be in rehearsals as often as possible, the travel distance to the venues, compounded by the additional responsibilities of undertaking a doctoral degree, prevented me from being in every session. However, my study is not an ethnographic account of a single rehearsal process such as that McAuley undertakes in *Not Magic but Work*. It is, rather, a focussed study with an established line of inquiry – the relationship between women, materiality, and agency in the theatre-making process. As I was unable to attend every rehearsal session for the productions, I consulted with the directors and assistant directors to establish which sessions would be the most valuable to attend and used this knowledge of the rehearsal schedule to structure my time at the theatres. The sessions I prioritised attending were those that were likely to present particular scenarios that related to the investigation of my thesis; for instance, when puppets or props were first introduced to the rehearsal room, or a session when the costume designer was going to be present in order to observe how a garment functioned in performance. On average, I spent four days a week in the rehearsal room and was typically present for the entirety of technical rehearsals. I believe that allocating my time this way allowed me to engage effectively with the rehearsal processes of the five productions and provide sufficient qualitative research for my case studies. Inevitably, I missed moments that might have made valuable additions to my analysis. However, I found that in these cases the assistant directors, and often the actors themselves, were keen to fill me in on what I had missed.

Similarly, when positioned in rehearsals the research process necessitated that I be selective in the observations that I recorded – it was not possible, or practical, to make an

exhaustive record of every session.¹³ I made notes by hand, anticipating that the noise of a laptop might be distracting for the company and wanting to demonstrate that the activities in the room had my full attention by removing the barrier of the digital screen. I occasionally took photographs during rehearsals on my mobile telephone to supplement my notes. These were taken, either because I thought the images might be useful memory aids when writing up my analysis, or with the view to include them at appropriate points in the study as illustrative evidence for my readers. When possible, I preferred to use the images taken by the professional photographers employed by the theatres to generate visual material for marketing and documentation purposes. These were most commonly taken during the final dress rehearsal of a production which took place at the end of technical rehearsals and before the first preview. My preference for using these images is partly pragmatic because the resolution is higher than my own photographs. My decision is also motivated by an awareness of the ethics of capturing images of performers during rehearsal. Although the directors and performers had given their consent for their activities to be recorded both in written and photographic form, I felt that the overt presence of a camera might be conspicuous and cause feelings of self-consciousness unproductive to the experimental nature of rehearsals. While aware of my dual status as a participant-observer, I was conscious to try and minimise my impact on the dynamics of the working environment in the rehearsal room – something that dissuaded me from making video or audio recordings of rehearsal sessions.

¹³ The challenge posed to the researcher of being selective when recording the activities of rehearsal is also discussed by McAuley in 'Towards an Ethnography of Rehearsal', p. 76.

The Scope of the Study: Hierarchies of Theatrical Production

The rare opportunity to observe live practice prompts questions about the scope of this study, not only in regards to which theatre-making activities are recorded, but in deciding which production to observe in the first place. Unlike studies of theatre that begin with a set of plays or performances, this project began with the line of inquiry that I wanted to pursue through my engagement with the two collaborating theatres' activities; the interrelationships between women's activities, materiality, and agency in the context of contemporary theatre-making. I decided that the focus of each chapter – the gendering of costume, props, the material apparatus of form, and the staged environment – would be explored through a series of case studies that took particular productions as their subject. Due to the methodological pragmatics of working as an embedded researcher, I had to select productions that were being produced by The Theatre Chipping Norton and the Royal & Derngate within my research period (2017-2019). Happily, I was able to complete my planned observation of live practice before the closure of performance venues enforced by the Government on the 16th March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. My description of the two theatres' approach to programming and, more generally, the processes of theatrical production observed in the course of this study thus detail the modes of contemporary theatre-making employed in the commercial theatre sector pre-pandemic (something I return to in the postscript).

The programming of self-produced work is scheduled by the theatres on an annual basis. This meant that case study selection was an ongoing process that had to be reviewed throughout the three-year research period of the project. This necessitated a level of flexibility when establishing the remit of the study. The different scales of production at each of the theatres resulted in four of the five productions featured in the case study

chapters being produced at the Royal & Derngate. This is a proportional reflection of the output of the self-produced work of the two theatres. My conviction in the importance of observing live practice meant that I had to select productions that I believed would resonate with the themes of this study (gender and the materiality of the stage) without knowing the precise outcome of my engagement. While I was able to anticipate that a production was likely to engage with female experience from the script or practitioners commissioned to work on a project, how this might intersect with the materiality of the stage only emerged in the course of observations of the theatre-making process. I found myself in the same position as the practitioners I observed at the start of a production period; we arrived at the rehearsal room or workshop with a set of expectations and questions that were then developed through a process of experimentation. At the end of the process, both parties clarified and consolidated their experiences to present a work to an external audience: for the practitioners, a production, and for me, a written study.

The focus of each chapter was therefore led by the particularities of each production. Accordingly, this study has not aspired to present a comprehensive account of theatre-making. Nor does it attempt to provide a singular theoretical reading of theatrical production. Rather, a selective and flexible approach was necessary to pursue the inquiry of this study and to accommodate the unpredictability of live practice. I therefore draw upon concepts from diverse theoretical frameworks to support my analysis of theatre-making. Such an approach is responsive to the methodological approach of this study. I found that crossing between the investigation of practice and representation, the experiences of theatre-makers and characters, and the critical acts of observation and analysis was supported most productively by an expansive, yet selective, use of theory. New materialism and particularly its intersections with feminist theory, have provided a valuable critical

framework that runs through each chapter. The field provides a vocabulary and set of concepts that productively intersect with the collaborative processes of meaning-making that emerges from the material performativity of theatrical production. However, as I demonstrate in the chapters, the application of new materialism to theatre-making also highlights tensions between the theoretical and the practical – for instance, the challenge of materialising the immaterial in *The Lovely Bones* and consolidating the affective assertions of the material world with the creative authority of the director. These dissonances are productive in considering the nature of interdisciplinary work and the demands it makes on the adaptability of the researcher.

A case study model also situates the wider enquiry of this thesis – the interrelationships between women, agency, and the materiality of the stage – in the context of an under-investigated area of theatre studies: the commercial theatre sector. Paradoxically, while the commercial sector attracts the largest number of British theatre-goers annually it is underrepresented in scholarship. Observing the same phenomenon, Susan Bennett argues that ‘we need always to reflect on what account of contemporary theatrical experience we are entering into historical record’.¹⁴ Typically, the experimental and avant-garde are centralised in many accounts of theatre history, used to trace how divergences from established conventions gave rise to innovations and new critical impetuses in theatrical performance. While certainly a valuable and engaging enterprise, such fetishizing of the avant-garde results in the marginalisation of the mainstream, skewing the historical record and leaving the popular underrepresented in performance scholarship. Such marginalisation of the popular is being readdressed in recent developments in the

¹⁴ Susan Bennett, ‘Theatre/Tourism’, *Theatre Journal*, 57 (2005), 407-28 (p. 407).

direction of research in the humanities. Modernist studies, in particular, has emerged as a site of scholarship actively concerned with breaking down preconceived notions of high and low culture. This approach is rooted, no doubt, in the fact that antagonisms between high-, middle-, and lowbrow art were at the heart of discourses about cultural production in the early decades of the twentieth century – in other words, such discussions are irretrievably entwined with the subject of modernist studies itself.¹⁵

In the context of contemporary theatre-making, but with resonances beyond this subject-matter, this study argues that focussing an enquiry through the material lens might be a productive strategy to decentralise hierarchies relating to the exceptionalism of the avant-garde and the authority of an individual creator (be they author, artist, or theatre-maker) – hierarchies that both rest on an idea of exceptionalism. The material conditions of production had already been understood to disrupt the Anglophone dramatic canon by early twentieth-century theories of the stage. Gordon Craig, for instance, argues that Shakespeare's plays are not so suited to theatrical production as medieval 'miracles and mystery plays': 'the plays of Shakespeare have so vast and so complete a form when read, that they can but lose heavily when presented to us after having undergone stage treatment'.¹⁶ This study does not pass qualitative judgement on the enterprise of staging Shakespeare, but rather notes that a study of the materiality of the stage might disrupt the received values placed on the work of certain playwrights, artistic movements, or periods in theatre history. An attentiveness to the materiality of the stage has the potential to render

¹⁵ See Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, 'Introduction: Modernisms Bad and New', in *Bad Modernisms*, ed. by Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 1-18 (p. 2).

¹⁶ Craig, 'The Art of the Theatre', p. 143.

the boundaries between different forms of theatrical production permeable. For instance, in the course of this study I discuss pantomime (*Sleeping Beauty*), the adaptation of popular fiction (*The Lovely Bones*), original playwriting (*Our Lady of Kibeho*), nineteenth-century realist drama (represented by Poulton's adaptation of Ibsen's *Ghosts*), and twentieth-century domestic melodrama (*Love from a Stranger*). Not only does this reflect the diversity of work produced by contemporary regional theatres, but it provides the opportunity for new resonances to be drawn across boundaries of period, genre, and form. This study thus demonstrates that a focus on the local and specific can provide methodologies for engaging with wider shifts in disciplinary fields.

The Scope of the Study: Gender Politics in Mainstream English Theatre

An examination of the mainstream is inevitably entwined with gendered ideologies of production and representation. In her discussion of 'everyday life', Rita Felski situates the critical discussion concerned with the marginalisation of the familiar in cultural studies in the context of feminist thinking. She notes that 'some groups, such as women and the working class, are more closely identified with the everyday than others'.¹⁷ This is, in part, because the everyday is conventionally associated with the domestic, repetition, habit, and familiarity – qualities that she argues are traditionally characterised as feminine. The everyday is juxtaposed with the innovation associated with the avant-garde that might, in contrast, be characterised as masculine. Felski argues that such characterisation of the everyday as feminine thus plays into 'a long chain of dichotomies' that 'deny women's contemporaneity, self-consciousness, and agency', including 'society versus community,

¹⁷ Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 79.

modernity versus tradition, [and] public versus private'.¹⁸ My focus on the activities of commercial theatre, here understood in the context of 'the everyday' rather than the exceptionalism of the avant-garde, might thus be understood as a methodology of feminist recovery.

A reassessment of the significance of the mainstream has been of particular interest in certain strands of feminist theatre scholars. For instance, Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris's study of popular feminism takes 'the phenomenon of the mainstream good-night-out-for-the-girls show' as its subject.¹⁹ This category of entertainment includes musical theatre adapted from films such as *Calendar Girls* (2015) and the jukebox musical represented by *Mamma Mia!* (1999) in which the music of ABBA is introduced to a plot with no relation to the history of the band. In their introduction to the study, Aston and Harris assess the role of the mainstream in the landscape of feminist theatre scholarship:

We belong to a generation of feminist-theatre scholars who in the eighties were influenced by and identified with second-wave feminism, and who worked between feminist politics, theory and theatre from the critical viewing point of the "feminist spectator as critic" (Dolan, 1988). At this time, to pay attention to feminism and theatre meant looking "outside" mainstream theatre to the alternative, experimental and counter-cultural margins, where works directly informed by this politics were being staged. This focus remained (more or less) a constant throughout the nineties and the early noughties, even while the socio-historical and political context, including that of feminism, shifted and changed.²⁰

Aston and Harris recognise that recently 'there have been some signs of a turn to the mainstream in feminist theatre and performance scholarship', citing Dolan's reappraisal of Wendy Wasserstein ('one of the most successful women playwrights on America's

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 94.

¹⁹ Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris, *A Good Night Out for the Girls: Popular Feminisms in Contemporary Theatre and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 3.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 3.

Broadway’).²¹ Their study of popular feminism in mainstream theatre argues for the value of ‘identifying and pursuing certain [feminist] themes, tropes, and ideas across the mainstream and the commercial fringe’ in order to recognise the diverse expressions and permutations of feminist thoughts across diverse cultural modes.²² Their project is thus not one intended to oppose the popular and the avant-garde, but to establish a continuity between the mainstream and ‘the fields of experimental performance and (self-consciously) political theatre’ that might more readily be termed feminist practice.²³

I situate the five productions staged at The Theatre Chipping Norton and the Royal & Derngate examined in this study within this context of a popular mainstream theatre entangled with feminist ‘themes, tropes, and ideas’. My interest in the entanglements of the materiality of the stage and women’s experiences foregrounds the productions’ engagement with issues relating to women’s work, gendered processes of meaning-making, and the representation of female characters. Yet, none of these productions have been explicitly identified as works of feminist theatre in either the marketing strategies devised by the two theatres or by the practitioners who created them. Despite this, examined through the lens of feminist new materialism, each chapter highlights aspects of the five productions that resonate with feminist discourses in theatre and performance studies. For example, a feminist ethic of care is modelled through director Melly Still’s treatment of the tactile relationship between performers, props, and puppets in the Royal & Derngate production of *The Lovely Bones*. In turn, the staging of the settings in the domestic dramas directed by Lucy Bailey, and also produced at the Royal & Derngate, reconceives the

²¹ Ibid, p. 4.

²² Ibid, p. 4.

²³ Ibid, p. 4.

gendered dynamics of domestic space in realist drama which is the subject of much feminist theatre criticism.

While recognising the feminist themes and ideas present in these five productions, the formulation of gendered identity presented in the work of the two theatres must also be understood within the context of the commercial theatre sector. Twenty-first-century studies of gender and performance frequently focus on avant-garde experimentation with staging gender that disrupts an outdated binary framework. While this study traces the ways in which the materiality of the stage participates in processes of gendering, the gender expression in question is normative in nature. The protagonists of the plays are cisgender women and even the pantomime, with its affordance for gender-play, iterates a normative conception of binary gender identity. As we will see in the first chapter, the traditional cross-dressing of the male actor in the 'female' role of the Dame typically foregrounds the male persona of the actor as he performs an unflattering caricature of womanliness. Here, masculinity and femininity are consciously opposed as distinct expressions of gendered identity. The performance conventions of the role uphold a normative notion of binary gender expression. Similarly, when practitioners seek to redress the gender politics of a play through their contemporary staging, their attention is primarily centred on the heteronormative power dynamics enacted between women and patriarchal structures of power. This approach is manifest in three distinct aspects of theatrical production: the dramatic action of a play (e.g. the representation of female experience within the particular socio-historic context of the plot), conventions of gendered representation in theatrical form, and gendered hierarchies of cultural production in the theatre-making process itself.

While the attention of much feminist scholarship is directed beyond the mainstream to the avant-garde, I argue there is value in examining normative formations of gender

expression. I follow Aston and Harris's conviction that examining how gender identity is expressed in popular cultural production provides an opportunity to consider how feminist ideas more readily associated with 'the fields of experimental performance and (self-consciously) political theatre' are made widely accessible through their dissemination into the mainstream. Furthermore, I argue that examining how the representational conventions of theatre and practices of theatrical production are gendered demonstrates that gender expression is, itself, a performative construction rather than an essential quality. This study illuminates how the different elements of stagecraft participate in material strategies of gendering in the five productions created at The Theatre Chipping Norton and the Royal & Derngate: gendering character (the Principal Girl and Dame of the *Sleeping Beauty* pantomime and Susie in *The Lovely Bones*), gendering registers of expression (the materialisation of the miraculous in *Our Lady of Kibeho*), and gendering space (the staged home in Bailey's productions of domestic dramas). Examining the strategies used to reconfigure the presentation of female characters and the gendering of theatrical form, labour, and space for twenty-first-century audiences highlights how normative gender expression is constructed and practised in mainstream forms of cultural expression.²⁴ This offers the opportunity to consider how the work undertaken by scholars in the 'counter-cultural margins' might resonate with the treatment of gender in popular forms of theatrical entertainment.

²⁴ My thanks go to Rachel Hann who helped me to formulate my ideas on the value of studying normative gender expression within mainstream theatre through discussion and generously allowing me to read a draft of her chapter 'Gender-Assemblages: The Scenographics of Victoria Sin', due to be published in the forthcoming edited volume *Analyzing Gender in Performance* (Routledge, 2021).

By addressing the theoretical, ethical, and pragmatic aspects of the methodology of this project, this chapter outlines the innovative approach taken by this study to the research and analysis of theatrical production – one that unites feminist inquiries into processes of gendering and a new materialist reconceptualisation of agency with embedded research. Observation of live practice introduces a specificity to my discussion of theatre-making. However, the theoretical and methodological frameworks developed throughout the thesis are applicable more widely to studies of performance to argue for the active role played by the material resources of the stage in the processes of gendering enacted in theatrical production.

Part One

Gendering Bodies: Theatre-Makers and Objects

Chapter One: Costume

The first of the case studies addresses perhaps the most intimate encounter between practitioners and the materiality of the stage: the designing, making, and wearing of costume. Costume is a bodily practice engaged in articulations of identity as it ‘situates the actor within systems of fashion, categories of social identity (such as gender or class) or social relations of power’.¹ Costume is ubiquitous in performance yet the lack of scholarship positioned ‘at a critical level’ (in distinction to histories of dress or the techniques of costume-making) is a notable absence in theatre studies.² Costume scholar Donatella Barbieri questions ‘why so little has been written about costume throughout its long history’.³ What Barbieri terms the ‘elusiveness’ of costume is partly due to ‘the physical disappearance of the material costume’ following the conclusion of performance.⁴ The disappearance also marks a critical tendency to subsume the work of costume into the work of the actor – overlooking the material garment itself and the labour of costume professionals. When costume *is* preserved in the archive, it is often because of its association with a celebrity or performer rather than a reflection of the practice of costuming (a tendency Duncan also identifies in relation to the archiving of props).⁵

¹ Aoife Monks, ‘Introduction’, in *Costume: Readings in Theatre Practice*, by Ali Maclaurin and Aoife Monks (London: Palgrave, 2015), pp. 1-6 (p. 3).

² For instance, James Laver’s foundational work *A Concise History of Costume and Fashion* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1969).

³ Donatella Barbieri, *Costume in Performance: Materiality, Culture, and the Body* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. xxii.

⁴ Barbieri, *Costume in Performance*, p. xxii.

⁵ Duncan, *Shakespeare’s Props*, p. 18.

The tactile proximity of body and garment frequently renders costume ‘an ideologically invisible practice’ that ‘reced[es] into the identity politics of “the body”’.⁶ This critical phenomenon has been particularly observed in the adjacent disciplines of fashion and dress studies. Fashion scholar Joanne Entwistle critiques the tendency of ‘the *dressed body* as a discursive and phenomenological field [to] vanish’: ‘Either the body is thought to be self-evidently dressed (and therefore beyond discussion) or the clothes are assumed to stand up on their own, possibly even speaking for themselves without the aid of the body’.⁷ The omission of the dressed body in accounts of performance also permeates theatre studies; for instance, Colette Conroy’s *Theatre & the Body* (2010) mentions costume only once in her survey of the field of corporeality and performance.⁸ In the last five years, the dual influences of new materialism (particularly an attentiveness to the dynamism of encounters between humans and objects) and third-wave feminist approaches to gender performativity have prompted a shift in critical approaches to costume. No longer conceived as ‘a symptom of bodily representation’, costuming is understood to be a ‘critical act’.⁹ Critical approaches to costume (also referred to as ‘critical costume’) address ‘the interdisciplinary tensions that score how costume is encountered, conceived and articulated’.¹⁰ Understood thus, costuming is conceived as a complex nexus of the material and corporeal, intimately entwined with processes of gendering.

⁶ Rachel Hann, ‘Debating Critical Costume: Negotiating Ideologies of Appearance, Performance, and Disciplinarity’, *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 39 (2019), 21-37 (p. 28).

⁷ Joanne Entwistle, ‘The Dressed Body’, in *Body Dressing (Dress, Body, Culture)*, ed. by Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (Oxford: Berg, 2001), pp. 33-58 (p. 36). Italics in original.

⁸ Colette Conroy, *Theatre & the Body* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 51.

⁹ Hann, ‘Debating Critical Costume’, p. 21.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 27.

This chapter frames costuming as a gendered practice: first, because of its meaning-making potential as a facet of characterisation; second, because it is a practice of a female-dominated industry that draws upon skills associated with epistemological domains traditionally coded as feminine. A material site of collaborative meaning-making, costuming stands as a productive practice to begin an investigation into the interrelationships between gender, materiality, and agency in theatrical production.

The observation of live costume practice by the embedded researcher offers an insight into the labour of (female) costume professionals frequently obscured in accounts of theatrical production. This chapter draws upon my engagement with the activities of the costume team as they contributed to the production of The Theatre Chipping Norton's 2017-18 pantomime, *Sleeping Beauty*. The examination of live practice provides the opportunity to examine the dynamics of costuming at different stages of theatrical production. In the workroom I observed the costume team as they designed, made, and fitted the pantomime costumes. Then, positioned in the auditorium of the theatre, I was able to trace how the activities of the workroom informed the process of rehearsals and performance (both undertaken onstage).

Written by seasoned pantomime writer and performer Andrew Pollard and directed by The Theatre Chipping Norton's artistic director John Terry, *Sleeping Beauty* is representative of the theatre's annual seasonal offering. The Theatre Chipping Norton's pantomime is the 'longest running and largest annual production' made 'in-house'.¹¹ As discussed in the introduction, the bedrock of the theatre economy, pantomime accounts for approximately 20% of all live performance that takes place each year in the UK, with around

¹¹ 'Our History', *The Theatre Chipping Norton website*.

260 productions playing simultaneously across the festive period. As is the case for many regional venues, the income generated by ticket sales from the pantomime play a vital role in financing the year-round programming of the theatre. The Theatre Chipping Norton, recognising the value of the pantomime to their operations, prides itself on producing an original script and music each year along with new sets and costumes and strictly no celebrity performers: 'We don't hire anything, we don't reuse anything, and it's all tailor made'.¹² By contrast, many theatres rely on the services of commercial production companies who specialise in pantomime, such as Qdos or Entertainment First, to deliver their festive entertainment.¹³ These production companies provide a template for a pantomime, replete with pre-made costumes, props, and sets, that can be remounted on different scales to meet the particular needs of a theatre.¹⁴ The Theatre Chipping Norton thus distinguishes its productions from these outsourced pantomimes by foregrounding their commitment to producing all elements of the production 'in-house'. Since commencing as Artistic Director of The Theatre Chipping Norton in 2008, Terry has selected the story, co-conceived the script, and directed the pantomime. The material resources of the theatre are utilised in full-force each year to ensure the continued popularity of The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime. The 2017-18 production of *Sleeping Beauty* featured

¹² John Terry, interview with Katy Hammond, 'Sleeping Beauty', *Daily Info Oxford*, 20th November 2017, <https://www.dailyinfo.co.uk/events/189284/sleeping-beauty?site_pref=mobile> [accessed 26th November 2017].

¹³ At the Royal & Derngate, for instance, a commercial Qdos pantomime runs concurrently in the Derngate to a self-produced family show in the Royal, representing the diversity of Christmas entertainment presented for different audiences at the venue.

¹⁴ Phillip B. Zarrilli, 'British Pantomime: How "Bad" Theatre Remains Popular', in *Theatre Histories: An Introduction*, second edition, ed. by Phillip B. Zarrilli, Bruce McConachie, Gary Jay Williams, and Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 347-353 (pp. 348-9). For a nuanced analysis of the activities of commercial pantomime production companies see Martina Lipton, 'Celebrity Versus Tradition: "Branding" in Modern British Pantomime', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 23 (2007), 136-151 (pp. 137-141).

original music by Harry Sever, set designs by Max Dorey, and costume designs by Emily Stuart.

My discussion of costuming as a gendered practice is structured in two parts. The first part of the chapter takes my observation of the activities of the costume workroom at The Theatre Chipping Norton to consider how tactile entanglements of costume, costume professionals, and performers enact distributive models of agency. Bodies and costumes are shown to both shape, and be shaped by, their interactions with the other. The embodied collaborations that emerge are not just between costume and performer, but between costume and costume professional. The second part of the chapter uses the example of the theatre's production of *Sleeping Beauty* to address how the work of the costume designer (and other members of the costume team) contributes to the processual construction of the gender identity of character. Of particular interest is how costume makes gender legible within the conventions of characterisation in the pantomime form (i.e. to what extent the representation of a particular formation of womanliness conforms or challenges traditional pantomimic stereotypes). I discuss how the revisionist desire of the production team to rework these stereotypes in The Theatre Chipping Norton production of *Sleeping Beauty* is placed in tension with the normative gendering of character that emerges from the costume assemblage. Bringing the activities of the workroom and rehearsal together, this chapter seeks to illuminate the complexity of the gendering processes enacted through the costume assemblage, while arguing for an understanding of the distributive model of agency enacted across its diverse actants, highlighting the work of the costume team.

Part One: Creating Costumes

The overt materiality of the pantomime and its traditional affordance for gender-play situates The Theatre Chipping Norton production of *Sleeping Beauty* as a fruitful case study for this chapter. Indeed, the ‘inventiveness of the costume design’ is recognised by many theatre-goers as ‘the highlight of any panto’, drawing particular attention to the work of costume teams in a manner unparalleled in most other forms of theatrical entertainment.¹⁵ The pantomime has historically been overlooked as an object of study with many scholars characterising it as “‘bad” theatre’ that has endured due to ‘popular’ taste rather than artistic merit.¹⁶ The work of Michael R. Booth, continued by theatre historians including Jim Davis and Katherine Newey, has revitalised interest in popular forms of nineteenth-century performance which has, in turn, induced a new wave of work on music hall, burlesque, melodrama, and, of particular relevance to this chapter, pantomime.¹⁷ These forms of popular entertainment epitomise the nineteenth-century appetite for theatrical spectacle. They have accordingly directed scholarly attention to the material conditions of production. However, mirroring a tendency that underpins theatre studies

¹⁵ Catherine Kodicek, ‘For Us Costume Pros, the Festive Season is a Time to Inspire’, *The Stage*, 23rd November 2017, <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/2017/catherine-kodicek-us-costume-pros-festive-season-time-inspire/>> [accessed 1st December 2019].

¹⁶ Zarrilli, ‘British Pantomime’, p. 347.

¹⁷ Michael R. Booth, *English Plays of the Nineteenth Century: V. Pantomimes, Extravaganzas and Burlesques* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); Michael R. Booth, ‘A Defence of Nineteenth-Century English Drama’, *Educational Theatre Journal*, 26 (1974), 5-13 (pp. 7, 9, 12); *Victorian Pantomime: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Jim Davis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); As the Principal Investigator of the project ‘A Cultural History of English Pantomime, 1837-1901’ (funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) from October 2009 to June 2012), Katherine Newey has published widely on gender, technology, and the body in nineteenth-century pantomime including ‘Bubbles of the Day: The Melodramatic and the Pantomimic’, in *Politics, Performance and Popular Culture: Theatre and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by Peter Yeandle, Katherine Newey, and Jeffrey Richards (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 59-74.

more widely, this attention has been focussed primarily on scenic and scenographic innovations, hence orientating the study of pantomime toward the field of technology and performance rather than costume studies.¹⁸ Indeed, Booth characterises pantomime as a ‘creature[...] of technology’; the dramatic structure and material conditions of performance shaped by ‘new materials, new stage machinery, and new methods of lighting’.¹⁹ When costuming is addressed in the context of pantomime, analysis tends to be performance-focussed and discusses the innovations introduced to the form by specific performers – particularly those who played the traditionally cross-dressed roles of Dame and Principal Boy.²⁰ Therefore, the activities of the costume professionals whose practice supported these innovations are largely obscured. Observation of the live practices of theatrical production of The Theatre Chipping Norton’s pantomime thus prompts a redirection of critical focus to the costume workroom to provide a fuller account of the gendering processes of the interrelationships between costume and gender in twenty-first-century pantomime.

In the weeks leading up to the premiere of The Theatre Chipping Norton’s 2017-18 pantomime, preparations took place across the entirety of the theatre building. Rehearsals were run onstage, or in improvised break-out spaces when the auditorium was required by the sound and lighting teams. Props were made and stored in the theatre’s bar – the tables

¹⁸ For instance, Christopher Baugh, *Theatre, Performance and Technology: The Development and Transformation of Scenography*, second edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 20, 200, 242.

¹⁹ Michael R. Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre, 1850-1910* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 65.

²⁰ Jim Davis, “‘Slap On! Slap Ever!’: Victorian Pantomime, Gender Variance, and Cross-Dressing”, *NTQ: New Theatre Quarterly*, 30 (2014), 218-230; Caroline Radcliffe, ‘Dan Leno: Dame of Drury Lane’, in *Victorian Pantomime: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Jim Davis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 118-134.

pushed to one side to accommodate the twisting ropes and faux leaves of the vines that overgrow the castle while its inhabitants slumber. The costumes were made in a small room situated above the stage accessed by a narrow flight of stairs. More frequently used for rehearsals, the space is transformed into a temporary workroom each year to accommodate the work of the costume team. The allocation of the largest self-contained space in the theatre (aside from the auditorium) to this work reflects the production team's recognition of the scale and importance of the task of creating the costumes for the pantomime. Even in the context of the small-scale theatre, the costume team requires significant working space to accommodate three sewing machines, an overlocker (a pedal-operated machine used to neaten the raw edges of seams and prevent textiles from fraying), rails to hang the completed costumes, and large tables upon which to cut out the fabric pieces to be constructed into garments (see Figure 1). The team assembled to costume the 2017 pantomime production of *Sleeping Beauty* was comprised of costume designer, Emily Stuart, and two skilled costume-makers, Laura Le Bayon and Rebecca Clark. Their work was supported on an ad hoc basis by volunteers from the local community who helped with a set of tasks that could be undertaken remotely in their homes, including crocheting woollen flowers to decorate the skirt of the Good Fairy of pantomime, here named Fairy Flax.

During the final stages of preparation for the production in November 2017, I embedded myself in the costume workroom to observe the activities of the costume team. I assisted in the making of several garments (drawing upon my own professional experience as a costume-maker and wardrobe manager). After two weeks spent in the workroom, I observed onstage technical rehearsals for the production from the theatre's auditorium to examine how the costumes functioned when introduced to the work of the performers. Having characterised my role as an embedded researcher as that of 'participant-observer',

my active contribution to the costume team's labour for The Theatre Chipping Norton's pantomime emphasises the participatory aspect of my research methodology. My analysis of the costume assemblage is thus rooted in my practical expertise as a costume professional.



Figure 1 The costume workroom at The Theatre Chipping Norton as arranged for preparations for the 2017-18 pantomime *Sleeping Beauty*. (Photograph taken by author).

'A very triffid-like totter': Collaborating with Costume from Fitting Room to Stage

Amongst the preparatory activities that took place in the costume workroom for the *Sleeping Beauty* pantomime, an emerald green fishtail gown created for the Bad Fairy character, Belladonna Bindweed, was a particular focus of the team. In the course of fittings and dress rehearsals (in which the actors run the production in full costume), the interplay of the gown and the embodied performance of the actor cast as Belladonna (Erica Guyatt)

generated a rich series of interactions between material garment, costume team, and performer that shaped the meaning emergent from the costume assemblage. The affective dynamics enacted between these participants in the costume assemblage, taken together, model a distributive expression of creative agency in the theatre-making process.

Before commencing the task of making the pantomime costumes, Stuart presented her designs to the two makers, Clark and Le Bayon, and they divided the work according to their respective strengths. Unlike a large-scale costume department that has specialists in womenswear, menswear, and tailoring, the intimate scale of production at The Theatre Chipping Norton necessitated that the makers had a diverse and flexible skillset. The construction of Belladonna's highly-structured gown was technically complex. The strapless bodice was corseted and demanded expertise in handling highly-structured garments in order to achieve a precise fit. The full-length fishtail skirt also demanded an attentiveness to fit. It was designed to hug the hips of the wearer, pulling the knees together, before flaring out at the ankles. Constructed from a heavy emerald green satin layered over a sturdy calico structure (textiles both sourced by Stuart ahead of production), the garment presented for Guyatt's fitting was the result of a complex and time-consuming making process. It was decided that Le Bayon would create the costume drawing upon her specialisation in making period costume and corsetry.

The basic structure of the gown had already been constructed when I arrived in the workroom and was ready for its first fitting with Guyatt. The fittings took place in the corner of the room using a screen that could be drawn around a mirror to give the actor privacy as they changed. The practices of a costume fitting conventionally commence with the costume-maker and/or designer explaining the intricacies of the costume to the performer. The garment is then tried on. Once the performer is dressed, the designer lists the

alterations to the garments that they perceive to be necessary ahead of performance. These are recorded in a written list and marked onto the costume by the maker using pins or tailor's chalk. The maker may also mark alterations prompted by their own observation of the fit of the garments informed by their specialist skillset. The marked garments are then returned to the workroom so that the alterations can be undertaken to prepare the costumes for technical rehearsals and, ultimately, performance. It is conventional for elements of garments to be left unfinished so they can be precisely altered to the proportions of the wearer's body. For instance, Le Bayon had left the skirt of the fishtail gown unhemmed so it could be adjusted to the height of the actor. The lining had also not been secured to the shell of the dress so that alterations could be made to the size and shape of the bodice before the seams were concealed.

The purposes of a fitting are threefold. First, in pragmatic terms, it is a process that ensures the garments constructed by the team fit the body of the performer. The second purpose of a fitting is to ensure that the designer is satisfied that the materialisation of their designs by the costume-makers adheres to their vision for the costuming of a production – a recognition of the makers' creative agency in the costuming process which I discuss in the following section. Finally, the fitting also provides the actor with an opportunity to interact with their costumes, often for the first time. This interaction gives the performer a sense of how the garments might affect their performance which might inform their process of characterisation. In their discussion of the relationship between actor and costume, Patricia Lennox and Bella Mirabella describe the significance of this moment: 'Actors say they never fully get the character until they see themselves in the costume and make-up' and sometimes it is a single detail such as the 'right boot' that 'is enough to make the character

click'.²¹ However, countering Lennox and Mirabella's account of the harmonious relationship between costume and actor, Monks relates that it is commonplace for performers to conceive of their costumes in the terms of an 'obstacle that must be overcome and understood by the actor through the acquisition and practice of technique'.²² It is certainly in these terms that costume is most frequently addressed in studies focussed on embodied performance. One of just three references made to costume in Simon Shepherd's *Theatre, Body and Pleasure* (2006) casts costume as an obstruction to the work of the performer. He describes how a garment might 'constrain muscle groups by tightness or weight', modifying the 'muscular activity' of the body.²³ Conceiving of costume as 'obstacle' casts the material element of production as a hindrance to the (supposedly otherwise) unhindered performance of the actor. The first encounter of actor and costume in the fitting room certainly resonates with this notion of costume as an obstacle to embodied performance.

Once Le Bayon had helped Guyatt into the costume, the actor voiced her concern that the tightness of the gown might restrict her movements in the performance sequences practised with director Terry in the rehearsal room. She was particularly anxious about her ability, of lack thereof, to lower her body into a seated position. The clothes worn in rehearsal are conventionally loose fitting and constructed from textiles with generous stretch properties to accommodate the wide range of bodily movements that might be

²¹ Patricia Lennox and Bella Mirabella, 'Introduction', in *Shakespeare and Costume*, ed. by Patricia Lennox and Bella Mirabella (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015), pp. 1-8 (p. 2).

²² Aoife Monks, 'Virtuosity, Craft and Technique in the Work of Costume', in *Costume: Readings in Theatre Practice*, by Ali Maclaurin and Aoife Monks (London: Palgrave, 2015), pp. 69-103 (p. 80).

²³ Simon Shepherd, *Theatre, Body and Pleasure* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 84.

required of the performer. In contrast, the gown pulled Guyatt's knees close together and the rigidity of the stiff satin and highly-structured bodice held her torso upright. She noted her apprehension that the costume would limit the range of physical expression she might be able to access in performance and this would require her to rework elements of the rehearsed action. Guyatt discussed with Stuart and Le Bayon the possibility of opening up the seams of the dress in order to loosen its fit. Indeed, a technical convention of costume-making that distinguishes it from non-theatrical dressmaking is to accommodate a large seam allowance when cutting out the fabric pieces. This means that, when the pieces are assembled, the usual width of a seam ($\frac{1}{2}$ inch) is doubled to 1 inch. The convention allows costumes to be let out (or taken in) during the fitting and alteration process by unpicking the stitching and easing more fabric into the garment.

However, Stuart was concerned that loosening the gown would change its fit on the body and potentially diminish the aesthetic effectiveness of the costume. She explained that her design was intended to convey Belladonna's role as the villainous pantomime fairy by elongating and emphasising the angularity of the performer's figure. Stuart noted that she had been inspired by the stylization of the proportions of the 'baddies' in Disney animations such as Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). Although the casting process took place after Stuart had finalised her designs, Guyatt's height and slim frame conformed to the designer's visual characterisation of the Bad Fairy in her illustration of the costume. With the designer reluctant to compromise their vision by altering the fit of the dress, Le Bayon reassured Guyatt that the costume would gradually mould to her body. Through repeated wear in performance, the heat and pressure generated by the actor's body would cause the fibres of the synthetic textile to stretch, increasing both the comfort and mobility permitted by the costume.

Guyatt's professionalism meant that she was content to defer to the expertise of the costume team. The challenges the costume posed to her rehearsed performance were raised with Terry by designer and actor and Guyatt was allocated time onstage in costume to practise moving within the space. She paid particular attention to the sequences where she was expected to sit down on either a pantomimic oversized toadstool or a stool set before the spinning wheel Belladonna uses to curse the 'Sleeping Beauty' character (named Princess Rose in The Theatre Chipping Norton production) (see Figure 2). Guyatt practised lowering her body onto the stool, familiarising herself with the height of the object so she could control her descent. While her movements were tentative at first, she quickly developed a technique for sitting down and standing up fluidly. With practise, her concern about the constraints that the costume might have enforced on her performance were alleviated. This process of consolidation was not simply one of the actor's mastery over the material obstacle of the costume. A review of the production emphasises the role of the gown in the co-constitution of Guyatt's embodied characterisation of Belladonna Bindweed; 'the evil Belladonna Bindweed was constrained by an emerald green dress which effectively tied her knees together' giving her 'a very triffid-like totter'.²⁴ Drawing upon the character's horticultural namesake, the review compares the actor's movements, caused by the narrow cut of the dress, to the tottering shuffle of the titular carnivorous plants that feature in John Wyndham's 1951 novel *The Day of the Triffids*, which has been visualised in an iconic cinematic adaptation.²⁵ The review implicitly foregrounds a reciprocal dynamic between actor and costume. It is the fishtail gown that is identified as the agent that ties the actor's

²⁴ Heather Kay, 'Panto Time Travelling from Tudor Rose to Flower Power', *Daily Info Oxford*, 20th November 2017, <https://www.dailyinfo.co.uk/events/189284/sleeping-beauty?site_pref=mobile> [accessed 26/11/17].

²⁵ *The Day of the Triffids*, dir. by Steve Sekely (UK: Security Pictures, 1962).

knees together, exerting its force on Guyatt's body through its material properties. The costume is understood to co-constitute meaning in performance not solely through the visual references, colour, and form of the garment, but in the ways that the materiality of the costume actively structures the embodied performance of the dressed actor.



Figure 2 Guyatt comfortably sitting in Belladonna Bindweed's gown during dress rehearsals. (Photo credit to Josh Tomalin, used with the permission of The Theatre Chipping Norton).

Costuming must therefore be conceived as a bodily practice engaged not only in representational adornment, but material-corporeal performance. Body and costume are active participants in this practice; the body is not a passive mannequin to be dressed, nor is the costume bent to the will of the performer and creative team. The interaction between the two is better understood as a process of reciprocal negotiation in which each must accommodate the physicality of the other. This co-constitution of material-corporeal performance is particularly evident in the example of costumes that are unfamiliar or distinct from the wearer's everyday experience of dress; for instance, period costume or

avant-garde design. This thinking underpins the work of the highly-skilled and specialised costume team at the Globe Theatre in London who follow the notion of ‘Original Practices’ in their creation of period dress. The principle of this practice is to create garments employing a methodology that utilises, as closely as possible, the same techniques and materials as those that would have been used in early modern dressmaking and theatrical production. ‘Original Practices’ are often more time-consuming and demand a distinct skillset than that developed in contemporary costume construction. However, they are pursued precisely because of a widely-shared conviction amongst costume professionals that the form of a garment plays a significant role in co-producing the bodily practices of the performer.²⁶ The cut of a corset, width of a skirt, weight of a hat or headpiece, and stiffness of a ruff will all have implications for embodied performance – implications that might prompt the performer to adopt or mimic historical bodily practices onstage. The affective dynamics of costume are not just employed by designers in the context of historical accuracy, but also when striving for artistic innovation. Pablo Picasso’s avant-garde designs for the Ballets Russes’ 1917 ballet *Parade* costumed two dancers in oversized, boxy structures that vastly extended beyond the proportions of their bodies. Flat, geometric planes were arranged to depict stylized figures conceived in a mode akin to Picasso’s Cubist portraiture and sculpture. The dancers’ legs were the only part of the body exposed from the costume. This posed a significant challenge to the performers and choreographer (Léonide Massine) but also, crucially, an opportunity to develop new modes of gestural

²⁶ Jenny Tiramani spearheaded the employment of Original Practices at Shakespeare’s Globe in London which she discusses in interview with Ali Maclaurin in *Costume Readings in Theatre Practice*, pp. 19-28 (p. 22).

expression appropriate to the avant-garde enterprise.²⁷ The generative role that costume might play alongside the performance of the actor in the co-construction of the characterisation of a role marks the distributive agency at play in the costume assemblage – the same dynamics evidenced in Guyatt’s co-performance with the Belladonna Bindweed gown (albeit in the vastly different context of The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime).

Analysis of the materiality of costume and its relationship to the performing body are foregrounded in discussions of agency within costume studies. In their new materialist approach to costuming the chorus in the 2018 Opéra du Rhin production of Eugene Onegin, Barbieri and Greer Crawley propose that it is ‘particularly through costume that human and non-human materiality are intra-actively entangled’.²⁸ They draw upon philosopher and physicist Karen Barad’s theorisation of agency to argue for ‘the material performativity’ of costume; that is, ‘the way costume matter performs and informs performance making and reception’.²⁹ They find Barad’s notion of ‘intra-actions’ particularly valuable in conceptualising the network of diverse participants (human and nonhuman) engaged in the act of costuming, including the costume designer and costume makers.³⁰ Barad’s neologism (‘intra-actions’ from ‘interactions’) challenges the traditional assumption ‘that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction’.³¹ Agencies are instead understood to materialise through intra-actions – as in the assemblage model discussed in

²⁷ For an account of Massine’s choreographic innovations developed for *Parade* in response to the costumes designed by Picasso see Susan Jones, *Literature, Modernism, and Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 183-194.

²⁸ Donatella Barbieri and Greer Crawley, ‘The Scenographic, Costumed Chorus, Agency and the Performance of Matter: A New Materialist Approach to Costume’, *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, 6 (2019), 143-162 (p. 145).

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 145.

³⁰ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 33.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 33.

the Introduction – arguing for the performativity of matter. In other words, costume does not *have* agency, but participates in a model of distributive agency in collaboration with other human and nonhuman elements. Emergent theories of agency in costume studies are focalised on the intimate relationship between the corporeal and material in the act of costuming (the direct ‘intra-actions’ enacted between body and costume).³² Hann conceptualises this ‘reciprocal relationship between body, material and action’ using the metaphor of the ‘hug of costuming’.³³ For Hann, a hug models the sustained ‘collaboration between distinct agents that act together – as a unit or assemblage – that is categorically temporal as well as physical’.³⁴ Furthermore, the notion of hugging productively corresponds to a number of other dynamics related to the processes of costuming:

A theory of hugging... retains a distinction between demarcated boundaries, while also recognizing the shared qualities of the agents involved. Yet, the experience of a hug is always fully understood from within: to observe a hug is to be ontologically removed from the immediacy of the hugging event... [Likewise, to] understand the event of costume is to understand how the intimate relationship of material and body sustains action through qualities of tension, texture and pliability.³⁵

Hann’s conceptual ‘hug of costuming’ is understood in the new materialist terms of collaborative agency enacted through the costume assemblage. The metaphor recognises the particular efficacies and forces of both the non-human (costume) and human (actor) in the embodied, as well as signifying, components of costuming. While Hann’s model is performance focussed, I argue that such inclusive modelling of costuming might be used to foreground the creative labour of designer and maker and *their* engagement with the material costume. For instance, the events of Guyatt’s fitting provides an example of how

³² See Rachel Grew, ‘Interplays of Body and Costume’, *Studies in Costume & Performance*, 4 (2019), 153-157.

³³ Hann, ‘Debating Critical Costume’, pp. 3, 33.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 33.

³⁵ Ibid, pp. 33-4.

the creative authority of the costume team might take priority over other elements of theatrical production. Rather than the costume team altering the dress to accommodate the actor's anxieties about the fit of the garment, it was Guyatt who agreed to rework elements of her rehearsed performance in order to accommodate the effects of the dress on her movements.

The critical framework of the costume assemblage, particularly the distributive model of agency enacted between its diverse elements, prompts an expansive consideration of the actants that co-construct meaning in the act of costuming. These include (but are not limited to) designer, maker, performer, and the costume itself. The diverse 'intra-actions' that constitute the embodied performance of Belladonna Bindweed includes the creative vision of the designer and tactile labour of the costume team, as well as that of performer and director.

The Interpretative Agency of the Costume-Maker

So far I have focussed on the interaction between costume and actor in the context of fittings. My analysis has centred on activities structured around a single costume. This is not to position the journey of the Belladonna Bindweed gown from workroom to stage as a case of exceptionalism. Rather, my observation of the creation of the costume provides a focussed study of the costume assemblage as it operates in the live practice of theatrical production – something facilitated by the particular methodological conditions of this project. I now turn to the dynamics of interpretative agency enacted between designer and costume-maker in the collaborative practice of costuming – another preparatory process that takes place ahead of performance. I examine, particularly, how these dynamics are illuminated through the material costume.

While each designer's process is distinct according to the particularities of their working practice, most will conduct research to inform their costuming of a production. Their designs are expressed through visual material; often hand-drawn or digital illustrations. The illustrations provided by the designer offer a stylised impression of a costume and its wearer. Conventionally, costume designers do not provide technical drawings. The designs are commonly completed before the casting of a production, so the designer is frequently unable to anticipate how the garment might fit the actual proportions of a particular actor's body. Furthermore, it is conventional to only provide a front view of a costume (unless there is a striking detail on the side or back of a garment that the designer wants the maker to achieve in the materialisation of their design) (see Figures 3 & 4). The process of materialising a costume from a two-dimensional illustration to a three-dimensional garment therefore rests on the interpretative authority and skilled practice of the costume-maker. Costume-makers are tasked with working out the specifics of construction – a highly-skilled process informed by their formal training, past experience, the visual cues of the design illustration, a knowledge of dress history, and the properties of materials. The decisions they make in the course of this process assert the maker's creative agency as co-designers of the material form of the costume. These decisions often play a significant role in shaping the function of a garment in performance – something I have discussed in relation to my observation of the fitting of Belladonna Bindweed's fishtail gown.

A close examination of the gown ahead of fittings suggested how certain decisions undertaken in the making process were likely to shape the actor's embodied performance when worn. The rigidity of the boning selected to structure the corseted bodice, combined with the placement of the narrow channels that held it in place, indicated the extent to

which the costume was likely to impact the mobility of the performer's torso. These details were not included in Stuart's design and were left to the discretion of the maker. A comparison of the made costume with Stuart's illustration also reveals that Le Bayon (the maker) dramatically altered the silhouette of the gown in the course of construction. In the design, the dress has a short bodice that is closely fitted to the waist to echo the cut of a 1950s evening gown (see Figure Four). However, the bodice of the made costume was constructed using panelled pieces that extended in a continuous line from bust to skirt. The changes created a more structured, angular silhouette – an adaptation to the design undertaken by the maker that Stuart felt elongated the body of the performer in line with her vision of the character. Working as an embedded researcher in the costume workroom thus provided the opportunity to engage critically with costume as a material object.

Barbieri also considers the methodological value of examining costume when divorced from the bodily dynamics of performance. Unlike this study of live practice, her discussion addresses unworn costume in the context of the archive rather than the costume workroom. She argues that '[a]s costume is routinely subsumed into the "already dressed" body of the actor in critical discourse, this separation of costume from the performer is a place from where to begin to articulate the performativity of [the archive costume itself]'.³⁶ The performativity of the costume is here evidenced in the way that the material properties of an archived garment infer how it was shaped by, and might have shaped, performance. For Barbieri, close attentiveness to the materiality of the costume 'as a made-object', facilitated by the nature of the encounter between researcher and garment in the archive

³⁶ Donatella Barbieri, 'Performativity and the Historical Body: Detecting Performance Through the Archived Costume', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 33 (2013), 281-301 (p. 284).

rather than performance, permits the historic costume 'to show its agency'.³⁷ Similarly, writing about an encounter in the archive with a Salomé costume worn by the early twentieth-century dancer Maud Allan, Marlis Schweitzer conceives of the costume as a 'choreographic thing'.³⁸ She adapts Bernstein's notion of the 'scriptive thing' (itself drawing upon Brown's 'thing theory') to propose that certain costumes suggest a set of responses that structure human-object interaction.³⁹ However, even while Schweitzer argues that the 'brassiere-like top' and 'sheer ankle-length brown or purple skirt' co-choreographed Allan's performance, she is reliant on piecemeal accounts of critical reception and static imagery of the costume provided by drawings and photographs. The ephemerality of performance means that how the 'hug' of the Salomé costume was truly enacted is lost to history. Additionally, while Schweitzer notes that Allan designed the costume herself, she does not investigate how the process of materialising the garment (probably undertaken by a skilled individual) might have (intentionally or unintentionally) shaped the dancer's performance as Salomé. If the costume is understood as a choreographic actant, then should the costume-maker also be considered a co-choreographer? Schweitzer's analysis reflects the broader tendency in new materialist enquiries to obscure the interpretative role of the makers of objects, instead focussing on the encounter between user and object. I build upon the arguments of both scholars to suggest that engaging with a costume as a 'made-object' might not solely suggest how the material properties of a garment affect the material-corporeal co-performance of the 'hug of costuming'. Particularly in the context of live practice when the activities of costume professionals are observable, I argue that costume

³⁷ Ibid, p. 282.

³⁸ Schweitzer, "Nothing but a string of beads", p. 36.

³⁹ Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), p. 13.

might evidence the creative agency of designer and maker which is physicalized in the materiality of the garment. When set apart from the body of the actor, the very materiality of the costume illuminates the ways in which the creative agency of costume-maker, as well as designer, is evidenced in theatrical production in a mode of distributive agency.

When asked about the collaborative nature of costume work, Stuart emphasised the specialization of labour within the industry: 'I couldn't make one of my own costumes because that's not what my training is and, at the same time, a costume-maker couldn't design a costume the way I could because that's not what their training is'.⁴⁰ The collaboration between Stuart, Le Bayon, and Clark was facilitated by the intimate proportions of the costume workroom at The Theatre Chipping Norton. The spatial proximity between one another throughout the course of production meant that they were able to confer throughout the process. The collaborative and open atmosphere of the workroom allowed the makers to suggest certain modifications to costumes – particularly relating to cut and fit – and undermines the notion of the sole interpretative authority of the designer. The costuming of a production rests on a back-and-forth between designer and maker(s) in which the authority of each is foregrounded in different moments and in distinct ways. The creative vision of the designer is foregrounded in the conceptual vision for the costume and its manifestation in their illustrations while the creative interpretation of the costume-maker is primarily enacted through the construction of garments and their subsequent affective dynamics as participants in the course of theatrical production.

⁴⁰ Emily Stuart, interview with author (telephone, 11th December 2019).

Hierarchies of Theatrical Labour: Costuming as Gendered Practice

As demonstrated in my discussion of costuming The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime, a costume team is commonly comprised of individuals tasked with different roles that encompass diverse practices and forms of expertise. Costume-making is often conceived as the practical labour employed in service to the creative vision of the designer. The two are placed in a hierarchy of production in which the former is characterised as craft and, the latter, artistic expression.⁴¹ This hierarchical valuation of costume work sits within a broader anti-material discourse surrounding theatrical labour. For instance, Monks recognises that theatre-makers commonly describe their ‘practices as “serving” the work’.⁴² Here, ‘the work’ is understood in Barthesian terms as an immaterial cultural representation ‘that exists beyond the purview of the stage, which is served and made manifest by the material structures of the theatre’.⁴³ In other words, the costumes, set, lighting, and even the actors themselves are the material means through which this immaterial ‘work’ is facilitated (or, potentially hindered if executed unsuccessfully). The rhetorical framework of the service of labour is thus closely related to the spectral metaphor frequently evoked by actors who conceive of themselves as a ‘conduit’, ‘vessel’, or ‘medium mediating between the author and the audience’ in performance.⁴⁴ Monks argues that within the rhetoric of servicing the work, there exists a ‘hierarchy of makers’ that structures perceptions of theatrical production within the industry.⁴⁵ She explains that the ‘more material’ the

⁴¹ See Aoife Monks, ‘In Defence of Craft: A Manifesto’, *Scene*, 2 (2014), 175-8 (p. 176).

⁴² Monks, ‘Virtuosity, Craft and Technique in the Work of Costume’, p. 71.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 71.

⁴⁴ Mary Luckhurst, ‘Giving Up the Ghost: The Actor’s Body as Haunted House’, in *Theatre and Ghosts: Materiality, Performance and Modernity*, ed. by Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 163-177 (p. 171).

⁴⁵ Monks, ‘Virtuosity, Craft and Technique in the Work of Costume’, p. 73.

practice of a theatre professional is perceived to be, 'the "lower" down the scale they go'.⁴⁶ The sliding scale of the value of theatrical labour places the supposedly 'immaterial' intellectual work of the director and playwright at one end. The work of the costume-maker, their labour literally entangled with the material through their tactile engagement with textiles, is placed at the other. The costume designer, their creative 'immaterial' vision more closely related to a material element of stagecraft (costume), sits somewhere between the two. The scale of service thus intersects with other gendered hierarchies of production including the distinct values attributed to fine art and craft practices, or the value placed on individualistic 'genius' versus collective group production. Within this ideological context of theatre-making, the creative agency of the costume-maker is almost always subsumed under that of the designer (whose labour, in turn, is often subsumed under the creative agency of the director) in reviews and theatre scholarship.

Perhaps the most significant factor at play in the marginalisation of costume work in theatre scholarship, and within the theatre industry itself, is its characterisation as a form of women's practice. The gender politics of labour underpin intersecting hierarchies of cultural production including the conceptualisation of costuming as a craft in 'service' to a production. In her feminist study of women's embroidery, *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), Rozsika Parker highlights the 'important connection between the hierarchy of the arts', outlined by Monks in the art/craft divide of theatrical production, 'and the sexual categories male/female'.⁴⁷ The persistent characterisation of textile labour as a traditionally 'feminine' skill associated with the activities of the (feminised) domestic sphere, contributes to the continued devaluation of costume labour today. While the gendering of the twenty-first-

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 73.

⁴⁷ Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, p. 5.

century theatrical workforce is becoming less rigid, costume continues to be a female-dominated industry. In a 2015 pay survey of costume professionals conducted by the Costume in Theatre Association (CITA), 93% of the total participants identified as women.⁴⁸ Informed by her thirteen years of experience working as Head of Costume at the Young Vic theatre in London (from 2006 to 2019), Catherine Kodicek, is outspoken in her belief that the invisibility and devaluation of costume labour in industry is primarily due to its categorisation as a form of women's labour.⁴⁹ She directly pinpoints the undervaluation of costume work, poor working conditions, and insufficient remuneration of labour to be because 'as a predominantly female workforce [its professionals] are invisible and victim to an unconscious gender bias' that permeates the industry.⁵⁰

Such obscuring of the work of costume professionals is epitomised in the portrait photography of actors in the backstage areas of theatres before performance taken by Simon Annand and collected in the photobook *The Half* (2008).⁵¹ Although his project explicitly focusses on the preparatory state of the actor, Annand occasionally captures the work of the costume professionals whose labour takes place concurrently in the dressing rooms as they help the performers dress, apply make-up, and secure their wigs. Yet, in contrast to the actors whose faces often fill the frames of the photograph in moments of self-reflection, the bodies of the costume workers are fractured. Only their hands are visible

⁴⁸ CITA, 'CITA Pay Survey 2016', online video recording, YouTube, 11th October 2016, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJ5HnvX4YqM> [accessed 4th August 2020].

⁴⁹ Catherine Kodicek, interview with author (London, 9th December 2019).

⁵⁰ Catherine Kodicek, 'Let's Have a Grown-Up Conversation About How We Pay Costume Supervisors', *The Stage*, 29th January 2019, <www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/catherine-kodicek-lets-have-a-grown-up-conversation-about-how-we-pay-costume-supervisors/> [accessed 4th August 2020].

⁵¹ Simon Annand, *The Half: Photographs of Actors Preparing for the Stage* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).

as they pin back a wig, lace an actor's corset, or deftly fastened a costume. The cropping of their bodies fetishizes their hands as tools of labour and converts individuality into a sign only of profession – while the captions of photographs tell the reader the name of the actor, production, date, and location of the photograph, the dressers remain unnamed and unidentified. The dresser is an accessory to the actor's process, their hands serving a purely aesthetic function in the artful composition of the image.

The aestheticisation of backstage labour has been employed distinctly by scholars as a conceptual framework to recover theatrical work marginalised in many accounts of theatrical production, including Annand's photographic series. Addressing the work of spotlight operators and stagehands, Christin Essin proposes the value of 'an aesthetic of backstage labor'.⁵² She is particularly interested in the value of 'a vocabulary of bodily engagement typically associated with onstage performance' that might render the theatre professionals hidden behind the wings, 'not just visible but visually appealing'.⁵³ Essin, like Schweitzer, promotes the discursive power of the choreographic. However, rather than applying her insight to the context of dance onstage, she conceives of the work of follow-spot operators as 'offstage choreography' – their movements 'a mirror to the exertions of their acting, singing, dancing colleagues'.⁵⁴ Essin's championing of the value of backstage labour asserts a valuable intervention in theatre and performance studies. Just as choreography describes the practised sequenced movements enacted by the dancers' bodies onstage, in Essin's conceptualisation of labour, it also references the ways that the

⁵² Christin Essin, 'An Aesthetic of Backstage Labor', *Theatre Topics*, 21 (2011), 33-47 (p. 35).

⁵³ Christin Essin, 'Unseen Labor and Backstage Choreographies: A Materialist Production History of *A Chorus Line*', *Theatre Journal*, 67 (2015), 197-212 (p. 199); *Ibid*, p. 35.

⁵⁴ Essin, 'Unseen Labor and Backstage Choreographies', p. 200.

bodies of backstage professionals are structured by their engagement with performance—be it operating lighting equipment, moving around the backstage area to assist the actors with their costumes, or manipulating set pieces from the wings. Yet, I suggest that recovering backstage work using aesthetic discourse associated with the representational action of performance has the potential to re-inscribe existing hierarchies of theatrical labour. By describing the embodied practices of backstage work as ‘offstage choreography’, Essin’s analysis equates the function of this labour with the labour of performance. The choreographic rhetoric privileges the role of the body in processes of theatrical labour – the primary ‘material’ of this work conceived as the body in motion. Such a preoccupation with the corporeal evoked through the choreographic must inevitably privilege the activities of actors, dancers, and other performers whose embodied work is enacted visibly onstage for an audience. The distinct context of the two forms of work are thus elided, as they are aestheticized and conceived as representational process of signification – a critical impetus that diminishes the specificities of each form of theatrical labour.

In contradistinction, my recovery of costume labour utilises a new materialist framework to conceive of a distributive agency enacted between material costume, costume professionals, and performer. This model understands the act of costuming as a continuous process that extends from the workroom to the stage. By dismantling a strict division between onstage and backstage theatrical labour, agency is located in the shared co-constitution of theatrical production rather than the attempt to equalise labour through a shared language of aestheticisation. The value of the work of costume is not placed in its mirroring of performance but the affective dynamics that emerge from the costume assemblage itself. A new materialist approach to theatrical labour that examines the interaction between costume professional and costume might then provide a

methodological lens and critical framework within which to recentralise the activities of costume professionals. Through observations of the practices of the costume team engaged in staging *Sleeping Beauty* at The Theatre Chipping Norton, I recognise the role of the costume team, particularly Stuart and Le Bayon, in co-producing the characterisation of Belladonna Bindweed in collaboration with Guyatt. The collaborative labour of the costume team responds to, and is carried by, the materiality of the costume. Through observation of the labour of the workroom, the distributive agency of costuming is evidenced, not only onstage in performance, but in the oft-overlooked offstage activities that also constitute theatrical production.

So far, this chapter has argued for an understanding of costuming as a collaborative gendered and material practice that foregrounds the labour of women within theatrical production. The following section of the chapter moves from the workroom to the stage to consider the role of costume in the gendering of character. Specifically, drawing upon my observation of the technical rehearsals for The Theatre Chipping Norton's production of *Sleeping Beauty*, I examine how the gender politics of pantomime are navigated through costume in the context of twenty-first-century theatre-making.



Figure 3 Stuart's designs displayed on the wall of the costume workshop as a reference for the makers. (Photograph taken by author).



Figure 4 Stuart's designs on the wall of the costume workshop. The illustrations offer a front view of a costume which must be materialised into a three-dimensional garment by the costume maker. (Photograph by author).

Part Two: Costume and the Gender Politics of Contemporary Pantomime

The gender politics of traditional pantomime have been the focus of twenty-first-century anxieties concerning the representation of women and, more broadly, gender expression onstage. The ‘pantomimic stereotypes’ including the ‘dame (weighty, oversexed woman played by a man), prince (clever and handsome, saves the day) and princess (beautiful, needs rescuing)’ have been understood to perpetuate outdated, and at times offensive, characterisations of gendered identities.⁵⁵ The persistence of these gendered pantomimic stereotypes has prompted theatre critic for *The Stage*, Natasha Tripney, to condemn ‘the overt and unremarked-upon sexism’ of many a pantomime script written and produced today.⁵⁶ Recognising the often problematic treatment of gender identity in the form, many theatre-makers tasked with producing pantomime for twenty-first-century audiences engage in experimental processes of revisionism. The reconfiguration of the gender politics of pantomime speaks to a wider impetus in the theatre industry to address issues of representation – particularly when restaging ‘classic’ plays for contemporary audiences (something I discuss in relation to the staging of domestic dramas directed by Lucy Bailey in chapter four). While this chapter focusses on the question of gender, this revisionism is increasingly being turned to problematic representations of race and sexuality in contemporary pantomime, particularly in relation to cultural appropriation in the costume and set designs of productions and in casting practices.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ali De Souza quoted in Simon Sladen, ‘From Mother Goose to Master: Training Networks and Knowledge Transfer in Contemporary British Pantomime’, *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 8 (2017), 206-224 (p. 209).

⁵⁶ Natasha Tripney, ‘There’s No Excuse for the Overt Sexism of Some Pantomimes’, *The Stage*, 15th December 2015, <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/natasha-tripney-theres-no-excuse-for-the-overt-sexism-of-some-pantomimes>> [accessed 21st May 2020].

⁵⁷ See Sladen, ‘From Mother Goose to Master’, pp. 209-210.

Characterisation in pantomime (as in the fairy tales it takes up to provide a narrative framework) trades in archetypes. Drawing upon her experience as a seasoned director of pantomime, Millie Taylor notes that these archetypes are formulated through two frames. The first frame is the 'performance frame' which Taylor terms 'pantoland'.⁵⁸ Pantoland encapsulates the pantomimic stereotypes or stock characters and mode of storytelling that are largely stabilised from production to production. Taylor understands the second frame of contemporary pantomime to be the particular fairy tale (or other well-known) story that structures the narrative of a production. The dual frames of the form gestures back to its theatrical origins in the conventions of the *commedia dell'arte*. Early formulations of pantomime in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century had an 'opener' or narrative introduction (often a fairy tale) that preceded the physical comedy of a harlequinade. Following the conclusion of the opener, the characters transformed into the archetypal figures drawn from the *commedia* who then performed a series of mimed sketches.⁵⁹ Historically the two sets of characters would be played by different performers – the latter trained in specialist physical techniques related to 'slapstick' comedy (the term 'slapstick' itself derived from the magical bat that transforms the opening characters into the pantomimic characters).⁶⁰ Inheriting innovations in the form that took place in the nineteenth century, in the contemporary pantomime two sets of characters are now incorporated into one role played by a single performer. The stock figures of pantoland taken from the *commedia* who 'exist as comic or anarchic personas who comment on the

⁵⁸ Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance*, p. 106.

⁵⁹ Gerald Frow, *"Oh, Yes It Is!": A History of Pantomime* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1985), p. 88.

⁶⁰ John O'Brien, 'Pantomime', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730-1830*, ed. by Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 103-114 (p. 106).

story, the performance, the perceived world of the performers and the audience's lived reality' are also cast in the role of the fairy tale characters.⁶¹ For instance, in The Theatre Chipping Norton production of *Sleeping Beauty*, Princess Rose (the fairy tale princess) is superimposed onto the pantomime role of the Principal Girl (the stock figure derived from Columbine in the *commedia*).

The pantomimic stereotypes stabilised across the centuries through the development of the form are often up taken up and reworked in twenty-first-century productions to readdress the traditional gender politics of the pantomime. The character of Sleeping Beauty, renamed Princess Rose in The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime, has particularly attracted revisionist attention. After all, as Angela Carter notes with her tongue-in-cheek assessment of the princess, 'you couldn't say that Sleepy Beauty was a figure full of get-up-and-go'.⁶² In the version of the fairy tale well-known today (a composite of different national storytelling traditions stabilised in the late nineteenth-century), Beauty is cursed by the Bad Fairy as a baby as revenge for the latter's exclusion from the court. The princess's desire for adventure is curtailed by her protective father until she activates the curse by pricking her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and falls into a deep slumber. The Good Fairy modifies the Bad Fairy's curse so that the princess will be awoken by the reviving kiss of a prince. The story concludes, ultimately, with the marriage of Sleeping Beauty and her rescuer. In her study of women's role in the transmission of fairy tales, Marina Warner points out that this version of the Sleeping Beauty story and the gender stereotypes it perpetuates have been shaped by nineteenth- and twentieth-century sensibilities. She

⁶¹ Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance*, p. 92.

⁶² Angela Carter quoted in Susannah Clapp, 'Angela Carter: Inside the Bloody Chamber', *The Arts Desk*, 24th August 2012, <<https://theartsdesk.com/node/48754/view>> [accessed 3rd December 2020].

particularly notes the marked impact of the animation film created by Disney in 1959 on the contemporary version of the story: 'Disney's vision has affected everybody's idea of fairy tales themselves; until writers and anthologists began looking again [including at the female tellers of fairy tales that are the subject of Warner's study], passive hapless heroines and vigorous wicked older women seemed generic'.⁶³ Warner asserts that tracing alternative traditions of the fairy tale stories alongside feminist revision of the familiar plots, such as those undertaken by Carter in her collection of short stories *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), provides the opportunity to consider women in more active roles within the familiar genre.⁶⁴ This revisionist impetus has also been translated to the stage, specifically in the context of contemporary pantomime. For instance, a 2015 production of *Sleeping Beauty* directed by Sally Cookson for the Bristol Old Vic 'axed' the eponymous heroine because of worries about enforcing gender stereotypes – the princess who is 'beautiful [and] needs rescuing'.⁶⁵ As in Carter's revisionist stories, Cookson's production of *Sleeping Beauty* at the Bristol Old Vic subverts the gender stereotypes of both the fairy tale and pantomime traditions. In this version, it is Prince Percy who pricks his finger on the spindle and awaits rescue from a newly-conceived heroine, Deilen. Cookson's production is just one example of the widespread revisionist approaches to the modern pantomime such as inclusive casting practices, removing misogynistic and racist representations of characters, and avoiding cultural appropriation in the design of settings, and costumes.

⁶³ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 207.

⁶⁴ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1979).

⁶⁵ Helen Horton, "'Sleeping Beauty' Axed from Sleeping Beauty Pantomime because of Gender Stereotypes', *The Telegraph*, 30th November 2015, <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/12024434/Princess-axed-from-Sleeping-Beauty-pantomime-because-of-gender-stereotypes.html>> [accessed 11th April 2018].

The approach taken in The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime, guided by Terry as artistic director of the theatre and director of the annual production, is consistent with the revisionist tendencies of many contemporary theatre-makers. The process of selecting a title each year for the theatre's production is determined by a number of factors including a desire to avoid carrying similar plots or settings across consecutive years. However, in recent years, one of the most significant criteria for Terry in the selection of the fairy tale narrative is the potential to successfully reimagine the gender politics of the traditional story for contemporary audiences. He is particularly mindful of the gender balance of roles available to actors and which characters are allowed to participate actively in the stage action: 'who gets to put mash on who, who gets to win the fight, who gets to lead the numbers, to show off, to have a direct relationship with the audience?'⁶⁶ These questions posed by Terry demonstrate his desire as artistic director and director of The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime to resist the gender stereotypes embedded in the form. His approach has led him to grapple, particularly, with the characterisation of the Principal Girl and the cross-dressed Dame, staple pantomime characters since the nineteenth-century.⁶⁷ Terry's primary strategy to address stereotype is to 'look for a specific time and place' within which to reimagine the story. Decided 'bilaterally' between director and writer, this new specificity of setting provides the context in which the representation and role of the pantomime characters might be reconceptualised. Here, the 'contemporary resonance' of the form is not confined to the employment of a twenty-first-century setting. Indeed, Terry notes that he typically avoids setting his pantomimes in the present day due to concerns that the humour derived from the exaggerated characterisation inherent to the pantomime

⁶⁶ Terry, interview with author (Oxford, 3rd January 2020).

⁶⁷ Zarrilli, 'British Pantomime', p. 350.

form has the potential to ‘take people out of the audience and put inverted commas around them’ – posing the question ‘who are we laughing at?’⁶⁸ Rather, for the director, the introduction of an unexpected historical setting to a production disrupts the conventions of the fairy tale story and provides a new context within which its plot and characters might be ‘reinvented’.⁶⁹

Inspired by the hundred-year-long slumber of the heroine, Terry worked with Pollard to select two decades set apart at intervals of a hundred years for their 2017-18 production of *Sleeping Beauty*. They settled on the 1560s and 1960s; the four-hundred-year gap a result of a comic miscalculation by the fairy godmother (Fairy Flax) when she modifies the curse placed on the princess. Reviewers noted that although the ‘choice of period setting is never really explained beyond the production’s flower theme (Tudor rose and flower power)’ the two decades provided ‘a rich canvas for lavish costume design’.⁷⁰ Certainly, the elaborate dress of the Tudor court and the iconicity of 1960s fashion were well-suited to the over-the-top pantomime aesthetic. However, the selection of these two periods was primarily motivated by Terry and Pollard’s desire to reframe the representation of the Principal Girl, Princess Rose.

In the first act, anachronistic elements are introduced to the Tudor setting to characterise Princess Rose as a football-loving, Walkman-listening princess who longs to explore life beyond the palace gates. Her father, King Lenny (the ‘identical cousin’ of Henry VIII – an epitome of patriarchal authority in English history) attempts to enforce gender

⁶⁸ Terry, interview with author (Oxford, 3rd January 2020).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Hannah Greenstreet, ‘Sleeping Beauty Review at Chipping Norton Theatre – “some comic miscalculations”’, *The Stage*, 16th November 2017, <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2017/sleeping-beauty-review-chipping-norton-theatre-comic-miscalculations/>> [accessed 25th November 2017].

distinctions when he characterises football as a masculine activity unsuitable for a princess: 'It is not the thing for a lady to be doing'.⁷¹ Rose protests, 'Dad, we ladies should be able to do what we want! This is 1567 not 1267!'⁷² Comic anachronisms foreground the use of the reimagined setting as a revisionist tool. Princess Rose is cast as a modern heroine who critiques the conservative gender politics associated with the Tudor court in popular conceptions of English history. The first act of the pantomime follows the traditional plot of the *Sleeping Beauty* fairy tale. Princess Rose is convinced by the Bad Fairy, Belladonna Bindweed, to try her hand at the spinning wheel. Rose pricks her finger and falls under a curse cast by Belladonna to avenge her exclusion from court. The curse is modified by Fairy Flax to save the princess from death. Instead, the heroine is forced to sleep until she is revived from the curse by the kiss of a worthy suitor. The period of sleep is used in The Theatre Chipping Norton production to relocate the action of the second act of the pantomime from the 1560s to the 1960s. The passing of time is a narrative device employed to trace a corresponding line of women's emancipation across the centuries. Princess Rose is awoken in the 1960s by the kiss of the prince character who has been reimagined as a musician, Byron Prince, about to play a concert at 'Chip Stock' (a tongue-in-cheek nod to Woodstock with a regional twist).⁷³ The popular association of the decade with social liberalism (the swinging '60s), provided Pollard and Terry the opportunity to subvert the gender roles of the traditional *Sleeping Beauty* story. The archetypal roles of the active male hero and the passive heroine are swiftly reversed. Byron is kidnapped by Belladonna

⁷¹ Andrew Pollard, *Sleeping Beauty* (2017), pp. 19, 7. The script referred to in this study is the unpublished performance script for the 2017 production directed by Terry for The Theatre Chipping Norton.

⁷² Ibid, p. 19.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 38

Bindweed and held hostage at the top of her (anachronistic) Trump Tower-like headquarters. It is up to Rose to scale the side of the building and rescue him to usher in the happy ending conventional to pantomime. The use of dual timeframes to mark a progressive liberation of the heroine is not an innovation of Pollard's script. Rather, it situates the production within the context of other contemporary *Sleeping Beauty* pantomimes, demonstrating a shared impetus to revisionism in twenty-first-century re-imaginings of the form's conventions.

Yet, despite these revisionist elements of The Theatre Chipping Norton production, the pantomime ends with Rose securing her father's permission to marry Byron which is accompanied by the customary celebration with the other characters. Accordingly, at the conclusion of the production, a tension emerges between the revisionist approach to the gender politics of pantomime pursued through the representation of Princess Rose in the context of the dual timeframes and the traditional plot of the fairy tales tied to the conventional ending of the pantomime. As emerges throughout this chapter, this tension between revisionism and tradition characterises the costuming of The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime and is particularly evident in the gendering of character.

While the role of director, writer, and producer are frequently foregrounded in discussions concerning the gender politics of pantomime, the interpretative agency of the costume team is frequently overlooked (or subsumed under that of the director). Stuart's approach to costuming The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime responds to Terry's desire for revisionism. However, her designs (and the resultant costumes materialised through the creative labour of the costume team) should not simply be understood as material vehicles for his vision. While the designer liaises with the director to ensure that their creative visions are aligned, the working culture fostered by Terry at The Theatre Chipping Norton is

one that he hopes encourages ‘costume and set [designers] to take a lead in generating ideas’.⁷⁴ He notes that his primary input into the costume design for the *Sleeping Beauty* pantomime was to ensure that any specific references to costume made in the script, including the period setting of the story or mentioning of costume elements in the dialogue, were served by the designer. Reflecting on the process of designing the costumes for The Theatre Chipping Norton’s production, Stuart notes the burden of ‘years and years of tradition’ that rests upon the designer’s shoulders as they attempt to reconcile the conventions of the form with contemporary approaches to gender and identity politics.⁷⁵ In the specific context of Stuart’s design practices for this production, I explore the tensions that emerge between revisionism and tradition in the costuming of the pantomime through two stock characters at the forefront of debates about the gender politics of the form: the Principal Girl and the cross-dressed Dame.

Costuming the Principal Girl: A Revolution in Fashion?

The meaning-making processes at play in the act of costuming pantomime are multifaceted and complex. Stuart’s conceptualisation of the costuming of Princess Rose was established within the two period contexts of The Theatre Chipping Norton production: the 1560s and the 1960s. For Princess Rose’s costume in the first act, set in the Tudor-inspired court, Stuart designed a golden floor-length skirt attached to a faux bodice decorated with red roses. A white blouse with puff sleeves and a red trim was worn underneath to complete the ensemble. The costume design, materialised by the costume-makers, nodded to the conventions of Tudor court dress. This was particularly evidenced in the cut of the

⁷⁴ Terry, interview with author (Oxford, 3rd January 2020).

⁷⁵ Stuart, interview with author (telephone, 11th December 2019).

bodice – the straight neckline and ‘v’-shaped front piece of the garment referenced the cut of a sixteenth-century corset. However, the costume was not designed nor executed to achieve historical accuracy.

Indeed, despite the references to Tudor dress, the gown more closely resembled a dirndl (see Figure 5). The dirndl is a nineteenth-century imitation of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ‘Alpine peasant costume with bodice and full skirt’ layered over a white blouse.⁷⁶ The ensemble is perhaps most familiar today in its contemporary iteration as the costume worn by women attending the German folk festival, Oktoberfest. A complex nexus of influences has also established dirndl-inspired costume as the conventional dress of the contemporary fairy tale heroine; these include the prominence of Germanic folk traditions in the acculturation of fairy tales in nineteenth-century Britain (when the conventions of modern pantomime were being formalised), the costuming conventions of Romantic ballets which often took fairy tale stories for their plots, and those associated with the *commedia* heroine and forerunner of the Principal Girl in early pantomime, Columbine.⁷⁷ The convention of dressing Columbine in a dirndl-inspired costume was further stabilised through the decorative arts, particularly the popular porcelain figurines produced by the German manufacturers Meissen in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁷⁸ Another significant, and more recent, iteration of the costuming convention is found in mid-twentieth-century Disney animations of well-known fairy tales including

⁷⁶ ‘dirndl, n.’, *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, September 2020) <www.oed.com/view/Entry/53353> [accessed 9th November 2020].

⁷⁷ See Judith Chazin-Bennahum, *The Lure of Perfection: Fashion and Ballet, 1780-1830* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 12

⁷⁸ See Jeffrey H. Munger, *European Porcelain in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), pp. 166-167.

Sleeping Beauty (1959).⁷⁹ The stylisation of the Disney princesses of this period were no doubt inspired by previous depictions of the costuming of the princess, particularly those that had appeared on the stage including in the pantomime tradition. In each iteration of the costumed princess the dirndl is adapted to suit contemporary fashion trends and have been stabilised through the costuming practices of 'traditional' pantomime today. In The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime, the dirndl costume has been adapted to the period setting of the Tudor Court. Stuart's design encapsulates both the historical setting of the fairy tale plot and the costuming conventions of the Principal Girl.

Understood thus, Princess Rose's gown gestures to the role of costume in constructing and iterating pantomimic stereotypes. Theatre historian John O'Brien notes that in early formations of eighteenth-century pantomime the 'basic plot of the *commedia* sections, and the stories chosen for the "serious" framework were so familiar that they could be told in a kind of visual shorthand'.⁸⁰ The costumed body of the actor operated as one of these 'visual shorthand[s]', the costume design used to aid the identification of the stock character played by a performer (the pantomimic stereotype) as well as conveying the character they played in the narrative opener. While the pantomime form has undergone substantial transformation across the centuries, the connection between costume, character, and narrative established in the *commedia* and early pantomime endures. The reference to the dirndl ensemble in Stuart's design characterises Princess Rose as the Principal Girl of pantomime. However, it is not solely through the visual reference that the costumed actor was aligned with the pantomimic stereotype. My observation of technical

⁷⁹ Kendra, 'Disney Princess Historical Costume Influences: Sleeping Beauty (1959)', *Frock Flicks*, 4th September 2015, <<http://www.frockflicks.com/disney-princess-historical-costume-influences-sleeping-beauty-1959/>> [accessed 5th November 2020].

⁸⁰ O'Brien, 'Pantomime', p. 105.

rehearsals for the production demonstrate how the materiality of the garment also infers the kind of embodied performance conventionally associated with the fairy tale heroine within the performance conventions of traditional pantomime.



Figure 5 Lucy Penrose as the Walkman-listening Princess Rose in the dirndl-inspired gown worn in Act One of *Sleeping Beauty*. (Photograph taken by author).

Kicking Like a Princess: Gendering the Embodied Performance of the Principal Girl

The Theatre Chipping Norton production of *Sleeping Beauty* reconceives Princess Rose as a twenty-first-century heroine. Her desire for freedom and to explore beyond the palace gates is characterised as a contemporary impetus represented through the introduction of anachronistic elements to the Tudor setting as she listens to her Walkman and plays football. The juxtaposing of the historical and the modern is a source of humour, derived from the nonsensical inclusion of anachronistic technology, and also asserts that Princess Rose is not the typical passive princess of pantomime. Yet, in technical rehearsals, when the actors performed the rehearsed action in costume for the first time, the

anachronistic activities undertaken by Princess Rose proved challenging for the traditionally-costumed actor cast in the role (the aptly-named Lucy Penrose). In the scene in which King Lenny forbids his daughter from playing football because it is 'unladylike', Terry had worked with Penrose to choreograph a routine with a ball to demonstrate the Princess's physical prowess (challenging a misogynistic understanding that football is 'unladylike' and a boy's sport). Penrose practised dribbling the ball across the stage before kicking it up into the air so she could catch it in her arms. However, once costumed in the gown Penrose found herself unable to perform the rehearsed sequence with the same ease. Her feet became entangled in the light-weight fabric of the long skirt causing the actor to trip and lose control of the ball. The costume had been designed primarily to characterise the costumed actor as the Principal Girl of pantomime within the context of the Tudor setting. The length of the gown thus prohibited a performance of the action as practised in rehearsals. The costume dictated that the sequence had to be reworked to accommodate the way the garment interacted with the gestural performance of the actor. While Penrose was still able to kick the ball across the stage, the complexity and speed of the movements had to be simplified. The modification did not shift the meaning of the performed sequence – the character was still shown to be proficient in the 'unladylike' activity of playing football. However, in the context of the reworking of the scene, the costume stood as a material reminder of the kind of activities associated with the traditional Principal Girl typically dressed in a similar gown.

Feminist phenomenologist Iris Marion Young argues for a gendered understanding of the comportment of the body. She notes, for instance, that in distinction to men, 'a woman

typically refrains from throwing her whole body into a motion'.⁸¹ Young suggests that this difference resides not in essentialist distinctions of sex but in women's perception of their own physical capacities. Adapting Maurice Merleau-Ponty's identification that the 'possibilities that open up in the world depend on the mode and limits of the body "I can"', she suggests that '[f]eminine bodily existence is an *inhibited intentionality*... a self-imposed "I cannot".⁸² Princess Rose's traditional costume is a materialisation of this gendered '*inhibited intentionality*'. One function of dress is as a tool of regulation that develops in dialogue with the activities and regimes of bodily comportment associated with the anticipated wearer. Therefore, the traditional gown might be understood to carry an expectation of the kinds of activities an actor cast in the role of the Principal Girl might be likely to perform. For instance, the rehearsals for Penrose's performance with the ball demonstrate the limitation that the floor-length skirt places on physical activity. The assertion suggests that the female characters of pantomime might have a passive role in the narrative – they are the ones to be rescued rather than doing the rescuing.

For Rose's liberatory adventure in the second act in which the stereotypical role of Principal Girl is reconceived, Stuart saw the opportunity to discard the conventional costuming in favour of two 1960s-inspired ensembles.⁸³ The dirndl-inspired gown is replaced with a mini-dress patterned in a large-scale bold floral print and paired with go-go boots. Stuart's inspiration was drawn from the influential aesthetic of fashion designer Mary Quant, who was at the forefront of the emerging youth culture in Britain in the 1960s.

⁸¹ Iris Marion Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Bodily Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality' [1980], in *On Female Bodily Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 27-45 (p. 37).

⁸² Ibid, p. 37

⁸³ Stuart, interview with author (telephone, 11th December 2019).

Quant is credited with popularising the mini-skirt which has come to stand as a visual shorthand for women's increased social freedoms in the period. In her autobiography, the designer reflects that the iconic mini-skirt 'expressed the sixties, the emancipation of women, the Pill and rock'n'roll. It was young, liberated and exuberant' – asserting the intimate connection between dress and gender politics.⁸⁴ The association of the garment with sexual liberation is necessarily underplayed in the context of the pantomime as a form of family entertainment. Nevertheless, Stuart's employment of the mini-skirt in the costuming of Princess Rose has the dual function of signifying the historical setting of the second act through the iconicity of its design while simultaneously signalling the reconceptualisation of the role of the Principal Girl in The Theatre Chipping Norton's approach to the *Sleeping Beauty* story.

Unlike the traditional gown designed for Princess Rose in the first act, when designing the 1960s costumes Stuart directly responded to the distinct demands made of the actor in the second act. The Principal Girl's liberation is reflected through a change in physical activity. This is particularly foregrounded in the sequence in which the pantomimic stereotypes of Principal Girl and Principal Boy are subverted; it is Byron Prince who 'needs rescuing' and Princess Rose who 'saves the day'. Terry's idea of how to stage the rescue mission had been discussed at length with the creative team ahead of Stuart's design process. Working with his production team, Terry described a screen, designed to look like a 1960s television set, to be lowered in front of the stage curtain. The actors, led by Penrose, would lie on their sides behind the curtain and shimmy their bodies horizontally across the stage, clutching onto a rope that ran alongside them (see Figure 6). The action would be

⁸⁴ Mary Quant, *Mary Quant: My Autobiography* (London: Headline Publishing, 2012), p. 275.

captured by a video camera positioned above the actors which would then be projected onto the screen in front of the curtain. The orientation of the image would be rotated so that it appeared that the performers were moving vertically, rather than horizontally, across the stage.

Stuart's design for the rescue mission anticipated the physical demands of the sequence for Penrose. Responding to Pollard's description of Princess Rose's entrance '*in a kind of Emma Peel, kick-ass costume – tooled up for battle*', she costumed the actor in an ensemble inspired by the 1960s 'Action Girl'.⁸⁵ In the course of conducting her research for the production, Stuart relates that she looked at the iconic costumes designed by John Bates and worn by Diana Rigg as the fictional spy Emma Peel in the popular television adaptation of *The Avengers* (1961-96). Drawing upon this imagery, she designed a brightly coloured, skin-tight jumpsuit. Joan Ormrod understands the costuming of Emma Peel to present the spy as a 'modern woman whose trouser suits, courage and active body with martial arts expertise exemplified a new attitude to the female body'.⁸⁶ Similarly, Stuart felt that the jumpsuit created for Princess Rose visually signified that the Principal Girl of The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime was a 'kick-ass character', ready for action.⁸⁷

The rescue sequence conceived in the production would have been challenging for Penrose to perform dressed in the full-length gown or mini-skirt dress; it might be anticipated that the skirts of both costumes would ride up and the fragile textile of the overskirt of the gown damaged if dragged across the floor. By contrast, the Emma Peel

⁸⁵ Pollard, *Sleeping Beauty*, p. 59; and Heather Kay, 'Panto Time Travelling from Tudor Rose to Flower Power'.

⁸⁶ Joan Ormrod, *Wonder Woman: The Female Body and Popular Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), p. 99.

⁸⁷ Stuart, interview with author (telephone, 11th December 2019).

jumpsuit was made from Lycra – a synthetic fabric valued for its hard-wearing stretch properties. The construction of the garment undertaken in the costume workroom was also intended to render the costume fit for action. It was made by Rebecca Clark who has extensive experience designing and creating costumes for circus performers. Her proficiency in working with stretch fabrics, which can be unwieldy in untrained hands, equipped her with the techniques necessary to create garments able to withstand physically-demanding activities. Clark knew to reinforce the seams of the jumpsuit with an extra row of stitching and insert gussets in the crotch and armpits when arranging the positioning of the panelling featured in Stuart’s design to allow for the performer’s movements. The designing and making of the costume reflects the physical competency of the reimagined Principal Girl in the second act.



Figure 6 Penrose appears on the 'television' in the Emma Peel inspired jumpsuit practicing the rescue mission sequence during technical rehearsals. The actor is actually lying behind the screen. In performance the curtains would be closed to conceal the actors. (Photograph taken by author).

However, the extent to which the role of the Principal Girl is revised through the costuming of The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime prompts further investigation. Stuart's designs for Princess Rose's costumes in the second act were motivated by her desire to signify Princess Rose's newfound freedom through the character's increased capacity for physical action and visual reference to the liberatory social ideals of the 1960s – to present her as a 'kick-ass character' through visual reference to the costuming of the 1960s fictional spy, Emma Peel. Despite the intentions of the designer, the costumes – and particularly the jumpsuit – shifted the characterisation of Princess Rose from the 'pantomimic stereotype' of the traditional Principal Girl to another gendered stereotype; the 1960s Action Girl.⁸⁸ The Action Girl was epitomised by Emma Peel and other heroines of the period such as the space detective Barbarella, played by Jane Fonda in the 1968 cult sci-fi film of the same name. The brightly-coloured and form-fitting costumes worn by the Action Girl epitomised the 'pop aesthetic of the spy-fi genre' which has been characterised a projection of 'heterosexual male fantasy' in many feminist critiques of the genre.⁸⁹ Indeed, Diana Rigg herself recalls how she became 'a sex symbol overnight' after the episode of *The Avengers* in which she wore the iconic jumpsuit aired.⁹⁰ The conception of female actors' performance of physical activity in the genre provided opportunity for titillation. The costuming of the actors cast in these roles, and referenced by Stuart's designs for The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime, situated them within the representational dynamics

⁸⁸ Heather Kay, 'Panto Time Travelling from Tudor Rose to Flower Power'.

⁸⁹ Dean Conrad, *Space Sirens, Scientists and Princesses: The Portrayal of Women in Science Fiction Cinema* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2018), p. 230.

⁹⁰ Diana Rigg quoted in Ruth Huntman, 'Diana Rigg: "Becoming a sex symbol overnight shocked me"', *The Guardian*, 30th March 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/mar/30/diana-rigg-becoming-a-sex-symbol-overnight-shocked-me->> [accessed 6th November 2020].

of heteronormative desire associated with the objectification of the body of female performers – an impetus Jacky Bratton also traces through the costuming of the cross-dressed Principal Boy of nineteenth-century pantomime.⁹¹ The legacy of this long tradition of female objectification in the representational conventions of pantomime continues to shape the reception of contemporary productions. Indeed, one reviewer of The Theatre Chipping Norton production of *Sleeping Beauty* praises Penrose’s transformation in the second act of the pantomime into a ‘catsuited babe’.⁹² The costuming of the character (‘catsuited’) is connected to the gendered representation of the Action Girl archetype asserted through terms associated with the 1960s spy-fi heroine (‘babe’). While the reviewer’s comment is a playful recognition of the Emma Peel reference incorporated by Stuart into her design, the language of the review simultaneously encapsulates the tradition of female objectification embedded in performance history of the pantomime, conflicting with the revisionist intentions of the designer.

These conflicting positions are a reminder that the meaning emergent from the costume assemblage of the jumpsuit (and its relationship to discourses of objectification and desire) will be understood distinctly by the different sectors of the audience. This is of particular relevance to the pantomime as a form of festive entertainment that attracts a multi-generational audience with different interpretative frameworks. For instance, a child is more likely to respond to the bright colours of the Emma Peel costume aligned with the over-the-top aesthetic of pantomime. As Stuart notes, contrary to her experience designing

⁹¹ Jacky Bratton, ‘Mirroring Men: The Actress in Drag’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress*, ed. by Maggie B. Gale and John Stokes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 235-252 (pp. 235-6).

⁹² Gill Sutherland, ‘Review: Last Chance to See Chippy’s *Sleeping Beauty*’, *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 12th January 2018, <www.stratford-herald.com/80921-review-last-chance-see-chippys-sleeping-beauty> [accessed 3rd June 2020].

for realist domestic dramas ‘where it’s all about detail and things looking as realistic as possible’, in pantomime ‘there’s no room for subtlety at all... everything needs to be bigger and bolder!’⁹³ In comparison, an adult is more likely to have knowledge of the 1960s references and might take nostalgic (or erotic) pleasure from the iteration of the Emma Peel jumpsuit. In turn, as a researcher interested in the gendering of the material conditions of production, I have taken critical position that addresses the ways in which the citational mode of the costume intersects with wider discourses of female objectification.

Furthermore, even with Princess Rose’s transformation from passive princess to a ‘kick-ass’ heroine (as reflected in the costuming of the character), The Theatre Chipping Norton production still concludes with the marriage of the Principal Leads. Despite the Principal Girl’s rescue of the Principal Boy, the narrative conventions of the form supersede a potential subversion of heteronormative gender politics of the pantomime. Princess Rose might be dressed in a 1960s mini-dress, but the liberatory signification of the garment is curbed when she still has to ask her father’s permission to marry. Therefore, while the production team sought to reconfigure the stereotypical gendered presentation of the Principal Girl, the costuming demonstrates a tension between such revisionist approaches and the persistent mode of archetypal characterisation prevalent in the pantomime form. I now turn to the function of costume in the representation of the Dame for The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime.

Dressing the Dame

While the costuming of the Principal Girl in this production of *Sleeping Beauty* is shown to navigate different stereotypes of womanliness (rather than disassemble the

⁹³ Stuart, interview with author (telephone, 11th December 2019).

stereotypical mode of representation itself), the costuming of the Dame provokes broader questions about the material representation of gendered identity. Since the influential career of nineteenth-century music hall and pantomime performer Dan Leno, the cross-dressed Dame has become a staple of pantomime.⁹⁴ Simon Sladen recognises that the ‘circle of experts in the industry is significantly smaller than in other performing arts fields’ which has established a clear lineage of expertise that has been transmitted from performer to performer to configure the role of the pantomimic Dame across the centuries.⁹⁵ The modern iteration of the Dame most commonly presented on the twenty-first-century stage, including at The Theatre Chipping Norton, has been termed the ‘over-the-top Dame’ by Peter Holland in his typology of the role.⁹⁶ The ‘over-the-top Dame’ is flirtatious, often portly in stature and middle-aged and contrasted with an iteration of the role that imagines the Dame as ‘a performer of camp drag’ – a mode of characterisation that Holland particularly associates with performers active in the twentieth century who practised female impersonation and transferred their personas into the pantomime context such as Danny La Rue.⁹⁷ The make-up and costuming of the ‘over-the-top Dame’ is described as ‘ludicrously exaggerated’ and understood to be ‘less an expression of the excessive glamour of camp than an exploration of the bizarre’.⁹⁸ The actor will traditionally undergo a costume change for every scene in which they appear, frequently donning a themed ensemble that responds directly to the pantomime’s action. The costumes are conventionally

⁹⁴ Radcliffe, ‘Dan Leno: Dame of Drury Lane’, p. 118.

⁹⁵ Sladen, ‘From Mother Goose to Master’, p. 214.

⁹⁶ Peter Holland, ‘The Play of Eros: Paradoxes of Gender in British Pantomime’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 13 (1997), 195-204 (p. 201).

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 201.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 201.

underdressed with padding and oversized breast forms to give the actor an exaggerated hyper-feminine silhouette.

The costuming of The Theatre Chipping Norton's Dame situated the character within the tradition of the 'over-the-top Dame'. Played by actor Eammon Flemming, the pantomimic character was imagined within the frame of the *Sleeping Beauty* story as Rose's nurse, Nanny Fanny, who arrives at the palace upon the death of the queen to look after the young princess. While Eammon Flemming had previously been cast as the Dame at other regional venues, *Sleeping Beauty* was his first engagement in The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime. The theatre does not have a resident Dame in the tradition of many other regional venues. Pollard, for instance, has earned himself the title of 'panto royalty' having starred as the Greenwich Theatre's Dame for over a decade (as well as writing pantomime scripts for other theatres including The Theatre Chipping Norton).⁹⁹ Resident performers tend to have a greater autonomy over the costuming of their Dame which allows them to develop a signature performance style. In the absence of this tradition at The Theatre Chipping Norton, Stuart retained the design authority for Nanny Fanny. In collaboration with performer, script, and director, the costuming of the role drew on the narrative action of the *Sleeping Beauty* script and the tradition of the 'over-the-top Dame', rather than Flemming's performance history in previous productions.¹⁰⁰ Inspired by the Dame's role as Princess Rose's nurse, Stuart design for Flemming's entrance costume consisted of a metallic blue dress with pink striped skirt that reimagined Superman's iconic suit – the large 'F' emblazoned across the chest (filled out with oversized breast forms) standing for 'Nanny

⁹⁹ Simon Sladen, 'Aladdin', *British Theatre Guide*, undated, <<https://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/aladdingreenwich-rev>> [accessed 2nd December 2020].

¹⁰⁰ Holland, 'The Play of Eros', p. 201.

Fanny'. A white apron tied over the ensemble and umbrella held in the performer's hand referenced Mary Poppins. Finished with oversized gold cuffs worn on each wrist, a curly black mid-length wig, and a small gold crown, the costume nodded to the styling of Wonder Woman. The hybridisation of references to other fictional characters integrated in the costume establishes a narrative connection between the exaggerated aesthetic of pantomime and the Dame's role in the *Sleeping Beauty* story. Crucially, the 'over-the-top' aesthetic and materiality of the costume assemblage overtly performs gendered identity – here, an exaggerated representation of femininity. Unsurprisingly, then, along with the Principal Girl, the cross-dressed Dame is the pantomimic stereotype upon which contemporary discussions of the gender politics of the form are predominantly focussed.

Many revisionist discussions concerning the gender politics of the pantomime argue that traditional presentation of the Dame perpetuates misogynistic and queer-phobic stereotypes. The stereotype of 'womanliness' performed by the Dame is described by Laurence Senelick as the 'hideous caricature of feminine sexuality'.¹⁰¹ Played by a performer rendered unattractive in exaggerated make-up, themed costumes, and hyper-feminine padding, the Dame, according to Senelick, is often the object of ridicule. Audiences are encouraged to laugh at the misfortune of the middle-aged Dame whose sexual frustration is often the source of much entertainment. Here, the contested comedic value of the Dame is understood to be both the misogynistic depiction of a woman in the context of the pantomimic fairy tale narrative and the act of a male actor wearing an exaggerated and 'over-the-top' form of conventionally feminine dress. In contrast, referring to the practice of crossdressing more widely, Marjorie Garber argues that the act 'offers a challenge to easy

¹⁰¹ Laurence Senelick, 'Changing Sex in Public: Female Impersonation as Performance', *Theater*, 20 (1989), 6-11 (p. 11).

notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of “female” and “male”.¹⁰² Garber’s position is mirrored in particular critical approaches to drag – another form of gender-play that uses costume to explore gendered identity in a performance context. The parodic style of gendered representation employed in certain drag queen cultures (namely drag artists who traditionally identify as men and construct exaggerated, overtly feminine personas in performance) are similar to those underpinning the costuming of the cross-dressed Dame: the donning of oversized breast forms, exaggerated hair and make-up, and hyper-feminine dress. In *Gender Trouble* (1999), Butler asserts that the overtly theatrical register of drag disrupts the notion of an essentialist correspondence between sex and gender. Drag, understood by Butler as a homogeneous practice, is characterised as a form of gender parody that, through its exaggerated aesthetics, ‘reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin’.¹⁰³ Butler argues that therefore even when ‘the gender meanings taken up in the parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynistic culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization’.¹⁰⁴ While this claim rests on a selective understanding of the diverse practices and distinct engagements with gender encompassed in drag performance, Butler’s argument highlights the importance of context when addressing the meaning of cross-dressing. In turn, Senelick’s critique of the Dame as a ‘hideous caricature of feminine sexuality’ argues that, in the pantomime context, the gendered stereotypes are not subverted through parody, but rather perpetuated through the citational mode of performance.

¹⁰² Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 10.

¹⁰³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 188.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p. 188.

Certainly, there is no single fixed interpretation of the Dame (nor of the diverse iterations of drag). The gender politics of the cross-dressed role differs from production to production. The meaning that emerges from each iteration of the role is dependent on script, costuming, and the performance of the actor cast in the role. Creator of the trans-positive pantomime *A Pair of Pantos* (2018, UK tour), Hester Chillingworth, accordingly notes that while there 'are some famously virtuosic pantomime dame performances... for every one of those, there are many lazy and problematic dames whose sole purpose is to suggest the idea of "a bloke in a dress" is funny in itself'.¹⁰⁵ Chillingworth therefore calls on the creators of pantomime to 'ask why is a man in a dress funny?' asserting '[h]e needs to actually do something funny to merit it'.¹⁰⁶ The questions posed by Chillingworth resonate with the approach to presenting the Dame in *The Theatre Chipping Norton* pantomime. Stuart agrees that the costuming of the cross-dressed Dame must be 'handled sensitively': 'I think it's fine to have a gender-swapped role that is a funny character in itself, but I think we need to steer away from the joke being that the woman is actually a man'.¹⁰⁷

Terry, too, recognises the challenges posed by presenting the cross-dressed role onstage in the context of the revisionist intentions of the production. His conviction in the importance of using a specific time and place to undercut stereotypical representations of pantomimic characters extends to the role of the Dame. He suggests that this strategy means that the starting point for the costuming is not simply 'a big bright garish costume' but a set of references embedded in the context of the production. Terry hopes this will

¹⁰⁵ Hester Chillingworth quoted in Rachel Bishop, 'A Pantomime that Ditches the Clichés in a Transpositive, All-Gender-Inclusive, Queer Mash-Up', *In Your Area*, 19th December 2018, <www.inyourarea.co.uk/news/transpositive-all-gender-inclusive-queer-pantomime-mash-up-for-all-the-family/> [accessed 26th May 2020].

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Stuart, interview with author (telephone, 11th December 2019).

prompt the costume designer to think ‘what could a Dame costume be in this era, in this world?’ rather than reverting to a costume that is simply an exaggerated caricature of womanliness.¹⁰⁸ In interview, he gives the example of the Dame’s costume designed by Helen Coyston in the theatre’s 2019 production of *Puss in Boots*. Set in London’s East End in the 1950s, the Dame’s extravagant costume was inspired by the iconic imagery of the Pearly Kings and Queens. The comedic aspect of the costume is no longer solely derived from the notion of the ‘man in a dress’ but the re-imagination of a specific set of well-known references provided by the setting of the narrative action.¹⁰⁹

Instances of costuming Nanny Fanny in the 2017-18 production of *Sleeping Beauty* demonstrate how the comedy of the Dame is derived from the interplay of the script and material elements of production – a tactic used by the production team to circumvent the joke residing in the fact that the performer is ‘a man in a dress’. When Nanny Fanny attends Princess Rose’s christening, Pollard’s stage directions describe how ‘*Nanny enters in an outrageous gown that has a huge ruff around her neck*’.¹¹⁰ In response to King Lenny’s admiration of her ensemble, Nanny Fanny replies, ‘Yes. Isn’t it fab! Though I must admit, I’m feeling a bit ruff!’¹¹¹ The success of the gag is thus dependent on the visual component of the costuming of the Dame. This is not to suggest that the playwright’s work eclipses the creative agency of the costume team. Within the collaborative mode processes of theatrical production, the script is suggestive rather than instructive. The stage directions and dialogue provide opportunity for the costume team to assert their creative agency in imagining how the ruff might be incorporated in the Dame’s costume. Stuart drew upon the

¹⁰⁸ Terry, interview with author (Oxford, 3rd January 2020).

¹⁰⁹ Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance*, p. 64.

¹¹⁰ Pollard, *Sleeping Beauty*, p. 12.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 12.

historical setting of the first act in which the gag appears – the mock-Tudor Court of King Lenny. The oversized ruff, understood as the material element crucial for the success of the gag, was introduced to the Dame's outfit in a parodic imagining of Queen Elizabeth I's iconic court dress (see Figure 7). The visual and verbal components of the joke explicitly identify the ruff, not the act of cross-dressing, as the source of comedy in the scene.

However, as in the costuming of the Principal Girl, the design for Nanny Fanny's 'ruff' dress navigated the dual framing of the Dame as fairy tale character and pantomimic stereotype. Iconic elements of Queen Elizabeth's dress familiar from popular imagery of the monarch are introduced to the costuming conventions of the 'over-the-top Dame'. An appliqué Tudor rose applied to the front of the faux-corseted bodice, a red and gold colour scheme, and an elaborate headdress shaped to mimic the arrangement of the Queen's hair are introduced to the traditional components of the Dame's costume including wide hips, 'excessively large sleeves and a silly hat'.¹¹² The approach to costuming Nanny Fanny is thus consistent with that taken by Stuart when designing Princess Rose's 'Tudor' gown. However, the gendering of the costume assemblage (how gendered meaning emerges from the diverse elements engaged in the costuming of a performer) is more overtly signalled in the costuming of the cross-dressed Dame than the Principal Girl. The Tudor elements introduced to Princess Rose's dirndl-inspired gown demonstrate the character's double-role as fairy tale princess and Principal Girl. The archetypal characterisation for both is broadly the same; the young, beautiful ingénue whose primary role is as the passive love interest for a handsome and brave hero. In contrast, the costuming of the Dame navigates two

¹¹² Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance*, p. 64

gendered performances that are self-consciously presented as distinct in the context of pantomime performance to supposedly 'comedic' ends.

In her discussion of the dual frames of pantomime, Taylor explains that the Dame occupies two overtly gendered roles. The performer engages in direct address with the audience referring 'through innuendo or irony to "his" maleness within pantoland asides and comedy, while the maternal dame playing truthful loving scenes with "her" son exists within the story'.¹¹³ It is the second aspect of the Dame that is addressed by the revisionist approach of the production team of The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime. To circumvent the joke of the crossed-dress role being simply that the Dame is a 'man in a dress', the costume is tied closely to the time and place in which the fairy tale is reimagined in Pollard's script.

However, these revisions do not disrupt the gendered meaning enacted through the costuming of Nanny Fanny in the context of the first frame. The introduction of elements of Tudor dress to the gendered conventions of the costume of the 'over-the-top Dame' means that an aspect of the visual gag continues to rest on the perpetuation of gendered pantomimic stereotype. Unlike in Butler's conception of drag performance, the exaggerated mode of costuming does not destabilise an essentialist binary notion of gender. Rather, through the concurrent signification of the dual frames of pantomime, the maleness of the performer is juxtaposed with an exaggerated performance of womanliness. Taylor notes that 'the comedy relies on the double representation of a man playing a woman rather than the uncertainty about gender that true female impersonation or drag attempt to invoke'.¹¹⁴ In other words, the caricature of womanliness is understood to be assumed for the course

¹¹³ *Ibid*, p. 106.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 110.

of the pantomime by the male performer: 'It is clear in design and dialogue that the audience and performer share a secret unknown to the other characters, because the dame is play-acting a role in the story as a woman but is also interacting with the audience as a male comedian'.¹¹⁵ Interpreted in this context, the 'over-the-top' aesthetic of the Dame's costume co-performs an representation of womanliness which, in its comedic exaggeration, reminds the audience of the 'maleness' of the performer. Thus, the presentation of the Dame in The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime upholds a normative depiction of gender expression – one in which the costuming of the role actively participates in portraying Senelick's description of the Dame as the 'hideous caricature of feminine sexuality'.

Recognising the perpetuation of gendered stereotypes in contemporary pantomime, some producers have taken imaginative approaches to reconceptualising the gender-presentation of the Dame. In 2019, a production of *Dick Whittington* staged at the Stag Theatre in Sevenoaks in Kent attracted attention from the press when it cast a 'gender fluid' Dame.¹¹⁶ The producers created the role of 'the Spirit of London' for Danny Beard, the drag persona of Daniel Curtis who reached the semi-finals of Britain's Got Talent in 2016 with their act.¹¹⁷ The gender-fluidity of Beard's drag character is expressed through their signature make-up which pairs hyper-feminine eyeliner and long lashes with a beard made of glitter. While Curtis pads their body to create an exaggerated feminine silhouette, they do not wear a wig as is typical for many femme-presenting drag queens, preferring to sport a bald head. The costuming of their character in the Sevenoaks pantomime was derived

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p. 111.

¹¹⁶ Mason Boycott-Owen, 'Pantomime Dame Will Be "Gender-Fluid" for First Time in Topical Twist', 16th November 2018, *The Telegraph*, <www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/11/16/pantomime-dame-gender-fluid-first-time-reflect-topical-identity> [accessed 17th July 2020].

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

from their presentation of their drag persona, similarly playing with masculine and feminine elements. For instance, in one scene Curtis wore a blue leotard decorated with gold fringing and epaulettes which was paired with their glitter beard and exaggerated feminine eye make-up to blend masculine and feminine elements in a camp imagining of a military uniform. Sladen points out that although many newspapers cited Beard as ‘the genre’s first gender-fluid Dame’, in fact, the role ‘is the latest in a line of Immortals à la Julian Clary’s seasonal Spirits, whose magic rules over proceedings and provided plenty of camp fun’.¹¹⁸ However, the pantomime’s writer and producer, Jamie Wilson, rather understood the role as a hybridisation of different pantomimic stereotypes, noting ‘Danny Beard is playing what would best be described as a blend of Fairy and Dame’.¹¹⁹ Wilson explains that casting Curtis and incorporating their drag persona into the pantomime form allowed him to ‘write a script that sticks to the traditions of panto, but delivers them in a new way’ – one that the theatre recognises as explicitly responding to the ‘topical issues’ relating to the presentation of gender expression in pantomime.¹²⁰ Here, the exaggerated aesthetics of pantomime are reimagined to present a queer expression of gendered identity that resonate closely with Beard’s approach to drag which disrupts the normative conceptual framework of binary gender. Crucially, what is under critique in the Sevenoaks pantomime is not gendered stereotype as in the revisionist approach taken in by the production team for The Theatre

¹¹⁸ Simon Sladen, ‘Dick Whittington’, *British Theatre Guide*, undated, <www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/dick-whittington-stag-theatre-s-16908> [accessed 17th July 2020].

¹¹⁹ Jamie Wilson quoted in Angela Cole, ‘Sevenoaks Panto to Feature the First Gender-Fluid Dame Role, Played by Danny Beard’, *Kent Online*, 16th November 2018, <www.kentonline.co.uk/whats-on/news/panto-gender-neutral-first-for-kent-193414> [accessed 17th July 2020].

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

Chipping Norton pantomime – the ‘hideous caricature of feminine sexuality’ – but a normative conceptualisation of gender itself.

Contrasting the approach to the Dame taken by the Sevenoaks pantomime with the revisionist intentions of the production team at The Theatre Chipping Norton highlights the limitations of the latter’s strategy. The costuming of *Sleeping Beauty* does not reconfigure the normative gender politics of the form. Nor does it disrupt the perpetuation of gendered stereotype. Whether costumed in the dirndl-inspired gown or skin-tight jumpsuit, the presentation of Princess Rose is configured through the gendered costuming practices of the Principal Girl. Similarly, the over-the-top costuming of Nanny Fanny continues to be a source of comedy because it performs the caricature of womanliness associated with the cross-dressed Dame. In an opinion piece for *The Stage* written in 2019, freelance costume designer Catherine Kodicek explains:

even as we challenge assumptions of gender on stage, costume design is still hard to disentangle from the binary perspective: we still think of women’s characters, men’s characters, women wearing men’s clothes and vice-versa... we are still seeing the binary in the clothing and therefore in costume design... Costume designers rely on the subtle meanings ascribed to certain clothes; we use these unconscious messages to convey character and provide context. To what extent are we reinforcing stereotypes as we do so?¹²¹

While Stuart’s costuming of the Dame responds to the particular context or scenarios of the pantomime’s action, the references she employs are reimagined using elements of dress particularly associated with feminine gender presentation. The ruff is incorporated into a parodic depiction of Queen Elizabeth’s dress despite it being an accessory worn by men and women. The ‘Super Nanny’ ensemble is inspired by Superman’s iconic suit and cape but

¹²¹ Catherine Kodicek, ‘It’s Important Theatre Costumes Do Not Reinforce Gender Stereotypes’, *The Stage*, 8th October 2019, <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/2019/catherine-kodicek-its-important-theatre-costumes-do-not-reinforce-gender-stereotypes/>> [accessed 1st December 2019].

reimagined as a dress and translated into traditionally feminine colours (from the red and blue of Superman's costume to metallic pink and blue) (see Figure 8). Not even the Dame's costume, designed to look like a cupcake, escapes the all-pervading gendering of the pantomime costume. Worn by Nanny Fanny for the pantomime's slish scene that takes place in the kitchen's castle, the cupcake is reimagined through items of clothing associated with women's dress; the paper case becomes a skirt, the icing a saccharine pink top, while a cherry sits atop the Dame's wig (see Figure 9). Elements of the costume assemblage that are particularly dynamic sites of gendering – the breast forms, hip padding, and application of cosmetics – are exaggerated to establish a feminised foundation for these ensembles. Here, the caricatured expression of femininity presented by costume actor does not subvert gendered categories but rather re-inscribes them; the costuming signifies the performance of womanliness undertaken by the actor. The exaggeration of this gendered identity is tailored to the pantomimic mode and used to establish the dual frames of the pantomime; the male actor performing the caricatured Dame who is made the subject of ridicule through other character's actions and the meta-theatrical performance of the male performer. Consequently, despite the production's intention to address the outdated gender politics of the Dame, a binary notion of gender is upheld in Stuart's costuming of Nanny Fanny expressed in a comedic fashion that nods to the traditional gendering of pantomimic stereotypes.



Figure 7 Nanny Fanny (Flemming, right) in the Elizabeth I 'ruff' costume. (Photo credit to Josh Tomalin, used with the permission of The Theatre Chipping Norton).



Figure 8 Nanny Fanny (Flemming) in the pink and blue 'Supernanny' costume. (Photograph taken by author).



Figure 9 Nanny Fanny (Flemming) in the cupcake ensemble. The paper wrapper has been imagined as a skirt and the cherry placed atop a whipped cream wig. (Photography taken by author).

Conclusion: Between Revisionism and Traditionalism

Reflecting on the challenge of revising the pantomime at The Theatre Chipping Norton, Terry notes that ‘panto and contemporary [ideas about] gender are still working out what they think of each other’.¹²² Indeed, the pantomime offered at The Theatre Chipping Norton might be best conceived as occupying a space between revisionism and traditionalism. This reflects both the creative intention of the production team and the mode of characterisation embedded in the form. It also reflects the expectations of the theatre’s audience. Terry notes that updating a pantomime is a delicate balancing act. While embracing innovation, the production must also retain certain elements that are understood to constitute the traditional pantomime to meet the expectations of audiences. These expectations are often particularly focussed on the costuming of pantomime and the representation of the Principal Girl and cross-dressed Dame. In their 2011 guide to creating a pantomime, for instance, Joyce Branagh and Keith Orton state: ‘All the little girls in the audience will feel let down if Cinderella’s gown is not a classic ball gown shape’.¹²³ Although perpetuating normative stereotypes of gendered behaviour, Branagh and Orton’s comment reflects how an audience’s familiarity with the conventions of pantomime might influence the creative decisions made by a production team aware of the expectations of the spectator. It is this audience expectation that Stuart understands as the weight of ‘years and years and years of tradition’ sitting on the designer’s shoulders as she attempts to reconcile the conventional costuming of characters with contemporary questions of cultural appropriation and gender politics.¹²⁴

¹²² Terry, interview with author (Oxford, 3rd January 2020).

¹²³ Joyce Branagh and Keith Orton, *Creating Pantomime* (Marlborough: The Crowood Press, 2011), p. 105.

¹²⁴ Stuart, interview with author (telephone, 11th December 2019).

As a result of the desire to balance tradition and innovation, the interrogation of contemporary gender politics in The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime might be termed conservatively revisionist. Stuart's costuming of Princess Rose across the two acts of the theatre's production of *Sleeping Beauty* was undertaken to demonstrate the liberation of the Principal Girl from the full-length gown of the Tudor court to the Lycra jumpsuit of the 1960s. However, the transformation of the Rose from passive princess to 'Action Girl' transfers the characterisation of the role from one archetype of womanliness to another. Similarly, while attempts are made to circumvent a presentation of the Dame in which the joke is that the role is played by 'a man in a dress', the revisionist approach does not go so far as to disrupt or critique normative expressions of gender.

In this chapter, I have shown how costume is utilised as a key critical tool by the production team in their attempt to rework the gender politics of pantomime – particularly in reimagining the representation of the Principal Girl and cross-dressed Dame for contemporary audiences. Costume is shown to be neither a secondary illustration of the action of the script nor a completion of the vision of theatre-makers; rather, it is a dynamic material participant in the meaning-making of gendered performance that has the potential to evade the creative vision of theatre-makers. Such recognition has argued for the active role played by costume in the shaping of meaning in a distributive model of agency enacted across the costume assemblage. In turn, this has extended the remit of the chapter to consider the activities of theatrical production that take place in the costume workroom ahead of performance. Drawing upon my experience as a participant-observer at The Theatre Chipping Norton, I have argued that costuming is a gendered practice. I have characterised it as a form of theatrical labour particularly associated with women's creative authority. The feminist reevaluation of women's practice I have pursued in this chapter

fosters a conceptually expansive critical approach – one that can consider, more fully, the diverse participants and processes involved in meaning-making. To this end, it is evident that more work needs to be done to understand other marginalised experiences entangled in the representational politics of theatrical labour including those relating to class, race, and sexuality. There is scope, for instance, to consider the costume workroom as a queer space through the intersection of gender and sexuality studies. Here, I have employed a new materialist framework of distributive agency to demonstrate how an attentiveness to the contributions of participants to the costume assemblage illuminates how the collaborative nature of theatre-making might be manifest through the materiality of the stage. Such an approach has been used both to recover the creative labour of the (female) costume team from the margins of theatre and performance studies and reassess the significance of this marginalised gendered material practice within accounts of theatrical production. The dual facets of gendered materiality discussed in this chapter – women’s work as theatre practitioners and the cultivation of gendered meaning through the material resources of theatre-making – structure my approach to other aspects of material production in the following chapters.

Chapter Two: Props and Puppets

The marvellous weight weighing me down is
The weight of a *human body!!!*¹

Turning from a discussion of costume as gendered bodily practice, this chapter addresses another mode of corporeal-material entanglement in theatrical production: that enacted between prop and performer. My observation of rehearsals for the Royal & Derngate's newly-commissioned adaptation of Alice Sebold's 2002 novel, *The Lovely Bones*, focused on the interactions that took place between performer, objects, and the staged environment in the depiction of gendered bodily experience. *The Lovely Bones* follows the female protagonist Susie Salmon in her search for selfhood in the afterlife after her assault and murder on earth. The stage adaptation of Sebold's novel was adapted by playwright Bryony Lavery and directed by Melly Still in 2018. The costume, props, and set design for the production were undertaken by theatre designer Ana Inés Jabaras-Pita and materialised by the in-house costume and workshop departments.

The epigraph to this chapter points to the centrality of bodies to the sense of (female) selfhood in Sebold's novel and, in turn, Still's staging of Lavery's adaptation. They are the words of Susie Salmon, the protagonist of *The Lovely Bones*. Susie's observation is

¹ Bryony Lavery, *The Lovely Bones* (2018), p. 102. Italics in original. The script referenced in this study is the unpublished performance script for the 2018 Royal & Derngate production directed by Melly Still. The script was updated throughout the course of rehearsals. The final edits were made during previews of the production ahead of press night. An acting edition of the script was subsequently published in 2020; Bryony Lavery, *The Lovely Bones* (London: Samuel French, 2020).

unusual. The sensation of embodiment is seldom remarked upon by protagonists in realist fiction such as Sebald's as it is naturalised through an intimate familiarity with one's own body. However, Susie is a protagonist with a difference – she is dead and has lost her sense of normative corporeal experience while retaining her cognitive and emotional faculties. Following her rape and murder in a cornfield in small-town Pennsylvania on 6th December 1973 by her sinister neighbour, Mr. Harvey, 14-year-old Susie finds herself reassembled in heaven. From this heavenly space, she watches the devastating effects of grief on her family and friends; her mother (Abigail Salmon) attempts to distance herself from the pressures of the family unit through an affair with the lead detective on Susie's case, Len Fenerman, while her father's (Jack Salmon) mental and physical health deteriorates. As both parents struggle to cope with the loss of their daughter, Abigail's mother, Grandma Lynn, moves in to care for Susie's academically-gifted sister, Lindsey, and her younger brother, Buckley. Frustrated that her life has been cut short, Susie is determined to help with the investigation of her murder from heaven. She discovers that by pushing hard on the 'In-Between' that separates her heaven from the world of the living she is able – with difficulty and unpredictable outcomes – to renegotiate the nature of her own, and other characters', embodiment. She uses the opportunity not only to try to lead the detectives to her murderer, but to follow the lives of her high school love interest, Ray Singh, and clairvoyant school friend, Ruth Connors. It becomes clear that before Susie can move on from the earthly activities of her past life and embrace her (after)life in heaven, she must fulfil some unfinished business: capture Mr. Harvey and gain closure in her relationship with Ray. The latter occurs at the denouement of the play when she falls from heaven and finds herself rematerialized in 'the marvellous weight' of Ruth's body and able to consummate her relationship. Susie replaces the traumatic memory of her rape with an act of sexual agency

driven by her desire for Ray. The play concludes with Susie observing the titular ‘lovely bones that have grown about my absence’ – a metaphysical substitute for her absent, corporeal body formed from the bonds established by her family and friends.²

Susie’s shifting relationship with her body thus sits at the heart of *The Lovely Bones*. Beyond the dramatic context of the play, the ‘weight’ of the human body gestures to the challenges of embodiment and its materialisation in adaptation from page-to-stage. This chapter explores the ‘weight’, or rather the materiality, of bodies in the rehearsal process. Just as Susie shifts from familiar earthly corporeality to a new heavenly state, so too must the written bodies in Sebald’s novel transition from textual to material embodiment in the course of theatrical production. The ‘weight’ of the human body described by Susie is thus also a reality of the physical medium of theatre. My observation of the rehearsal process for the production traces the conceptual and material challenge posed to theatre-makers when translating unconventional bodily states to the stage. Props and puppets are introduced to the theatre-making processes to collaboratively co-perform the character’s bodily experiences enacting a distributive model of agency across the material and human elements of theatrical production. Of particular interest to this study are the ways in which these material participants – props and puppets – actively rework the presentation of gendered bodily experience to disrupt conventions of theatrical representation associated with the objectification of female bodies in performance. The approach to staging female embodiment taken by the production is therefore considered within the context of feminist theatre practice.

² Lavery, *The Lovely Bones*, p. 109.

My analysis of the activities of the rehearsal room characterises the function of unworn costumes, prop limbs, and puppets as active material co-performers of gendered bodily experience. The performance of character through prop objects – and particularly puppets – is commonplace in contemporary theatre. It is not in itself a gendered technique, nor is its use confined to depicting the experience of female characters. However, within the context of this production, the experimentation with props and puppets is harnessed to address the particular challenges posed by staging unconventional states of corporeality; here, with the express intention of modelling an alternative material form of women’s bodily experience. This material-corporeal entanglement disrupts what Christina Delgado-García describes as the conventional equation of ‘character with the illusionist representation of a person generated by an actor’.³ I share Delgado-García’s interest in instances of characterisation that extend beyond the ‘illusionist’ equation of character and actor. However, while her study is predominantly script-led, interested in the experimental treatment of character in British playwriting since the 1990s, my inquiry is situated firmly in the material conditions of theatre-making. Focussed on the meaning co-performed by performer and prop, this chapter draws upon feminist new materialist models of relational subjectivity. These consider how the reassessment of ‘matter and things’ might be used to reimagine the relationship between humans and objects in ‘ways that are different to the patriarchal structures of the world, through a focus on the agency that engenders other ways of being’.⁴ Applied to the context of theatrical production, this new materialist approach provides a conceptual framework with which to conceive the relationship

³ Christina Delgado-García, *Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics, Subjectivity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), p. 2.

⁴ Colman, ‘Agency’, *New Materialism: How Matter Comes to Matter*.

between prop, puppet, and performers in the performance of female embodiment cultivated in the rehearsal room for *The Lovely Bones* as a form of feminist practice.

As in the previous chapter, my examination of the interrelationships between materiality and processes of gendering in theatrical production rests on the observation of live practice. A co-production supported by Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Northern Stage, the Liverpool Everyman & Playhouse, and the Royal & Derngate, *The Lovely Bones* rehearsed at the Royal & Derngate in August 2018. Director Melly Still and the company of ten actors underwent four weeks of rehearsals. This had been preceded by a week-long dramaturgical workshop with Lavery a month earlier to refine the script. Working as an embedded researcher, I observed the activities of the dramaturgical workshop, sessions across the four-week rehearsal period, and technical rehearsals for the production. The stage adaptation of *The Lovely Bones* premiered in the Royal auditorium on 3rd September 2018 before commencing on a tour to the three other co-producing venues and The New Wolsey Theatre in Ipswich. I also observed the technical rehearsals and a number of performances that took place when the production moved to the Birmingham Repertory theatre in October 2018. Receiving widespread critical acclaim, the adaptation was praised by critics for the way it ‘deftly condenses the action [of the novel] into 100 minutes’.⁵ The success of the production led to a revival in 2019 which embarked on a second UK tour to eleven venues from September to November. I watched this remounted production at the Oxford Playhouse in November 2019 where I also undertook additional interviews with the cast and creatives. My extended experience with this production placed me in the spaces utilised for

⁵ Michael Billington, ‘The Lovely Bones Review – Sorrowful Tale Retold with Startling Verve’, *The Guardian*, 9th September 2018, <www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/sep/09/the-lovely-bones-review-royal-and-derngate-northampton-bryony-lavery> [accessed 8th June 2020].

rehearsals rather than those utilised for material production, such as the costume workroom at The Theatre Chipping Norton featured in the first chapter. It was in the course of my observation of the activities of rehearsal that I developed a particular interest in the experimental approach the production took to staging bodily experience using props and puppets. This chapter, then, explores how '[t]he marvellous weight' of the body – distributed between the performers, props, and puppets – destabilises subject/object relations as a feminist tactic to find alternative means of representing gendered bodily experience in experimental approaches to characterisation in contemporary theatre-making.

'How do you do a ghost?': Bodies in Adaptation

A significant challenge faced by Lavery and Still, particularly in the latter's role as director, was how to translate Susie as the first-person, dead-but-alive, present-yet-disembodied narrator of Sebald's novel onto the material stage. Lavery had previously dramatized the aftermath of an assault and murder of a young girl in what is widely considered 'her most critically successful work to date', *Frozen* (1988), which premiered at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in 1998. A high-profile revival of the play opened in London's West End, also to great critical acclaim, in the months preceding the premiere of *The Lovely Bones* in 2018.⁶ *Frozen* is a realist drama that unflinchingly explores the intimate reflections of a woman whose young daughter disappears, a male criminal who has committed heinous sexual crimes against women, including the former's daughter, and a female psychiatrist who uses the male criminal as a case study to theorise her understanding of the

⁶ Elaine Aston, *Feminist Views on the English Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 106.

psychological motivators of such violence. Although delivered primarily in monologue form, the experiences of the three characters are entwined throughout the play as they each grapple with complex notions of culpability and forgiveness. The similarities of the subject matter of the two plays was recognised by critics who asked Lavery if she had been reluctant to undertake an adaptation of *The Lovely Bones* so soon after the revival of *Frozen*. Lavery admitted her apprehension but noted that she 'really wanted to do it because there is so much in Alice's novel that isn't about murder': 'The only real similarity between the two stories is that both are about redemption and surviving and the important people are the innocent'.⁷ The innocent in *Frozen* is the mother, Nancy Shirley, left to deal with the loss of her daughter, Rhona, and faced with the challenge of confronting the perpetrator of the violence. The child is absent; the audience must imagine her through the dialogue of the other characters. In contrast, the action of *The Lovely Bones* is reoriented to centre on the experiences of the deceased teenage girl, Susie Salmon. Here, the events of the play are filtered through her perspective, delivered by the character absent from earth rather than her mother, the authorities, or the murderer.

Lavery's centring of Susie in her adaptation draws upon the narrative style of Sebald's novel. In the latter, the process of Susie coming to terms with the tragedy that has befallen her is told through first-person narration. This renders the intimate thoughts, revelations, and reflections that constitute Susie's inner life available to the reader. Sebald is primarily interested in her protagonist's perception of events and thus does not focus on the specificities of Susie's state of embodiment when detailing the teenager's activities in

⁷ Bryony Lavery quoted in Nick Curtis, 'Playwright Bryony Lavery: "We have to watch our backs, particularly in this strange climate"', *The Guardian*, 25th August 2018, <www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/aug/25/bryony-lavery-interview-the-lovely-bones-we-have-to-watch-our-backs> [accessed 8th June 2020].

heaven. Sensory experience takes precedence over the physical appearance of Susie's ghostly body: Susie describes how she drinks 'lime Kool-Aid' while sitting on a heavenly swing-set and how she momentarily 'broke through... the line between the living and the dead' to reveal a glimpse of herself to her father and sister.⁸ Encountering the fictional world of Susie's heaven through the novel's narration, the indeterminate nature of mental imagery (a concept well-traversed in Western philosophies of the mind) means that the reader of Sebold's novel can accept that Susie undertakes these activities (drinking Kool-Aid and watching her family) without having to confront the specificities of the character's bodily state.⁹ However, in page-to-stage adaptations the representational strategy shifts from *diegesis* to *mimesis* – from 'the telling to the showing mode' – confronting the theatre-maker with the challenge of 'showing' the embodied state of Sebold's protagonist.¹⁰ Susie's embodied state can no longer reside in the indeterminate mental imaginary of each reader, but must be materialised on stage through the creative decisions of the production team (to be mediated through the variation of reception for each spectator).

Susie's otherness as a ghostly narrator might have prompted the creative team of Still's production of *The Lovely Bones* to present the character's heavenly body in a distinct fashion to the earthly bodies of her friends and family; for example, through extreme body modification using costume or make-up, the introduction of digital technology such as video projections, or the use of puppetry (a material technology addressed later in this chapter in relation to other heavenly bodies). Presented in the analogous medium of film, Peter

⁸ Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones* (London: Picador, 2002), pp. 20, 36, 46, 48.

⁹ See Dan Rebellato, 'When We Talk of Horses: Or, What Do We See When We See a Play?', *Performance Research: Performing Literatures*, 14 (2009), 17-28 (p. 21).

¹⁰ A Platonic understanding of theatrical form taken up by Linda Hutcheon in her theorisation of adaptation. See Linda Hutcheon with Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 38.

Jackson's 2009 adaptation of *The Lovely Bones* seeks to distinguish Susie's heavenly body from that of the other characters using computer-generated imagery (CGI). When Susie, played by Saoirse Ronan, moves between heaven and earth, the actor's body is digitally manipulated in post-production so that it appears to glow with an orange aura. Jackson's film thus employs the distinct representational technologies available to digital film to express the distinguishing status of the film's protagonist as a ghostly character. Such cinematic techniques are frequently valued for their greater capacity for realism made possible through technological developments in film-making. Yet, as filmmakers such as David Lowery show, overtly theatrical representational strategies offer equally effective, yet distinct, approaches to represent a character's otherness. Sharing a premise similar to *The Lovely Bones*, Lowery's film *A Ghost Story* (2017) follows the perspective of a deceased man, played by Casey Affleck, who observes his wife's grief within the walls of their apartment.¹¹ Affleck is costumed in a white sheet draped over his body in his portrayal of the ghostly figure. His performance is powerful precisely because it eschews the sophisticated special effects and sensationalism so often associated with the supernatural in horror cinema. The depiction opts, instead, for the prosaic and everyday nature of grief, captured poignantly in the almost childlike white sheet with two eyeholes. This ready acknowledgement of materiality is rare in cinema but standard in theatre and it underpins Still's approach to staging Susie's ghostly body in *The Lovely Bones*.

Lavery fosters a mode of storytelling in the script that preserves the first-person perspective at the heart of Sebald's novel as the central axis of her adaptation. This guided the approach to staging the ghostly protagonist in the Royal & Derngate production. Despite

¹¹ *A Ghost Story*, dir. by David Lowery (UK: A24, 2017).

Susie's otherworldly experiences, Still relates that 'in the book she's just a character and that's what she is in the adaptation too [and] because Susie just remains alive even when she's dead I never thought, "Oh god, how do you do a ghost?"' The role was cast with no regard to the heavenly nature of the protagonist's body. When Charlotte Beaumont auditioned for the role, Still recalls, 'it was a no-brainer – she could just evoke the character of Susie better than anyone else'.¹²

Recognising the importance of establishing a connection between the audience and performer to drive the emotional resonance of the story, the production team worked to signify Susie's otherness through *relational* stage technology. Here, relational stage technologies are understood as material, technological, and scenographic elements (including props, set, lighting, and sound), employed to represent a character in tandem with the embodied performance of the actor. In other words, relational technologies do not replace embodied performance but work as an additional element collaboratively engaged in a process of characterisation. For instance, in *The Lovely Bones*, sound designer Helen Skiera overlaid an echo on the microphones of actors when they are playing a 'heavenly' character to indicate that they occupy an alternative dimension to the earth-bound characters. Beaumont's 'excellent central performance' was unanimously praised by reviewers suggesting the successfulness of Still's approach to staging the protagonist's otherworldly experience.¹³ Drawing upon my observation of the activities of the rehearsal room, I discuss how the employment of props and puppets performed as relational technologies to express Susie's otherness in collaboration with Beaumont's embodied

¹² Melly Still, interview with author (London, 28th January 2019).

¹³ David Cunningham, 'The Lovely Bones', *British Theatre Guide*, undated, <www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/the-lovely-bone-the-lowry-salf-18293> [accessed 8th June 2020].

performance. This was facilitated through the spatial dynamics of the scenic design for the production of *The Lovely Bones* which, itself, stands as another form of relational technology.

Bodily Experiences in Staged Environments

Director Melly Still worked with the designer Ana Jabaras-Pita to create what they termed an ‘installation’ for the production that would address the challenges of staging a ghostly body.¹⁴ The stage was left open without flats or a backdrop, creating an impression of expansive space that stretched into the wings. Props were scattered amongst a pile of dirt arranged in a semi-circle across the front of the stage and brought into the central playing space when required. The most striking element of the installation was a large mirrored panel that reached across the width of the stage. Titled forward at an angle, the mirror rendered the stage action visible from above – the reflection actualising Susie’s birds-eye view of her family and friends on earth from her heaven. The panel was composed of a length of textile stretched taught across a series of interconnected smaller wooden square frames like a painter’s canvas. The nature of the textile was such that when it was front-lit or in low-lighting, it had a reflective surface like a mirror. However, when back-lit, the opaque textile transformed into a ghostly scrim-like gauze that revealed the supporting wooden structure behind and allowed actors, positioned on scaffolding, to perform from behind the barrier. Finally, real dried corn sheaves protruded horizontally in a line from the bottom of the suspended panel which, when reflected in the mirror, appeared to stand

¹⁴ Still, interview with author (London, 28th January 2019).

upright to give the illusion of a cornfield reaching back into the depths of the stage in reference to the site of Susie's murder (see Figures 10, 11, & 12).



Figure 10 The set installed onstage at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre during technical rehearsals for the 2018 tour of the production. The corn laid horizontally underneath the mirror is reflected vertically in the mirrored panel. The actors are in their own clothes rather than costume for the purpose of rehearsals. (Photograph taken by author).



Figure 11 The installation unlit and unpopulated by actors at Birmingham Rep. (Photograph taken by author).



Figure 12 The wings are left exposed by the installation. The actors are in their own clothes for the purpose of technical rehearsals undertaken at the Birmingham Rep. (Photograph taken by author).

The non-representational register of the installation was used to disrupt the expectations of a realist treatment of space which, in turn, facilitated a presentation of Susie's otherworldly body. Capitalising on the imaginative potential of placeless space, the installation could simultaneously represent the Salmon (or any number of neighbours') house(s), the cornfield, earth, heaven, and the In-Between (a liminal place in which the heavenly characters are sometimes momentarily visible to the earthly characters). Multiple *places* are layered onto a single stage *space*. Crucially, the distinction I make here between space and place understands *space* as the material topology of the stage that is physically occupied by the scenery and actors. Meanwhile, *place* refers to the dramatic setting(s) of the play's action established through dialogue, the actor's use of stage space, and modifications made to the staged environment including lighting and sound design.¹⁵ So, when the actor playing Susie stands next to the actors cast as her father, school principal, or sister, they all occupy a single stage space – that is, Beaumont is physically positioned in the same playing space as her fellow cast members. However, situated in the alternate dimension of heaven-on-earth signified by the installation, the actors' performance indicates that Susie is unable to directly interact with the other characters. For instance, when Principal Caden attempts to distract Lindsey from the disappearance of her sister by encouraging her to join the school's football team, Beaumont walks around the two actors in the stage space that represents the school office:

¹⁵ Here I follow the distinction made between space and place by McAuley in *Space in Performance*, pp. 29-33.

PRINCIPAL

You're the only Salmon girl now... so...

SUSIE

No I'm still here.

FRANNY

You're not.¹⁶

The exchanged dialogue is almost absurd as Susie debates her own locatedness. The actor's body *is physically* in the stage space that represents Caden's office and visible to the audience. Yet, in the context of the play's narrative she is invisible to the earthly characters. The character's movement between different places, or her simultaneous occupation of earthly and heavenly dimensions and corresponding spatial relationship to other characters, is signified through the narrative context of a scene, rather than detailed material transformation of the stage space.

The non-delineated fluidity of place facilitated by the installation designed for the production correlates with the spatial dynamics of Sebold's novel. Still recalls that in early drafts of Lavery's script, 'there was a located heaven and a located earth'. However, director and playwright collaboratively decided that this approach 'couldn't work because, actually, they just co-exist'.¹⁷ This idea was carried forward by Lavery in the development of the script and in the final draft she removed all description of setting from the stage directions. The only remaining references to place are key landmarks or features central to the play's action such as the trapdoor of the underground structure in which Mr. Harvey assaults Susie or the local sinkhole used by the community to discard unwanted items.¹⁸ Still reflects 'with something as full of wonder and imagination as this piece is, you kind of have to let the mind do the dividing or the compartmentalising and just allow a coexistence of time and

¹⁶ Lavery, *The Lovely Bones*, p. 21.

¹⁷ Still, interview with author (London, 28th January 2019).

¹⁸ Lavery, *The Lovely Bones*, pp. 3, 29.

place'.¹⁹ This is the purpose of the placeless space cultivated by the non-representational installation. Here, the mirrored panel visualises multiple perspectives of the staged action which further supports the fluidity of setting pursued in the production.

The use of the mirrored panel also stands as a form of relational technology that is used explicitly to depict Susie's corporeal otherworldliness. The reflection of the performed action from above literalises Susie's bird's-eye view of the activities of earth from heaven. The mirror is also played to directly by Beaumont – and no other actor – to visualise her unique bodily state in heaven. In one scene, Beaumont lay with her back to the floor of the stage looking upwards. A spotlight was used to isolate her body. Using her legs to rotate herself in a slow running motion matched to the tempo of David Bowie's space-themed song, *Major Tom* (1969), the treatment of the installation made it appear as though the actor's body was floating in mid-air. Reminiscent of the nineteenth-century stage trick known as Pepper's Ghost, the immateriality of Beaumont's reflection depicts Susie's ghostly status as the dead-but-present narrator of the play. When asked, designer and director asserted that they had not intentionally referenced Pepper's Ghost. However, the analogous use of mirror technology to signal the otherworldly status of both ghost and dead-but-alive protagonist invites comparison between the two. Pepper's Ghost achieves a 'phantasmagorical' illusion using carefully arranged mirrors to reflect the ghostly image of an actor (concealed below stage) onto a plane of glass onstage.²⁰ Marvin Carlson points out that this technique was employed in the pursuit of greater realism in depictions of the

¹⁹ Still, interview with author (London, 28th January 2019).

²⁰ See John Henry Pepper, *The True History of the Ghost and All About Metempsychosis* (London: Cassell & Company, 1890), p. 17.

supernatural on the Victorian stage.²¹ In contradistinction, Still's approach is successful precisely because of its theatricality (the mirror is not concealed from the sight-lines of the auditorium, and both the actor's body and her reflection are visible). This careful configuration of mirrors and light deliberately evades the kind of realism that Carlson argues motivated the nineteenth-century illusion. The installation operates as a relational technology that asserts Susie's otherness in a non-representational mode – particularly when used in the course of performance to isolate Beaumont's performance in the reflection of the mirror. The relationship between actor and stage environment established in these moments establishes the protagonist's distinct status from the earthly characters. The installation thus supports the experimental representations of the female body pursued in the production.

Disassembling the Body: Props and Performers

The tactic of othering Susie's body through the use of relational stage technology, including the mirrored panel, is established in the opening sequence of the production. As the auditorium is thrown into darkness, loud music plays and a snapshot series of mimed vignettes are carried out onstage in quick succession. Blackouts and bursts of strobe lighting between each unit of the sequence emphasises the fragmented nature of the episodes. The technique formally mirrors Susie's corporeal disassembly following her murder when the dramatic action jumps between earth, heaven, and the In-Between. In the first episode, the actor playing Ruth (Natasha Cottrill) appears, frantically clutching at Susie's soul which

²¹ Marvin Carlson, 'Charles Dickens and the Invention of the Modern Stage Ghost', in *Theatre and Ghosts: Materiality, Performance and Modernity*, ed. by Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 27-45 (p. 37).

darts around her (materialised as a thin sheet of white plastic drawn through the air by a concealed actor who is unlit and dressed in black) – **‘Ruth is amazed to see SUSIE leave earth’**.²² Next, the lights come up on the actor playing Mr. Harvey (Keith Dunphy) thrusting **‘dismembered and bloody body parts’** into a cloth sack.²³ The body parts are weighted prop objects that have a horrifying plumpness to their texture that mimics their fleshy counterparts. After the following blackout, the action moves from earth to an expressionistic depiction of the In-Between where Susie’s dismembered body floats, seemingly lost; **‘Somebody’s body parts are seen, here and there, in limbo working out how to reassemble...’**²⁴ The dismembered parts are played by other members of the company dressed all in black, exposing only the body part they are representing, for example, a knee, lower leg, or hand. The actors lie on stage and gently move their exposed body part in and out of a cross-lit beam that stretches from wing to wing. The next blackout lifts to reveal an elbow, left behind, and a hand furiously beckoning it closer in an attempt to put the body back together again. Finally, as the last blackout dissolves, Beaumont, playing Susie, walks downstage rubbing her elbow – the last addition to her new heavenly body, as she **‘reassembles and becomes our helpful hostess’**.²⁵

In the brief duration of the opening sequence, multiple representations of a single body are presented in quick succession with little dramatic context. The blackouts, strobe lighting, and startling sound design (which introduces a burst of noise at the start of each episode) establish the non-naturalistic representational register of the production. The opening sequence also disrupts the representational conventions of the body onstage. The

²² Lavery, *The Lovely Bones*, p. 2. Bold in original.

²³ Ibid, p. 2.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 2.

²⁵ Lavery, *The Lovely Bones*, p. 2.

beginning of the play presents the disassembly of Susie's earthly body when she is murdered and dismembered by Mr. Harvey and her subsequent reassembly in heaven. The disassembly of the protagonist is staged through multiple representations of her body (parts) that incorporate diverse material and corporeal elements: a plastic sheet, prop limbs, the actual limbs of the cast, and the body of the actor playing Susie. Functioning as a theatricalized bodily assemblage, the meaning of each element emerges from its shared role in the representation of Susie's body. The weight of representation is split across several performers and prop objects to indicate the character's shifting corporeal state. Taken together, the multiple representations of Susie's body destabilise fixed ontological notions of the body. It is neither subject nor object, whole nor fragmented, self nor other.

Through the approach taken to staging Susie's transformative experience, the production depicts the character's bodily state as one in flux. The co-performance of character by prop and performers can be understood as a manifestation of abjection. When Susie has reassembled, Beaumont points to the sack in which Mr. Harvey has supposedly collected her body parts – represented by the bloodied prop objects – and tells the audience in a matter-of-fact tone, 'That's me in there'.²⁶ The contents of the sack both belong and do not belong to the character; using the language of abjection, the bodily remains are a familiar 'me' that is horrifyingly 'there'.²⁷ In her theorisation of the abject, Julia Kristeva argues that the constitution of the self occurs through an on-going process of self-definition against the external other. The abject object challenges this system of self-identification since a 'jettisoned object' (such as excrement, blood, or vomit) refuses to be

²⁶ Lavery, *The Lovely Bones*, p. 2.

²⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia, 1982), p. 2.

entirely disentangled from a conceptualisation of the self: 'It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated' and therefore 'draws me toward the place where meaning collapses'.²⁸ For Kristeva, abjection thus functions as a mechanism to constitute the self as a unitary subject within a unitarily conceived body. What cannot be psychologically assimilated – the 'jettisoned object' – is rejected and thrust beyond the corporeal borders of the body that constitute an understanding of the self. Corpses thus stand as the ultimate objects of abjection. Here, it 'is no longer I who expel [but rather] "I" that is expelled', undermining the mechanisms of abjection.²⁹ For Kristeva, abjection is a process of the psycho-symbolic which is the focus of her approach to philosophy and theory. The opening sequence of *The Lovely Bones* demonstrates how the shifting relationships between the material and the corporeal and the self and other at the heart of a theory of abjection might be expressed theatrically.

In order for the props and actors' body parts to signify their simultaneous relationship to, and separation from, Susie and thus to represent the character's shifting corporeal state, they had to be visually isolated from the actors who co-perform with them. The isolation of these diverse elements was achieved through the use of focussed lighting. Conventionally, focussed lighting is achieved using spotlights positioned in the lighting rig above the auditorium in front of the stage. However, it was noted in a production meeting (where the director, creatives, and production team meet to ensure the theatre-making process is on track and solve any unforeseen problems) that the peculiarities of the set design for *The Lovely Bones*, namely the reflective quality of the mirrored panel, rendered

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 1-2.

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 3-4.

such an approach impossible. This necessitated a further period of development for the sequence in the course of rehearsals discussed below.

The process of experimentation facilitated by rehearsals was essential in developing and stabilising the relational stage technologies that supported the disassembly and reassembly of Susie's body. Acutely aware of the time-constraints imposed by the short, four-week rehearsal period, Melly Still aimed to work through the production chronologically before running the rehearsed action to time. However, her awareness of the challenges associated with particular moments of the production – such as the opening – prompted her to set aside particular sessions or 'workshops' that disrupted the broad chronology of rehearsals. These were used to experiment with staging the complex sequences that could not be rehearsed by the actors without the support of specific scenic elements, props, or lighting states. The mirrored panel, in particular, was a site of uncertainty for Still because, as she relates, 'we didn't know what it was going to be like until we were in the theatre'.³⁰ Her comment reflects the processual nature of theatre-making: the staging of a production is an ongoing process in continuous development throughout the course of rehearsals (and, indeed, performance) that might be significantly altered at any point, especially when the activities of the rehearsal room are first translated onto the stage in technical rehearsals. Recognising the unpredictable impact of the mirror on the rehearsed action, Still organised a workshop to devise the most successful approach to staging the sequence. A scaled-down prototype of the reflective panel was built by the in-house workshop and variations of black 'morph' suits created by the costume department to be worn by the actors whose bodies had to be concealed in the performed action. The

³⁰ Still, interview with author (London, 28th January 2019).

composer Dave Price was present to establish how the sequence would be synchronised to the underscored music devised for the opening. In turn, the lighting designer, Matt Haskins, also attended the session to work out how to isolate the body parts and props employed in Susie's disassembly when faced with the challenges posed by the mirrored panel (namely, its tendency to reflect the light in an unanticipated manner that illuminates aspects of the action that should remain unseen from the auditorium). The need for complete darkness in the course of the workshop (i.e. the stage conditions when the house lights are down in the auditorium) meant that the proto-mirror and lighting equipment were set up in a black-box studio space that is part of the Royal & Derngate complex (see Figures 13 and 14).



Figure 13 Testing out a prototype of the mirrored panel in the black box studio space at the Royal & Derngate during rehearsals. The team experimented with isolating Beaumont in the mirror as if she were floating in space to signify her heavenly status. (Photograph taken by author).

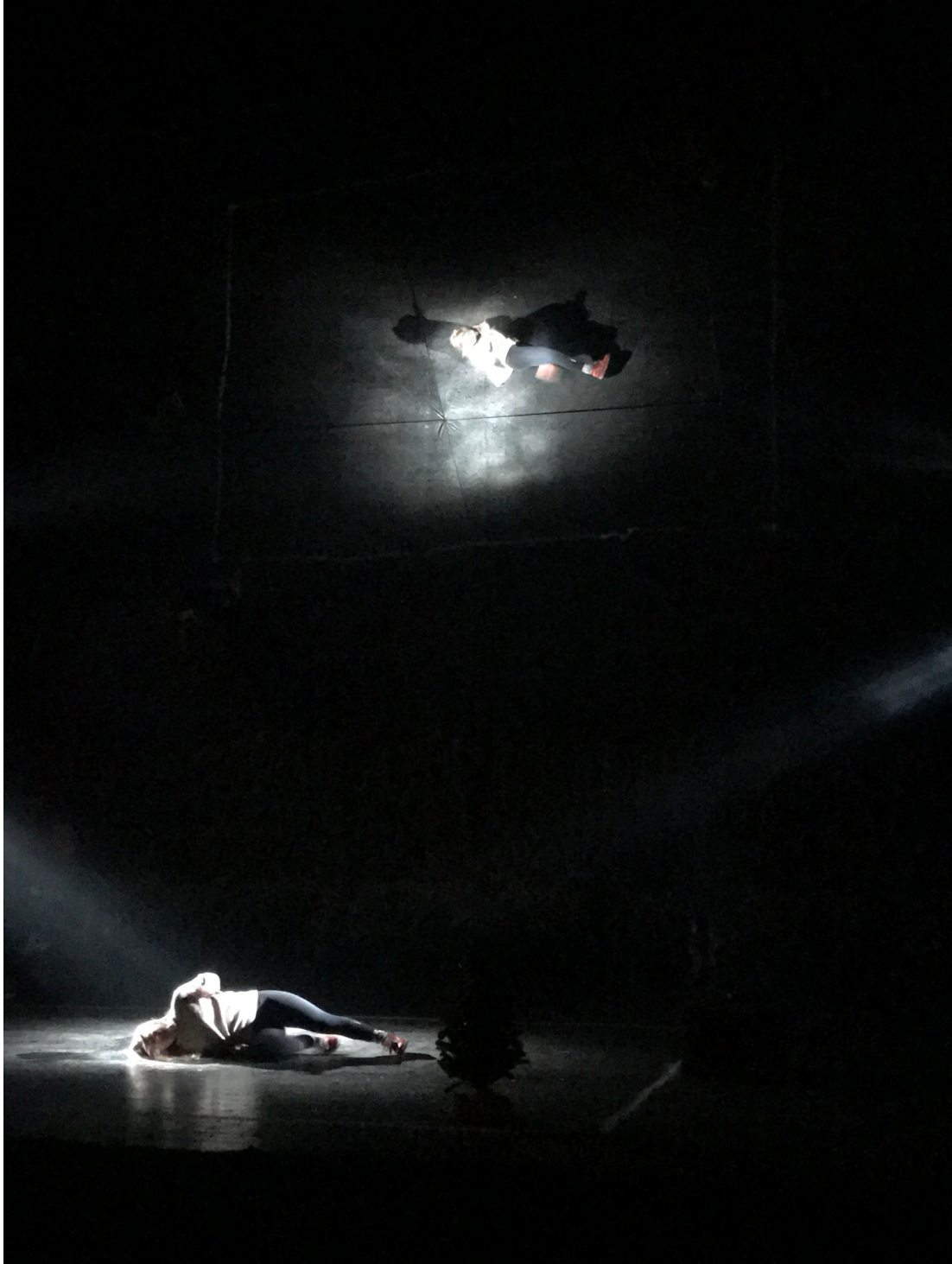


Figure 14 Isolating Beaumont's body onstage and in the reflection in the mirrored panel during technical rehearsals at the Birmingham Rep. Beaumont is wearing her own clothes, not costume, for the purpose of rehearsal. (Photograph taken by author).

Lighting designer Matt Haskins used portable lights which could be moved around the space and their height swiftly adjusted to suit the demands of the workshop. He soon established that the sequence would have to be cross-lit in order to avoid illuminating the activities of the actors, whose presence was intended to remain hidden, in the mirrored panel. This meant that the installation would have to be unlit apart from a horizontal beam of light extending across the stage from wing to wing. The actors representing Susie's body parts had to run into place during the blackouts that took place between each episode in the opening sequence to extend a limb or prop into the light while concealing the rest of their bodies. To minimise the visibility of the actors as much as possible, they were dressed in black morph suits – skin-tight jumpsuits that cover the entirety of the body, including the face. The costume team provided a variety of suits made out of different black textiles to test which would be least visible onstage. Ultimately, after several tricky changes where the actors' wrestled with the snug fit of the garments (along with their own self-conscious embarrassment and corresponding hilarity), it was decided that the black velvet suits granted them the greatest level of concealment in the dark. The morph suits had been adapted by the costume team so that the body part each actor represented was cut out and covered in nude mesh to expose only that area.³¹ Once dressed, the cast soon discovered that in order to move their visible body part in and out of the cross-beam in a controlled manner, they would have to lie on the floor. The corporeal contact with the stage allowed them to ground their bodies more effectively, although finding their spot (and not running into each other) proved difficult in the blackouts necessitating a prolonged process of repetition to stabilise the performance of the sequence.

³¹ As the actor playing Susie was Caucasian, the 'nude' mesh corresponded to her skin tone.

My observation of the workshop showed the staging of the opening sequence to be reliant on the complex interplay of material and corporeal elements – something that characterises the production’s approach to depicting the otherworldly nature of Susie’s body. Observations of rehearsals demonstrated how a distributive model of representation was established to depict the character’s bodily experience through the co-performance of actors and stage objects. Isolated through the lighting design, both props and bodies were fragmented and carried equally the weight of performing the protagonist’s unconventional bodily experience. In this sense, the staging of the sequence speaks to the new materialist conviction in the non-hierarchical arrangement of humans and objects within an assemblage. The meaning of each component – be it prop or isolated body part – was constituted by its collaborative co-performance of Susie’s bodily state.

Just as Susie has to work out how to reconstitute her relationship with her new heavenly body, the opening sequence also challenges audience expectations of how bodies might be represented within the adaptation of *The Lovely Bones* story. The tightly choreographed lighting and sound elements of the opening sequence have a disorientating effect. This disorientation is significant in the context of the production as an adaptation of a best-selling novel with a successful film adaptation. After all, it is likely that a significant proportion of ticket sales would have been purchased by theatre-goers with a prior knowledge of the story. Industry research shows that adaptations of well-known novels or films sell almost five times as many tickets as original scripts, making them an attractive prospect for commercial theatres that rely on this income to sustain their activities.³² In *The*

³² Georgia Snow, ‘Shows Based on Books and Films Sell Five Times More than Original Work – Report’, *The Stage*, 16th July 2018, <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2018/shows-based-books-films-sell-five-times-original-work-report/>> [accessed 22nd December 2018].

Haunted Stage (2003), Carlson conceptualises a spectator's prior knowledge of a production as an example of the multifaceted processes of 'ghosting' that he argues are enacted in 'the structure of theatrical experience'.³³ He observes that the experience of watching a production of a familiar play (or in this case an adaptation) is informed by an expectation of 'implied patterns of action'.³⁴ Therefore, despite the lack of dramatic context provided in the opening sequence of Still's production, a 'knowing audience' familiar with the plot of *The Lovely Bones* might infer that the multiple representations of the body in the opening sequence belong to Susie Salmon.³⁵ The lightning pace of the sequence, overtly theatrical representational techniques, and lack of verbal exposition, work to defamiliarise the (potentially) familiar material. The disorienting function of the lighting and sound design thus work in tandem with the episodic nature of the opening to disrupt the expectations or 'implied patterns of action' brought to the production by a 'knowing audience' familiar with the novel or film.

Therefore, the process of 'ghosting' perhaps more evident in the opening of the production is that relating to directorial style: 'an inevitable bank of remembered previous work in the minds of spectators that will bear upon their expectations and their reception of subsequent work'.³⁶ With a reputation for imaginatively staging adaptations of well-known novels, Still has a characteristic style involving bold employment of stagecraft and the integration of physical theatre elements in the performed action (rooted in her early career as a movement director and designer). Key productions include Helen Edmundson's 2005

³³ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

³⁵ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, p. 120.

³⁶ Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, p. 104.

adaptation of Jamila Gavin's work of children's fiction, *Coram Boy* (2000), and *My Beautiful Friend*, April de Angelis's two-part adaptation of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels (2012-2015) that premiered in 2017 – productions both staged on the Olivier stage at the National Theatre.³⁷ Still's directorial style is certainly evident in the opening sequence of *The Lovely Bones*. However, my experience as an embedded researcher evidenced the close collaboration established between director, production team, and performers and how this mode of working was key to the development of the sequence.

As my observation of rehearsals for the production demonstrated, the experiment with bodily representation in the production is not confined to these scenic solutions. I now consider how the signification of Susie's bodily experience is distributed between object and actor in more detail with a particular focus on the relationship between performers and garments when the latter is used, not as costume, but as props and puppets.

Props as Proxy Bodies: Performing Sexual Assault

Clothing is introduced as a collaborative performer of Susie's experience of sexual violence near the beginning of the production. The challenge of staging the character's rape and murder was felt acutely by both Lavery and Still. In the course of redrafting the script, Lavery experimented with whether to include the assault in the onstage action or leave it implied offstage. Ultimately, she decided to include it, prompted by Still who argued that the event is 'integral to the novel', and therefore to the adaptation, because 'in order [for Susie] to come to terms with her death, she needed to face that particular moment in the

³⁷ *My Brilliant Friend* premiered at the Rose Theatre Kingston, London in 2017 before transferring to the Olivier auditorium at the National Theatre and running from 12th November 2019 to 22nd February 2020.

last moments of her life'.³⁸ The challenge then was how to stage the episode or, in Still's words, 'communicate [Susie's] experience without fetishizing the violence'.³⁹ She recognised that while the assault 'was dealt with very graphically by Alice Sebold'. It was narrated 'with this sort of detached, almost retrospective voice. It was Susie saying, "this is what happened"'.⁴⁰ Motivated to sustain Sebold's narrative voice in the novel, she wanted to find 'a way of... theatricalizing and physicalizing that particular tone', rather than depicting the violence in a realist mode.⁴¹

Still's desire to translate the tone of Susie's narration into the production prompted her to make use of an audio recording of the novel in the rehearsal room.⁴² When a new section of the script was being staged, the session would often begin with the company listening to the corresponding part of the audiobook. The actors were encouraged by Still to track the experiences of their characters in the narrative, particularly those omitted from the theatrical adaptation, and to use that additional information to enrich their performance – an exercise that established a subtext that ran underneath Lavery's script in performance. When the task of staging the assault was first approached in the rehearsal room, Still agreed with the actors playing Susie and Mr. Harvey (Beaumont and Dunphy) that it would be valuable to physicalize the action – as far as they were both comfortable and was appropriate – as it was narrated in the audiobook. The result was a simple acting-

³⁸ Melly Still, joint interview with Bryony Lavery and author conducted in front of a live audience at a symposium, *Collaboration in Theatre*, that took place at the University of Oxford on 19th October 2018 facilitated by The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH) Theatre & Performance Network.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Still used a version of the audiobook narrated by Alyssa Bresnahan for Audible (Recorded Books LLC, 2002) and accessible at <<https://www.audible.co.uk/pd/The-Lovely-Bones-Audiobook/B004FU481I>> [accessed 20th August 2020].

out of the events as told from Susie's first-person perspective. While the process was carefully monitored by Still who ensured that the actors felt safe and supported dealing with the challenging material, the rehearsal was deeply uncomfortable to watch. The early encounter of staging the assault corroborated Still's intuition established ahead of rehearsals that it was important for the production to find a non-representational means of staging Susie's experience of sexual violence. Here, as in the opening sequence, the director turned to the material resources of the stage, specifically to the relationship that might be developed between performer and garment in the co-performance of female bodily experience.

In an imaginative use of costume, duplicates of the garments worn by Beaumont throughout the entirety of the play were introduced to the rehearsal room. Designed by Jabares-Pita, the protagonist's costume was comprised of a navy padded parka with a faux-fur trimmed hood, yellow corduroy trousers, a pale pink shirt, a short-sleeved knitted pullover with bold stripes across the chest, two white bobby socks, a pair of white briefs, and a knitted hat with a red pompom attached at the crown. Susie's costume was influenced both by the detailed description of particular garments in Sebold's novel (including the 'hat with the jingle bell') and the dress of young American teenagers in the 1970s.⁴³ The costume pieces were made or sourced by the in-house costume department at the Royal & Derngate. At Still's request, the materialisation of Susie's costume from Jabares-Pita's design was prioritised early in the production process in order that the costume elements could be introduced as active participants in the experimentation of rehearsals.

⁴³ Sebold, *The Lovely Bones*, p. 134.

The rehearsal process for the assault was structured by Lavery's script. Beaumont narrated Susie's account of the violence, slipping in and out of the representational depiction of events. Mr. Harvey instructs Susie to take off her parka. In the rehearsed action, Beaumont pulled the coat tightly around her body to demonstrate the character's discomfort. Suddenly, Dunphy ripped the garment from her body and slammed it to the floor. In that moment, Beaumont simultaneously manipulated her upright body to mimic the form of the coat. The physical correspondence between actor and garment distributes the performance of the assault across material-corporeal sites. The coat stands both as evidence of Susie's undressing and as the body that she leaves on earth when she reassembles in heaven. As in the opening sequence, the representation of Susie's bodily experience is untethered from the body of the performer and extended into the materiality of the stage. The very thing that should appear disembodied – the unworn garment – becomes an active participant in the depiction of embodied experience.

Melly Still worked with the actor in the rehearsal room to choreograph this shared physicality between performer and garment. Beaumont was asked to examine the form of the coat once it had been thrown to the stage. Through close observation and practised movement, she developed a sequence in which she twisted her spine, awkwardly thrust out her arms, and jolted forwards to synchronize her movements with the garment as it moved through the air and hit the stage.

Using the example of Belladonna Bindweed's highly-structured gown in the previous chapter, I demonstrated how the material properties of costume can be understood to direct the embodied performance of an actor (and vice versa). In this instance, Hann's concept of the 'hug of costuming' can also be applied, here enacted in a distinct fashion. The parka is removed from the body – set apart in spatial terms – yet retains a connection

with Beaumont through their shared performance of Susie's bodily experience. The 'intra-action' is not direct, yet is sustained through 'qualities of tension, texture and pliability'.⁴⁴ The material performativity of the coat (its 'qualities of tension, texture and pliability') affected the way in which it fell to the stage when removed from the body of the performer and directed Beaumont's performance. In turn, the materiality of the garment was shaped (in part) by the actor; the coat was constructed by the costume team and fitted to the proportions of Beaumont's body. Then, the fabric and seams of the coat were stretched and softened by the actor's body in the course of rehearsals, so that the garment evidenced the embodied presence of the performer, even when the two were set apart spatially. Susie's experience of violence is thus co-performed through the material-corporeal performativity of garment and actor, evidencing the distributive model of agency enacted through a 'reciprocal relationship between body, material and action'.⁴⁵ Crucially, this co-performance allows the depiction of violence to be directed away from the body of the female actor.

Following experimentation with the coat, Melly Still proposed incorporating other duplicate elements of Susie's costume into the rest of the scene to explore how the sexual assault might be depicted without fetishizing the body of the actor. Still suggested that Dunphy try miming his performed enactment of violence using the unworn costume that represented items of clothing named in the script. Beaumont read Susie's narration of events to structure the other actor's physicalizing of the play's action:

⁴⁴ Hann, 'Debating Critical Costume', pp. 33-34.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 22.

I'm on the ground
in the ground
I say
"Don't Mr. Harvey.
he's on top of me panting and sweating
Don't.
he kisses his wet lips down my face and neck
Don't
he begins to shove his hands up under my shirt
[...]
He takes the hat that my mother had made me
Smashes it into my mouth⁴⁶

Guided by the dialogue, Dunphy 'shove[d] his hands' inside the pink shirt. He threaded one arm through the garment from hem to collar to create a structure inside the shirt which gave the impression of embodiment. He was then able to grope at the structured shirt, kissing the garment sloppily as described in Susie's narration of the events. The shirt was then discarded and he picked up the knitted hat. This was 'smashe[d]' onto the floor of the rehearsal room near the collar of the shirt where the mouth of the imagined body would be situated. In the process of experimentation, Dunphy engaged with the unworn duplicate garments as if they were a proxy body for Susie transferring the violence from body to material object.

A 'proxy' is conventionally understood as '[a] person appointed or authorized to act on behalf of another', or, in more abstract terms, '[t]he agency of a person appointed to act in place of another'.⁴⁷ The function of the duplicate items of clothing as a proxy body for the character in this sequence thus encapsulates a process of substitution – the conventional equation of 'character with the illusionist representation of a person generated by an actor'

⁴⁶ Lavery, *The Lovely Bones*, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁷ 'proxy, n.', *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, September 2020) <www.oed.com/view/Entry/153573> [accessed 12th November 2020].

is disrupted as the costume becomes the primary material site at which the character's experience is depicted.⁴⁸

The technique had been employed previously by Still in her staging of sexual violence in another page-to-stage adaptation, *My Brilliant Friend*. Based on Ferrante's four-part Neapolitan Novels, the two-part adaptation follows the life-long friendship of two women, Lila Cerullo and Elena Greco. The first part follows their childhood and adolescent experiences lived out in an underprivileged neighbourhood on the outskirts of post-war Naples. Lila, like Susie in *The Lovely Bones*, endures repeated acts of male violence including two episodes portrayed onstage: first, when her father throws her from the window of their home to the street below and second, a marital rape committed by her husband, Stefano. In both instances of staged violence, the body of the actor playing Lila (Catherine McCormack) was replaced with duplicates of the character's costume designed by Soutra Gilmour. In the first instance, the hem, collar, and cuffs of a long-sleeved navy smock with white peter pan collar designed for the adolescent character were held by actors who threw the garment from the scaffolding that represented the densely populated housing of the Neapolitan neighbourhood. Similarly, in the second instance of staged violence, it was the skirt of the unworn substituted wedding dress that was lifted by the actor playing Stefano (Jonah Russell) to depict the character's sexual assault of Lila. As in the use of the duplicate costumes in *The Lovely Bones*, the mimed violence is enacted on the material costume which functions as a proxy body, rather than the actual body of the female performer.

The use of costume as a proxy body in the depiction of the sexual assault of female characters might then be considered a feminist tactic carried across both productions to

⁴⁸ Delgado-García, *Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre*, p. 2.

address the relationship between bodily violence and female objectification onstage. However, following a period of experimentation with the performers and unworn costume in the rehearsal room, Melly Still decided that the process of mimed violence was not effective in the context of *The Lovely Bones*. She was concerned that enacting the assault on the garments might appear grotesque or even comical. Furthermore, the violent acts were still being physicalized, just on the duplicate costume rather than the body of the performer. Reflecting on the rehearsed action, Still worked with the actors to devise an alternative means of performing the sequence.

Feminist Approaches to Staging Violence: Reworking the Assault Sequence

The assault sequence was revisited in the course of rehearsals to rework the relationship between the duplicate garments and performers. At the moment when Dunphy ripped the coat from Beaumont's body and threw it to the floor, Still suggested that he pull the actor tight to his body so that she was trapped in his grasp. While Beaumont continued to narrate the assault, actors not directly involved in the scene were asked to throw the doubles of Susie's costume into the playing space at the moment when they are mentioned in the dialogue. Item-by-item, the garments flew through the air to land crumpled around the coat (see Figures 15 and 16). Like the coat, they came to stand both as the discarded clothes of the character that signify her state of undress and the dismembered body parts that she leaves on earth. However, unlike the first experiment with a corporeal correspondence between actor and discarded coat, Beaumont does not mimic the form of these garments as they land on the stage – she is, after all, held in place by Dunphy's arms. The co-performance of Susie's experience is not conveyed through physical correspondence between costume and body. Yet, the discarded garments are enlivened by their

participation in the performance of the bodily experiences of the character. Understood as a proxy body for Susie, they vibrate with a more-than-objectness even while physically immobile on the stage.

This more-than-objectness was heightened by the conditioning of the duplicate costume ahead of performance. In rehearsals, Still stressed the importance of ‘breaking down’ the garments – that is, making them appear worn – before introducing them to the playing space. She asked the actors charged with throwing the duplicate costume onstage to bag out the socks with their hands and scuff the knees of the corduroy trousers on the floor.⁴⁹ These preparatory activities were intended to encourage the spectator to connect the garments with Susie’s embodied experience, not through Beaumont’s direct mimicking of their form, but through the material modification of the costume. The stretched, scuffed, and bagged-out clothing performed the ghostly trace of embodiment – an embodiment imbued both backstage through material modification and in the performed action through the integration of the clothing into the staged assault sequence.

A similar expression of the uncanny ‘aliveness’ of costume is observed by Monks on encountering items of discarded clothing in a dressing room following performance. Monks argues that the conventions of representational theatre generate a ‘fantasy of seamlessness’ between actor, costume, and character. In this performance context, costume cannot ‘quite be understood as an autonomous object...distinct from actors’. Understood thus, the corporeal and material are inseparably ‘enmeshed’ in the representation of character, each always already signifying through its tactile entanglement with the other. Monks consequently proposes that costumes might be conceived as ‘bodies

⁴⁹ Observation from technical rehearsals for *The Lovely Bones* tour at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in October 2018.

that can be taken off'. It is precisely this 'seamless yet removable aspect of stage-dress' that she suggests can make costume 'so uncanny when unworn – peculiar and disembodied'.⁵⁰ The 'aliveness' of costume described by Monks rests on a sustained intra-action between body and costume, even when the two are set apart in spatial terms. In the distinct context of performance in *The Lovely Bones*, the perceived 'seamlessness' between actor, character, and costume is disrupted. A gap opens up between the material and the corporeal. Yet, both actor and garments continue to function as active participants in the co-performance of Susie's bodily experience. The relationship between actor and costume is thus one of collaborative proximity rather than substitution (as implied by the notion of a proxy body).

The dual meaning of proximity helpfully encapsulates the complex terms of this material-corporeal performance. Proximity describes both a 'condition, or position of being near or close by in space' and the 'fact or condition of being near or close in abstract relations' including 'kinship', 'time', and 'nature'.⁵¹ The unworn garments used in the assault scene of Still's production of *The Lovely Bones* are in proximity with the actor both in spatial terms – occupying the same stage space – and in terms of the 'abstract relations' between the two – their shared function as material performers of Susie's embodied experience. Crucially, proximity names the nature of the relationship between costume and actor, rather than presupposing the function of either rooted in ontological definition. The approach to staging the assault sequence therefore recalls the new materialist interest in the active role played by the nonhuman in the constitution of action and its participation in expressions of distributive agency. The different spatial relationships established between

⁵⁰ Aoife Monks, *The Actor in Costume* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 70.

⁵¹ 'proximity, n.', *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, September 2020) <www.oed.com/view/Entry/153569> [accessed 12th November 2020].

actor and costume in *The Lovely Bones*, and the corresponding uncanny ‘aliveness’ of the latter, might be derived from the fluctuating function of the duplicate clothing as costume, prop, and/or performer.

The first two chapters of this study illustrate distinct employments of costume. In the first chapter, costume is designed and utilised in performance in a conventional fashion, worn upon the body of the performer to generate a ‘fantasy of seamlessness’ in the performance of character. In this chapter, a relational tie is still established between actor and garment in the co-performance of character. However, the spatial separation of body and garment disrupts the expectation that the performance of character resides solely with the costumed actor. Taxonomical definitions of stage objects are ill-equipped to describe the various functions of props, costume, puppets, and scenery in performance. Indeed, the challenge of providing a comprehensive and satisfactory definition of the prop – particularly what distinguishes it from other stage objects – frames most studies on the subject.⁵² The issue here, is not whether the duplicate garments should be defined as costumes or props, but how they participate in the co-performance of character. Recognising the function of the duplicate garments as active participants in the depiction of Susie’s experience of the assault argues for the value of proximity when describing the relationship between actors and the materiality of the stage – the term addresses the function of each component without presupposing a capacity for action based on the ontological categories of the human and non-human.

⁵² For instance, Margolies, *Props*, p. 1; Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, p. 1; and Jonathan Gill Harris and Natasha Korda, ‘Introduction: Towards a Materialist Account of Stage Properties’, in *Stage Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. by Jonathan Gill Harris and Natasha Korda (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1-31 (pp. 1-2).



Figure 15 The duplicate items of costume fly through the air onto the stage as Beaumont narrates Susie's assault. She is held in place by Dunphy (stood behind). The actors who throw the garments can be seen in shadow right of the shirt. The actors are in their own clothes for the purpose of rehearsals. (Photograph taken by author).



Figure 16 Beaumont dressed in Susie's costume, doubles of which are thrown onstage by other actors during the assault sequence. (Photo credit to Shelia Burnett, used with the permission of the Royal & Derngate).

The staging of bodily experience through a distributive model of representation shared between performer and stage objects, asserts the value of theatre as a critical tool that might be used to map out alternative relationships between the material and the human, here harnessed specifically to reconceptualise the staging of women's experiences and, more generally, the gender politics of representation. In her study of violence and theatre, Lucy Nevitt provocatively asks, '[w]hether it is ever possible to embody a simulated rape without performatively citing a history of pornography and sexual oppression?'⁵³ The reconceptualisation of the assault sequence in this production of *The Lovely Bones* directs the enactment of violence away from the body of the performer. Unlike the first approach to the sequence where the costume stands as a proxy body upon which the assault was mimed by the male actor, the acts of violence are here rendered more abstract. This abstraction further mitigates the performative citation of gendered sexual oppression that might be perpetuated through the representation of rape in the production; that is, while the act of rape stands as an act of sexual oppression within the context of the play's narrative, its depiction onstage was developed to avoid citing the violence of the act through the co-performance of actors and costume. Reflecting on the gender politics of staging sexual violence in contemporary performance, Lavery contends that 'the absolute point of theatre is working out how much you can get the audience to do the imagining'.⁵⁴ The approach to depicting the rape in *The Lovely Bones* asks the audience to infer the horror of the violence without staging it in a naturalistic mode.

⁵³ Lucy Nevitt, *Theatre & Violence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 35. See, particularly, her analysis of directorial decisions made in the course of staging rape in productions of Sarah Kane's plays (pp. 34-35).

⁵⁴ Lavery, interview with Still and author (Oxford, 19th October 2018).

My discussion of the representation of Susie's sexual assault demonstrates how a distributive mode of representation established across the material and corporeal elements of theatre-making might disrupt the theatrical conventions of gendered bodily representation. The employment of the unworn costume to direct attention away from the body of the female performer may then be considered a feminist tactic that challenges the mode of 'women's objectification in the history of representation' on the stage.⁵⁵ In the shared representation of the character's experience, the body becomes another material element across which Susie's subjectivity is distributed. Paradoxically, by casting the body as one object among others (the unworn clothing, props, and other actors), Still sidesteps the objectification of the performer's body. Through the experimentation of rehearsals, director, performers, and stage objects establish a mode of 'nonsexist objectification' – an emergent concept within object-oriented feminist philosophy.⁵⁶ By flattening the conventional hierarchical distinction between bodies and objects in the co-performance of character, subject-object positions are destabilised. The dynamic is no longer that of the passive female body as object. Rather, the body of the actor is one material participant that, along with the duplicate costume, plays an active role in the co-performance of female bodily experience and disrupts a mimetic representation of the assault. Elaine Aston recognises disruptive tactics as central to feminist theatre practice. She adapts director Simone Benmussa's description of the theatre as a potential 'sphere of disturbance'.⁵⁷ The term recognises theatre-making as a generative process from which new and unexpected meaning might emerge to challenge established theatrical conventions ('stagnant

⁵⁵ Dolan, Jill, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, second edition (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), p. 57.

⁵⁶ Behar, 'An Introduction to OOF', p. 20.

⁵⁷ Elaine Aston, *Feminist Theatre Practice: A Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 18.

categories').⁵⁸ In Aston's feminist configuration, the concept of the theatrical 'sphere of disturbance' is brought to bear on 'feminist theatre practice [that] seeks to disturb [...] systems of representation that refuse women the possibility of representing themselves; refuses them agency, subjectivity, identity and so on'.⁵⁹ Aston observes, particularly, the tendency of feminist practitioners 'to activate a sphere of doing for the purpose of undoing'.⁶⁰

This 'nonsexist objectification' of the female body cultivated through rehearsals for *The Lovely Bones* might therefore be perceived as a feminist tactic. Stage objects stand as valuable co-performers of female experience, destabilising the 'stagnant categories' of the human and nonhuman, in a fashion that avoids 'performatively citing a history of pornography and sexual oppression'. *The Lovely Bones* is not explicitly a feminist production; it was marketed as an adaptation of Sebald's novel rather than a work of socio-political theatre. Yet, the disruptive treatment of the female body employed in staging of Lavery's script might be contextualised as feminist practice following the definition provided by Aston. The opening sequence of the production fragments the female body as it is signified across multiple material sites; the actor, the prop limbs, and the body parts of other actors isolated by beams of light. Bodies are literally undone (disassembled) so that they might be redone (reassembled). In turn, the staging of the assault sequence disrupts the representational conventions associated with the objectification of the performing female body through the incorporation of duplicate costume as co-performers of female bodily experience.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 18.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 18.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 18.

I now consider another imaginative use of clothing engaged in the presentation of the unconventional embodied states of female characters in the Royal & Derngate production of *The Lovely Bones*: dresses-cum-puppets. However, unlike the example of Susie's sexual assault, the clothing is here used to displace the body of the performer. While a collaborative mode of performance is still enacted between the material and the corporeal, the obscuring of the performer's body in the act of puppetry renders the dynamics of this entanglement distinct.

Performing Puppets

Once Susie begins to acclimate to her new life in heaven, she is introduced to a gaggle of Heavenly Girls who were also victims of Mr. Harvey's violence. Represented by five characters in Lavery's script, four of the Heavenly Girls are aged between six and thirteen. The final 'Girl' is a forty-nine-year-old woman, Sophie Cichetti. Although unexplained in the script, the novel reveals that Sophie had a consensual sexual encounter with Mr. Harvey after which he murdered her.⁶¹ The character was included by Lavery to demonstrate the different manifestations of Mr. Harvey's violence against women. However, without the opportunity to explain this in the course of the play, the character was removed from the revival of the production as she was perceived to be an incongruous anomaly amongst the other, younger Heavenly Girls.⁶² In the play, the Heavenly Girls encourage Susie to turn her back on the happenings on earth and embrace her new (after)life in heaven. Soon, however, Susie convinces them to help her seek revenge on Mr. Harvey. The Heavenly Girls are

⁶¹ Sebold, *The Lovely Bones*, p. 181.

⁶² This decision to reimagine the Heavenly Girls was related to me by Lucy Bird who acted as the assistant director for both versions of the production. Lucy Bird, interview with author (Oxford, 19th November 2019).

conceived as supporting characters in Lavery's script and, therefore, also in the action of Still's production. They gather around Susie to cheer her on, invite her to dance, or help her to lead the police to clues to prove Mr. Harvey's guilt. The Heavenly Girls stand as an alternative community for Susie in the afterlife, bonded by their shared trauma.

In interview, Still recalls that when reading Sebold's novel she was struck by the idea of 'animating dresses' to represent these ghostly characters.⁶³ This was motivated by a desire to signify their 'heavenly' status. Unlike Susie, whose perspective shapes the narrative of the play, their function as supporting characters meant that Still wanted to take a distinct approach to staging their otherness. As we will see, this approach was also motivated by her conceptual approach to embodiment and subjectivity in the production. Ahead of rehearsals, a three-day workshop was organised by the director with a small group of performers trained in physical theatre. The workshop was designed to develop strategies for staging elements of Lavery's script that Still anticipated might be challenging to realise and would therefore benefit from a process of experimentation outside of rehearsals proper when she could draw upon the expertise of physical-theatre performers before working with the actors cast in the production. This was particularly valuable given the short (four-week) rehearsal period. One of the sequences Still particularly wanted to explore in these workshop sessions was her idea of animating dresses to represent the Heavenly Girls. This approach built upon her staging of sexual violence using duplicate costumes in her production of *My Brilliant Friend*. For this reason, several of the performers invited to participate in the workshop were those cast in the production when it premiered in 2017. The process of developing a strategy for depicting the Heavenly Girls was therefore

⁶³ Still, interview with Lavery and author (Oxford, 19th October 2018).

informed by the past experience of performers and director. My observation of the workshop was not possible. Still felt that an awareness of being observed might curtail creative experiment, particularly if the performers were to feel self-conscious. Through discussion with the assistant director, Lucy Bird, I learnt that the Heavenly Girls characters emerged from the process as disembodied figures depicted using unworn dresses that were operated like puppets in co-performance with the actors.

The use of puppetry to depict the otherness of the Heavenly Girls is particularly fitting. Eric Bass, a designer and practitioner in the puppet theatre company Sandglass, recognises the value of using puppets to represent characters with an otherworldly quality. He asserts that the first question that must be asked by a production that intends to use puppets is:

‘Why is this character played by a puppet and not an actor?’ If we cannot answer this question, it is probably because the character is too much like a human and should remain in that domain. On the other hand, a character who comes out of dream of memory, a character whose being embodies imbalance or fragmentation, a character who sees us as ‘other’ – all of these (and more) beg to be played by puppets. Each suggests a world that could be other than ours.⁶⁴

In *The Lovely Bones*, the Heavenly Girls are characters literally born out of ‘fragmentation’. Their bodies are disassembled and disposed of by Mr. Harvey on earth and they find themselves reconstituted in heaven in a disembodied state. The use of puppetry to portray the characters thus connects the performance technique with the narrative function of the Heavenly Girls in the action of the play.

Following the workshop, Still worked with Jabaras-Pita and the in-house costume team at the Royal & Derngate to design and create the dresses-cum-puppets. The size and

⁶⁴ Eric Bass, ‘Visual Dramaturgy: Some Thoughts for Puppet Theatre-Makers’ in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, ed. by Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 54-60 (p. 55).

style of dresses were individualised for each of the Heavenly Girls to reflect the age and period in which the character died. The costume team were given freedom in selecting the style, fabrics, and colour of each dress (reflecting the role costume-makers play in the process of characterisation discussed in the first chapter). However, because the function of the dresses was as puppets, rather than costume, the garments had to be constructed in a fashion different from those designed to be worn on the body. During the workshop, the performers had discovered it was essential that 'a shoulder structure' was inserted into the garments 'to give them a little bit more outline'.⁶⁵ The purpose of this structure was twofold; first, to enliven the dresses by giving the impression of embodiment and, second, to facilitate the performers' tactile interaction with the object. The costume team therefore devised a means of padding out the shoulders using a flexible structure made from fine netting. They also created underskirts for the dresses made from tulle. This made the skirts flare out, appearing as though they were being worn rather than hanging limply from the shoulder structure. The design of the dresses-cum-puppets co-developed by the performers in the workshop, designer, and costume team facilitated a mode of operation classified by puppeteer Penny Francis as 'corporeal contact (hands-on, hands-in)' rather than 'via strings, wires, [and/or] wooden or metal rods'.⁶⁶ The puppets were designed to allow the actors to thread one arm through a sleeve of the dress so that their hand appeared at the cuff, as though belonging to the Heavenly Girl. The garment was then supported by the performer's other hand that grasped the neck of the dress to stabilise the form of the puppet (see Figure 17). The workshop and production of the puppets took place ahead of rehearsals with the

⁶⁵ Still, interview with author (London, 28th January 2019).

⁶⁶ Penny Francis, *Puppetry: A Reader in Theatre Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 13.

actors. In order to impart the techniques developed for performing with the dresses, Still invited Emily Mytton (one of the performers who had participated in the workshop) to run several sessions with the actors playing the Heavenly Girls in the production.

None of the actors had puppetry experience. When working with Mytton, they quickly discovered that they were undertaking a collaborative process of performance with the puppets. The size of each dress (representing the age of the Heavenly Girl) dictated the height at which the actor had to hold the puppet. They had to stoop their bodies so that the position of the garment indicated that the invisible legs and feet of the character were touching the floor. Furthermore, the different material properties of the garments – dictated by the characterisation process undertaken by the costume team under the supervision of Jabares-Pita – directed the gestural range of the actor. The different styles of the dresses dictated the way in which the performer might establish corporeal contact with the puppet. Those with a button-down back allowed the actor to easily thread their arm through the opening and down through the sleeve. In comparison, the dresses with a zip or front fastening forced the actors to insert their arms through the neck opening in order to access the sleeve. This twisted their arms into awkward and, at times, uncomfortable positions, limiting the range of movement they were able to employ in their performance with the puppets in comparison to those working with dresses that had a buttoned-back fastening. The impact of the different material properties of the puppets on the actors' embodied performances was noted by Andrew Joshi when reflecting on his experience playing a Heavenly Girl in the 2019 revival of the production: 'The dress that I use is made of quite rigid material, so my puppet is probably the easiest to handle'. By contrast, the fabric that some of the other dresses were constructed from is 'quite floaty and flimsy making it

difficult at times to manipulate the puppet'.⁶⁷ The different materialisations of the dresses, rooted in decisions made by the costume team in their process of characterisation, were thus shown to direct the performance of the actors.

In turn, as described by Hann in her concept of the 'hug of costuming', the material form of the dress-cum-puppet was also shaped by the physicality of the actor co-performing the Heavenly Girl character, even though the garment was not worn in the conventional sense. Through the repeated movements of rehearsal, and then performance, the fibres in the fabric softened and eased. Just as the physical performance of the actors was stabilised through practise, the materiality of the puppets adapted to accommodate the rehearsed performance. The relationship between the dresses and actors thus offers an example of the way in which participants within relational networks of action (here, the performance of character) have the potential to both act and be acted upon by one another. Such a model of collaborative performance challenges Edward Gordon Craig's conception of the puppet as metaphor for the actor conceived in 1907 as the Über-Marionette. According to Craig, the actor is understood to be a perfectly controllable medium of expression through which the director is able to channel their creation vision for a production to achieve a total unity of style – a central tenet of his conceptualisation of a new 'Theatre of Art' in the early decades of the twentieth-century.⁶⁸ In contrast, the process of experimentation with the dresses undertaken in the workshop and rehearsals for *The Lovely Bones* asserts the generative qualities of both the material object and physicality of the actor. The development of the co-performance of the Heavenly Girls assert that puppets are not simply material vehicles

⁶⁷ Andrew Joshi, interview with author (Oxford, 15th November 2019).

⁶⁸ Edward Gordon Craig, 'The Actor and the Über-Marionette', in *On the Art of the Theatre* (London: Heinemann, 1956 [1908]), pp. 54-94.

for the director's vision, as conceived through Craig's metaphor of the Über-Marionette, but active participants in the meaning of performance.

In her discussion of the function of the puppet, Dassia N. Posner also argues that an effective approach puppetry 'assumes that inanimate matter contains agency not simply to mimic or mirror, but also to shape and create'.⁶⁹ The performance of character that emerges from the puppet assemblage is one responsive to the 'matter' or affectivity of the puppet which models a form of distributive agency in collaboration with puppeteer. Crucially, the co-performance creates new forms of character (not simply mimicking or mirroring the characterisation process undertaken by an actor). To this extent, adaptation and puppetry are aligned as generative processes of (re-)production that do not attempt to directly replicate that which they are based upon – be it novel or, in the case of the Heavenly Girls, (disembodied) human beings. Puppetry thus relates to Hutcheon's conception of adaptation as palimpsestic process. She argues that 'an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing'.⁷⁰ The performance of the Heavenly Girls puppets enacts a distinct expression of female subjectivity derived from a conventional conception of character but reimagined in its new formation as puppet.

⁶⁹ Dassia N. Posner, 'Introduction', in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, ed. by Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 1-12 (p. 5).

⁷⁰ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, p. 9.



Figure 17 Actor Karan Gill with his arm threaded through the sleeve of the puppet dress in the co-performance of a Heavenly Girl character. Another Heavenly Girl puppet-cum-dress can be seen in the shadows right of Gill. The actors are in their own clothes for the purpose of rehearsals. (Photograph taken by author).

Puppets, then, are inherently relational objects. Director Paul Piris uses the term ‘co-presence’ to describe the interdependency of actor (or puppeteer) and puppet.⁷¹ His term highlights the spatial dynamics of the collaboration between the material and corporeal in the act of puppetry – something heightened when puppets are operated through ‘corporeal contact’ rather than strings or rods, such as the dresses that represent the Heavenly Girls in *The Lovely Bones*. Piris suggests that the term is also valuable in understanding the ontological fluctuation that takes place in successful puppetry. He argues that the ‘co-presence’ of human performer and puppet generates ‘ontological ambiguity by confronting

⁷¹ Paul Piris, ‘The Co-Presence and Ontological Ambiguity of the Puppet’, in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, ed. by Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 30-42 (p. 30).

the [seemingly animated] puppet with a human protagonist'.⁷² While his phrasing asserts the dominance of the human within the relationship (the actor cast in the role of protagonist), his observation challenges an anthropocentric conception of human as subject and puppet as object. The ambiguity of the subject/object position in the act of puppetry is exemplified in the prevalent trope of the suicide of the puppet. Here, a marionette puppet notices the strings attached to their head and limbs. Looking upwards, they realise that they are being controlled by a puppeteer. Desiring freedom, they cut the strings which inevitably results in their 'death' as they are no longer animated by the puppeteer. Similarly, no longer connected to the puppet, the puppeteer must conclude their performance.⁷³ The destabilisation of subject/object positions enacted through the collaborative production of meaning pursued in puppetry might be productively conceived within the new materialist concept of the assemblage. The meaning that emerges from the puppet assemblage is the performance of character. This meaning is co-constituted through the relational ties or intra-actions established between the diverse participants in the assemblage (most directly actor, puppet, and, in performance, spectator). As in new materialist models of distributive agency, while the actions of individual participants can be identified, the overall meaning of the assemblage emerges through collaborative performance.

Paradoxically, despite the intensely collaborative nature of puppeteering, the human participant is often rendered 'invisible' in the act of performance. Even when the puppeteer is visible onstage – perhaps physically entwined with the puppet as in the example of the Heavenly Girls – the spectator understands that they are meant to perceive the puppet-

⁷² Ibid, p. 30.

⁷³ See Margaret Williams, 'The Death of the Puppet?', in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, ed. by Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 18-29.

object as the site of signification for the co-performed character (rather than the body of the performer). Consequently, a process of omission takes place in the observation of puppetry. The spectator sorts through the aspects of the performance presented onstage (or in the rehearsal room) to determine which elements should signify as part of the character and which are understood solely as necessary apparatus of theatrical representation. Frequently, the puppet belongs to the former category and the performer to the latter. This process of sorting through the different aspects of puppetry are aided through a set of conventions learnt through familiarity with the performance style.

It is also facilitated by puppeteering techniques undertaken by the performer to direct attention to the puppet, rather than their own embodied performance. For instance, Joshi explains that even though the Heavenly Girls were conceived as, paradoxically, disembodied figures, when performing with the puppets, the actors were instructed by Mytton to direct their gaze on the area of the dress where the head would be'.⁷⁴ Specifically, the actors were to look at the puppet as though a secondary observer of its actions (even though they are actively co-performing the character). Joshi notes this technique is designed to 'make [the puppet's] existence believable' and to signify that the actor is 'just an extension' of it, rather than establishing performer and puppet as separate and distinctly signifying sites of subjectivity.⁷⁵ The gaze of the puppeteer is one that anticipates that of the spectator. They observe the actions of the puppet (which they are co-performing) to encourage the observer to follow their sightline, directing attention to the material object rather than their secondary performance. The eclipsing of the performer was also expressed through the proximity enacted between the actor and dress-cum-

⁷⁴ Joshi, interview with author (Oxford, 15th November 2019).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

puppet. When engaged in 'corporeal contact', the actors stooped, shuffled, and hunched their bodies to ensure that the puppets were held away from their torsos (see Figure 17). In so doing, they demonstrated through their physicality that their own bodies were not to be interpolated into the subjectivities of the characters. The presentation of the Heavenly Girls in Still's production of *The Lovely Bones*, like the depiction of Susie's assault, is co-performed between unworn clothing and actors. In both examples, the two parties are engaged in a reciprocal relationship of distributive representation. However, while actor and duplicate costume are equally foregrounded in the first example of staging Susie's assault, the presentation of the Heavenly Girls is designed to obscure the performer as a signifying element in the puppet assemblage. The purpose of imagining the characters as puppets is thus not to model a collaborative performance of female bodily experience, but to foreground their otherness as heavenly figures. Therefore, while the two instances of unworn costume used to depict the bodily states of female characters who have experienced violence at the hands of Mr. Harvey, the relationship between actor and object is distinct in each case.

The decision to signal the otherness of the Heavenly Girls using puppets perhaps seems inconsistent with Still's conviction in the significance of employing relational technology (rather than direct bodily modification) to signal Susie's ghostly state. Yet, despite such apparent inconsistencies in the treatment of the heavenly characters, the introduction of the disembodied dress puppets to depict the Heavenly Girls relates to the director's wider conceptualisation of the interrelationship between characterisation, female bodily experience, and the material in her production.

Female Subjectivities: From Corporeal Subject to Intersubjective Affect

Susie is a subject in the making. Her coming-of-age is disrupted by her rape and murder. The story of *The Lovely Bones* (in both novel and theatrical forms) is one of redirection: from the *Bildungsroman* to the making of a different kind of subjectivity. The protagonist of the coming-of-age narrative conventionally passes through a series of trials or obstacles to ‘acquire a philosophy of life and “the art of living”’.⁷⁶ When Susie first reassembles in heaven, Franny (the guidance councillor who helps her acclimate to her new existence) asks her what she wants to pursue in the afterlife:

SUSIE:

I know what I want....

I want to *grow up*...

FRANNY:

People grow up by *living*

SUSIE:

I want to live

FRANNY:

You can't

SUSIE:

I want Mr. Harvey *dead* and me *living!* *don't tell me...*

FRANNY/SUSIE:

That's out

That's the deal.⁷⁷

The ‘art of living’ is beyond Susie’s reach. While the formation of Susie’s subjectivity remains at the heart of *The Lovely Bones*, the play follows Susie’s journey from a singular notion of selfhood – defined by the material boundaries of her earthly body – to an increasingly

⁷⁶ C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, third edition (New York: Odyssey Press, 1972), p. 39.

⁷⁷ Lavery, *The Lovely Bones*, p. 15.

immaterial state. This gradual process of immaterialising is depicted in the production through the distributive representation of the character across the bodies of performers and stage objects.

In interview, Still explained that she conceived of Susie's journey to discover her new sense of subjectivity in the play as one that shifted from earthly embodiment to heavenly disembodiment, like that represented by the Heavenly Girls puppets. She believed that 'the disembodied state was where Susie would have to end up... able to evaporate and just surface occasionally as a kind of dress'.⁷⁸ She asserted that if she had had more time during the rehearsal period and greater resources (namely a larger cast and the ability to experiment more with the materialisation of the puppets) she would have tried to foreground this idea of the shifting states of embodiment more clearly in her production:

[Following her death, Susie] is at a place of transition when she meets the Heavenly Girls. Initially, rather than going towards them [and embracing her newfound state of being] she brings them closer to her earthly concerns. And I guess, if you had the time and resources, they would start to become more embodied again. Those dresses would grow into other human beings and in the end they'd be banging on Mr. Harvey's door [demanding justice] as embodied characters [played by actors] rather than disembodied dresses. I suppose that's what I was hinting at with [the use of the dress puppets].⁷⁹

In her approach to characterisation, Still describes a process of becoming experienced by Susie and the Heavenly Girls: from their corporeality on earth to their disembodiment in heaven. A similar understanding of the processual formulation of character underpins Delgado-García's conceptualisation of character in contemporary British theatre. In *Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre*, she draws a distinction between 'selfhood' and 'subjectivity': 'Often used as synonyms, "selfhood" is a psychological term

⁷⁸ Still, interview with author (London, 28th January 2019).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

that refers to the experience of individuality and identity, whereas “subjectivity” is a wider philosophical notion, encompassing a number of conceptualisations of human ontology’.⁸⁰ For Delgado-García, ‘character can be best understood as theatre’s figuration of subjectivity’.⁸¹ Engaging with the work of playwrights including Sarah Kane and Martin Crimp, Delgado-García traces examples of characterisation where the subject is no longer understood ‘as a self-identical, unique, coherent and rational individual... firmly located in space and time’.⁸² While *The Lovely Bones* is an example of commercial theatre-making and not the experimental playwriting to which Delgado-García refers, there is nonetheless a similar reconfiguring of the characterisation of the female protagonist in Lavery’s adaptation and the representational strategy taken by the production.

Still’s explanation of her approach to depicting the heavenly characters demonstrates that conceptualising a production is also an ongoing process. It is often not possible for practitioners to fully articulate their vision within the pragmatic conditions of production in the British commercial theatre sector. The process is product-focussed (e.g. the efficient production of work for performance). Furthermore, the short rehearsal periods and limited budgets characteristic of contemporary commercial theatre curtails the scale of experimentation that might take place ahead of performance. Creative decisions have to be made quickly and compromise is often necessary. Such an understanding of the production process is a prudent reminder to those engaged in the study of theatre and performance not to fetishize the performance as the direct manifestation of the creative vision of director as sole artist. Rather, as my observation of the theatre-making process demonstrates, the

⁸⁰ Delgado-García, *Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre*, p. 20.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 86.

⁸² Ibid, pp. 14-15.

elements that shape a production are multiple and meaning emerges, not from the individuated vision of the practitioner, but from the theatre assemblage. Some aspects of a production are planned, others generated by accident or unpredictable outcomes in the course of theatrical production, and others are the result of compromise due of pragmatics such as budgetary or time restrictions.

Yet, despite such compromise, the renegotiation of the relationship between the body and subjectivity pursued in *The Lovely Bones* speaks to the experimentation with character in contemporary theatre. Delgado-García conceptualises this model of processual characterisation using the notion of 'subjectivation'.⁸³ Engaging with the philosophical framework employed by Judith Butler to theorise the performative mechanisms of gendered identity, subjectivation is described as 'the moment or process when the subject comes into existence'.⁸⁴ In short, 'the subject occurs rather than is'.⁸⁵ The concept is particularly resonant with the nature of performance as a spatio-temporal act of meaning-making; character 'occurs' in a processual fashion, accumulating meaning in the course of performed action (both in the context of rehearsal and performance itself). This process of becoming (or rather unbecoming and re-becoming) is represented in *The Lovely Bones* through the disassembly of Susie's body (and corresponding sense of selfhood) in the opening sequence, and journey towards disembodied subjectivity in heaven. In the material conditions of Still's production, this process of subjectivation is depicted through the shifting relationship between actor and material elements of the stage that collaboratively represent Susie's state of being.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 86.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 48.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 49.

Crucially for Delgado-García, such an approach to characterisation (albeit addressed within the specific context of playwriting rather than performance) has political and ethical implications. She explains that her reconceptualisation of character in contemporary theatre:

attempts to uproot character and subjectivity from an expectation of individuality, and to move away from the political and ethical effects of positing the individual, its rights and interests at the centre of governance and intersubjective relations – namely, individuation.⁸⁶

These same tenets inform a strand of new materialism that similarly challenges the notion of the individual (conceived as the universal white, male, European subject of much Western philosophy), to argue for ‘an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others’ to overcome ‘the obstacle of self-contained individualism’.⁸⁷ This is pursued by reassessing the power dynamics embedded in traditional relationships between the human and the material. This reassessment underpins a modelling of relational subjectivity that permeates certain strands of feminist theory including, for instance, Donna Haraway’s metaphorical figure of the cyborg and Rosi Braidotti’s critique of the humanist subject in *The Posthuman* (2013).⁸⁸ In Braidotti’s formulation, the posthuman is a Deleuzian ‘*conceptual persona*’ used to theorise her notion of intersubjectivity ‘framed by embodiment, sexuality, affectivity, empathy and desire’.⁸⁹ As noted in the introduction, feminist new materialist frameworks reassess the nature of matter, things, and subjectivity to ‘engender other ways of being’ outside patriarchal structures of individuated selfhood.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 18.

⁸⁷ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), pp. 49-50.

⁸⁸ Donna J. Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century’, in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149-182.

⁸⁹ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 26.

The conceptualisation of Susie's shifting subjectivity in Still's production of *The Lovely Bones* is certainly not an overtly political enterprise like that proposed by Delgado-García in her study of character, or Braidotti in her theory of the posthuman. The approach to staging Susie's shifting subjectivity in the production was rather prompted by the specificities of *The Lovely Bones* script: that is, the challenge of materialising the protagonist's unconventional bodily experience in the process of adapting Sebald's novel from page to stage. However, the experimental approach to staging the protagonist's relationship to embodiment asserts Still's interest in formulating new representational strategies for staging female experience; sidestepping the objectification of the protagonist in the depiction of sexual assault and employing puppets to imaginatively conceptualise the distinct bodily state of the Heavenly Girls. Embracing the material conditions of performance, the prop objects and puppets are material means of reconfiguring conventional forms of subjectivity. Like Samuel Beckett in his creation of fragmented and disembodied characters, Still recognised the value of undoing characterisation to facilitate alternative perspectives of human experience. The mouth in Beckett's *Not I* (1972) emits a jumbled verbiage of disjointed and displaced trauma. Isolated, often using a focussed spotlight, the mouth is separated from the body of the actor; it is all we see of her, physicalizing the character's fragmented self-narration. Similarly, the disassembled and disembodied depiction of the heavenly characters between performers and performing objects is a material representation of an unconventional process of subjectivation. Such discussion of alternative forms of being, positions the production's experimentation with characterisation – and, more specifically, the depiction of women's bodily experience – simultaneously, within a framework of feminist practice and approaches to character in contemporary theatre-making. However, a paradox underpins this representational

strategy: Susie's processual disembodiment, along with that of the Heavenly Girls, is staged using props and puppets. In other words, the material resources of the stage are employed in the staging of the immaterial formulation of relational subjectivity. As I now demonstrate, the tensions emerging from this material representation of the immaterial proved difficult, at times, to negotiate in the course of rehearsals.

Materialising the Immaterial in Theatrical Production

One such challenge was faced in staging the denouement of the play, in which the corporeal boundaries of the characters' bodies are shown to be permeable in an enactment of relational subjectivity. Although this example centres on the relational ties established between the bodies of actors in the co-performance of Susie's bodily experience, the difficulties encountered in staging this sequence are shown to be analogous to those generated when using stage objects to depict the character's immaterial state. The processual formulation of Susie's subjectivity from corporeally-bound subject to the disembodiment of the Heavenly Girls is punctuated with episodes of intersubjective experiences shared with a female community comprised of her family and friends left on earth. From heaven, she is able to experience bodily sensations even though she is untethered from her material body. Susie's participation in this relational network of sensory experience is, initially, unexpected. When she witnesses Lindsey's first kiss with her boyfriend, Samuel, Susie **'feels it in heaven'**:

Lindsey cute boy touches her in *the cornfield*
And / feel it here!
an *amazing* discovery of sensation...⁹⁰

In rehearsals, Still worked with the actors to establish a means of physicalizing the shared bodily experience of the sisters. The precise nature of Susie's discovery is ambiguous in

⁹⁰ Lavery, *The Lovely Bones*, pp. 45-46. Bold and italics in original.

Lavery's depiction of the event. The 'here' to which she refers might be spatial – a heavenly 'here' – or physical – a corporeally-located 'here'. Both were explored in rehearsals through different articulations of Beaumont's performance. Ultimately, Susie's discovery ('I feel it here!') was accompanied by the actor gesturing to her genitals with her hand. While the gesture was initially introduced in jest by the actor, Still felt that it physicalized the notion that, through these experiences, Susie is able to participate in a process of growing up that has been denied to her due to her untimely death. Susie is emboldened by her unexpected share in Lindsey's relationship with Samuel. When Ruth and Ray revisit the sinkhole many years after Susie's death, she pushes hard on the 'In-Between' and falls from heaven into Ruth's body (resulting in her exclaimed recognition of the 'marvellous weight' of '*a human body!!!*'). With Ruth's consent, Susie finds herself able to consummate her sexual relationship with her school-crush, Ray. Sharing in the sexual awakening of her sister and friend supplants the trauma of her assault with a pleasurable sexual encounter facilitated through a network of relational subjectivity supported by female friendship. Along with the police's discovery of Mr. Harvey's guilt, her experience with Ray allows Susie to tie up the loose ends of her life on earth and move onto her new, (after)life in heaven as a disembodied being.

Susie's shared sensation of Lindsey's kiss was easily physicalized through the gestural performance of the actor. However, the mobilisation of subjectivities between bodies and places (heaven and earth) that takes place in the encounter between Susie, Ruth, and Ray proved more challenging to stage. Lavery's scripting of the episode focuses on the dialogue that takes place between the characters rather than detailing the corporeal presentation of the encounter. The sparse stage directions do not suggest precisely when or how Susie's

occupation of Ruth's body should be presented. When '**Susie falls to earth/ Suddenly, shockingly**', Ruth faints and Susie unexpectedly finds herself in her body:

FRANNY

Susie!

Susie!!!!

Where Are You????

SUSIE

I'm *in* her body!!!

[...]

I'm...

In Ruth!

RAY appears...runs for RUTH....

RAY

Ruthie!

What *happened?*

RUTH

Try it

RUTH opens her eyes

Looks at RAY

Electric shock moment.

RAY

Wo!

RUTH

What?

RAY

You've changed.

Something's changed

SUSIE

Kiss me

RAY

What?

SUSIE

Kiss me

RUTH

Pretend I'm Susie
Just as an experiment

SUSIE

Don't you want to?

RAY

strange but....

Yes.

And kisses her.

SUSIE

When you kiss me I see heaven

RAY

Looks closely into her eyes

You're not Ruth.

SUSIE

No

And waits until he finally realises...

RAY

....*Susie*...?

SUSIE

Nods

I've watched you both for years

I'm here right now

He touches her

She touches him⁹¹

Lavery's scripting of the sequence carefully avoids dictating the way in which it might be performed. When first approached in the rehearsal room, Still asserted that a fundamental decision had to be made as to whether Susie's occupation of Ruth's body would be performed by Cottrell as Susie, or if Beaumont should play Susie as if she were in Ruth's body. In other words, should the subjectivity of the characters be visualised in performance (Susie's

⁹¹ Ibid, pp. 101-103. Bold and italics in original.

interaction with Ray)? Or the exterior reality of their corporeal states (Ruth's body interacting with Ray's body)? The actors ran the scene twice in quick succession; first with Cottrill playing Susie's occupation of Ruth's body, then with Beaumont playing Susie as though she was in Ruth. Following this experiment, director and performers decided that the important element of the story was Susie's union with Ray. It is this encounter that allows her to conclude her business on earth. In order to play the emotional truth of that relationship, it was decided that the second option in which Beaumont plays occupying Ruth's body, would be most successful.

In the course of rehearsing the sequence, Still and the actors discovered that, as with Beaumont's mimicking of the coat in the depiction of Susie's assault, in order to signify the shared experience of the two characters, a physical correspondence had to be established between the two actors. Lavery's script suggests that '**RUTH faints**' when Susie enters her body.⁹² Still worked with Cottrill and Beaumont to see if they were able to choreograph a sequence in which the two actors fell backwards onto the stage so that their bodies were mirror images of the other. Their bodily positions were largely dictated by the physicality necessary to cushion their fall. However, Beaumont and Cottrill were encouraged to be attentive to the physicality of the other. Accompanied by Susie's expositional dialogue ('I'm *in her body!*'), Still felt that the correspondence established through the gestural performance of the actors effectively communicated Susie's inhabitation of Ruth. Throughout the remainder of the rehearsals, at the moment in which Susie falls in Ruth's body, the actors fell backwards, paused for a moment on the floor before continuing the scene as though they had swapped bodies. However, during previews (the small number of

⁹² Ibid, p. 101.

performances used by theatre-makers to 'test out' their production in front of a live audience while continuing to make changes before press night), the staging of the rehearsed sequence changed. Still was not convinced that it was clear that Susie was in Ruth's body. During a rehearsal between preview performances, the sequence was re-blocked with the actors. Still's new idea employed a blackout at the moment that the actors fell to the stage which allowed Cottrill and Beaumont to swap positions before the lights came back up. The act of spatial substitution represented more clearly the substitution that had taken place even while the audience was asked to imagine that Beaumont played Susie inside Ruth's body.

The staging of the production demonstrates the difficulty of representing unconventional bodily states (the immaterial components of an intersubjective network) through the material conditions of theatrical production. The novel and the script describe a disintegration of the borders between Susie and Ruth's bodies and subjectivities as they participate in a shared network of affect. There are moments when they cohabit Ruth's body and, while Susie and Ray have sex, Ruth is described as visiting heaven. She does not occupy Susie's ghostly body which is supposedly in a state moving towards the disembodiment of the Heavenly Girls. In both written forms of the narrative, the precise state of the characters' bodily state is left indeterminate – a representational strategy not possible in the spatio-temporal medium of theatrical performance. The overlapping subjectivities and bodily experiences of the characters must be conveyed through the physicality of the actors. The distributive network of sensation is simplified in the production's approach to staging the sequence which depicts the shared experience through an act of substitution conveyed through the swapping of the actors' positions in the stage space. To focalise the action on Susie and Ray's encounter, Cottrill moves behind the

mirrored panel once the substitution has taken place. The lighting state renders the panel transparent so that the actor is still visible from the auditorium. She plays a guitar and sings, serenading the union between Ruth and Ray (performed downstage by Beaumont and Gill) – the actor is thus distanced from the action in a way that does not reflect the bodily participation of the character she plays (Ruth) as detailed in the script or novel. The reworking of the sequence during previews suggests Still's discontent with the strategy for depicting the action collaboratively devised in the rehearsal room. My observation of the process illustrates the challenge of materialising the immaterial in the course of theatrical production – a challenge amplified when staging a narrative adapted from one medium to another, each with distinct representational capacities.

The tension that underpins a material representation of an immaterial subjectivity also underpins the presentation of the Heavenly Girls in the Royal & Derngate production. Here, paradoxically, the immateriality or disembodied state of the characters is depicted by an object: the dress-cum-puppet. The material presence of the unworn dress signifies the disembodiment of the characters through the actors' co-performance with the garment. Following the conventions of puppetry, the spectator is asked to ignore the presence of the actor, but what of the dress itself? The dress-cum-puppet plays a crucial role in the characterisation of the Heavenly Girls. The style and size of the dress individuates the characters indicating, particularly, their age and the period in which they died. Are we asked to believe that this is the physical state of the Heavenly Girls within the fictional world of the play, or is this a representational tool necessitated by the material condition of performance used to signify the characters' presence onstage? Furthermore, what are we to make of the intertwining of the material and corporeal in the performance of the puppet? The actor threads their hand through the sleeve of the dress so that their body part stands in for that

of the Heavenly Girl. Some aspects of the disembodied character are, therefore, embodied. The corporeal substitution of actor and character facilitates greater expressive potential for the puppets; the Heavenly Girls convey their shared sense of community by holding hands and one invites Susie to join them by handing her an olive branch. However, the partial materialisation of the representation of the supposedly disembodied characters disrupts the logic of Still's conceptualisation of embodiment; that is, the characters leave their corporeal bodies on earth and transition into a disembodied state of subjectivity.

The slippage between the body of the performer and bodily state of the character does not disrupt the storytelling process of the production. The inconsistency in the treatment of the representation of the corporeal state of the character is likely to go unnoticed by audience members, superseded by the lively and powerful mode of storytelling of Still's production. However, in the context of this chapter, the presentation of the Heavenly Girls offers an example of the challenges faced in reconceptualising unconventional presentations of subjectivity; in this case, materialising the immaterial through the representational strategies of theatre. This chapter has argued that the distributive representation of gendered bodily experience co-performed across actor, props, puppets, and aspects of the scenic environment disrupt conventional expectations of character. This disruption stands as a feminist tactic that imagines new ways of constructing character that challenges representational conventions associated with the objectification of female bodies or patriarchal structures of being. I conclude by addressing how this material experimentation with character is co-constituted by the casting strategy of the production.

Conceptualising Character Through Casting

As demonstrated in this chapter, the representational strategies utilised in the production's approach to characterisation are not employed to pursue verisimilitude. Rather, the employment of prop objects (including unworn costume, artificial limbs, and puppets) untethers the representation of character from the body of the actor. I have argued that this relates to feminist new materialist strategies to propose new formulations of subjectivity that reassess the relationship between humans and the material world through the notion of intersubjectivity. The effectiveness of the use of the material resources of the stage to present distributive models of characterisation is facilitated, in part, by the casting strategy of the production. Working with casting director Polly Jerrold to find actors for *The Lovely Bones*, Still undertook non-representational multi-role casting. There were exceptions to this strategy. Ray and his mother, Ruana Singh, are characters of British-Indian heritage and experience racially-motivated discrimination from the police in both Sebald's novel and Lavery's script. Still felt it was important that these characters were played by actors of Indian heritage to play that discrimination truthfully. Similarly, the nature of the assault and murder in *The Lovely Bones* addresses the specific dynamics of an act of sexual violence committed by a middle-aged white man on a white teenage girl in the context of small-town Pennsylvania. It was consequently important to Sebald, who Still consulted by email when casting the production, that Susie and Mr. Harvey were cast with white actors whose playing age and gender corresponded to the character they played. Still notes that the dynamics of the violence would have been different had Susie been played by a black actor, particularly in the context of American racial politics in the 1970s in the aftermath of the 1960s Civil Rights revolution. While she relates that they auditioned many actors of different ethnicities for the role, the 'more I understood Alice's point of view and

the specificity of the story and who it was about', the more she was convinced that the two characters had to be played by white actors.⁹³

Aside from Beaumont, cast in the role of the play's protagonist Susie, the nine other actors played multiple characters throughout the production. In the casting process, the actors auditioned for one principal role. Then, in the course of rehearsals, the method for assigning the supporting roles was based on the availability of an actor. The pragmatic approach meant that the casting of many characters was non-representational within a context of verisimilitude. For instance, in the 2018 production the members of the Salmon family were played by actors of different ethnicities despite the white ethnic uniformity of the characters in the source text. Buckley, the youngest son, is played by Cottrill (the female actor who also plays the teenage Ruth). Similarly, in the 2019 touring production, Joshi notes that the casting strategy meant that he was 'a nearly 40-year-old man pretending to be a girl' when playing one of the Heavenly Girl puppets, while also cast as the middle-aged male Principal Caden, a teenage student, and a dog.⁹⁴ The fast pace of the production meant that the shift between the roles played by an actor is signified not by modifications to the costuming or appearance of the actor but what Anna Cutler terms 'the bodily meanings generated through performing'.⁹⁵ Each time an actor steps onto the stage, the audience has to work out from the context of the scene, minor changes to their costume, or identifying interpellations in the script ('Detective Fenerman, what are you

⁹³ Still, interview with author (London, 28th January 2019).

⁹⁴ Joshi, interview with author (Oxford, 15th November 2019).

⁹⁵ Anna Cutler, 'Abstract Body Language: Documenting Women's Bodies in Theatre', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 14 (1998), 111-118 (p. 113).

doing with my mother's scarf?'), who they are playing and whether the character is familiar or new.⁹⁶

The multi-role casting thus destabilised expectations of direct representational correspondence between actor and character. It is for this reason that I term the strategy 'non-representational' rather than the more widely used terminology of 'non-traditional' or 'colour-blind' casting – both terms that have been critiqued for the problematic value judgements implicit in their use.⁹⁷ The casting strategy employed in *The Lovely Bones* provides an example of how 'the illusionistic representation of a person generated by an actor' might be disrupted in the material conditions of production rather than the script.⁹⁸ The multiple roles played by each actor not only allows the production to retain a greater number of the characters from the novel – a form in which the cast size is not limited by the budgetary constraints of employing actors – but also trains the audience to be flexible and expansive in the relationship they observe between character and actor. The approach is thus particularly valuable to Still's experimentation with new forms of embodiment. Such untethering of actor from character supports the introduction of prop objects in the co-performance of character; the unworn costume, prop limbs, and puppets participated in a distributive model of representation with performer in the constitution of character. The reconceptualisation of Sebald's novel across mediums in Lavery and Still's theatre production thus demonstrates the potential that lies in adaptive practices to challenge and expand the representational possibilities in the materialisation of bodies from page to stage.

⁹⁶ Lavery, *The Lovely Bones*, p. 84.

⁹⁷ See Angela C. Pao, *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), pp. 1-5; and Sita Thomas, "'The Dog, the Guard, the Horses and the Maid": Diverse Casting at the Royal Shakespeare Company', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24 (2014), 475-485 (p. 478).

⁹⁸ Delgado-García, *Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre*, p. 2.

The formal distance in the realist representational strategies of the novel and Still's theatrical presentation of Lavery's script creates interpretative space to expand audience's expectations of the theatrical conventions of bodily representation rendering casting and the employment of the materiality of the stage in the co-performance of bodily experience both creative and, possibly, even political acts.

As in this chapter, the effects of non-representational casting are predominantly conceived within the context of identity politics. In *Building Character* (2018), Amy Cook argues that casting practices in theatre and film have implications for our categorisation of individuals in real life. Drawing upon a critical framework informed by the cognitive sciences, Cook proposes that character 'is a way of organizing into memorable units the large amount of stimuli that many human beings we come into contact with provide'.⁹⁹ According to Cook, the interpretation of character is a process of cerebral categorisation. Writing in the context of non-representational casting practices that address a disparity between race and/or gender of a character and the actor playing them in performance, she argues:

A strategic attention to performances – in fiction or in life – that don't seem right, that stretch, extend, or break what seems like the right casting, allows us to see casting as a way to blur or transform categories. People who play against a role, inviting an audience to build a new character through a different performance, can force spectators to consciously think about the role instead of reflexively relying on pre-existing cognitive maps... Casting is creative and ideological, and understanding how it shapes our everyday life grants us an indirect way of thinking about our thinking and the opportunity – perhaps our responsibility – to change what we think.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Amy Cook, *Building Character: The Art and Science of Casting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 122-3.

Cook's discussion of the creative potential of casting is directed towards the promotion of more inclusive representational strategies relating to gender, race, ethnicity, disability, and sexuality in their various and specific intersections. So too, this chapter centres on how the conventions associated with the depiction of female bodily experience are challenged through theatrical representation. Here, I extend Cook's assessment of casting to consider how the prop objects utilised to depict bodily experience in *The Lovely Bones* might also be used to 'stretch, extend, or break' expectations and transform perception of character. Like Cook, I understand the disruption of the traditional superimposing of actor and character to create an opportunity to reconceptualise the conception of stagnant categories and conventions. I argue that the unexpected distribution of character's subjectivity across props, unworn clothing, the bodies of multiple actors, and puppets invites the audience 'to build a new [sense of] character through a different performance'. The collaborative enactment of female experience between performer and prop in the production traces Susie's journey from a unitary understanding of the self within the corporeal boundaries of the body to an affective intersubjective network. Situated within Aston's conception of feminist theatre practice as disturbing the systems of gendered representation, Still's approach to characterisation in *The Lovely Bones* is framed by wider discussions concerned with the intersections of gender and representation in theatre and performance studies.

Conclusion

In his account of puppetry, Kenneth Gross argues that the function of the puppet is two-fold. It is both a performing object and 'an *idea*' that becomes 'a tool of thought, a spur

to reimagine parts of our ordinary life, our play and work'.¹⁰¹ Of particular interest in this chapter has been how the puppet and, more broadly, the prop object, is 'a tool' in Still's production of *The Lovely Bones* to reimagine the presentation of unconventional (female) subjectivities. An attentiveness to the interactions between performers and props is utilised to reconceptualise character and present new formations of bodily experience through co-performance with the material as modelled in certain strands of feminist new materialism.

Still's approach to staging the experiences of the unconventional characters in *The Lovely Bones* embraces a theatrical mode of storytelling. The production does not pursue verisimilitude through mimesis in its representation of character. Rather, the material apparatus of the theatrical representation is taken up to disrupt established hierarchies between the human and material to conceptualise new strategies for asserting female experience in the theatre. Rehearsals are shown to be a site of experimentation in which theatre-makers actively engage with issues of representation and characterisation through the material conditions of performance. In turn, the process demonstrates the ways in which props contribute to the development of strategies of representation. They are not simply vehicles for the theatre-maker's creative vision, but active participants in the formulation of new strategies for presenting the bodily experiences of female characters. The interaction between prop, performer, and practitioner in rehearsals for *The Lovely Bones* thus argues for the value of forms of meaning-making that rest, not solely on the cerebral work of practitioners, but on attentiveness to the tactile interactions between the corporeal and the material.

¹⁰¹ Kenneth Gross, 'Foreword', in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, pp. xxiii-xxiv (p. xxiii).

The situated knowledge derived from my experience as a participant-observer embedded within the rehearsal room (as opposed to costume workroom, for instance) has inevitably centred the analysis of this chapter on the work of director and performers in collaboration with stage objects. At times, this has resulted in the foregrounding of the director's creative vision in the development of the production. As discussed in the methodology chapter, this is demonstrative both of the mode of commercial theatrical production and, inevitably, the methodological conventions in theatre and performance studies. However, this chapter aims to elucidate the expressions of collaborative agency exerted in the rehearsal room of which directorial intention is but one facet; here, by focussing on the co-constitution of subjectivity and gendered bodily experience expressed between the materiality of the stage and performers with both parties conceived of as generative participants in theatrical production.

Part Two

Staging Gendered Experience: Theatre Apparatus and Character

Chapter Three: The Material Apparatus of Form

So far, this thesis has examined the nature of specific encounters between practitioners and theatrical objects to establish a reciprocal relationship between the material resources of the stage and the enactment of women's agency (both with regard to practitioners and the depiction of characters' experiences within the particular representational strategies of the productions). This chapter shifts the inquiry from these individual encounters to consider how the material apparatus of theatrical representation participates in the gendering of form; specifically, how it constitutes and complicates an engagement with women's narratives through realism.

No other form of theatre has attracted as much critical attention as realism. In his study of dramatic realism, William W. Demastes argues this is because realism 'has been the dominant mode of theatrical expression' in modern and contemporary American theatre.¹ The same claim has been made for the English stage.² Examining the critical tendency to assert the dominance of realism on the contemporary Western stage, Mary Luckhurst traces the ways in which the championing of the form has shaped 'the received history of English twentieth-century theatre' and obscured 'the actual multiformity of theatrical styles and

¹ William W. Demastes, 'Preface: American Dramatic Realisms, Viable Frames of Thought', in *Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition*, ed. by William W. Demastes (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1996), pp. ix-xvii (p. ix).

² Janine Hauthal, 'Realisms in British Drama since the 1990s: Anthony Neilson's *Realism* and Gregory Burke's *Black Watch*', in *Realisms in Contemporary Culture: Theories, Politics, and Medial Configurations*, ed. by Dorothee Birke and Stella Butter (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), pp. 146-177 (p. 146).

practices'.³ Such 'multiformity' is evidenced in the diverse formal elements of the productions drawn from the programming of the two regional theatres that feature as case studies in this thesis. I have observed, for instance, that pantomime continues to be one of the most popular forms of theatrical entertainment in the UK. My focus on realist theatre in the argument of this chapter is thus not intended to once again divert attention from the diverse offerings of the English stage, but to respond to the fraught critical terrain surrounding the gendering of form which has so often centred on realism. This chapter engages with both the feminist critique of realism that emerged in the 1980s (and continued into the 1990s) and the recent critical '(re)turn to realism' that recognises the political potential of the form to engage afresh with identity politics in twenty-first century performance.⁴ I focus on the ways in which playwrights and theatre-makers take up and extend the conventions of realist theatre to accommodate the experiences and perspectives of those traditionally excluded from the dramatic canon. The Royal & Derngate's production of Katori Hall's play *Our Lady of Kibeho* directed by James Dacre provides a case study to examine how these reworked conventions might be staged through the material conditions of theatrical production. In regard to this production I argue, particularly, for the material as a distinct site of authority for black women within the apparatus of representation in theatrical realism.

American playwright Katori Hall's three-act social drama *Our Lady of Kibeho* contributes to the revitalised interest in realism in a particular strand of twenty-first-century

³ Mary Luckhurst, 'Contemporary English Theatre: Why Realism?', in *(Dis)continuities: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English: Papers Given on the Occasion of the Tenth Annual Conference of the German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English*, ed. by Elke Mettinger-Schartmann (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2002), pp. 73-84 (pp. 76-7).

⁴ Adishesiah and LePage, 'Introduction: What Happens Now', p. 4.

playwriting. The play is a semi-fictionalised account of a series of Marian apparitions witnessed by three schoolgirls in the titular Rwandan village of Kibeho in the early 1980s. These apparitions have subsequently been interpreted as prophetic and perceived by many to be a premonition of the genocide that would tear the country apart a decade later. Hall's religious-political drama focusses on the experiences of three of the schoolgirls – Alphonsine Mumureke, Anathalie Mukamazimpaka, and Marie-Claire Mukangango. The girls' status as visionaries is both supported and questioned by the authority figures they encounter including the Head of Kibeho College and tentative believer, Father Tuyishime, the cynical head nun and primary discipliner of the girls, Sister Evangelique, and Bishop Gahamanyi, the Head of the Diocese keen to monetise the apparitions. As news spreads of the miraculous occurrences at Kibeho, an Italian priest, Father Flavia (the only white character in the play), is sent by the Vatican to investigate the validity of the girls' status as visionaries (although it was only in 2001 that the Vatican declared the authenticity of the visions). In the play, evidence of the apparitions is revealed to the characters – and the audience – through a series of miraculous occurrences that accompany the girls' visions. These include a ball hovering in mid-air, the sun splitting into four and dancing across the sky, the girls floating above their beds which break underneath them, and a luscious garden growing across the dormitory. The miracles are employed as dramaturgical assertions of the girls' spiritual authority within their community – indeed, they are soon referred to as 'the Trinity' by the villagers in Kibeho, replacing the masculinist configuration of paternalistic relations with one of female friendship through a mode of affective spirituality (a form of devotion particularly associated with the feminine).⁵

⁵ Katori Hall, *Our Lady of Kibeho* (2018 [2014]), p. 75. The script referred to in this chapter is that used for the 2018 Royal & Derngate production directed by Dacre. For affective

The events that take place at Kibeho College are used by Hall to explore the tensions between Rwandans of Hutu and Tutsi ethnicity that erupted into civil war in the 1990s. She takes the historical events of the apparitions as ‘a frame, a slight timeline’ that are compressed and structured into the formal conventions of the three-act drama.⁶ The resulting form is that of the ‘well-made play’ particularly associated with dramatic realism with its tightly written plot, dramatic climax, and resolution. The miraculous occurrences build from small phenomena – papers rustle on a desk, a ball hovers in mid-air, and Anathalie becomes supernaturally heavy so that she is unable to be lifted by her father – to large-scale transformations of the setting: the sun spins in the sky, a garden grows across the dormitory, and an apocalyptic premonition of the genocide materialises. The escalation in the scale of the miracles not only serves a dramaturgical function by building momentum to reach the climactic build of the narrative (the premonition of the genocide), but demonstrates the growing influence and authority of the girls within their community. The play is broadly structured by alternating scenes that depict these miraculous apparitions with dialogue-heavy interactions that examine characters’ shifting perceptions of the visions. Demonstrating her intersectional understanding of the socio-political context of the historical events, she is particularly interested in the patriarchal and racial dynamics that inform a character’s impetus to embrace or dismiss the schoolgirls’ claim to spiritual authority.

spirituality as a mode of devotion associated with the feminine see Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), p. 13.

⁶ Katori Hall, interview with Lynn Nottage, ‘Katori Hall’s Rapture of the Spirit in “Our Lady of Kibeho”’, *American Theatre*, 16th January 2015, <www.americantheatre.org/2015/01/16/katori-halls-raptures-of-the-spirit-in-our-lady-of-kibeho/> [accessed 12th March 2019].

First staged at the Signature Theatre in New York in 2014 as part of Hall's residence with the company, *Our Lady of Kibeho* had its British premiere at the Royal & Derngate on 12th January 2019. Dacre commenced rehearsals in December 2018 with a cast of twelve professional actors and a community ensemble of local amateur performers (termed the 'community chorus' in the rehearsal room). *Our Lady of Kibeho* was not the first play by Hall that Dacre had directed. The director and playwright have a longstanding working relationship having met at Columbia University where Hall was studying African American Studies and Dacre was a Fulbright Scholar in Theatre Directing. In 2009, Dacre directed the world premiere of Hall's play *The Mountaintop* (2009) at Theatre 503 in London. As with the treatment of the Marian apparitions at Kibeho, *The Mountaintop* is an imaginative dramatization of historical events, here, Martin Luther King's last night on earth. The production transferred to the West End and won Best New Play at the Olivier Awards in 2010. The British premiere of *Our Lady of Kibeho* was similarly well-received by critics who praised Dacre's skilful handling of Hall's play, garnering a spate of four and five star reviews and earning it a place in *The Guardian's* list of the '50 best theatre shows of the 21st century' in 2019.⁷ The success of the production amongst critics and audiences alike saw *Our Lady of Kibeho* transfer to Theatre Royal Stratford East in London for an additional six weeks from 25th September 2019, generating equally positive responses from critics.

The staging of the miraculous occurrences that accompany the Marian apparitions in the two versions of the production directed by Dacre are the focus of this chapter. My interest in the gendering of the material apparatus of theatrical realism is located in the challenge posed to the production team to stage the extraordinary occurrences of the play

⁷ 'The 50 Best Theatre Shows of the 21st Century', *The Guardian*.

within the material conditions of theatrical production. Hall's script indicates that the Virgin Mary should, herself, not be depicted. Instead, environmental changes and the bodily performance of the Trinity assert the presence of the divine. The miraculous occurrences that evidence the girls' communion with the Virgin Mary are integrated seamlessly within the rest of the realist drama – they are not abrupt shifts of mode that call attention to themselves formally. The material resources of the stage are employed as key tools utilised by the production team to depict the apparitions. As we will see, this inclusion of the extraordinary within the conventions of the realist play, and the corresponding importance of the materiality of the stage in asserting the experiences of those frequently marginalised in the dramatic canon, places *Our Lady of Kibeho* within a tradition of twentieth- and twenty-first-century (American) dramatic realism that stretches the conventions of the form to accommodate new modes of storytelling.

Through the observation of rehearsals for *Our Lady of Kibeho* at the Royal & Derngate and my experience as a spectator of both the Northampton and London productions, I consider how the representational apparatus of realism is utilised to accommodate the miraculous occurrences of the play in order to assert women's authority through a material register. Supported by interviews with Dacre and assistant director, Sarah Stacey, I trace how practitioners' approach to staging the miracles were refocussed through experimentation in rehearsals. I track a shift from attempts to present the miraculous through material illusion using props to a scenographic crafting of the scenic environment: in other words, from a materialisation of the miraculous to a cultivation of mystical atmosphere. The transfer of the Northampton production to London offers an additional opportunity to observe how the shift in approach to staging the miracles was consolidated (and adapted to the new performance environment).

Repurposing Realism

Hall was motivated to write *Our Lady of Kibeho* following a visit to Rwanda on an annual writers' programme led by her mentor, the playwright Erik Ehn. Confronted with the legacy of the genocide, Hall wanted to explore the socio-political dynamics within communities that escalated into the extreme violence of civil war. She identifies that her interest with this episode of Rwandan history lies in the fact that the causes of the violence resonate with her experience of American racial politics:

Almost a million people were killed, or disappeared due to a perceived difference in perceived ethnicity [between Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups], an imposed ethnicity [by Belgian colonial rule]. Me being African American and having inherited a history of oppression and racism and that then being exacerbated by sexism and classism, I look at a country that has faced these imposed divisions and it fills me with empathy. I had to bear witness to the story of Rwanda. A lot of people who need to be spoken for are dead. They're in the ground, not even truly buried in the way they deserve.⁸

Hall's comment embeds an intersectional understanding of identity politics in her approach to staging the historical events of her play. She recognises the parallels between her own experience of systemic marginalisation as an African American woman with those experienced by Rwandans, and particularly the Visionary Girls, in the lead-up to civil war. More broadly, her writing practice is expressly motivated by a desire to write about black female experience: 'being a woman of color... those two parts of my identity are so inextricably linked that they inform one another'.⁹ Resonating with the influential intersectional critiques of white feminism undertaken by Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Toni

⁸ Katori Hall, interview with Alex Wood, 'Katori Hall on *Our Lady of Kibeho*: "I had to bear witness to the story of Rwanda"', *WhatsOnStage*, 7th January 2019, <https://www.whatsonstage.com/northampton-theatre/news/katori-hall-on-our-lady-of-kibeho-rwanda_48258.html> [accessed 15th November 2020].

⁹ Katori Hall, interview with Paulette Beete, 'Art Talks with Playwright Katori Hall', *National Endowment for the Arts*, 28th May 2015, <www.arts.gov/art-works/2015/art-talk-playwright-katori-hall> [accessed 17th October 2020].

Morrison, Hall asserts: 'You cannot talk about being black and a woman within traditional feminist dialogue'.¹⁰ Her observation has prompted her to identify herself as 'a womanist' in recognition of the fact that often 'the feminist movement has excluded black women'.¹¹ In *Our Lady of Kibeho*, the specific context of the Rwandan civil war is presented through Hall's political interest in exploring intersectional structural inequities relating to racism, sexism, and classism in her work. Her play extends the conventional subject of dramatic realism to address the supernatural experiences of the schoolgirls in Kibeho – approaching the socio-political events of the 'state of the nation' play through black female experience asserted through the divine.

Our Lady of Kibeho sits in a dramatic tradition of socio-historic plays that explore women's authority within their community through their privileged visionary contact with female saints. The best known of these is perhaps George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* (1923). Here, the playwright's fictionalised account of the eponymous figure's life and death is used to address key issues that preoccupied Shaw's contemporaries, particularly the gender politics of early-twentieth-century British society. Shelia Stowell argues that while Shaw's 'immediate impetus' for writing the play was the canonization of Joan of Arc in 1920, his treatment of the historical subject matter was also directed by his desire to engage with women's struggle for increased political power associated with suffrage.¹² Stowell notes that Joan of Arc's 'own militancy and martyrdom became touchstones of radical suffragism' fostered, particularly, through the performative strategies of the Women's Social and

¹⁰ Katori Hall, interview with Nosheen Iqbal, 'Katori Hall: "I've had two hours sleep!"', *The Guardian*, 23rd March 2010, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/mar/23/katori-hall-the-mountaintop-review>> [accessed 23rd October 2020].

¹¹ Beete, 'Art Talks with Playwright Katori Hall'.

¹² Shelia Stowell, "'Dame Joan, Saint Christabel!'", *Modern Drama*, 37 (1994), 421-436 (p. 421).

Political Union (WSPU) – something Shaw was more than aware of as a supporter of the cause.¹³ The dramatization of history ‘to make relevant connections between the nation’s present and its past’ is a well-established trope of the modern history play carried through into the twenty-first century.¹⁴ It was the contemporaneity of the themes of Hall’s *Our Lady of Kibeho* that prompted Dacre to stage the play at the Royal & Derngate in 2019. He was particularly interested in the treatment of the girls’ ‘protest against the moral, social and political decay of their community’ and their particular attunement to the forthcoming national unrest which he perceived to resonate with the political mobilisation of young people in today’s ‘turbulent times’.¹⁵ Dacre’s comment calls to mind Shaw’s own description of Saint Joan in the preface to his 1923 play. He describes her as an individual marginalised from institutional power but whose genius involved ‘seeing farther and probing deeper than other people’.¹⁶ For twenty-first-century audiences, divine apparitions might be characterised as ‘a medieval phenomenon, a relic of a former age’ more readily associated with Joan of Arc than schoolgirls in 1980s Rwanda.¹⁷ However, the increased number of reported Marian apparitions in the twentieth century witnessed by women in areas of extreme conflict suggests a connection between female authority, mystical engagement with the divine, and the traumas of modernity.¹⁸

¹³ Ibid, p. 422.

¹⁴ Brean S. Hammond, ‘“Is everything history?”: Churchill, Barker, and the Modern History Play’, *Comparative Drama*, 41 (2007), 1-23 (p. 3).

¹⁵ James Dacre, ‘The Schoolgirls Who Warned of Rwanda’s Genocide’, *The Guardian*, 14th January 2019, <www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/jan/14/our-lady-of-kibeho-royal-and-derngate-northampton-rwandan-genocide-katori-hall> [accessed 12th March 2019].

¹⁶ George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan: A Chronicle Play in Six Scenes and an Epilogue*, ed. by Dan Laurence (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 10.

¹⁷ E. Ann Matter, ‘Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the Late Twentieth Century: Apocalyptic, Representation, Politics’, *Religion*, 31 (2001) 125-153 (p. 125).

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 125.

Hall's conviction in the importance of bearing witness to the experience of communities following the Rwandan tragedy resulted in another play that centred on the conflict commissioned by the National Theatre in 2012, *Children of Killers*. The one-act play explores the legacy of the conflict from the perspective of the children of perpetrators of the violence of the civil war. On the eve of their fathers' release from jail, imprisoned due to their participation in the genocide, a group of boys playfully taunt each other during a game of football. The trash talk quickly descends into a boasting match about whose father killed more Tutsis (the primary victims of the conflict). The legacy of their fathers' violence haunts the children in the form of the laughter and voices of the 'guhahamuka' or 'silenced victims' that permeate the action in an eerie, ghostly fashion.¹⁹ Here, as in *Our Lady of Kibeho*, Hall does not write about the violence of the genocide directly but incorporates supernatural elements to engage with the horrifying events. While *Children of Killers* addresses the aftermath of the conflict, *Our Lady of Kibeho* is focussed on the events leading up to it. Her approach to writing the latter was inspired by her encounter with a priest at the shrine built to commemorate the visionary experiences of the schoolgirls in the titular village. The priest told her the story of the Trinity and she realised that it 'was the way in – my sneaky way to write a play about the genocide without writing a play *about* genocide. I walked through the doors of heaven instead of the gates of hell'.²⁰

Although not wishing to overemphasise the influence of August Wilson's playwriting on her work, Hall notes that she finds his 'ability to stage spirituality in a naturalistic world' helpful in her ambition to centralise the marginalised experiences of characters in her

¹⁹ Charles Isherwood, 'The Genocide Is Past, the Lessons Are Not', *The New York Times*, 2nd October 2012, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/03/theater/reviews/children-of-killers-by-katori-hall-at-the-castillo-theater.html>> [accessed 15th November 2020].

²⁰ Hall, interview with Nottage, 'Katori Hall's Rapture of the Spirit in "Our Lady of Kibeho"'.

plays.²¹ Characterised as the site of the Visionary Girls' authority within their community, the miracles are presented by Hall within her script 'as if these things really happened':

The fact that the three young women were eventually confirmed by the local diocese as actual visionaries was a fact that kept me going. I kept on going back to what the priest [that relayed the story of the visionaries in Kibeho] said, 'This is where their beds would break.' It was a touchstone, an emotional talisman that allowed me to write the play as if these things really happened. I had to embrace the reality of these events no matter my own spirituality or lack thereof. It was an undeniable, indisputable, tangible, physical fact that could not be disproven, and I saw those beds breaking in the most spectacular of ways in my mind.²²

Using the fitting material metaphor of 'an emotional talisman', Hall writes about the miracles as 'indisputable, tangible, physical fact' and thus directs the conflict of the play away from the conversion or the disillusion of the characters – and, by extension, the audience – as the veracity of the miracles is assumed; the beds really do break, a garden really does grow, and the sun really does spin in the sky. For some reviewers, such unambiguous treatment of the veracity of the apparitions proved frustrating, with Michael Davies relating, 'I have reservations about the steadfast refusal to offer any kind of rational – or even irrational – explanation of the events'.²³ Unlike the rationalisation of the girls' hysteria in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1956) – another realist play with a historical setting that uses the (supposed) supernatural experiences of young women to explore the prejudices and tensions within a community – Hall does not undermine the authenticity of the miracles. This is recognised in Michael Billington's review of the Royal & Derngate production, which praises the play's boldness as it 'swims against the tide by asking us to

²¹ Christopher Bigsby, *Twenty-First Century American Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 56.

²² Hall, interview with Nottage, 'Katori Hall's Rapture of the Spirit in "Our Lady of Kibeho"'.

²³ Michael Davies, 'Review: *Our Lady of Kibeho* (Royal and Derngate)', *WhatsOnStage*, 17th January 2019, <https://www.whatsonstage.com/northampton-theatre/reviews/our-lady-of-kibeho-royal-derngate_48331.html> [accessed 5th February 2019].

acknowledge the miraculous' resulting in the treatment of the miracles being, in Natasha Tripney's words, one that 'resists ambiguity'.²⁴ In so doing, Hall positions the miracles as the vehicles through which to explore the girls' assertion of spiritual authority that challenges the institutional authority of church and state.

While these supernatural occurrences might occur in the 'most spectacular of ways' in Hall's 'mind' and on the pages of her script, materialising these events in performance is another matter. Unlike the voices of Saints Margaret and Catherine heard by Joan but unrepresented to the audience in Shaw's play, the miracles witnessed by the Visionary Girls take place onstage. The miracles are primarily described, not in the play's dialogue, but in the stage directions of Hall's script – the element of the written dramatic text that Marvin Carlson describes as 'most directly concerned [with] the translation of the literary text into the text of performance'.²⁵ Her approach therefore places the responsibility for representation of the events onto the material resources of the stage.²⁶ While the dramaturgical use of stage directions is diverse and multifaceted, a distinction might be drawn between those that describe the events of the plot as if they are really occurring in the fictional world of the play and those concerned with the material conditions of theatrical representation (i.e. the use of scenery, lighting, or costume). The stage directions

²⁴ Michael Billington, 'Our Lady of Kibeho Review – Startling Story of a Heavenly "Visitation"', *The Guardian*, 17th January 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/jan/17/our-lady-of-kibeho-review-royal-and-derngate-northampton-katori-hall-rwanda>> [accessed 5th February 2019]; Natasha Tripney, 'Our Lady of Kibeho Review at the Royal and Derngate, Northampton – "engaging and strongly-performed"', *The Stage*, 17th January 2019, <www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2019/lady-kibeho-katori-hall-review-royal-derngate-northampton/> [accessed 5th February 2019].

²⁵ Marvin Carlson, 'The Status of Stage Directions', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 24 (1991), 37-48 (p. 37).

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 37.

for *Our Lady of Kibeho* belong to the former and, thus, do not suggest how Hall envisioned materialising the miraculous apparitions onstage creating conceptual space for the interpretative vision of a production team in their engagement with the play.

The challenges faced by Dacre's production team for *Our Lady of Kibeho* are comparable to those addressed by the production team of *The Lovely Bones* when tasked with the figuration of Susie's heavenly body. They, too, had to undertake a process of materialising an experience beyond the bounds of normative reality from the written context of the script (and novel as a page-to-stage adaptation) using the material apparatus of representation available in theatrical storytelling. The non-naturalistic mode of Still's production allowed her to stylise her presentation of Susie's otherworldliness through the spatial dynamics of the scenic design and the interplay of performer and prop in the constitution of character. However, the realist mode of Hall's play presents a distinct set of obstacles for Dacre's team pursuing verisimilitude in their depiction of the miracles. These obstacles are summarised by Michelle Asante, the actor cast as Sister Evangelique, the stern Head Nun at Kibeho College in her rehearsal blog: 'How do you bring the supernatural into a tangible world without the help of the Virgin Mary?'²⁷ The next section of this chapter explores precisely this dilemma and considers how the theatrical toolkit at the disposal of the creative team – including props, set, lighting techniques, and music design – were utilised in the course of rehearsals to approach the miracles.

²⁷ Michelle Asante, 'Our Lady of Kibeho Blog', *Royal & Derngate website*, undated (but written during the rehearsal period), <<https://www.royalalndderngate.co.uk/lady-kibeho-blog/>> [accessed 6th March 2019].

First Approach: Materialising the Miraculous

From his early conceptualisation of how to present the miracles in the Royal & Derngate production of *Our Lady of Kibeho*, Dacre intended to translate each element of the apparitions described in Hall's stage directions as faithfully as possible using the apparatus of theatrical representation.²⁸ The production team and performers therefore worked to materialise the miraculous within the realist mode of the production to characterise the apparitions as an 'undeniable, indisputable, tangible, physical fact that could not be disproven'. The seven miracles that occur in Hall's play can be grouped into three categories: bodily, illusory, and environmental. As the titles of the categories indicate, the first refers to miraculous events that are localised on the bodies of the Visionary Girls, the second addresses the unexpected behaviour of objects achieved through material illusion, and the final category describes the transformation of the scenic environment. Each group necessitated a distinct approach when translating Hall's description of the miracles from script to stage. The depiction of the bodily and illusory miracles was pursued through the co-performance of actors and props (supported by lighting and sound design). The staging of this category of miracles recalls the encounters between performers and theatrical things analysed in the first two chapters of this study. In contrast, the techniques used to achieve the transformations of the scenic environment were achieved using sound, lighting, and digital video projection technologies. The operation of these sequences occurred offstage, distanced from the activities of the actors. The staging of the environmental miracles thus rested on the effect of larger scenographic assemblages constituted of the diverse elements of stagecraft. My discussion of such scenographic assemblages in this chapter lays the

²⁸ Dacre expressed his intention in production meetings and the rehearsal room throughout the process.

preparatory ground for my engagement with the gendering of theatrical space in the following chapter. The distinct scale of the three groups of miracles meant that each category was addressed by the production team at different points of the theatre-making process. While it was possible to workshop the bodily and illusory miracles early in the rehearsal process, the formulation of the scenic transformations had to be delayed until technical rehearsals when it was possible to bring together the lighting, sound, and digital projection technologies in the performance space. Hence, Dacre initially focussed the attention of the production team on giving the bodily and illusory miracles a material presence in the rehearsal room through the physical register of the actors' co-performance with stage objects.

Bodily Illusions

Movement director Diana Alison-Mitchell was charged by Dacre to devise the bodily performance of the miracles. In the early stages of rehearsals for the production, she led a sequence of workshops with the actors playing the Visionary Girls – Gabrielle Brooks, Pepter Lunkuse, and Yasmin Mwanza – to develop a strategy for performing the characters' engagement with the apparitions. First, they established that the Virgin Mary should appear raised in the air before them during the visions. For each apparition sequence, the actors identified a shared point in the air that they would lock their gaze onto to indicate Her presence (see Figure 18). Hall's description of the apparitions in the script suggests that when communing with the Virgin Mary the Visionary Girls are in a trance and unaware of their surroundings. For instance, during one of the tests administered on Alphonsine by Father Flavia, the priest sent by the Vatican to confirm the veracity of the apparitions, he produces a long, thick needle which he 'plunges... deep into Alphonsine's sternum'. While

the schoolgirl 'should be in terrible pain', Hall's stage directions state, 'She does not flinch, for she is swept up in the rapture'. Father Flavia's testing of Alphonsine is compared to the persecution of Jesus when her chest is shown to have 'trickled blood like the body of Christ on the Cross' – an analogy emphasised by the staging of the sequence in the Royal & Derngate production in which the actor, kneeling upstage, lifted her arms up until parallel with her shoulders in the 'cross' position while the actor playing Father Flavia mimed piercing her side with the needle.²⁹ The actors' decision to locate the apparition by locking their gaze onto a point in the middle distance simultaneously gave the impression that they were lost in a trance that responded to the treatment of the miraculous in the script.



Figure 18 Gabrielle Brooks performs Alphonsine's first encounter with a Marian apparition that takes place onstage. Her eyes are fixed in the middle distance to convey that the Virgin Mary has appeared before her. (Photograph taken by author).

²⁹ Hall, *Our Lady of Kibeho*, p. 83.

Having established a set of guidelines for staging the apparitions (where the Virgin Mary appears to the girls and their obliviousness to their surroundings), the actors began to devise the physical performance of the Visionary Girls' experience. Alison-Mitchell's approach was to draw out descriptive terms from the script used to detail Alphonsine, Anathalie, and Marie-Claire's encounters with the Virgin Mary. She split the words into two groups according to their association with joyful or violent feelings. Each group was then arranged into a hierarchical list ordered by the intensity of feeling suggested by the verb. This strategy was employed by the actors to build a kinaesthetic vocabulary that could move up and down gestural registers to present each vision as a unique event that was cohesive with the broader treatment of the apparitions.

In the first workshop, Alison-Mitchell presented the actors with the violent terms drawn from the stage directions to describe the characters' embodied responses to the appearance of the Virgin Mary; 'pulse', 'writhe', 'quiver', 'shaking', 'seizure', and 'convulsing'.³⁰ Informed by her research into the physical symptoms of medical fits and seizures, reported possessions, and apparitions – including documentary footage of the girls at Kibeho – she worked with the actors to develop specific movements that corresponded to each of the terms. For example, 'writhe' prompted the girls to cross over and entangle their limbs, while 'shaking' involved the externalisation of a tension located in the torso. Once the three actors had assigned and practised the movements associated with the violent terms, they moved onto the joyful descriptive terms; 'at peace', 'rapt', 'luxuriate', 'ecstatic', 'exuberant', 'orgasmic'.³¹ In contrast to the tension and rigidity of movement inferred from the first set of terms, Alison-Mitchell and the actors decided that these

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 62, 65-66, 117.

³¹ Ibid, pp. 19-20, 81, 104.

pleasurable feelings should relate to different forms of laughter. This was initially prompted by Hall's description of Anathalie's first experience of an apparition: 'She laughs. Giggles. Coos. Laughs. Giggles. Coos'.³² As with the violent terms, each joyful term generated a distinct response. While at peace and rapt laughter consisted of smiling and cooing, luxuriant laughter was understood to be a self-indulgent and internalised pleasure which built on the ecstatic and exuberant hysteria shared amongst the three girls.

The association drawn by the actors and Alison-Mitchell between laughter and the characters' embodied experiences as visionaries and spiritual authorities in their community resonate with second-wave feminist notions of the creative potential of laughter as a site of women's agency. Hélène Cixous's feminist essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976) calls women to disrupt established (phallogocentric) symbolic systems and forms of cultural expression through a 'return to the body'.³³ For Cixous, laughter is conceived as simultaneously destructive and productive. Arguing for the generative potential of the female body, she encourages women to 'smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter'.³⁴ Although her essay is expressly concerned with women's literary production, Cixous's metaphor of the act of laughing lends itself fruitfully to performance. The laughter of the Visionary Girls in Alison-Mitchell's conceptualisation of the Marian apparitions might be similarly understood to break up the established patriarchal authoritarian order – here represented by the Catholic Church and carried out through Father Flavia's testing – to cast female embodiment as a powerful site of authority. Simultaneously, the dual nature of the apparitions as potentially

³² Ibid, p. 26

³³ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs*, 4 (1976), 878-893 (p. 880).

³⁴ Ibid, p. 888.

joyful and violent characterises the laughter as a somatic anticipation of the trauma of the forthcoming genocide.

In the course of devising a physical register for the terms, and particularly when addressing the 'violent' forms of expression, the actors noted that their gestural performance affected their own, personal emotional state. When they shared this with Alison-Mitchell, she agreed, 'it's amazing how it sends your thoughts elsewhere. You're getting a strong neural response. Your brain is getting lots of messages from it'.³⁵ She suggested that, for this reason, altering their use of breath during the performance of the different words might have the greatest effect on how the actors felt in their performance of the Visionary Girls' encounters with the miraculous occurrences. This became a helpful way for the actors to connect the choreography of the apparitions to their characterisation of their characters' experiences, enacting a relationship between mind, body, and affect championed in cognitive approaches to theatre and performance.³⁶ The performance of the joyful and violent terms provided the actors access to sensations analogous to those they imagined were experienced by the characters' spiritual encounter. The process of choreographing the visions became almost a form of ritual itself, a phenomenon identified by scholars interested in connections between ritual and performance studies.³⁷

³⁵ From observation of the movement workshops that took place during rehearsals for the 2018 production of *Our Lady of Kibeho* at the Royal & Derngate.

³⁶ See Rhonda Blair, *The Actor, Image, and Action: Acting and Cognitive Neuroscience* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 14-15.

³⁷ The relationship between ritual and performance is epitomised by the working partnership of anthropologist Victor Turner and avant-garde director Richard Schechner whose work underpins performance studies. See Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ publications, 1986). See also Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2005).

This strategy for performing the apparitions rests on the affective experiences of the actors and movement director, all of whom are black women. Hall's descriptions of the Visionary Girls' experience in the stage directions often have a metaphorical quality that depend on the creative interpretation of the performer in the course of staging the play. For instance, for the first apparition presented onstage, the stage directions state that 'Alphonsine looks utterly at peace. Exuberant even. Stars stream from her eyes. She is somewhere else...' ³⁸ Performance scholar Bess Rowan proposes the term 'affective stage directions' to describe these metaphorical 'instructions'. ³⁹ Affective stage directions are those that 'require actors, directors, and designers to think through their own embodied experiences in order to make meaning out of these moments of the script'. ⁴⁰ These experiences are analogous rather than literal – after all, it is highly improbable that any of the actors had literally experienced Marian apparitions. Instead, they are able to draw upon their responses to the research provided by Alison-Mitchell in the rehearsal room and 'work associatively through images and parallel situations', bringing their experiences from everyday life, media, and other acting jobs to the production. ⁴¹ Of particular resonance to my focus on the gendering of form in this chapter, Rowan argues for the socio-political potential of an affective approach to rehearsal. In asking the actor to draw upon their own personal experience to interpret their stage directions to embody the performance of a character, the playwright places interpretative authority in the specificity of the performer's lived experience. Regardless of whether this was Hall's intention when writing *Our Lady of*

³⁸ Hall, *Our Lady of Kibeho*, p. 19.

³⁹ Bess Rowan, 'Undigested Reading: Rethinking Stage Directions through Affect', *Theatre Journal*, 70 (2018), 307-326 (p. 307).

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 309.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 310.

Kibeho, Alison-Mitchell and the female actors' affective engagement with the metaphorical stage directions in the script was the authoritative element in the rehearsal room.

Considered in these terms, the process of devising the performance register for the apparition sequences might be conceived as a form of political performance practice that is shaped by the experiences of black female theatre-makers.

Illusory Miracles

While the bodily miracles could be depicted through the embodied work of the actors devised in movement workshops, staging the illusory miracles necessitated the introduction of props to the rehearsal room. A dramaturgical function of the miraculous in *Our Lady of Kibeho* is as a site of privileged authority for the Visionary Girls. The power of the miraculous lies precisely in the fact that its ontology transcends the bounds of everyday experience, confounding epistemological frameworks of meaning-making and obscuring how it comes into being. To represent the ontological uncertainty of the miraculous occurrences that accompany the Marian apparitions, the production team worked to depict the sequences described in Hall's script through illusion; that is, to stage the events realistically rather than gesturing towards them theatrically. In the lead up to rehearsals, Dacre enlisted the expertise of illusion consultant John Bulleid. A member of the Magic Circle, a British organisation that promotes the advancement of the art of magic, Bulleid has worked as a consultant or associate consultant on many theatrical productions with elements of illusion including *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* at the Palace Theatre London (2016) and *The Prince of Egypt* at the Dominion Theatre London (2020). The latter, a work of musical theatre based on the 1998 DreamWorks animated biopic of Moses's life, depicts a series of supernatural occurrences with divine origins: ten plagues unleashed by

God on the Egyptian Pharaoh as punishment for his enslavement of the Israelites. The employment of theatrical illusion presents awe-inspiring moments of spectacle that has become 'crucial to the making of a megamusical', reiterating the link between spectacle and popular entertainment as discussed in relation to the pantomime in the first chapter.⁴² In the context of the narrative action of the musical, the depiction of the supernatural through theatrical illusion makes a material argument for the veracity of the divine intervention and authority of God's chosen character, in this case Moses. So, too, for *Our Lady of Kibeho*; the representational tactic of materialising the miraculous has the metatheatrical purpose of demonstrating the presence of the divine within the fictional world of the play to other characters and audience alike. Here, the use of illusion to represent the miraculous events is employed to extend 'the aesthetic of realism' – understood as 'a mirror held up to nature or reality' – to incorporate the supernatural elements of the biblical narrative.⁴³

In the staging of *Our Lady of Kibeho*, the miraculous occurrences are characterised as supernatural through their supposed independence from human activities: both those of performers and backstage professionals who support performance from the wings. That which is conventionally presumed to be inanimate – namely everyday objects including balls, paperwork, and a rosary – are animated in performance. In the context of the sociology of theology, Gordon Lynch describes the interaction of humans and sacred objects as 'psycho-social' processes.⁴⁴ What he terms 'sacred others' (things relating to faith or the divine) might be understood as objects in the sense of being the focus of adherents'

⁴² Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 2.

⁴³ Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. xiii.

⁴⁴ Gordon Lynch, 'Object Theory: Toward an Intersubjective, Mediated, and Dynamic Theory of Religion', in *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*, ed. David Morgan (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 40-54 (p. 51).

[believers'] psyches' but are simultaneously perceived as 'separate centers of subjectivity' due to 'the kinds of influence they exert on adherents' lives'.⁴⁵ While Lynch is working within a 'psycho-social' context, the mutability of subject/object ontology speaks to the new materialist reconceptualisation of agency as the performative dynamics enacted across complex assemblages of humans and the material world. The sacred, like performance, is shown to be a context which is particularly adept at disrupting established dynamics between humans and the material world and corresponding subject/object positions. Following Brown's 'thing theory', the signification of the object changes during an embodied encounter with a human actor when it performs differently to the user's expectations transforming from an indefinite to definite object or 'thing' (Brown gives the example of a tool breaking).⁴⁶ Similarly, in the dramatic context of the play, when an object has performed unexpectedly, perhaps even miraculously – books fall to the floor without being touched, a ball freezes in mid-air – they are imbued with spiritual authority that stands in for its inexplicable nature within everyday epistemological frameworks. In the context of *Our Lady of Kibeho*, objects gain status as 'separate centers of subjectivity' through their unexpected behaviour, or ability to act autonomously, as they transform from object to 'thing'.

The process of establishing the autonomy, and thus miraculous status, of an object in Dacre's production of *Our Lady of Kibeho* rested on the careful choreographing of the interaction between performer, members of the stage management team, and prop. The precise mechanisms of the illusions co-created by Bulleid and the company cannot be detailed. Members of The Magic Circle are directed not to demystify their practice.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 51.

⁴⁶ Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 4.

Commonly, non-disclosure agreements are utilised to ensure the secrets of the illusionists are protected when they act as consultants on external projects. Without penetrating the specificities of the theatrical illusions employed in the production, the illusions often involved the choreographed co-performance of actor, (sometimes) stage management team, and (modified) prop. Set pieces, lighting and sound design might be used to conceal elements of the performance from the audience; particularly if it is meant to look like objects are behaving independently of human intervention.

The first miraculous occurrence that takes place in the play is marked by papers rustling on Father Tuyishime's desk. Without revealing how the stage object was made to move independently from human intervention, the process of selecting the object itself reveals the significance of the material properties of the miraculous 'things' incorporated into the performance of the illusion. Bulleid explained that if they were to use a stack of papers as described in Hall's script, the lightness of the paper would make it difficult to control the playing-out of the miracle, particularly where the paper would fall within the performance space. Furthermore, the scale of the miracle – papers rustling on a desk – might be so small that an audience might not notice the miraculous event, undermining the effectivity of the illusion. In contrast, were the pile of papers to be replaced with a stack of books, the weight and comparative size of the objects would open up a greater range of illusory effects which were likely to have a greater impact amongst the stage action. It was therefore decided by Dacre and Bulleid that the most effective illusion would be to knock a pile of books to the floor. They believed that the noise the books would make when they hit the ground would draw attention to the miraculous behaviour of the inanimate object amongst the bustle of the stage action, emphasising the objects' autonomous behaviour. For this reason, the objects incorporated in the illusion were swapped in the course of the

workshop. Bulleid experimented with the cast and members of the stage management team to explore ways of making a book's cover spring open and the pages flip over rapidly. He noted that the book illusion would appear 'stronger' if the prop object was not held by an actor when its cover opened because it would make the object's performance appear independent from human intervention. Dacre therefore asked the actor playing Anathalie (Mwanza), who brought the books into the playing space in the rehearsal room, to imagine that she would place them onto the window ledge built into the set when she entered the scene. In the absence of this set in the rehearsal room, they were placed on a chair to mark the elevation of the books in the performed action. Once in place, Bulleid worked with the performers and stage management team to devise a strategy for staging the miraculous performance of the books which was incorporated into the performance of the play in the rehearsal room.

However, the book illusion was ultimately cut from the production. It was determined that, in order to characterise the miraculous occurrences as evidence of the girls' privileged communion with the Virgin Mary, a close relationship should be established between their embodied experience of the visions and the miraculously performing objects. During technical rehearsals when the illusion was performed in the larger space of the Royal (rather than in the intimate proportions of the rehearsal room), Dacre believed that it was lost amongst the other action. He anticipated that the books toppling to the floor would either pass unnoticed by a spectator or might distract their attention from the embodied performance of the actor playing Alphonsine (Brooks) as she performed the character's first engagement with an apparition onstage – the event that he deemed to be more significant in centring the events of the play on the experiences of the Visionary Girls. The cutting of the book illusion asserts that Dacre's conceit of externalising the agency of the girls into the

material world required delicate handling – something evidenced by the staging of other miracle sequences in rehearsals for the production.

Environmental Miracles

The bodily and illusory miracles are shown to be conceived on a small-scale with their success relying on the carefully choreographed interaction of performer(s), stage management team, and prop. In contrast, the environmental miracles necessitated large-scale scenographic transformation. No longer focussed on a single object manipulated by actor or stage management, nor solely on the bodies of the actors themselves, the transformation drew upon the different elements of stagecraft. In these miracles, set, lighting, sound, costume, actors and stage technicians collaboratively perform the miraculous onstage. Accordingly, while the production team were able to discuss and prepare aspects of these environmental miracles during the rehearsal period, the sequences could not be developed fully until technical rehearsals when these elements of theatrical production were brought together under the expert guidance of director, creative and production teams, and stage technicians in the performance space.

The miracle that proved most challenging to stage in Dacre's production took place in the second act of *Our Lady of Kibeho* when 'the most perfect garden' grows inside the girls' dormitory.⁴⁷ The stage directions suggest that the dormitory setting includes a 'shrine' to the Virgin Mary made out of the beds that break underneath the bodies of the levitating Visionaries in the first act. The beds, 'cracked and caving in on their sides', are surrounded with 'wildflowers', 'fruits' and 'candles'.⁴⁸ The schoolgirls gather around a radio to hear a

⁴⁷ Hall, *Our Lady of Kibeho*, p. 104.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 97.

report of the girls' experience of the Marian apparitions. A fight soon breaks out as the authenticity of the Visionary Girls' communication with the Virgin Mary is contested by other members of the school community. In the midst of the commotion, Anathalie 'sinks to her knees in convulsions'.⁴⁹ Contrary to the previous visions in which the Trinity see the Virgin Mary as if from a distance in the sky, Hall's stage directions state, 'She has been possessed by Our Lady' and begins 'to speak in tongues'.⁵⁰ Father Flavia is called to witness the miracle. When he enters, 'Vines start growing along the walls, Flowers start blooming out of the cracks and crevices of the dorm...'⁵¹ He approaches Anathalie, who is still possessed by the Virgin Mary, 'with his tools poised to prod' to test the veracity of her vision.⁵² She looks at him 'with enormous serenity' and, speaking as the Virgin Mary in 'perfect Italian' (a language unknown by the schoolgirls who only speak Kinyarwanda and French), implores Father Flavia to argue in favour of the girls to the Vatican.⁵³

The description of the miracle in Hall's script thus posed a challenge to the production team who were tasked with making it appear as though a garden grows across the stage. Early in the rehearsal period, Dacre shared with the company that the complexities of materialising such a spectacular apparition sequence meant it was the only miracle that the production team had yet to develop a strategy for staging. Accordingly, when initially blocking the scene in the rehearsal room, he encouraged the actors to react to the garden growing as it was described in Hall's stage directions – that is, as if an environmental change was really taking place all around them. In the script, the schoolgirls

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 101.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 101.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 102.

⁵² Ibid, p. 103.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 103.

‘stand back and see that little room has become the most perfect garden’. Vestine, a friend of the Visionary Girls, cries, ‘Look! Look!’, directing the gaze of the other characters – and, by extension, of the audience – to the vines and flowers that the script assumes will be materialised in performance.⁵⁴ The moments when characters are described as physically interacting with the garden proved particularly challenging in the rehearsal room as the actors considered the impact that staging the miracles might have on the development of their performances. When Immaculée (a schoolgirl described as ‘the last convert’) re-enters the dormitory after fetching Father Tuyishime and Father Flavia to observe the Visionary Girls, the stage directions indicate that she ‘is taken by what is growing at her feet’.⁵⁵ There was extensive discussion between Ibinabo Jack (cast as Immaculée) and Dacre about how to treat the stage direction. Unsure of the precise means by which the garden was to be depicted growing across the room ahead of technical rehearsals in the theatre, it was decided that Jack should look down at her feet in wonder before falling to her knees in supplication to illustrate her conversion to the veracity of the miracles. Anticipating that the miracle would be materialised through stagecraft, the other actors looked around the rehearsal space (at the imagined ceiling, floors, and walls of the dormitory set covered in flowers) to express the wonder felt by their characters’ experience of the supernatural occurrence.

Outside of the rehearsal room, the production team experimented with solutions to staging the garden miracles. These included sewing artificial flowers onto a gauze which would then be dropped down onto the stage, feeding fake branches through gaps in the set to indicate the movement of the growth, and dropping faux vines from the rig above the

⁵⁴ Ibid, pp. 102, 104.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 102.

stage at high speed to give the illusion that they were actually shooting upwards. Ultimately it was decided that the miracle would be depicted using video projection technology that was already incorporated in the production's toolkit. The decision to attempt to stage the miracle using the projector was primarily driven by the pragmatic factors of cost and time. The development period for the production was short and did not allow opportunity to explore other approaches to staging the garden that necessitated creating material scenic elements (such as the vines dropped from the rig above the set). The projection technology was already being used to create a backdrop for the action that situated the play in the hilly Rwandan landscape surrounding the village of Kibeho. An additional gauze or scrim was due to be set up a metre in front of the backdrop which was intended to give depth to the video design as the projected video interacted with the two surfaces. The team hoped that the three-dimensionality facilitated by the gauze might be used to convey the movement of vines growing across the backdrop to materialise the garden in the dormitory setting.

The transformation of the scenic environment began with the treatment of the shrine located upstage. The in-house workshop embedded at the Royal & Derngate had created a structure out of interlocking twisted bedframes which had then been decorated with flowers. When the Marian apparition began, lights that had been interwoven through the structure began to glow, imbuing the shrine with a sense of mystical energy. Simultaneously, the video design used to depict the garden growing across the backdrop of the stage was played. When technical rehearsals commenced, the video design created by Duncan McLean was still in its preliminary stages. It was understood that it would be developed in the course of rehearsals so that it could be adapted to respond to the rehearsed performance of the actors. The video depicted a spray of flower buds that slowly unfurled into full bloom. Despite the gauze conceit, the projection appeared two-

dimensional. A crucial limitation of the technology was that the video could only be projected onto the back of the stage due to the practical positioning of the projector itself. The confinement of the video to the backdrop prevented the cast from interacting with the miraculous garden as they had rehearsed. Therefore, when the scene was first blocked on the stage in the course of technical rehearsals, and the video projection of the garden introduced to the rehearsed action, Dacre was dissatisfied with its effect. The technology was not able to facilitate a transformation of the stage space that corresponded with the miraculous description of the garden in Hall's stage directions.

A similar apprehension about the effectiveness of the projection technology had been raised by Dacre earlier in technical rehearsals in relation to another miracle in which the sun 'splits in half and starts dancing around [Alphonsine's] finger tips'.⁵⁶ The ambitious stage directions detail the growing scale of the miracle that ends with 'a sky with four suns spinning round and round'.⁵⁷ As with the garden miracle, Dacre worked with video designer, McLean, to literalise Hall's description and project it against the backdrop of the stage (see Figure 19). However, the effect was judged to be unsuccessful due to its non-naturalistic appearance. Different approaches to visualising the miracle were pursued in an attempt to make the technology more cohesive with the realist register of the production. One of the final iterations saw the projected sun grow gradually in size and brightness until it exploded into a 'white-out' at the climax of the scene – an effect that would momentarily blind the audience before the lighting state was established for the next scene. Ultimately, despite several reworked versions of the sun splitting and dancing across the sky tested out in the video design, the technology was judged to be ineffective by Dacre. Instead, the focus of the

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 55.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 55.

scene was shifted to convey the effects of the miracle rather than the occurrence itself. The lighting state took on a supernatural red quality as the actors playing the villagers and schoolgirls described the peculiar behaviour of the sun as detailed in the dialogue. Dacre positioned the actors so they faced outwards, their gaze directed through the fourth wall of the stage into the auditorium, to indicate that the miracle was occurring offstage and was thus out of sight of the audience. The red light projected onto the backdrop and expressed through the overall lighting of the stage was intended as an effect of the miracle that signified the unnatural sky, rather than a direct depiction of the supernatural behaviour of the sun(s).



Figure 19 An early iteration of the video design for the sun miracle tested during technical rehearsals at the Royal & Derngate. (Photograph taken by author).



Figure 20 An early iteration of the video design for the garden miracle scene tested during technical rehearsals at the Royal & Derngate. The shrine is visible upstage illuminated with yellow light. (Photograph taken by author).

The use of the video design in staging the garden miracle required a similar process of reworking during technical rehearsals to address the perceived shortcomings of the projection technology. Dacre's conviction that the projection lacked continuity with the realist expression of the rest of the production motivated his desire to try and use the video technology with increased subtlety. He decided to relocate the setting of the miracle from inside the dormitory to outside the school. This decision was made to allow a subtler transition from the presentation of the setting to the miraculous environment. In the new conceptualisation of the video design, the night sky was projected onto the backdrop. When

the apparition commenced, stars gradually morphed into flower buds (see Figure 20). The intensity of the colour and boldness of the flowers were also reduced until they were almost ghostly in appearance. These modifications were designed to blend the transformation more cohesively with the realist expression of the rest of the production. However, despite the changes made to the video design, Dacre remained dissatisfied with the depiction of the garden miracle. Ultimately, as with the sun miracle, he decided not to materialise the garden directly in the performance space. Assistant director Sarah Stacey recalls that at the conclusion of the third day of technical rehearsals, the production team took a step back from their experimentation with the miracle to consider, 'what's the story we're telling here? What's the thing that makes Father Flavia and Immaculée believe suddenly [in the veracity of the Marian apparitions]?'⁵⁸ Confronting the elements of the scene that drove the play's narrative forward, rather than continuing to be entangled in the pragmatic challenges of materialising the miracle sequence, Stacey notes that they:

decided that the important bit of the scene wasn't the fact that we see flowers grow out of nowhere but that the Virgin Mary was possessing one of the schoolgirls – that She appeared in the room and spoke in Italian and knew things that Anathalie couldn't have known.⁵⁹

Faced with the perceived ineffectiveness of the projection technology and corresponding refocussing of the story they were telling, Dacre asked Stacey to revisit the script to identify how many times the garden miracle was directly referenced in the characters' dialogue. Upon discovering that only six lines would need to be cut or reworded to remove any reference to the garden growing across the dormitory (the description of the miracle being

⁵⁸ Sarah Stacey, interview with author (telephone, 13th February 2019).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

largely confined to Hall's stage directions), Dacre decided to remove this aspect of the miracle from the production.

Reworking the Miracles: Realism and the Question of Theatricality

Although the reason that each Marian apparition sequence was reworked is distinct, revisions were predominantly driven by the production team's desire to pursue authenticity or greater realism in the representation of the miraculous. Authenticity might broadly be paraphrased as believability or truthfulness – terms equally as slippery in their definitions and multiple contexts of application. How, then, might it be qualified in the theatre-making process? As Janine Hauthal recognises in her study of contemporary realism, 'realist notions have to be historicised with regard to [the] aesthetic conventions' of distinct media.⁶⁰ She therefore proposes a conceptualisation of realism as a dynamic and 'multi-faceted effect of representation resulting from the interplay of subject matter, aesthetic conventions, and recipients' horizons of expectation'.⁶¹ For Hauthal, then, realism is best understood as an '*effect of representation*' rather than an essential quality.⁶² As a dynamic and flexible mode of expression, realism is in the eye of the beholder or, rather, measured by the adherence to or transgression of conventions of representation. Despite such instabilities of definition, Demastes suggests that '[m]inimalization of theatricality is very much a central gauge of realism, upon which rests a fundamental criterion of the realist mode'.⁶³ While theatricality is a mode of expression with as many permutations as realism, in Demastes's formulation it is a term that describes theatre-making as a 'craft' that relies on 'a crafter to manipulate

⁶⁰ Hauthal, 'Realisms in British Drama Since the 1990s', p. 147.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 147.

⁶² Ibid, p. 147.

⁶³ Demastes, 'Preface: American Dramatic Realisms', p. x.

[its] material': 'A realist production minimizes theatricality because theatricality implies a fabrication by a crafter/playwright that belies realism's very essence – "objective intentions"''.⁶⁴ Certainly, theatrical realism is not devoid of theatricality but promotes a particular mode of expression that naturalises or conceals the very representational devices it relies upon. Paradoxically, then, conventionally the theatricality of realism is one designed to obscure its own theatricality.⁶⁵ Overt reference to the apparatus of theatrical representation might then be considered at odds with theatrical realism. This overt reference might be purposeful and take the form of metatheatrical devices or a theatre-maker's use of non-naturalistic representational techniques. It might also be unintentional or accidental – a result of incongruous design elements that seems inconsistent with the realist mode of a play. The question of representation within the realist mode therefore depends on the careful negotiation of theatricality, materiality, and authenticity.

The realist aesthetic stands at odds with other forms of theatrical presentation that pursue authenticity through alternative representational strategies. This is demonstrated by comparing distinct approaches to the staging of supernatural aerial sequences in two productions: *Our Lady of Kibeho* and the National Theatre's 2018 production of *Angels in America*. This, in turn, clarifies the representational strategy employed to stage the authenticity of the Visionary Girls' experience in the Royal & Derngate production of Hall's play. At the climax of the first act, the stage directions describe the Trinity rising above their beds which then break underneath them. In the Northampton version of the production, the team worked to materialise the action as outlined in the script. The three actors playing

⁶⁴ Ibid, pp. x-xi.

⁶⁵ Shelia Stowell, 'Rehabilitating Realism', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 6 (1992), 81-88 (p. 85).

the Visionary Girls underwent intensive training with an aerial consultant (Vicki Amedume) so they could be flown above the stage via a harness and wires. This training took place in the rehearsal room and was focussed on providing the actors with the correct physical technique for the aerial sequence, rather than on the representation of the illusion as a whole which did not take place until technical rehearsals. When the practised routine was transferred onto the stage of the Royal it proved challenging to conceal the material mechanisms of the illusion (i.e. the harnesses and lines), particularly when the actors were raised above the beds. The production team recognised that these elements of theatrical apparatus should not be visible to a spectator sitting in the auditorium to sustain the authenticity of the staged action through illusion. Dacre consequently re-blocked much of the action upstage where it was easier to control the lighting state and conceal the lines in the darkness (see Figure 21). As a result, the scene had to be cross-lit from the wings to avoid casting the shadow of the lines against the back of the stage. This lighting strategy, and particularly the necessity of the dimly-lit state to conceal the mechanics of the illusion, meant that the actors who were meant to be visible onstage as part of the dramatic action were not sufficiently lit. The staging of the sequence thus came to rest on a compromise in order to accommodate the complex material illusion within the realist mode of presentation pursued by the production.

The distinct presentation of an aerial sequence in Tony Kushner's two-part play, *Angels in America* (1991) demonstrates an alternative approach to achieving authenticity when staging the supernatural. In the production notes for the first of the two plays, *Millennium Approaches*, Kushner explains that '[t]he moments of magic... are to be fully realized, as bits of wonderful theatrical illusion – which means it's okay if the wires show, and maybe it's good they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly

amazing'.⁶⁶ In the National Theatre's 2018 production directed by Marianne Elliott, Kushner's instruction is applied to staging the flight of the titular angel. The angel is characterised as a terrifying, monstrous visitation that crashes through the bedroom ceiling of Prior, a gay man in the throes of AIDS-related psychosis. In Elliott's production, the angel (played by actor Amanda Lawrence) is fastened into a pair of huge shredded, feather-like wings conceived by puppet designer, Nick Barnes. The wings are operated by two additional performers positioned on either side of Lawrence co-constituting the puppet assemblage. All three performers are attached to lines that allow them to be flown in and out of the stage space. In line with Kushner's vision, the presentation of the angel in performance is certainly a moment of 'wonderful *theatrical* illusion' – the 'wires show', as do the operators of the puppet wings.

Yet, as in the apparition sequence in *Our Lady of Kibeho*, the presentation of the angel in the National Theatre production also relies on material elements that are concealed from the audience. The process of flying the angel is achieved by attaching the wires connected to performers and puppet wings to stage technicians positioned fifteen meters above the stage.⁶⁷ The technicians act as counterweights, ascending and descending ladders to lower and raise the actors far below them. The operation of the puppet thus relies on seven performers, although only three are visible onstage. While the theatrical depiction of the angel's flight (the puppeteers and visible wires) infers that the sequence lays bare the theatrical apparatus of the production, in fact, the production team is similarly selective in

⁶⁶ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Parts 1 & 2* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993), p. 159.

⁶⁷ National Theatre, 'Angels in America: Flying the Angel', online video recording, YouTube, 17th July 2018, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=loa2bOq9_so&ab_channel=NationalTheatre> [accessed 3rd December 2020].

deciding which elements of the aerial assemblage the audience is permitted to view. Just as in *Our Lady of Kibeho*, illusion is employed to conceal elements of the theatrical apparatus to ensure that the sequence feels authentic in the context of the rest of the production – it is the performers who are visible to an audience and not the stage technicians. Therefore, the material approaches to staging the aerial sequences in the two productions are not radically different. What renders them distinct is how they relate to the representational mode of the rest of the production; be it overt theatricality in *Angels in America*, or the realism of *Our Lady of Kibeho*. My comparison of the two productions demonstrate that success in staging the supernatural resides primarily in the pursuit of authenticity – that is, the approach to staging the supernatural is consistent with that taken to depict other events in a production.

This approach underpinned Dacre's conception of staging the miraculous in the Royal & Derngate production of *Our Lady of Kibeho*. He asserted that of fundamental importance when 'trying to capture extraordinary events onstage' is the question of 'credibility' – a term that might be understood as another synonym for authenticity or believability.⁶⁸ Crucially, his understanding of 'credibility is less about whether something might happen and more about how one is consistent in ensuring that all of the variables [of a production] are pointing in the same direction'.⁶⁹ In the context of *Our Lady of Kibeho*, the success of the aerial sequence (and the depiction of the miracles more widely) rested for Dacre on the minimisation of theatricality, here expressed as a desire to conceal the apparatus of theatrical representation through illusion to depict the miraculous in a fashion consistent with the realist mode of the rest of the production.

⁶⁸ James Dacre, interview with author (telephone, 10th December 2019).

⁶⁹ Ibid.



Figure 21 The rehearsed action was re-blocked upstage during technical rehearsals to conceal the mechanisms of the aerial illusion. A prop ball is shown hovering stage right. (Photograph taken by author).

The importance of this understanding of credibility in Dacre's directorial practice has, in part, been developed through his interest in the teachings of Konstantin Stanislavski (and subsequent interpretations of his approach). As an evolving practice with divergent strands (most notably between the American Method and Continental systems), there is no single or 'pure' application of Stanislavskian technique. Practitioners have adapted the teachings to suit their own particular approaches to theatre-making. For instance, Katie Mitchell has developed a Stanislavskian approach through her directorial practice, writing, and teaching which has been particularly influential in contemporary European theatre.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Ibid. See, Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2009).

Despite such diversity, in general terms the approach foregrounds psychological realism. The technique encourages practitioners to develop cohesive backstories for characters and flesh out the context of a play's narrative through a detailed process of research (see Figures 22 & 23).⁷¹ A Stanislavskian approach works to clarify the details of a play to align the practitioner's conceptualisation of elements including the 'immediate circumstance' or events that took place in '[t]he 24 hours preceding the action of each scene or act', discerning the time of each (including the year, season, hour, day of the week), and identifying the events of the play ('[t]he changes that affect the behaviour of the characters').⁷² These factors are established through the director's preparatory work on the script and a process of research undertaken with the acting company during rehearsals. Stanislavski's teachings are thus centred on the importance of aligning the interpretations of a play by director and actors to ensure that the performances of the latter convey a shared knowledge of the fictional world their characters occupy – it underpins a production with the 'credibility' valued by Dacre within his own practice.

A significant proportion of time in the first two weeks of rehearsals for *Our Lady of Kibeho* was given over to table-based research in the rehearsal room evidencing the Stanislavskian elements of Dacre's directorial approach. The research involved creating detailed timelines of action (both of the historical events of the Marian apparitions at Kibeho and their compression into theatrical time in Hall's script), researching the historical elements of the play (including first-hand accounts of the schoolgirls' visions), and tracking the characters' fluctuating perceptions of the Marian apparitions throughout the play.

⁷¹ Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski: An Introduction*, fourth edition (London: Methuen Drama, 2008), p. ix; Emma Cole, 'The Method Behind the Madness: Katie Mitchell, Stanislavski, and the Classics', *Classics Reception Journal*, 7 (2015), 400-421 (p. 403).

⁷² Mitchell, *The Director's Craft*, p. 10.

In the staging of the apparition sequences, this notion of ‘credibility’ – understood as the alignment of the diverse elements of a production – was extended from the facts of character and place to representational mode. The initial staging of the garden and sun miracles had been deemed unsuccessful precisely because the video technology utilised to depict the supernatural occurrences was disconnected from the realist mode of the rest of the play, characterising the material apparatus employed in the sequences as overtly theatrical. Unlike the illusory and bodily miracles whose success rested on embodied performance and the small-scale manipulation of stage objects, the environmental miracles relied not only on the physical and material, but also the digital. The mode of representation thus signified on a different plane to the rest of the staged action, rather than characterising the miracles as real events situated within the fictional world of the play. As discussed above, the challenge of staging miracles within a realist mode is amplified because, by their very nature, miraculous occurrences confound the logic of epistemological norms. They pose a direct challenge to the normative experiences that are frequently the subject of narratives of realism. The production team therefore worked to shift the representational weight of the miracles from the visual transformation of the scenic environment using digital video projection to the performances of the actors and their interaction with stage objects – the latter, elements of theatre-making associated with the realist mode of storytelling. These elements then became material and corporeal anchors for the miraculous that helped to situate them within the realist mode of the production.

The reworking of the garden miracle in the course of technical rehearsals demonstrates this shift from the use of projection technology to embodied performance in the pursuit of credibility or authenticity. Freed from the pragmatic limitations of the video technology that depicted the garden growing against the back of the stage, the focus of the

production team was redirected to staging Mwanza's performance of Anathalie's possession by the Virgin Mary. As in the staging of Susie's otherworldly state in Still's production of *The Lovely Bones*, the miraculous elements of the scene were depicted using relational technologies that focussed the play's action on the performance of the actor, rather than the illusionistic transformation of the scenic environment to depict the garden growing across the dormitory. It had been determined early in the production process that when the character speaks in Italian, the supernatural nature of the act would be conveyed through the actor's delivery of the dialogue through song. In technical rehearsals, an echoing reverb was applied to the actor's microphone to amplify the supernatural nature of the possession, rendering the quality of the sound distinct from the dialogue of the other characters (a technique also employed in relation to the heavenly characters in *The Lovely Bones*). Pre-recorded audio of Mwanza whispering snippets from the sung dialogue was layered into the sound design. The whispers were played through speakers placed around the auditorium as though the Virgin Mary's presence had burst through the boundaries of the stage and engulfed the audience. A coloured spotlight was directed onto the white nightgown worn by the actor, subtly transforming it into an aquamarine blue associated with imagery of the Virgin Mary. The staging of the garden miracle was stripped back even further in the version of the production presented at the Theatre Royal Stratford East. Reviving the production in another venue several months after its premiere at the Royal & Derngate afforded Dacre and the production team the time to develop their collective vision for the miracle sequences, drawing upon the expertise derived from rehearsals for the first production. There was not a renewed attempt to stage the garden growing across the dormitory. Rather, to focus the sequence more keenly on the Visionary Girl's experience of the

possession, the scenic design was further simplified; the shrine was removed and the action presented on a bare, open stage with no video projection.

Reflecting on the development of the garden miracle across the two productions, Dacre notes that, through the process of rehearsals, 'we just found that we were trying to do too many things and it quite quickly verged into the territory of fantasy rather than actuality'.⁷³ He details how his experience staging the miraculous in Shakespeare's plays guided his reconfigured approach to staging the Marian apparitions in *Our Lady of Kibeho*:

when Shakespeare is trying to create something miraculous onstage, often characters will use words like 'strange', 'amazed', and 'wonderful'. The root of all of those words [means] to be confused or at odds with the world. This understanding of strangeness is key. To make something strange on stage you have to root it in normality and then change a couple of things. Over and over again, from Shakespeare through to the Greeks, when dramatists are trying to allow audiences to see the familiar as if it were strange – to see it in a new light – the process is actually just about making sure that 90% is totally truthful, credible, detailed, and rigorously observed, but then 10% is at odds with that.⁷⁴

In Dacre's conception, the miraculous is firmly located in the everyday experiences of reality which are rendered unfamiliar through the slight modification of particular elements. In regard to the staging of the garden miracle, it might be understood that there were initially too many elements used to make the apparition 'strange' (as opposed to inauthentic), including the video projection, the glowing shrine, and the sound design. Dacre recognised that it was Anathalie's experience of the possession, rather than the garden growing in the dormitory, that was the most important element of the miracle to preserve. He notes that while 'the miracle, in Stanislavskian terms, is "the event", what's interesting is how that event affects everyone's behaviour in the way in which they act towards one another

⁷³ Dacre, interview with author (telephone, 10th December 2019).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

onstage'.⁷⁵ Dacre's assertion is reflected in the stripping-back of different elements in the sequence to focus on the actor's performance – made strange by the sung dialogue and the subtle use of relational technologies (the blue light and reverb on the microphone) – situated the miraculous occurrence more firmly in the familiar. The scene retained its supernatural element, but the staging meant it felt more credible within the rest of the action of the production through its treatment onstage. The centring of the apparition sequences on the experiences of the Visionary Girls and, thus, the performance of the female actors playing them, reiterates my understanding of the miraculous as a site of female authority in Hall's play and demonstrates how this authority is asserted in the approach taken by the production when staging the script.



Figure 22 Reference images that contributed to the research undertaken by the company of *Our Lady of Kibeho* arranged on the walls of the rehearsal room at the Royal & Derngate. (Photograph by author).

⁷⁵ Ibid.



Figure 23 Reference images that contributed to the research undertaken by the company of *Our Lady of Kibeho* arranged on the walls of the rehearsal room at the Royal & Derngate. (Photograph by author).

Heightened Realism: From Material Illusion to Atmosphere

The reworking of the garden miracle illustrates a wider shift in the approach to staging the miracles taken by the production team. Initially, they pursued a materialisation of the miraculous through illusion. However, increasingly the focus of the apparition sequences was redirected to the performance of the actors as the Visionary Girls and the crafting of a miraculous atmosphere to accommodate the supernatural elements of the script within the realist mode of the production. In a rehearsal mid-way through the production period, Dacre explained to the actors that Hall used the term ‘heightened realism’ to describe the miraculous atmosphere that she felt underpinned the play.⁷⁶ When asked to elaborate on his understanding of the term in interview, Dacre explained that

⁷⁶ From observation of rehearsals for the 2018 production of *Our Lady of Kibeho*.

through his discussion with Hall he had surmised that ‘heightened realism’ described the feeling that ‘the divine was always just beneath the surface’ and ‘the miracles are just the moment where it breaks the surface and becomes visible, only then to sit beneath it once more’.⁷⁷

A ‘heightened realism’ seems to encapsulate the paradoxical. After all, the heightening of a realist aesthetic suggests that the conventions of the form have been transcended to constitute a new mode of expression. However, the term might instead be understood as evidence of the shifting nature of theatrical form engaged in a process of continual flux as its representational conventions are taken up and reimagined by playwrights and theatre-makers. In the context of *Our Lady of Kibeho*, a ‘heightened realism’ describes the ways in which the representational strategies of realism are reworked to depict experiences that have often been marginalised from the Western dramatic canon – here, the spiritual and social authority of Rwandan women. Such an engagement with realism counters the feminist critique of realism undertaken in a strand of theatre scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s. Feminist theatre scholars including Jill Dolan, Sue-Ellen Case, Elin Diamond, and Elaine Aston argued that the ideological and formal apparatus of realism ‘othered women in its grand narrative of patriarchal interests and concerns’.⁷⁸ In *Unmaking Mimesis* (1997) Diamond explains that ‘setting out to offer truthful versions of experience, realism universalizes but one point of view... In the process of exploring social (especially gender) relations, realism ends by confirming their inevitability’.⁷⁹ In other

⁷⁷ Dacre, interview with author (telephone, 10th December 2019).

⁷⁸ Elaine Aston, ‘Room for Realism?’, in *Twenty-first Century Drama: What Happens Now*, ed. by Siân Helen Adiseshiah and Louise LePage (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 17-36 (p. 18).

⁷⁹ Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, pp. 4-5.

words, if realism is perceived to offer a reflection of the 'real world' onstage, then the values and ideologies underpinning a realist play are naturalised (that is, divorced from the ideological position of the playwright and theatre-maker). The feminist critique was therefore accompanied by an interest in the value of Brechtian experimentation with formal and theatrical techniques that denaturalised the representational apparatus of realist theatre by historicising or challenging the 'presumed neutrality' of the 'objective' world that supposedly underpinned realism.⁸⁰ However, in the context of twenty-first-century theatre-making, Aston has reassessed her critique to argue for the 'politicizing possibilities' of the form.⁸¹ Through her discussion of the work of contemporary female playwrights, Aston observes "'more fluid" applications of realism' that reflect 'a shift away from those conservatively formed, phallogentric uses of the genre that were previously the object of feminist criticism'.⁸² She notes that 'the heterogeneous mix of socially progressive realisms now circulating on the English stage' have opened up 'realist conventions to humanistic ends'.⁸³ It is within this context that I situate my discussion of Dacre's production of Hall's play.

In *Our Lady of Kibeho*, Hall takes up and reworks formal realist conventions to accommodate the divine experiences of the Visionary Girls. The supernatural nature of these events destabilises the crafting of 'an objective world that is the source and guarantor of knowledge' associated with the realist play.⁸⁴ The miraculous is characterised as an expression of black female authority that, due to its distinct epistemological nature, inserts

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 50.

⁸¹ Aston, 'Room for Realism?', p. 32; see also Jill Dolan, 'Feminist Performance Criticism and the Popular: Reviewing Wendy Wasserstein', *Theatre Journal*, 60 (2008), 433-457 (p. 435).

⁸² Aston, 'Room for Realism?', p. 32.

⁸³ Ibid, pp. 32-3.

⁸⁴ Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, p. 4.

multiple perspectives or ways of knowing into the realist form. Hall's conception of a 'heightened realism' thus mirrors the narrative techniques of magical realism. The dialogical juxtaposition of the magical and the real is often employed to insert marginalised experiences into hegemonic or dominant accounts of history, myth, and culture. Magic realism is thus conceived as 'a disruptive narrative mode' within postcolonial and feminist cultural production.⁸⁵ Hall's notion of 'heightened realism' encapsulates a similar disruption of the normative using the supernatural to disrupt the representational conventions that have marginalised black female experience from the dramatic canon.

Deployed within the traditional structure of the 'well-made play', *Our Lady of Kibeho* prompts us to rethink what might be considered radical in the theatre. Just as in Lorraine Hansberry's domestic drama *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) centred on the experiences of a black family living in Chicago, and more recently Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel* (2003) set in 1905 which follows the personal trials of a black seamstress in New York, the conventions of realist drama are employed to depict configurations of black female experience. In *Staging Black Feminisms* (2007), Lynette Goddard notes a tendency in critical approaches to black theatre to present work by black playwrights 'as an alternative and oppositional practice' that operates on the cultural margins or theatrical fringe.⁸⁶ Yet Hall's engagement with the realist form, like that of Hansberry and Nottage, situates her play within a dominant mode of theatre history. Her writing practice is not one of marginality. Rather, she explicitly relates her desire to foreground black women's experience on the stage – 'to write

⁸⁵ Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism* (London: Routledge, 2004) p. 4.

⁸⁶ Lynette Goddard, *Staging Black Feminisms: Identity, Politics, Performances* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 40.

myself into existence'.⁸⁷ In so doing, her work highlights the historical absence of these stories from the dramatic canon. Rather than pursuing the story of the Visionary Girls through an 'oppositional practice', Hall's conception of a 'heightened realism' argues for an expansive approach to the kinds of experiences and perspectives that might be accommodated within the formal conventions of realism.

While discussions of realism typically centre on the work of the playwright, the Royal & Derngate production of *Our Lady of Kibeho* asserts the significance of stagecraft in accommodating the expanded realism of the play. When conceiving the scenic environments of the production, Dacre relates that he and designer Jonathan Fensom discussed how the play's settings might be imbued with a sense of the supernatural or divine: a heightened realism. They were inspired, in part, by the work of American photographer Gregory Crewdson. He is particularly well-known for 'cinematic' renderings of individuals captured within the domestic interiors of small-town America – layering 'David Lynch's surreal dread over Alfred Hitchcock's snap-trap narratives of suspense'.⁸⁸ Crewdson's stylized amplification of colour, lighting, and composition injects his photographs with an otherworldly quality that transcends the prosaic nature of the domestic subjects of his work. A similar approach was taken by the production team to stage the scenic environments of *Our Lady of Kibeho*. Using the representational apparatus

⁸⁷ Haley Levitt, 'Katori Hall Patches Together a Family History in *The Blood Quilt*', *TheatreMania*, 30th April 2015, <www.theatremania.com/washington-theater/news/katori-hall-the-blood-quilt-interview_72734.html> [accessed 4th December 2020].

⁸⁸ Kate Kitamura, 'Gregory Crewdson', *Frieze Magazine*, 19th May 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110514193035/http://www.frieze.com/shows/review/gregory_crewdson/> [accessed 21st October 2020].

of theatre rather than photography, lighting, sound, and scenic design were employed to create a sense of heightened realism in the production.

Fensom's set design presented an interior space with a sloping roof and walls that could be flown in and out of the playing space to depict different places within Kibeho College. The walls were a bold yellow and trimmed with a turquoise border which contrasted with the clay-like 'red dirt floor' particularly associated with the region.⁸⁹ Charles Balfour's lighting design worked in tandem with the boldly-coloured set to cultivate the cinematic aesthetic pursued through the notion of heightened realism. The lighting often had an architectural function as it carved out playing areas within the larger stage space through an atmospheric use of light and shadow. The set and lighting design allowed the action to move fluidly from Father Tuyishime's office to a narrow corridor, and when the wall was flown out, the space expanded to depict the yard outside the school building or the dark interior of the girls' dormitory. The significance of the lighting design to the atmospheric quality of the scenic environments was reflected in the technology used by Fensom to present his designs to the production team. Traditionally, a designer builds a model box of their set which is installed within a miniature replica of the stage space on a scale of 1:25. The model serves as a three-dimensional blueprint that allows the production team, director, and cast to visualise the stage layout and scenic elements ahead of their installation in the performance space. However, for this production Fensom used digital software that allowed him to incorporate the effect of different lighting states on the set into two-dimensional illustrations (see Figure 24). These suggested lighting states were then developed by Balfour in his conceptualisation of the lighting design (see Figure 25). The

⁸⁹ Hall, *Our Lady of Kibeho*, p. 46.

brightly illuminated interior of Father Tuyishime's office used warm lighting to give the impression of the Rwandan climate and to symbolise that the space served as a haven for Alphonsine when she is being ill-treated by the other schoolgirls still cynical about the veracity of her apparitions. By contrast, the terror experienced by the characters who witness the Visionary Girls' levitation in the dormitory at the end of Act One was amplified by flying out the walls of the set to create an expansive space that recedes into darkness. Cross-lit by two beams of light to conceal the harnesses and wires used to fly the actors, the pragmatic solution to staging the scene also cast looming shadows across the set conveying a sense of unease through its reference to the aesthetic of cinematic horror. The otherworldly quality of the setting was also achieved through the video of the Rwandan landscape projected onto the double-layered backdrop. In some of the miraculous sequences, the hyper-realistic depiction of the landscape was modified. The speed at which the clouds moved across the backdrop was ever so slightly increased. The video design was still within a visual discourse of verisimilitude but the treatment of the clouds introduced a supernatural quality to the landscape, imbuing the setting with a sense of the miraculous. This approach to design thus models an understanding of uniting the composite elements of stagecraft in the crafting of a heightened realism.



Figure 24 Fensom's set designs displayed on the wall of the rehearsal room at the Royal & Derngate. (Photograph taken by author).



Figure 25 Fensom's set installed onstage in the Royal and illuminated by Balfour's lighting design for the opening scene of *Our Lady of Kibeho*. (Photograph taken by author).



Figure 26 The set within the full height of the proscenium arch stage in the Royal. The slanted roof of the interior structure could be raised up into the empty space underneath the arch to open up the playing space. (Photograph taken by author).

The production team's cultivation of the heightened realism of the play's settings was undertaken with a particular understanding of the importance of crafting a miraculous atmosphere through the staged environment. The atmosphere of performance is difficult to capture outside of the live act. Defined as an affective phenomenon experienced subjectively, atmosphere is frequently described in ways that conflate psychological perception with meteorological metaphor; the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for instance, defines it as the 'prevailing psychological climate'.⁹⁰ The representational conventions of theatre have long been recognised for their effective capacity to craft atmosphere. Indeed, the German philosopher Gernot Böhme even goes so far as to characterise '[t]he art of the stage set as a paradigm for an aesthetics of atmospheres'.⁹¹ Böhme argues that, because atmospheres are established 'between subject and object' (that is, they cannot exist independently from the phenomenological experience of an individual), the practical 'making of atmospheres [is] confined to setting the conditions in which atmosphere appears'.⁹² In the theatre, this involves preparing and modifying the performance space in the duration of performance utilising the tools of stagecraft including set, lighting, sound, costume, and props.

This unification of the theatrical apparatus of the stage engaged in the crafting of atmosphere is frequently addressed within the context of scenographic practice. Due to the distinct application of the term in different national, linguistic, and cultural traditions, definitions of scenography are multiple. The term has been somewhat stabilised with the

⁹⁰ 'atmosphere, n. 4a', *OED Online*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, June 2019), <www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/12552> [accessed 29th July 2019].

⁹¹ Gernot Böhme, 'The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres', *Ambiances, en ligne* [online] (2013), 1-8 (p. 1). Accessible at <<https://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/315>> [accessed 29th July 2019].

⁹² *Ibid*, p. 3.

emergence of ‘scenographic studies’ as a critical field in the last decades of the twentieth century.⁹³ Working within the field, theatre historian Arnold Aronson describes scenography as the ‘all-encompassing visual spatial construct’ of the theatrical event which embodies ‘the process of change and transformation that is an inherent part of the physical vocabulary of the stage’.⁹⁴ Here, scenography is not simply a synonym for scenic design, nor does it solely describe the unification of the diverse elements of stagecraft under the singular vision of the individual (director or designer). Rather, in Aronson’s formulation, scenography describes the processual transformation of the theatrical space in the course of performance.

This focus on the meaning generated by process, rather than the individual elements of stagecraft, also underlies Hann’s focus on the atmospheric qualities of scenography. In *Beyond Scenography* (2018), Hann productively engages with new materialist thinking to conceive of scenography as ‘an affective atmospheric assemblage [that] is configured and reconfigured over the duration of a situational art time’.⁹⁵ Her notion of the ‘atmospheric assemblage’ builds upon anthropologist Kathleen Stewart’s notion of ‘worlding’ to theorise the crafting of atmosphere in performance.⁹⁶ ‘Worlding’ is the means through which a subject is phenomenologically orientated and thus makes sense of their environment. Bringing this anthropological perspective into dialogue with Deleuzian theories of affect,

⁹³ See Jane Collins and Arnold Aronson, ‘Editors’ Introduction’, *Theatre and Performance Design*, 1 (2015), 1-6 (p. 1-2); and Arnold Aronson, ‘Introduction: Scenography or Design’, in *The Routledge Companion to Scenography*, ed. by Arnold Aronson (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1-16 (p. 4).

⁹⁴ Arnold Aronson, *Looking into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 7.

⁹⁵ Rachel Hann, *Beyond Scenography* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 70.

⁹⁶ See, Kathleen Stewart, ‘Worlding Refrains’, in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 339-353.

Hann is interested in how the orientating qualities of the material resources of the stage (and designed space more broadly) generate meaning. She introduces the term ‘scenographics’ (in distinction to ‘scenography’) to describe ‘how the methods of costume, stage geography, light, and sound orientate interventional encounters of place’ – an orientation that is ‘inclusive of haptic proxemics and orders of knowledge’.⁹⁷ The affective qualities of stagecraft (‘the capacity to affect or be affected’) account for the ways in which the material apparatus of the stage might be utilised to craft atmosphere in performance.⁹⁸ The scenographic interventions of lighting, sound, costume, actors’ performances, scenic design, and theatre architecture participate in a process of ‘worlding’ or orientation to collaboratively craft atmosphere. In Dacre’s production of *Our Lady of Kibeho*, the ‘heightened realism’ pursued through the amplification of elements of the crafted settings – including the bold colours of the scenic design, the supernatural speed of the clouds in the video backdrop, and the lighting design – orientates the spectator in a staged world able to accommodate the miraculous.

The other designed element particularly significant in the scenographic crafting of the miraculous atmosphere in the production were the music and sound design. Although an integral part of theatre-making, sound design is often overlooked in theatre studies and reviews alike. Sound designer Ross Brown suggests that this is partly due to the association of ‘the term “design” with the visual’.⁹⁹ While sound is typically not manifest in a visual format, its employment within the context of designed performance is reliant on material technologies that include computer hardware, mixing boards, and speakers. Therefore,

⁹⁷ Hann, *Beyond Scenography*, p. 4.

⁹⁸ Fox and Alldred, ‘The Sexuality-Assemblage’, pp. 772-3.

⁹⁹ Ross Brown, *Sound: A Reader in Theatre Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 11.

although perhaps less evident than other aspects of theatrical design, it is very much a part of the materiality of theatrical production discussed in this thesis. Despite critical tendencies towards omission, the sound design and particularly the music for the Royal & Derngate production of *Our Lady of Kibeho* were identified by critics as key elements that contributed to the crafting of a miraculous atmosphere in performance:

[the music] reinforces the mysterious elements of the narrative without overplaying them.¹⁰⁰

The opening moments alone are an act of faith – with soaring offstage voices slowly being incarnated on stage. Enough at least to make you want to believe.¹⁰¹

The attention paid to the sonic aspect of the production in these reviews recognises its sensory role in the characterisation of the play's action. Composed by Orlando Gough, the music was inspired by Rwandan folk music and predominantly employed for the dramaturgical purpose of underscoring the narrative to contribute to the tone of the action. Gough described this function of the music as 'cinematic' recognising the same use of sound design in the analogous medium of film.¹⁰² Non-diegetic in nature, the purpose of this music was to contribute to the crafting of atmosphere in collaboration with the performance of the actors and lighting and scenic design. During technical rehearsals, Gough worked with sound designer Claire Windsor to tailor his music to the rehearsed action onstage. Just as Dacre described that 'the divine was always just beneath the surface' and only 'breaks the surface' during the miracle sequences, so too did the underscored music explode into song

¹⁰⁰ Michael Davies, 'Review: *Our Lady of Kibeho*'.

¹⁰¹ Susannah Clapp, 'The Week in Theatre', *Guardian*, 20th January 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/jan/20/our-lady-of-kibeho-royal-and-derngate-review-stop-and-search-arcola-approaching-empty-kiln>> [accessed 5th February 2019].

¹⁰² Observation made in the rehearsal room when Gough introduced the cast to the sections of sung music.

during the presentation of the Marian apparitions.¹⁰³ The Visionary Girls' communion with the Virgin Mary would typically culminate in the actors' sung performance. This is not a direct replication of the actual, historic responses of the schoolgirls in Kibeho, but rather a stylisation that emphasises the divine nature of their encounter. The use of music to signify this communion is suggested in the stage directions of the script, although the nature of the music and its precise employment within the staged action of the Royal & Derngate production was developed by Gough and Windsor. The soundscape of the production, and particularly the use of song, is thus an aural manifestation of the miraculous and contributes to representational mode of Hall's 'heightened realism'.

The capacity of music to establish multiple planes of reality, or insert the subjective experience of a character in the 'objective' action of a play, is well-established in American realism. The flute refrain in Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) symbolises Willy Loman's nostalgic and idealised memories of his father. In *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), Tennessee Williams uses polka music to signify Blanche's psychological deterioration and her remorse for the unkind treatment of her dead husband when memories of her past resurface. In Lorraine Hansberry's *Les Blancs* (first performed in 1970), the drums that '*throb and recede*' have both a diegetic and symbolic function, integrated into the play's action while also reflecting the conflicted inner life of the protagonist.¹⁰⁴ Set in a fictional African country under European colonial rule in the mid-twentieth century, the drums are a means of communication for the Kwi people which can be deciphered by characters able to 'read' the sounds.¹⁰⁵ However, they also serve a symbolic purpose. The drums externalise

¹⁰³ Dacre, interview with author (telephone, 10th December 2019).

¹⁰⁴ Lorraine Hansberry, 'Les Blancs', in *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays*, ed. by Robert Nemiroff (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 80. (Italics in original).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p. 51.

the protagonist's conflicted sense of commitment to both the community he has left behind in Africa and his new life and young family in England. The drums accompany the appearance of a female dancer who appears only before the protagonist. She represents '*the slaughter, the enslavement*' that has taken place in the fictional African country of the play; '*a warrior summoning him urgently, insistently, unrelenting*'.¹⁰⁶ As with these examples, the use of music in *Our Lady of Kibeho* works to introduce an alternative plane of reality to the supposedly objective fictional world of the plays. The affective quality of the music fosters a sense of mystical potential within the atmospherics of the process of worlding onstage in Dacre's production of Hall's play. It thus centralises the Visionary Girls' experience of the miraculous by conditioning the audience's affective openness to the 'heightened realism' of the production.

The production team's conviction in the significance of crafting an affective atmosphere through music, lighting, and scenic design in order to present the miraculous occurrences in the play shaped the transfer of the production from the Royal & Derngate to the Theatre Royal Stratford East in 2019. In interview, Dacre asserted that he was particularly interested in trying to amplify the affective quality of the miraculous sequences as experienced by an audience: 'we aspired to make them a bit more experiential and a bit more visceral. Not more shocking, but certainly more wondrous or more frightening'.¹⁰⁷ He explained that this aspiration was pursued in the production process by trying 'to understand better what it might have felt like to be in the room with [the Visionary Girls]' during the Marian apparitions, rather than staging the miraculous events 'through their

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁷ Dacre, interview with author (telephone, 10th December 2019).

eyes'.¹⁰⁸ He wanted 'to put the audience in the room and to create the kind of sense of suspense, jeopardy, fear, and claustrophobia of each of the environments that the play is set in'.¹⁰⁹ This reconceptualisation of the presentation of the miracles reemphasised the shift from materialising the miraculous through illusion to cultivating a mystical affective atmosphere in performance tracked in this chapter.

While I was not present for the rehearsals for the London revival, I observed in performance that much of the action had been located further downstage, bringing the embodied performance of the actors playing the Visionary Girls closer to the audience. The increased intimacy between audience and action was fostered through modifications made to the reworked design of the production. The set was adapted to better suit the architecture of the stage at the Theatre Royal Stratford East. The Royal in Northampton has a narrow raised stage with a tall proscenium arch (see Figure 26). The architectural form of the stage distances the audience from the action of performance: the performance space is positioned above the eye-level of the audience sat in the stalls and the depth of the stage sets the action of performance apart from the auditorium. While the Theatre Royal Stratford East also has a proscenium-arch stage, the height of the raised stage is significantly less than at the Royal & Derngate. The stage also extends downstage beyond the proscenium to bring the performers closer to the audience. Motivated to amplify the affective atmosphere of the miracle sequences, the production team decided to take out the first two rows of seating in the stalls in order to install a wide flight of stairs across the front of the stage. The steps permitted Dacre to block parts of the action further downstage and allowed the actors to enter and exit the performance space through the auditorium.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

The modification of the set to the dimensions of the new stage connected the playing space to the auditorium so that the action ‘started to actually invade’ the whole theatre space.¹¹⁰ This ‘invasion’ was fostered by the placement of artificial Rwandan flora and fauna around the edge of the stage and stairs so that the scenic environment crossed over into the auditorium. Therefore, although the set design was broadly the same across the two productions, the differences in the architecture of the two theatres were employed to facilitate the reconceptualisation of the miraculous, specifically the crafting of an affective atmosphere consistent with the heightened realism of the play. Dissolving the fourth wall through the scenic design and staging of action had the effect of bringing audiences closer to ‘these moments of theatrical surprise and shock and wonder’.¹¹¹ Reflecting on his experience sat amongst audiences at the Stratford East version of the production, Dacre observed that the response to the miracles seemed to be ‘more emotional’ rather than ‘cerebral’.¹¹² My own experience as a spectator corroborated Dacre’s observation; the inhalations of breath and vocalisations in response to the supernatural occurrences by fellow audience members suggest that the modifications made to the staging of the miraculous heightened the affective quality of the sequences in comparison to their depiction in the Royal & Derngate production.

The approach to staging the miraculous established throughout the rehearsal period for the Royal & Derngate production and developed through the reworked production at the Theatre Royal Stratford East demonstrates a shift from the crafting of illusion to the cultivation of atmosphere. The challenge of accommodating the miraculous within the

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

realist mode of the play resulted in aspects of the apparitions being refocused on the embodied performance of actor. This led to the significant reworking of certain miracles in the course of rehearsals. The development of the representational strategy for depicting the supernatural elements of the production shifted from verisimilitude to illusion (the papers rustling on the desk, the garden growing across the dormitory, the sun spinning in the sky) cultivating the affective quality of the sequence through the crafting of an atmospheric assemblage. The resultant heightened realism cultivated through the scenographic elements of theatrical production supported the actors' performance of the Visionary Girls' interaction with the Marian apparitions. However, the treatment of the final apparition sequence is distinct, both in the way it is presented in Hall's script and how the production team materialised it onstage. This divergence in the presentation of the miraculous at the denouement of *Our Lady of Kibeho* calls for a reconsideration of the relationship between authenticity and theatricality within the context of the realist play.

The Final Miracle: Shattering Realism

The final miracle comes near the end of the play once news of the Visionary Girls has spread beyond the local community. Villagers, news reporters, and representatives from the Church gather outside Kibeho College to witness the girls commune with the Virgin Mary. The Trinity step out onto the stage erected for the gathering. They declare that they must 'prepare the grounds for her' by joining with the crowd in sung prayer.¹¹³ As they sing, the sky becomes tempestuous and She arrives: 'It now seems as though the brightest sun is in the sky, but there is rain'.¹¹⁴ The Visionary Girls, the only characters able to 'see' the Virgin

¹¹³ Hall, *Our Lady of Kibeho*, p. 115.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 116.

Mary, notice that She is crying. They ask Her to show them what has caused Her distress. Suddenly, they are thrown into a violent and terrifying trance unlike any other they have previously experienced. The stage directions describe them 'shaking, convulsing, quivering'.¹¹⁵ The girls bend over and vomit while reciting in unison over and over, 'THE HILLS OF RWANDA WILL RUN RED WITH BLOOD'.¹¹⁶ Abruptly, the realist mode of the script is broken and the stage directions introduce a new representational idiom:

Lights shift. Time is stretched and echoey in this space.

In the black, there are moans and screams. The crackle of burning of fire. The electric slice of a machete being drug across asphalt. Echoes. A light pulses and we see shards of a vision. Visions of the unthinkable. The unseeable. The unvoiceable. Marie-Claire is running, running, running, running, red ribbons streaming from her feet. Until she is felled. **SONG 15** builds and builds.¹¹⁷

The tone shifts from one of joyous rapture, which has previously characterised the visions in the play, to one of terror. The girls are confronted with an apocalyptic vision, employed dramaturgically as a premonition of the Rwandan genocide through sensory reference to the violence, including the sound of a machete. Unlike Hall's description of the other apparitions, here the focus shifts from the bodily experience of the girls in communion with the Virgin Mary and the accompanying miraculous occurrences that affect their environment, to the vision itself – *what* is being experienced rather than *how* it is being received. While the descriptions of the previous apparitions clearly outline the different facets of the supernatural occurrences, the final apparition is fragmented into 'shards of a vision'.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 117.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 118.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 118.

The final apparition marks a breakdown in representation. Hall's recurring use of the 'un-' prefix conveys the un-representability of the vision. This notion the un-representable is a trope prevalent in the aesthetic conventions of what has been termed 'Trauma Drama'; that is, drama that experiments with representational strategies to depict the traumatic event at the centre of a play.¹¹⁸ In her influential study of cultural representations of trauma, Cathy Caruth draws upon Freudian psychoanalytic theory to argue that the traumatic event is 'experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known'.¹¹⁹ It is only through flashbacks or hallucinations that the event itself can be revisited by the subject. The experience returns in fragmented or partial form similar to the 'shards of a vision' described in Hall's stage directions. Popular conceptions of trauma have thus understood the phenomenon as 'an event this is always displaced in space and time'.¹²⁰ In narrative forms, such as the novel or play this is often manifest as a disruption of the temporal chronology of the plot. For instance, Suzan Lori-Parks's two-act drama *The America Play* (first performed in 1994) is a formally experimental critique of modes of history-making that have omitted the traumas of African American history. Parks employs 'the structure of Rep & Rev' or 'Repetition and Revision' to 'create a dramatic text that departs from the traditional linear narrative style'.¹²¹ The action of her play is set inside a 'great hole' that 'is an exact replica of The Great Hole of History'. This setting is a metaphoric landscape the represents the

¹¹⁸ Christina Wald, *Hysteria, Trauma, and Melancholia: Performative Maladies in Contemporary Anglophone Drama* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 5, 157-8.

¹¹⁹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 4.

¹²⁰ Allen Meek, *Trauma and Media: Theories, Histories and Images* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 5.

¹²¹ Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Elements of Style', in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013), p. 15.

‘African-American history [that] has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out’.¹²²

Narrative tropes, characters, and scenographic motifs recur with variation throughout her play creating complex, highly allegorical, and multiple (re-)tellings of American history, destabilising the notion of a singular Grand Narrative. Parks asserts that ‘one of my tasks as a playwright is to... locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down’.¹²³ In other words, to recover, reimagine, and retell the African American histories marginalised in dominant national narratives. The process of recovery undertaken by Parks through her playwriting evades representation in a linear narrative structure as the past is shown to return repeatedly to bear on the present. The ‘structure of *Rep & Rev*’ shows historical narratives to be multiple and in a continuous state of flux. Parks’s treatment of historical trauma in *The America Play* demonstrates that the disruption of chronological time is not necessarily confined to flashbacks as often depicted in cinema and theatre.

Hall, too, plays with the linear narrative in an unexpected fashion in *Our Lady of Kibeho*. She characterises the final Marian apparition as a premonition or flash-forward to the traumas of the Rwandan genocide. The physical responses of the Visionary Girls (seizures, vomiting, and fainting) are symptoms of pre-traumatic rather than post-traumatic stress. The association of the schoolgirls with the disruption of time through the delivery of their message also situates the characters within the tradition of the oracle – a prophetic role in which women play ‘a starring role’ as divine messengers.¹²⁴ As with Hall’s presentation of the Marian apparitions, messages are frequently conveyed by the oracle

¹²² Parks, ‘Possession’, in *The America Play*, p. 12.

¹²³ *Ibid*, p. 12.

¹²⁴ Bronwen Neil, *Channelling the Divine: From Paganism to Monotheism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 74.

through a mode of somatic expression that characterises the female body as a site of privileged knowledge. While their messages are often disbelieved or questioned by contemporaries at the time of delivery, the playing out of events vindicates the veracity of the oracle's privileged relationship to the divine. Indeed, following the final apparition in *Our Lady of Kibeho*, Father Tuyishime finds his previous support of the Visionary Girls shaken by his reluctance to accept the horrific premonition of forthcoming violence as he shouts 'I DON'T WANT TO BELIEVE THIS!'¹²⁵ The power of the schoolgirls is shown to be so great that it disturbs even the Head of Kibeho College: 'Fix them! We have to fix them... They are disrupting the order of things. Making everyone afraid'.¹²⁶ The association of the Visionary Girls with the oracle tradition through their shared relationship to disrupted chronology thus situates black female bodily experience within a wider lineage of female authority.

The 'unthinkable', 'unseeable', and 'unvoiceable' nature of the apparition is signified in Hall's written description of the sequence in the script using an overtly theatrical mode. The 'red ribbons streaming' from Marie-Claire's feet evoke the abstraction of violence in Peter Brook's 1995 *Titus Andronicus* staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company in the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. The production was directed and designed by Brook; reflecting his totalising vision for the production, the characters' wounds were represented using red ribbons that fell from the actors' limbs, mouths, and eyes. The symbolic stylization of the wounds confronted audiences with an unfamiliar depiction of violence that avoided sensationalism. Hall's decision to stage the premonition of the genocide in this fashion,

¹²⁵ Hall, *Our Lady of Kibeho*, p. 122.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 121.

perhaps also demonstrates a reluctance to perpetuate the violence she depicts – to avoid entering ‘the gates of hell’ in her treatment of the genocide.

The description of the final apparition disrupts the approach taken to staging the other apparition sequences – one which materialised the miraculous occurrences as far as possible within a mode of verisimilitude. Dacre had decided ahead of rehearsals not to stage the stylisation of Marie-Claire’s murder as detailed in the stage directions. Instead, elements of Hall’s description were interpreted in a more abstract sense through collaboration between Dacre, Fensom (designer), McLean (video design), Balfour (lighting designer), Gough (composer), and Windsor (sound designer), who worked to create a visual and aural depiction of the apocalyptic vision onstage. Although Hall’s description of ‘echoey space’ and the lights shift[ing]’ refers to the subjective experience of the Visionary Girls when the Virgin Mary appears – *what* they experience – the description also suggested how the performance space might be conditioned through scenographic transformation. Strobe lighting was employed to visualise the notion of time stretching. The actors playing the crowds gathered to witness the apparition were illuminated by bursts of light as they cowered back in slow motion. Their movements, paired with the ‘echoey’ soundscape that built up into a terrifying cacophony, offered a visual and aural reference to the stage directions. The overwhelming stimuli experienced by the girls in their engagement with the terrifying vision is projected into the scenographic environment in an expressionistic, rather than realist, mode. How, then, does this overtly theatrical stylisation of the final apparition sequence cohere with the otherwise realist register of the production?

Despite the non-naturalistic representation of the sequence, the presentation of the apparition retains a connection to the real events of the genocide cultivating the authenticity of the sequence within the wider production. This is achieved not through

mimetic techniques associated with theatrical realism, but by establishing a direct connection to the historical tragedy through the inclusion of documentary material in the scenographic design. In interview Dacre explains that the production team 'didn't want to let audiences off the hook by suggesting that the terrible tragedy of the genocide might not have occurred' – that the events depicted had fictional rather than historical origins.¹²⁷ This conviction in asserting the historical context of the play motivated the production team's decision to project documentary photographs showing the aftermath of the violence of the Rwandan Civil War onto the backdrop of the stage. Conscious of the ethical responsibility of using images associated with the lived experience of trauma, the decision was made not to use photographs that depicted casualties or perpetrators of the violence. Instead, the team chose to use 'environmental photographs' taken by the war photographer Paul Watson.¹²⁸ These images depicted the beautiful Rwandan landscape rent apart by the violence of war rather than the acts of violence themselves. With Watson's permission, the photographs were incorporated into the video design by McLean which was projected onto the backdrop when the actors performed the Visionary Girls experience of the premonition. The video design consciously aimed to convey the status of the images as historical photographs. McLean framed the photographs with a thin white border to reference the images' origins as material objects even though they were projected in digital form. The framed 'environmental photographs' came into focus against a black backdrop and moved across the space in a dynamic collage before dissolving back into darkness. Caruth explains that '[t]o be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event'.¹²⁹ While her

¹²⁷ Dacre, interview with author (telephone, 10th December 2019).

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Cathy Caruth, 'Introduction', *American Imago*, 48 (1991), 1-12 (p. 3).

observation refers to the return of traumatic memories as images in flashbacks and hallucinations, the inclusion of the documentary photographs in the production design for the final apparition sequence visualises these symptoms of traumatic experience in a theatrical mode. The visual documents function like a traumatic surfacing of the violence foreshadowed by the apocalyptic premonition. The photographs, representing Rwanda's violent past, resurface in the fictional world of the play and connect the experiences of the Visionary Girls at the centre of the dramatic action with the wider historical context that Hall wishes to examine through her play – the production itself functioning as a cultural expression of trauma.

The use of documentary photographs to situate the fictional world depicted in the play within a historical reality is a dramaturgical technique previously employed by Dacre in the staging of another of Hall's plays, *The Mountaintop*. Here, Hall fictionalises Martin Luther King's last night on earth before his assassination. The play's action takes place in King's motel room in Memphis. His only company is a maid, Camae, who is soon revealed to be an angel sent by God (whom the audience discovers is a black woman with a sharp sense of humour when King speaks to Her on the telephone). Tasked with preparing King for his death, her spiritual status is proven to the disbelieving protagonist through a series of minor miracles including the motel door burning bright red, snow falling unseasonably early and trapping King in the motel room, and flowers bursting into bloom at Camae's feet. When Hall's fictionalised depiction of Martin Luther King comes to terms with his assassination that will take place the following day, he asks Camae to show him '*the future he will never inhabit*'.¹³⁰ In Dacre's production, staged at Theatre 503 in 2009, the stage was cast in

¹³⁰ Katori Hall, *The Mountaintop*, in *Plays 1* (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), p. 245.

darkness so that a photographic montage of historical milestones relating to King's legacy and the Civil Right Movement could be projected onto the surfaces of the performance space. As in *Our Lady of Kibeho*, the photojournalistic images disrupted the chronology of the dramatic narrative by bringing the real events of the future to bear on the fictionalised past presented in the play. The technique also asserted the contemporary resonances of the historical events depicted in the production. The montage concluded with an audio clip of (the then newly-elected) Barack Obama's resonant call for change taken from his presidential election victory speech: 'Yes, we can!'¹³¹ The integration of photojournalistic images in the scenographic design of *The Mountaintop* and *Our Lady of Kibeho* thus breaks the realist representational mode otherwise employed in the two productions while still making a direct claim to reality. This claim is achieved, not through the aesthetic conventions of realism, but the introduction of photography to the theatrical context understood as a medium with a distinct relation to a factual rendition of reality.

The relationship between photography and the depiction of reality has been explored in the theatre since the inception of the medium in the nineteenth century. The 'representation of one medium in another', or more specifically how one medium 'responds to, deploys, competes with, and reforms other media', has been termed 'remediation' by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin.¹³² Adam Sonstegard utilises this notion of 'remediation' to address the use of photography in another play entangled in issues of racial justice, Dion Boucicault's nineteenth-century melodrama *The Octoroon* (1859). In the fourth act of the play, also known as the sensation scene in melodrama which encompasses a sensational

¹³¹ Bigsby, *Twenty-First Century American Playwrights*, p. 58.

¹³² Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, 'Remediation', *Configurations*, 4 (1996), 311-358 (pp. 311, 345).

denouement of the action, a photographic plate is used to reveal the identity of the murderer of a young enslaved boy. Wahnotee, a character of Native American descent, has been framed by the white villain, M'Closky, who calls for him to be lynched. However, in the course of the trial it is discovered that a camera captured M'Closky in the act of committing the crime. The photograph plate is offered as evidence and Wahnotee is acquitted. The remediation of photography in the play draws upon the claim of the medium 'to naturalized, authenticated truth'.¹³³ The characters tasked with judging Wahnotee accept the veracity of the material evidence as unquestionable proof of M'Closky's guilt, comparing the camera to the 'eye of the Eternal'.¹³⁴ The mechanical nature of the captured image is equated to divine omniscience: 'the machine can't err'.¹³⁵ Sonstegard argues that, here, 'theatrical performance looks to the "truths" photography can establish, beyond what theatrical performance can'.¹³⁶ The idea of theatre as an event crafted by a team of practitioners is juxtaposed with the mechanical capturing of the photographic image. The use of the photographs in the Royal & Derngate production of *Our Lady of Kibeho* rests upon a similar notion of the evidentiary nature of the medium as a factual document of events. The images are employed as a scenographic technique to situate the dramatized narrative within the historical context it explores making a distinct claim to reality and notions of truthfulness.

Certainly, an understanding of photography as a factual rendition of reality as expressed in *The Octoroon* is outdated in the context of twenty-first-century performance.

¹³³ Adam Sonstegard, 'Performing Remediation: The Minstrel, The Camera, and The Octoroon', *Criticism*, 48 (2006), 375-395 (p. 376).

¹³⁴ Dion Boucicault, 'The Octoroon', in *Plays by Dion Boucicault*, ed. by Peter Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 163.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 110.

¹³⁶ Sonstegard, 'Performing Remediation', p. 376.

This is observed in Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's 2014 metatheatrical deconstruction of Boucicault's play, *An Octoroon*. BJJ, a character who stands as a fictionalised depiction of the playwright, argues that 'we've gotten so used to photos and photographic images that we basically do nothing but fake them, crop them, filter them, Photoshop them' making the evidentiary role of the photographic plate in the original play 'a little dated'.¹³⁷

Yet, an alternative use of photography in Jacobs-Jenkins's play sustains a connection between the medium and reality. Challenged with confronting the audience with 'something new and novel', an 'overhead projector' is wheeled onto the stage and used to project 'a lynching photograph on to the back wall'.¹³⁸ The 2018 production of *An Octoroon* staged at the National Theatre interpreted the stage directions by projecting the well-known photograph of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana in 1930 on a billowing white sail (used to signify the setting of the scene on a steamboat). Here, the representations of racially motivated violence are multiple and transhistorical. There is the murder of the enslaved boy and the accusation and suggested lynching of Wahnotee within the narrative context of the nineteenth-century melodrama. Then, the photograph utilised in the National Theatre production records an act of violence committed in the 1930s which is projected before a twenty-first-century audience in the act of performance. The photograph, as a historic document, prompts the audience to bring the past to bear on the present.¹³⁹ Thus, while the claim to reality commonly associated with photography is questioned by Jacobs-Jenkins in *An Octoroon*, as in Dacre's productions of

¹³⁷ Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, *An Octoroon* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2015), p. 120

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 122.

¹³⁹ Carrie Preston, 'Hissing, Bidding, and Lynching: Participation in Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's *An Octoroon* and the Melodramatics of American Racism', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 62 (2018), 64-80.

Our Lady of Kibeho and *The Mountaintop*, the medium is ultimately used to connect the fictional world of the play to actual instances of racially motivated violence through scenographic design, prompting twenty-first-century audiences to reflect on contemporaneous racial politics using the materiality of the stage.

In the Royal & Derngate production of *Our Lady of Kibeho*, the theatrical depiction of the final apparition sequence thus makes a claim to reality through the scenographic employment of photography. It is this connection to the historical that renders the vision credible within the context of the production even while staged in an overtly theatrical idiom. Crucially, the positioning of the apocalyptic vision as the last of seven apparitions increasing in scale also allowed the miraculous to be normalised within the realist framework of the production. The earlier miracles are broadly depicted within a mode of verisimilitude, asserting the authenticity of the miracles within the fictional world of the play and the representational strategy employed to stage it. This laid the groundwork for the non-naturalistic climax of the performance. The veracity of the apparition, and the authority of the girls as visionaries, is therefore not undermined by the shift in representational strategy. A claim to reality is sustained, albeit in a distinct manner through the documentary photographs, situating the representation of black female experience so often marginalised in accounts of history and theatre firmly in the realist tradition of the dramatic canon.

Conclusion: Why Realism?

The challenges encountered by the production team when staging the apparition sequences as described in the script for *Our Lady of Kibeho* perhaps prompts the question: why tell the story in the realist mode at all? Hall fictionalises the historical events that took

place at Kibeho to address the dynamics between race, gender, and institutional assertions of power. The aesthetic, representational, and formal conventions of realism are extended to accommodate perspectives traditionally marginalised from the Western dramatic canon – here, that of black women in line with Hall’s desire ‘to write myself into existence’.¹⁴⁰ Understood thus, the expression of the miraculous in *Our Lady of Kibeho* marks a double assertion of black female authority; the spiritual authority of the Visionary Girls, and Hall’s intervention in the realist tradition as a black ‘womanist’ playwright.

My analysis of the Royal & Derngate production does not argue that realism is a form fundamentally unequipped to express women’s narratives. As has been discussed, such broad characterisations of realism (such as those undertaken in feminist theatre studies in the 1980s) are frequently ahistorical and perpetuate generalisations that cannot be substantiated by the diverse theatrical offerings encapsulated within categories of genre or form. Such discussions that address the nature of realism have typically focussed on the work of the playwright. In this chapter I have emphasised the collaborative processes undertaken by director, designers, performers, movement director, illusion consultant, and the material resources of the theatrical production to stage the miraculous. These collaborative processes of theatre-making are not characterised as gendered practice as in my framing of costume as women’s labour. Rather, as with the staging of the protagonist’s experience in *The Lovely Bones*, the production team was tasked with devising a strategy for depicting the unconventional through the material conditions of theatre-making (here, the Marian apparitions rather than the otherworldly quality of Susie’s embodiment). Rather, the production stands as an example of experimentation with realism undertaken by both

¹⁴⁰ Levitt, ‘Katori Hall Patches Together a Family History in *The Blood Quilt*’.

playwright and theatre-makers to accommodate alternative experiences within the form – here, the miraculous as a vehicle for black female authority. This experimentation is shown to be an ongoing creative process in the afterlife of the Northampton production through its transfer to the Theatre Royal Stratford East which saw the apparition sequences restaged once more in line with the developing approach to the miraculous: from materialisation to an atmosphere of heightened realism. This process of revision demonstrates the team’s commitment to foregrounding and authenticating the experiences of the Visionary Girls by accommodating them within the realist mode of the production using the material apparatus of representation. The material register is therefore gendered in the production as it evidences the authority of the female characters. In short, within the context of the twenty-first-century ‘(re)turn to realism’, what Aston terms ‘the politicizing possibilities’ of the form are pursued in this production of *Our Lady of Kibeho*, not only through innovations in playwriting, but experimentation with the material resources of the stage.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Aston, ‘Room for Realism?’, p. 32.

Chapter Four: The Staged Environment

My discussion of the gendering of form in the previous chapter has moved the focus of this study from encounters with props and costume to the crafting of atmosphere through the conditioning of the staged environment. This final chapter also examines the gendering of the stage environment but, here, with a distinct focus on the relationship between women and the staging of the domestic interior – a relationship that is historically entwined with, but not confined to, the representational conventions of realist theatre. I focus particularly on how the perspectives of female characters are foregrounded through the scenographic dramaturgy of the home. Two domestic dramas directed by Lucy Bailey and designed by Mike Britton for the Royal & Derngate serve as case studies: Agatha Christie and Frank Vosper's *Love from a Stranger* (1936/2018) and Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1882/2019) in an adaptation by Mike Poulton. The productions are typical of the work produced by director and designer in the course of their longstanding collaboration. This collaboration is driven by their mutual interest in reimagining nineteenth- and twentieth-century classic plays for contemporary audiences without undertaking substantial textual revisions to the script. This chapter traces the ways in which the conventions of staging the theatrical home are reworked by theatre-makers in their reinterpretation of classic plays. The question of directorial intention thus underpins my discussion. In the course of this thesis, I have argued for the collaborative nature of theatrical production and extended my definition of active participants to include the material elements of the stage. I have simultaneously traced the ways in which directors, designers, makers, and actors have worked with costumes, props, and staged environments to pursue their creative vision for a production. I conclude this

chapter by addressing the potential paradox of these two aspects of theatrical production explored in this study, interrogating the relationship between intention and material agency in the theatre-making process.

Love from a Stranger was co-produced by the Royal & Derngate and the production company Fiery Angel. It premiered in the Royal auditorium on 23rd February 2018, receiving mixed reviews, before it embarked on a nationwide tour that concluded on 7th July 2018 at the Milton Keynes Theatre. *Ghosts* opened on 19th April 2019, also in the Royal auditorium, and had its final performance the following month on 11th May. Described as ‘a respectful version’ by Michael Billington in his five-star review and critically well-received, Poulton’s interventions (aside from the translation of the play into English) primarily worked to contextualise Ibsen’s drama for a contemporary British audience.¹ The design teams charged with crafting the domestic environments onstage for both productions were comprised of the same practitioners with whom Bailey had established working relationships; Britton undertook the set and costume design, Oliver Fenwick the lighting design, and Richard Hammerton served as the composer and sound designer.

Having worked previously at the Royal & Derngate in 2015 to stage another classic domestic drama, Patrick Hamilton’s *Gaslight* (1938), Bailey and the designers were familiar with the working practices of in-house production conducted at the venue. They had also worked with many of the individuals across the different departments including the stage

¹ For Poulton’s approach to adapting *Ghosts* see ‘Mike Poulton Talks About His Career as an Adaptor of Neglected Classics’, *Theatre Voice*, 17th December 2013, <www.theatrevoice.com/audio/mike-poulton-talks-about-his-career-as-an-adaptor-of-neglected-classics> [accessed 9th June 2019]; Michael Billington, ‘Ghosts Review – Spirits of the Dead Haunt Ibsen’s Gripping Classic’, *The Guardian*, 25th April 2019, <www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/apr/25/ghosts-review-royal-derngate-northampton-mike-poulton> [accessed 21st May 2019].

management team, the costume professionals, and the stage technicians who assisted with the installation and operation of the set, lighting and sound. The sustained working relationships across the production team established a continuity of practice across the productions. As we will see, although the domestic interiors staged in each production are distinct, certain scenographic techniques recur in the presentation of the domestic dramas. Indeed, Britton notes that having worked with Bailey for fifteen years (their first collaboration being the premiere of Nell Leyshon's *Comfort Me with Apples* in 2005 at the Hampstead Theatre in London), he was aware of 'motifs' that recurred throughout the design of their productions – including the mobilisation of sets discussed in this chapter.² He relates that when they approach a new project, they are therefore careful 'not to repeat ourselves too much' by developing new strategies or innovative ways to employ tried and tested technologies.³ Britton's reflections on his collaboration with Bailey illustrates the practitioner's awareness of the continuities established across their productions through their collaborative working practices – something traced through this chapter's focus on the relationship between women and the representation of domestic space onstage.

Building on the discussion of scenography and gendered experience in relation to Dacre's production of *Our Lady of Kibeho*, and with Bailey's productions as case studies, this chapter addresses how domestic settings are reimagined through scenographic practice to foreground the experiences of female characters. In her transhistorical study, *Woman's Theatrical Space* (1994), Hanna Scolnicov argues that 'the articulation of theatrical space is an expression of woman's position in society'.⁴ Her account focuses on how the changing

² Mike Britton, interview with author (video call, 2nd July 2020).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hanna Scolnicov, *Woman's Theatrical Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 1.

formulation of the gendered division of public and private space is configured through the conventions of theatrical space. Here, 'theatrical space' is defined as the 'composite creation of the play, *mise-en-scène*, acting, choreography, scenery, lighting' and the theatre space itself.⁵ The gendered conventions of theatrical space in the domestic drama were particularly established through the representational strategies of late-nineteenth-century realism.⁶ The ideological divide between the public and the private cast the home a key site in which playwrights interrogated female subjectivity. The dynamics of the middle-class home, so frequently the subject of this drama, are often played out in the drawing room, characterised by Bert O. States as 'the most versatile intersection of the private and social spheres' and, thus, gendered relations.⁷ According to Scolnicov, the settings of these domestic dramas 'seemed to promise a closer and less restricted view of the woman's problem by shifting the scene... into her own territory'.⁸ However, she argues that the shared occupation of the domestic setting by male and female characters causes 'the woman [to become] confined and hampered by the drawing-room'.⁹ Scolnicov turns to Ibsen to substantiate her proposition; noting Hedda Gabler's retreat to the inner room in which she ultimately commits suicide and Nora's departure from the home at the denouement of *A Doll's House* (1879).

These oppressive domestic settings were staged using 'a single unit interior' that contained the performance of a play's action within the three walls of the box set (with an

⁵ Ibid, p. 2.

⁶ Ibid, pp. 3-4.

⁷ Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 66.

⁸ Scolnicov, *Woman's Theatrical Space*, pp. 3-4.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 3-4.

illusory fourth wall simulated by the architecture of the proscenium stage).¹⁰ As discussed in the previous chapter, feminist critics including Case, Diamond, and Dolan have argued that the thematic and representational apparatus of this late-nineteenth-century realist theatre ‘othered women’.¹¹ The box set interior is associated with the ‘portrayal of female characters within the family unit’ and particularly ‘their confinement to the domestic setting’.¹² The perceived formal and thematic oppression of women in the domestic setting of dramatic realism is encapsulated in Case’s well-known metaphor that conceives of nineteenth-century realist theatre as ‘a “prisonhouse of art” for women’.¹³ Scolnicov and Case’s discussions of woman’s theatrical space illustrate the gendered spatial conventions of the domestic drama inherited by contemporary theatre-makers, such as Bailey and her production team, when staging classic plays for twenty-first-century audiences.

Yet, an uncompromising characterisation of the theatrical home as a site of female oppression excludes the many historical and contemporary instances of the domestic setting being used by playwrights and theatre-makers to empower female characters or reimagine women’s shifting social status. For instance, Susan Glaspell transforms the kitchen into a privileged domain of women’s authority in her one-act play *Trifles* (1916). By interpreting the neglected condition of the kitchen – spoiled preserves, untidy sewing, dirty towels – a group of women uncover the motive for a wife’s murder of her husband. Judging the murder to be a legitimate response to an abusive marriage, the women decide to conceal the motive from their husbands, who represent the legal authority charged with

¹⁰ Amy Holzapfel, ‘Boxed Illusions: From Melodrama to Naturalism’, in *The Routledge Companion to Scenography*, pp. 349-360 (p. 354).

¹¹ Aston, ‘Room for Realism?’, p. 18.

¹² Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 124.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 124.

investigating the murder, in order to protect the woman, whom they know will not be tried by 'a jury of her peers' (the name given to the short story version of the play that Glaspell wrote a year later). The play argues for the epistemological authority of the domestic in the women's challenge to the masculinist legal system. The naturalistic family kitchen becomes the site of feminist agitation once more in the final act of the influential feminist play, Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982). A critique of Thatcherite individualism, the play takes place in a domestic setting that spatializes the second-wave feminist conviction that the personal is the political: two sisters discuss familial responsibilities, politics, and women's position in the workplace. The kitchen settings in both Glaspell's and Churchill's plays are often presented within a naturalistic scenic environment when staged. The naturalistic setting connects the fictional action of the play with the wider socio-political context which the playwrights critique through their depiction of the female characters' relationship to the home.

In *Home on the Stage* (2017), Nicholas Grene is interested in this 'persistent afterlife of the naturalist home'.¹⁴ However, Grene's author-focussed study is primarily centred on the work of twentieth-century playwrights and often obscures the interventions made by directors, and particularly designers, in fashioning domestic space onstage. Yet, the material conditions of theatrical representation are fundamental to the reinterpretation of domestic setting and its meanings in performance. Informed by her experience as a director of domestic drama, Ann M. Shanahan recognises that in 'the material terms of production, the gendered spatial dynamics of the plays becomes clearer'.¹⁵ In turn, this might 'prompt the

¹⁴ Nicholas Grene, *Home on the Stage: Domestic Spaces in Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 5.

¹⁵ Ann M. Shanahan, 'Making Room(s): Staging Plays About Women and Houses', in *Performing Dream Homes: Theater and the Spatial Politics of the Domestic Sphere*, ed. by

dismantling of limits or oppressions related to gender invoked by the original stylistic and staging conventions' of plays by directors and other theatre-makers 'in conceptually and materially significant ways' – a strategy she terms 'spatial dramaturgy'.¹⁶ For instance, in her practice-led research, Shanahan directed a production of *Hedda Gabler* (1891) in 2016 to address the 'single-sided proscenium dynamics that [a certain strand of feminist criticism argues] typically support the male gaze'.¹⁷ Staged in a black box studio at Loyola University Chicago (rather than on a proscenium-arch stage), her production positioned the audience on benches placed *within* the walls of the staged interior. Her decision was motivated by her desire to 'make the audience more aware of the entrapment inherent within realistic forms by having them experience it alongside the characters'.¹⁸ The confluence of scenic design and the architecture of the performance space were modified to shift the relationship between performance and spectator with the intention of heightening the experiential nature of spectatorship. In a technique derived from Antonin Artaud's theorisation of the Theatre of Cruelty, Shanahan's 'spatial dramaturgy' confronted the audience with the gender politics of the play by aligning their experience of the spatial dynamics of the home with that of the female characters.

The revisionist approach to the gender dynamics of classic plays through the manipulation of theatrical space also underpins Bailey and Britton's approach to staging domestic drama. Their scenographic practice intervenes in the conventions of material production employed to stage the realist domestic interior. These interventions frequently

Emily Klein and Jennifer Mobley-Scott (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 87-105 (p. 94).

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 105.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 92.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 93.

take the form of non-naturalistic staging devices that materialise the perspective of female characters in the scenic environment. In *Love from a Stranger* and *Ghosts* this is achieved through two scenographic techniques. First, by reconfiguring the layout of the domestic interior to reflect the female protagonists' shifting claim to agency in the home; second, by projecting these characters' affective responses to the action into the material environment. Here, I adapt Shanahan's 'spatial dramaturgy', which primarily focuses on the architectonic qualities of scenery and theatre space, to argue that the staged environments are shaped through a process of *scenographic* dramaturgy. The notion of scenographic dramaturgy is more explicit in its reflection of the constituent elements of stagecraft, including lighting and sound design, that are understood as key tools employed in shaping the 'material-spatial assemblage' of the staged environment.¹⁹ This chapter focuses, specifically, on the scenographic dramaturgy of the home as it is crafted onstage during technical rehearsals for two domestic dramas directed by Bailey. While the dramaturgical function of scenographic elements of a production are guided by Bailey and Britton's interpretation of the play, my observation of technical rehearsals shows how the staging of the domestic interior is developed through intense collaboration with Fenwick and Hammerton.

Technical rehearsals offer a rich environment for the participant-observer interested in scenographic intervention. It is during this process that the elements of stagecraft are brought together onstage and fine-tuned in conjunction with the rehearsed performances of the actors. The productions are staggered through at a glacial pace with many stops and repetitions of sequences to ensure that the designed elements are successfully integrated

¹⁹ Rachel Hann, *Beyond Scenography*, p. 68.

into the rehearsed action – particularly crucial in Bailey’s domestic dramas as aspects of the scenography are synchronised to the experiences of female characters performed by the actors. Bailey and Britton’s approach to staging domestic drama was observed during the technical rehearsals for *Love from a Stranger* and *Ghosts* and their practice discussed in interviews conducted subsequently. This provided the opportunity to consider the relationship between the intention of the theatre-makers and collaborative models of meaning-making in the theatre (including the question of reception) – a discussion that concludes this chapter.

Foregrounding Women’s Experiences in the Staged Home

Agatha Christie and Henrik Ibsen are, perhaps, an unlikely pairing. Beyond the distinct geo-temporal contexts in which *Ghosts* and *Love from a Stranger* were written, while Ibsen is upheld as a preeminent playwright in the canon of Western theatre, Christie’s work for the stage is often overlooked, dismissed as light entertainment or ‘glorious tosh’.²⁰ Nevertheless, Christie’s plays continue to be popular with theatregoers. Her 1952 thriller, *The Mousetrap*, holds the record for being the longest-running show in the world at its London home in the West End. More recently, Bailey’s production of *Witness for the Prosecution* (1953) – staged as an immersive piece in a courtroom in London’s County Hall – opened in 2017 to four- and five-star reviews that reflect the critical revaluation of Christie’s work in the hands of contemporary theatre-makers.

Despite the evident differences between the two writers, domestic settings feature prominently in both Ibsen’s and Christie’s writing for the stage. The title of *A Doll’s House* is

²⁰ Lyn Gardner, ‘Love from a Stranger Review – Agatha Christie Chiller is Glorious Tosh’, *The Guardian*, 28th February 2018, <www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/feb/28/love-from-a-stranger-review-agatha-christie> [accessed 21st May 2019].

frequently cited to epitomise the significance of the domestic setting in Ibsen's interrogation of middle-class gender relations (even while it is standardisation of the mistranslation of Ibsen's new term 'dollhome').²¹ Meanwhile, the closed setting or 'confined space' is epitomised by the country houses and remote cottages in which Christie's crime plots take place.²² Recent reassessment of her work has countered its reputation as 'cosy' fiction, to identify an 'unsettling frisson of anxiety' in 'the deadly potential embedded in even the most mundane domestic situation'.²³ Stephen Knight characterises this dynamic as an 'intimate danger' located in 'the repetitive traumas of betrayal' central to Christie's crime writing.²⁴ The home also functions as the site of detection in Ibsen's domestic dramas. Clues concerning characters' backstories are pieced together to drive the dramatic action of the plays and reveal how the past bears upon the (often tragic) circumstances of the present, frequently through frameworks of hereditary inheritance. Such revelations are often prompted by objects or memories intimately associated with the domestic settings, embedding the significance of the material meaning-making in the dramaturgical strategies of the plays.

The action of both *Love from a Stranger* and *Ghosts* is played out in middle-class domestic settings; in these spaces, women fight to assert their claim to agency against an oppressive male presence in the home. *Love from a Stranger* follows Cecily Harrington, a

²¹ Mark B. Sandberg, *Ibsen's Houses: Architectural Metaphor and the Modern Uncanny* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p 72.

²² Susan Rowland, 'The "Classical" Model of the Golden Age', in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 117-127 (p. 124).

²³ Merja Makinen, 'Agatha Christie (1890-1976)', in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, pp. 415-426 (p. 417).

²⁴ Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 91-3.

naïve ingénue swept up in a romantic whirlwind with the eponymous stranger Bruce Lovell, who is ultimately revealed to be a murderer intent on securing her recently-won fortune. The action opens in Cecily's dreary London flat which she is desperate to leave behind in search of adventure. The chilling denouement concludes in a remote country cottage purchased by the newly-wed couple in the second act. Ibsen's *Ghosts* is set in the drawing room of a nineteenth-century Norwegian home in which the widowed Mrs. Alving navigates the destructive legacy of her philandering husband, her own belief in upholding social proprieties, and her deteriorating relationship with her son, Oswald.

The complex interrogation of gendered relationships within the home depicted in the two domestic dramas is something that Bailey is particularly drawn to when selecting plays to direct. She relates that her interest in domestic dramas is rooted in the centralisation of 'the physical and sexual relationship between two people to what's going on onstage'.²⁵ Bailey strives to underpin the action of her productions with the dynamics of these intimate relationships through the pursuit of psychological realism. Reflecting on her approach to staging *Love from a Stranger*, Bailey reflects that 'it felt right to try and make these people, people we recognise today'.²⁶ Her comments demonstrate that she brings a contemporary sensibility that champions the importance of backstory, motivation, and psychological nuance to her productions – an approach familiar to twenty-first century audiences from the proliferation of psychological thrillers on film, television, the stage, and in popular fiction. Bailey's interest in psychological realism is consistent with the approach taken to other contemporary adaptations of Christie's work. This is epitomised by Sarah Phelps's 2015 television version of *And Then There Were None* (which Britton noted Bailey

²⁵ Lucy Bailey, interview with author (London, 18th July 2018).

²⁶ Ibid.

particularly admired).²⁷ Phelps compares her interrogation of the characters' psychology (which she has 'ramped up') to that presented in popular and critically successful Scandinavian thrillers such as *The Killing* (2007-2012) and *The Bridge* (2011-2018): 'Everyone in the book is quite polite and clipped. They're a whole lot less so in the adaptation because I kept thinking "what would you do if you were on an island and people kept dying?"'²⁸ Similarly, recognising the potential to develop the psychology of Christie's characters through performance, Bailey carved out time in rehearsals for the actors to explore the potential richness of the inner lives of their characters. Demonstrating the influence of Stanislavskian technique discussed in the last chapter, she even commissioned a psychoanalyst to create a psychological profile for Bruce Lovell, the homicidal stranger in Christie and Vosper's play. Bailey's approach particularly worked to focalise the action of the plays through the female protagonists, recognising that, as in the case of psychological thrillers, it was the characters' shifting perspectives of events rather than the action itself that charged the momentum of the plays.

Bailey's foregrounding of the female protagonists in the domestic dramas corresponds to the shift in critical focus in the reception history of the two plays which turned from the experiences of the male characters (Bruce and Oswald) to those of the female protagonists (Cecily and Mrs. Alving). When *Ghosts* was first performed in theatre capitals across Europe, for reviewers, 'the undisputed focus of the drama' was Oswald and

²⁷ Britton, interview with author (video call, 2nd July 2020).

²⁸ Sarah Phelps quoted in Tara Conlan, 'BBC's *And Then There Were None* Puts a Darker Spin on Agatha Christie', *The Guardian*, 13th December 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/dec/13/bbc-and-then-there-were-none-agatha-christie>> [accessed 22nd September 2020].

his hereditary inheritance.²⁹ However, in the course of the twentieth century, it was Mrs. Alving's experiences that were increasingly the subject of critical interest. The shift in the reception of *Ghosts* can also be partly attributed to the skill of the actors cast as Mrs. Alving in key productions whose influences have extended over subsequent interpretations of Ibsen's play.³⁰ Bailey, too, chooses to foreground Mrs. Alving in her production of *Ghosts*. In an interview conducted for the programme of her 2019 production staged at the Royal & Derngate she explains that, for her, 'the story is about Helen Alving's quest for confronting her past', noting that 'the consequences are profoundly painful'.³¹ Reviews of Bailey's production recognise the focalisation on Mrs. Alving's experiences are the driving force of the play, frequently singling out 'the towering performance of Penny Downie' cast in the role, who 'provides the stunning, tender and heart-wrenching engine for Ibsen's action'.³²

A corresponding redirection of attention from the male to female character is evidenced in the production history of *Love from a Stranger*. The origins of the 1936 script are somewhat obfuscated. At the premiere of the production, Vosper was identified as the adaptor of Christie's short story 'Philomel Cottage'. However, he also drew heavily upon her own unpublished adaptation of the story which she titled *The Stranger* (and exists in the

²⁹ Frederick Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, *Ibsen's Lively Art: A Performance Study of the Major Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 96.

³⁰ See, for example, Erika Fischer-Lichte's analysis of Agnes Sorma's performance in a 1906 production of *Ghosts* directed by Max Reinhardt in 'Ibsen's *Ghosts* – A Play for All Theatre Concepts? Some Remarks on its Performance History in Germany', *Ibsen Studies*, 7 (2007), 61-83, (p. 73). For the role played by female actors in shaping the reception of Ibsen in Britain and France see Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, *Ibsen and Early Modernist Theatre, 1890-1900* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 95-6.

³¹ Lucy Bailey, interview with Michael Davies, 'Making Ghosts Real', a feature published in the programme produced by the Royal & Derngate for their 2019 production of *Ghosts*.

³² Michael Davies, 'Review: *Ghosts* (Royal and Derngate)', *WhatsOnStage*, 25th April 2019, <https://www.whatsonstage.com/northampton-theatre/reviews/ghosts-royal-derngate-poulton_48944.html> [accessed 21st May 2019].

form of a type script (dated to 1932) held in the Agatha Christie archive). Despite lifting sections of dialogue directly from Christie's script, her co-authorship remained unacknowledged by Vosper and in the marketing material for the original 1936 production. In recognition of the diverse source material of *Love from a Stranger*, the two writers are co-credited on the script licensed for performance today.³³ In his comparison of the two adaptations written by Christie and Vosper, Julius Green notes that in the script licenced for performance (and still used today) 'the leading male role has clearly been built up as a star vehicle for [Vosper], to the detriment of that of the female protagonist, with whose predicament we engage more fully in Christie's own version'.³⁴ Christie's unperformed play foregrounds women's specialist knowledge of gendered relations in the home. Two housekeepers, cut from the 1936 script, help Cecily realise Bruce's sinister intentions by reflecting on their own experiences with men including an abusive ex-husband.³⁵ The building-up of Bruce's stage time in Vosper's version suggests that, following a different directorial interpretation of the play, *Love from a Stranger* might more readily be described as a case study of a male psychopath. However, as with her production of *Ghosts*, reviews of Bailey's *Love from a Stranger* recognise the foregrounding of the perspective of the female lead thanks to the skill of the actor cast in the role, Helen Bradbury: 'Bradbury makes sure we are on Cecily's side, negotiating the pitfalls of a role that is passive for most of the play, and showing her surprised by love and gradually blooming'.³⁶ The production histories of

³³ For a detailed account of the complex history of the authorship and original production of *Love from a Stranger* see Julius Green, *Curtain Up: Agatha Christie – A Life in Theatre* (London: Harper Collins, 2015), pp. 111-125.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 114.

³⁵ Observation made by the author during consultation of the typed copy of *The Stranger* (dated 1932) held in the Agatha Christie archive.

³⁶ Gardner, 'Love from a Stranger review'.

both plays demonstrate the potential power wielded by the interpretative vision of theatre-makers to shape the meaning of a play. The reviews focus on the performances of the actors cast in the roles of the plays' protagonists to note the foregrounding of female experience in Bailey's production (a casting decision ultimately made by the director).

The centralisation of the action of the two plays on the perspectives of the female protagonists is not only pursued through Bailey's work with the actors on their process of characterisation, but through the interventions made in the domestic settings of the two productions devised collaboratively with her production team. Reflecting on his longstanding professional relationship with Bailey, Britton notes their approaches to staging a production are 'on a par': 'we really love to get into the psyche or more psychological side of things and try and illustrate that in the set'.³⁷ This is often informed by their interpretation of the main character's subconscious or 'feelings', which they work to 'echo' or 'surround' the actors with onstage 'as opposed to just doing things very representationally'.³⁸ Thus, in their productions of *Love from a Stranger* and *Ghosts*, the domestic settings do not simply function as backdrops to the action but are actively employed in the characterisation of the female protagonists.

Shifting Sets: Mobilising the Domestic Interior

The mobilisation of the set is a scenographic technique employed by Bailey and Britton to foreground female characters' perspectives through the interiors they craft for their productions of domestic drama. *Love from a Stranger* has two settings: a dreary London flat and a country cottage. The play follows Cecily Harrington, an altogether

³⁷ Britton, interview with author (video call, 2nd July 2020).

³⁸ Ibid.

unremarkable young woman, as she comes into a large sum of money after winning a sweepstake. She is engaged to be married to her long-time fiancé Michael who has recently been absent while working in Sudan.³⁹ However, Cecily yearns for adventure and dreams of using her fortune to travel and escape her secretarial job and dull life in London. Cecily meets Bruce when he comes to the flat she shares with her friend Mavis in the guise of a potential tenant. He convinces her to break off her engagement with Michael. We learn in the second act she has married Bruce within a couple of weeks giving him control over her recently bolstered monetary assets. The action then moves to the remote and inaccessible aptly-named Philomel Cottage recently bought by the newly-wed couple using Cecily's fortune. Bruce's past as homicidal criminal with a string of female victims in his wake – all of whom he had married and disposed of for their money – is exposed to the audience but, in a twist of dramatic irony, not to Cecily. With the help of Mavis, Michael, and a broadly-sketched cast of supporting 'country' characters introduced in the second act of the play – the rheumatic local gardener, Hodgson, the comic maid, Ethel, and the doctor with a passion for criminology, Dr. Gribble – Cecily eventually discovers the danger she is in. The climax of *Love from a Stranger* is set in the cottage on the evening that Bruce intends to murder Cecily. In a desperate attempt to save herself, she uses household objects to overthrow his plan and defend herself – ultimately exacerbating Bruce's heart condition so that he collapses and dies.

Britton's designs for both settings demarcated the playing space with the three walls of the box set interior (see Figures 27 & 28). He employed a false proscenium to reduce the

³⁹ Bailey changed the character's name from Nigel (as it is in the 1936 script) to Michael as she felt the former was too dated and would be jarring to the ear of a contemporary audience.

height of the stage and narrow the playing space to the dimensions of a single storey to help evoke the intimacy of the domestic setting. Reflecting the 'persistent afterlife of the naturalist home', the domestic interiors were richly populated with objects, from large items of furniture to small, portable props. Indeed, the level of detail in Britton's designs was so ambitious that there were fears during technical rehearsals for *Love from a Stranger* that it would not be possible to complete the set change from the London flat of the first act to the country cottage of the second within the twenty-minute interval. The transformation of the stage space consequently had to be rehearsed a number of times against the clock to ensure its viability – an example of the integral, but frequently overlooked, role played by a skilled crew of stage technicians in theatre-making. Presented using the box set, the domestic interiors might seem to correspond to realist staging conventions. However, the front sections of both sets, Cecily's London flat and the living room of Philomel Cottage, were built on trucks that could be shifted to the left or the right by stage technicians concealed in the wings to reveal rooms previously hidden offstage. Britton's intervention thus marks an experimentation with the established staging conventions to which the sets initially appear to adhere.

While the dynamic capacity of the set was built into its construction, it was only when the production team were on the stage of the Royal theatre during technical rehearsals that its movements were choreographed into the rehearsed action. Ahead of this period, Bailey had decided that certain portions of the play's action would take place in the rooms initially concealed in the wings at the start of the show or after the interval (a hallway and bedroom in Cecily's London flat and the kitchen of Philomel Cottage, respectively). However, at the beginning of the technical rehearsal period she explained to the cast, designers, and technicians poised in the wings that she wanted the precise moment in

which the set was mobilised to respond to key developments in the plot which altered Cecily's claim to agency in the home. The movement would then be coordinated with corresponding developments in the lighting and sound design. The decision-making process was thus distributed between director, designers, and actors – a demonstration of how directorial intentionality is dependent on the collaborative labour of the production team.



Figure 27 A section of the domestic interior of the London flat designed by Britton for Act One of *Love from a Stranger* at the Royal & Derngate (Photo credit to Shelia Burnett, used with the permission of the Royal & Derngate).



Figure 28 A section of the domestic interior of the country cottage designed by Britton for Act Two of *Love from a Stranger*. (Photo credit Shelia Burnett, used with the permission of the Royal & Derngate).

The set of Cecily's London flat was first mobilised when Bruce identifies Cecily as his next victim. The rehearsed performances of the two actors (Sam Frenchum as Bruce and Helen Bradbury as Cecily), in collaboration with the scenic environment, enact the shifting power dynamics between the characters. (For clarity, in the following description of the staged action I use the characters' names to refer to the embodied performance of the actors). The truck was shifted stage-left to reveal an entrance hall and doorway which had been previously concealed in the wings and into which Bruce made his entrance. As he stepped onto the stage, he was accompanied by non-diegetic musical underscoring which communicated Bruce's sinister intentions to the audience – a characterisation soon reinforced through his voyeuristic photographing of Cecily through the open doorway. Bruce passed through the first door and was held, momentarily, in the entrance hall. The second door, crucially, left ajar to expose Cecily to his gaze. Upon hearing the click of

Bruce's camera Cecily jumped, unaware she was being observed, and invited Bruce to cross the threshold of the second door as her guest to give him a tour of the flat.

Bailey explains that the sequential scenographic transformation that accompanies Bruce's entrance was intended to demonstrate the threat that the character poses to Cecily's safety from the moment he enters the domestic space without a word being uttered: 'The first thing is the slide [of the set]. And the second thing is the camera. And we [the audience] go: "pervert"'.⁴⁰ Later in the scene, his assertion of power over Cecily is indicated once more when the set shifts again, this time stage right, to reveal her bedroom. Bailey inserted a sequence into her production not detailed in the script in which Bruce picks up an item of Cecily's underwear which has been discarded on the floor. He brings it up to his face to smell, before covertly photographing it. Bailey notes that the creation of the sequence was to explore the 'eroticism out of voyeurism' which she perceived to be 'under-investigated' in Christie and Vosper's original script. Accordingly, she decided to update the setting of the production from the 1930s to 1950s in order to explicitly 'shift [the play] into territories that we have in our memory space' associated with movies such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) and Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960) that portray a violent imbalance of gendered agency in the home (see Figure 29).⁴¹ The mid-century design of the interior (and corresponding) lighting design worked to evoke these films in which the camera is wielded by a male character to objectify women – a dynamic termed 'fetishistic scopophilia' by Laura Mulvey in her theorisation of the male gaze in mid-century Hollywood cinema (see Figure 30).⁴²

⁴⁰ Bailey, interview with author (London, 18th July 2018).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' [1975], in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, second edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 14-27 (p. 22).

The hallway into which Bruce first enters in Bailey's production is a space commonly characterised as a threshold that separates the security of the domestic from the potential threat posed by the outside world. The liminality of the space is emphasised by Britton's design which employed two doors – one supposedly leading from the outside into the hallway of Cecily's flat, and the other from the hallway into the living room. Cecily's invitation to Bruce to enter her home unwittingly strips her of her authority in the domestic space. In his understanding of hospitality, Derrida asserts that 'the crossing of the threshold always remains a transgressive step' regardless of whether the crosser is a benign 'invited guest' or a threatening 'visitor'.⁴³ He argues that the host's invitation of another into the home is necessarily a responsive act because it is always-already prefaced by a demand from the guest to be given entry (i.e. by approaching the threshold in the first place). Accordingly, when the host or 'the one who invites' (Cecily), grants entry to the guest or 'the one who invites the one who invites' (Bruce), the guest becomes 'the master of the host' who has conceded to their wishes for admission.⁴⁴ A shift takes place in the power dynamics between host and visitor as latter supplants the authority of the former. As Joanne Watkins observes, in the Gothic tradition such transgression often gives the guest 'the power to disrupt the home from the inside... reducing their hosts to victims' – a trope established in *Love from a Stranger* through Bruce's murderous plan to claim Cecily's fortune.⁴⁵ In an enactment of spatial dramaturgy, Bruce's entry into the flat and the corresponding

⁴³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 75.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 125.

⁴⁵ Joanne Watkins, 'Welcome the Coming, Speed the Parting Guest: Hospitality and the Gothic', *A New Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 523-534 (p. 524).

mobilisation of the set thus illustrates the character's usurpation of Cecily's authority in the home.

The 'scenic manoeuvres of lifting, lowering and sliding' have been commonplace practice in the history of stage design; from the lowering and raising of backdrops by hand via a rope and pulley system, to more technologically advanced scenic effects achieved through hydraulic power, electric motors, and computer-controlled 'cushion' air pallets.⁴⁶ Such mobilisation of the scenic environment has been employed to a variety of ends, including to represent a change in the setting of a play's action, to craft spectacle, and to respond to atmospheric shifts in dramatic action. In contrast, a fundamental characteristic of the box-set domestic interior is its static quality. Playwrights, such as Ibsen, embraced the dramaturgical potential of the scenic technology by setting the action of their plays within a single room to heighten the intensity of the interpersonal relationships enacted between his characters. The mobilisation of the sets of the domestic interiors in Bailey and Britton's productions do not, then, introduce new 'scenic manoeuvres' to the stage. However, they do disrupt the conventional presentation of the 'single unit interior' commonly employed in the staging of the domestic drama.⁴⁷ The specific function of the mobilisation of the set is to disrupt the conventions of the realist scenic environment to illustrate Cecily's shifting agency in the home following Bruce's entrance.

As discussed, the mobilised set is a technique that recurs in productions designed by Britton and directed by Bailey – albeit executed distinctly in each instance. For example, in their 2009 production of Frederick Knott's *Dial M for Murder* (1954), the sleek living room of the 1950s Maida Vale flat was set on a platform that slowly rotated 360 degrees throughout

⁴⁶ Baugh, *Theatre, Performance and Technology*, p. 93.

⁴⁷ Holzapfel, 'Boxed Illusions: From Melodrama to Naturalism', p. 354.

the performance.⁴⁸ The mobilisation of the set was a materialisation of the various viewpoints of the characters attempting to unpick the complex web of lies surrounding the attempted murder of a woman, ultimately revealed to have been orchestrated by her husband. The revolving stage worked to destabilise the fixed perspective of the box set interior. The spectator's shifting perspective of the domestic setting was aligned with those of the characters attempting to either uncover or conceal the true nature of the crime. The mobilisation of the stage in this production of *Dial M for Murder* was utilised to physicalize the themes of the play. In both *Love from a Stranger* and *Ghosts* the scenographic device is employed to materialise moments when Cecily or Mrs. Alving's claim to agency within the home alters. I return to the function of the mobilised set in *Ghosts* later in the chapter. First, I consider how non-naturalistic interventions in the conventional staging of the box-set interior in this second production externalise Mrs. Alving's psychological state into the staged environment – another instance of scenographic dramaturgy that ties the configuration of the staged home to the centralising of the female protagonists in Bailey's productions of domestic dramas.

⁴⁸ Bailey's production of *Dial M for Murder* was first performed at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in 2009 and then revived for a UK tour in 2014.



Figure 29 Frenchum as Bruce emerging from the darkroom in Act Two of *Love from a Stranger*. (Photo credit to Shelia Burnett, used with the permission of the Royal & Derngate).



Figure 30 Bradbury (as Cecily) poses for the camera in a scene that explores the 'eroticism out of voyeurism' in Bailey's production of *Love from a Stranger*. (Photo credit to Shelia Burnett, used with the permission of the Royal & Derngate).

Psychological Metaphor, Women, and Domestic Space

Staged the year after their production of *Love from a Stranger*, Bailey and Britton's approach to the domestic setting in *Ghosts* foregrounds the experience of the female protagonist, Mrs. Alving. The play's action takes place in a single domestic setting; the drawing room of the Alving family estate, Rosenvold. In the Royal & Derngate production, the conventions of the box set interior employed to depict the single setting in early naturalist productions of *Ghosts* were reimaged. Britton's design rendered the solid walls of the room transparent, using plastic sheeting to demarcate different areas of the stage

space. Behind the drawing room, which was located downstage, he created a corridor which connected this main playing space to a smaller, second space upstage. This was used as the dining room in which Oswald attempts to seduce the maid, Regina, unaware that she is the product of his father's indiscretion with the previous maid and hence his half-sister. The seduction conventionally takes place offstage and is described by Mrs. Alving, rather than witnessed, by the audience. The transparent walls allowed the actors' performance of Oswald's advances to be rendered visible beyond the drawing room (see Figure 31). As with the shifting set in *Love from a Stranger*, Britton's design provided additional playing spaces that could be utilised to extend the staging of the play's action beyond the 'single unit interior' facilitated by the box set. This extension of the playing space was understood by Bailey to be a distinctly contemporary approach to staging the domestic interior. In interview, she contrasted the design for her production with 'the old-fashioned' way of staging a play.⁴⁹ The mobile set and transparent walls reimagine the 'thickness' she associated with the box set interior to reflect the 'psychological instability' of the female protagonist, Mrs. Alving.⁵⁰

This 'instability' was visualised in the treatment of the materials utilised in the creation of the set. The semi-transparent plastic walls that demarcated the different rooms of the Alving family home were painted with loose brush strokes to create a misted, ghostly effect. Britton devised the wall treatment with the scenic workshop so that the surfaces caught the reflections of the actors as they moved around the set. In technical rehearsals, Fenwick worked to direct light onto the misted walls in a fashion that rendered the reflections visible to the audience, demonstrating the significant relationship between

⁴⁹ Bailey, interview with author (London, 18th July 2018).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

lighting and scenic design in achieving scenographic effects. The ghostly reflections of the actors' bodies were intended to visualise the 'ghosts' of the family's past (the 'spirits of the dead – decaying ideas, old rotting beliefs') that Mrs. Alving believes continue to haunt the home.⁵¹ Keen to exploit the dramatic potential of the scenographic device, Bailey cast two additional actors (selected from the Royal & Derngate's amateur company) as servants in the Alving household. She directed them through sequences of mimed housework that allowed their moving bodies to be glimpsed as ghostly figures through the misted walls (see Figure 32). The greater number of actors onstage (due to the addition of the servant characters) permitted movement to be created in the scenic environment that would not have been possible to achieve using the small professional cast alone.



Figure 31 The transparent walls of the domestic interior in Britton's set design introduce a second playing space used in Bailey's staging of the production. (Photograph taken by author).

⁵¹ Mike Poulton, *Ghosts* (2019), p. 38. The script referred to in this study is the unpublished performance script for the 2019 production directed by Bailey for the Royal & Derngate. The script was based upon his earlier adaptation of the play published as an actor's edition in 2014 (see Mike Poulton, *Ghosts* (London: Samuel French, 2014)).



Figure 32 The bodies of the actors downstage are reflected in the walls and overlay the ghostly figures of the actors behind. (Photograph taken by author).

Following the Freudian model of the return of the repressed, the materialisation of the ghosts in the walls of the home visualises the Ibsenian surfacing of the hidden family secrets that Mrs. Alving has tried to conceal and, more specifically, how it affects her as the individual at the heart of the scandal. In his model of the mind, Freud employs an architectural analogy in which the unconscious urges of an individual jostle against one another in the hallway of a house. They attempt to cross the 'threshold' of a doorway to enter the drawing room which stands as a metaphor for the conscious mind. The doorway is guarded by a watchman, who 'examines the different mental impulses, acts as a censor, and will not admit these into the drawing-room if they displease them'.⁵² Freud explains that

⁵² Sigmund Freud, 'XIX. Resistance and Repression', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (Volume XVI: 1916-1917): Introductory Lectures on*

any unconscious impulses that 'have already pushed their way forward to the threshold and have been turned back by the watchman [are] inadmissible to the consciousness' and are therefore considered to be repressed.⁵³ At times, it can be difficult to distinguish reflections from the shadowy bodies of the actors moving behind the misted walls, suggesting that the ghosts might emerge from beyond the psychological realm, crossing the threshold into the present-day action of the play. In Poulton's script, Mrs. Alving cries out, 'If these walls could bear witness to what I've suffered "in this house"' and, in Bailey's production, they do.⁵⁴ The ghosts that Mrs. Alving observes at Rosenvold, materialise through the reflection of the actors in the Perspex walls of the set, externalise the surfacing of her traumatic relationship with her husband, memories of which return via her unconscious impulses. In Poulton's script, this is conceived by Mrs. Alving in terms of 'an exorcism' in which the haunting of her husband is associated with her 'bad memories' of her marriage – memories she wishes to be freed from by redirecting her husband's influence away from the home.⁵⁵

Bailey's direction of Penny Downie, cast in the role of Mrs. Alving, strengthened the connection between the scenographic haunting of the scenic environment and the character's psychology. During technical rehearsals, the performance devised in the rehearsal room is often re-blocked within the specificities of the actual stage space and set. During this process, Bailey encouraged Downie to find opportunities to react to the ghostly reflections visible in the walls. The actor's reactions were subtle in nature; the slight turn of her head, a momentary pause in the delivery of her dialogue, or shifting her gaze into the

Psycho-Analysis (Part III), trans. and ed. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1963), pp. 286-302 (p. 295).

⁵³ Ibid, p. 295.

⁵⁴ Poulton, *Ghosts*, p. 31

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 34.

middle-distance to indicate that the character has become distracted by the resurfacing of memories or ghosts. Downie's performance thus reframes the 'spirits of the dead – decaying ideas, [and] old rotting beliefs' that haunt the home in the psychological terms of the individual protagonist.

Freud's architectural metaphors of the mind are not his alone: they are also familiar in popular culture from the Gothic to the contemporary psychological thriller. As with the conventional alignment of the domestic with women's experiences, these metaphors are often gendered. The relationship between women's psychology and domestic space is longstanding in theatrical and literary traditions in which the internal state of an (often female) character is projected onto their environment.⁵⁶ This reciprocity between character and environment underpins experimentation with domestic space in late nineteenth-century naturalism – the context in which Ibsen wrote many of his domestic dramas including *Ghosts*. Familiar with the actualities of theatre-making from his early years directing plays in Bergen and Christiania (now Oslo), Ibsen was well-versed in how to exploit the dramatic potential of theatrical space in his writing.⁵⁷ Raymond Williams's oft-quoted description of what he terms the 'high' naturalism of this period traces a reciprocal relationship in which 'the lives of the characters have soaked into the environment' and, in turn, 'the environment has soaked into their lives'.⁵⁸ The scenographic presentation of

⁵⁶ See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, second edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 348. Peter Brooks notes how the Gothic castle 'realizes an architectural approximation of the Freudian model of the mind' in *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 19.

⁵⁷ Marker and Marker, *Ibsen's Lively Art*, p. 1. See, also, Sandberg, *Ibsen's Houses*, p. 4.

⁵⁸ Raymond Williams, 'Social Environment and Theatrical Environment: The Case of English Naturalism', in *English Drama: Forms and Development*, ed. by Marie Axton and Raymond Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 203-223 (p. 217).

domestic setting associated with the 'single unit interior' of the box set is irrevocably entwined with theatrical form, action, and characterisation in naturalist theatre. The dense material realism of the domestic setting is used to evoke the conditions that shape the characters' lived experience, drawing upon a philosophy of materialism. Bailey and Britton's reconceptualisation of the conventional staging of the naturalist interior in their domestic dramas reflects a twenty-first-century approach to relationship between environment and character. Here, the non-naturalistic modifications to the traditional box-set interior visualise Mrs. Alving's perspective. The gendered dynamics of the staged home are not solely presented in the materialist conditions of the home, but in metaphorical terms as the domestic interior becomes a psychological landscape that reflects her journey through the play.

Such a refocussing of the play from the material conditions that shape a family's fortunes to the psychological condition of the female protagonist is common in twenty-first-century adaptations of classic domestic dramas – particularly contemporary productions of Ibsen's social problem plays.⁵⁹ For instance, director Ivo van Hove's production of *Hedda Gabler* (1891), performed on the Lyttelton stage at the National Theatre in 2016, externalised the eponymous character's ennui onto the staged domestic environment. The minimalist interior designed by Jan Versweyveld was a contemporary reimagining of the nineteenth-century domestic environment imagined in Ibsen's play. The material conditions that entrap Hedda in the marital home (comparable, perhaps, to the 'decaying ideas' and 'old rotting beliefs' that haunt Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts*) are displaced through the distinctly twenty-first-century conception of the sleek interior setting. The clinical white space was

⁵⁹ Julie Holledge, Jonathan Bollen, Frode Helland, and Joanne Tompkins, *A Global Doll's House: Ibsen and Distant Visions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 113.

trashed in the course of a performance. In non-naturalistic sequences inserted between the scenes, actor Ruth Wilson, as Hedda, danced frenetically as she stapled flowers across the wall of the minimalist interior. Her metaphorical imprisonment within the conservative ideology of the material home was literalised when other actors boarded up the windows of the flat using electric drills. The domestic interior was thus conceived as a materialised psychological landscape that represented the production's conceptualisation of Hedda's deteriorating mental condition in the play. The production prompted theatre critic Lyn Gardner to address the challenges faced when reimagining Ibsen's drama in a contemporary setting, particularly the implications of a twenty-first-century Hedda: 'why, when one is unfettered by the societal conventions of the 19th century, doesn't she just get up, walk out the door and make her own life?'⁶⁰ Gardner suggests that the character's entrapment might be explained by an interpretation of Wilson's performance 'as an acute study of depression, in which Hedda is desperately trying to keep up appearances as things go from bad to worse'.⁶¹ The review of van Hove's production highlights the challenges faced by theatre-makers when striving to convey psychological complexity through the materiality of the staged environment; that is, to externalise the internal. The non-naturalistic interventions made to the domestic setting seek to literalise Hedda's internal state. Yet, the loss of the nineteenth-century domestic setting – a material reminder of the social constraints placed on women at that time – decontextualizes the causes of the character's psychological deterioration and, perhaps, undercuts the complexity of the role. At the very least, it

⁶⁰ Lyn Gardner, 'We Need to Talk About Hedda: Why the National's Ibsen Shocker Isn't Sexist', *The Guardian*, 17th January 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2017/jan/17/hedda-gabler-national-ibsen-sexist>> [accessed 30th September 2020].

⁶¹ Ibid.

prompted reviewers such as Gardner to devise justifications for the disparities they observe between setting and characterisation. It is precisely the difficulty of conveying psychological interiority through scenographic design that I turn to in the following section.

Psychological Projection: Staging Perception

The projection of the female protagonist's inner life into the staged domestic interior as discussed in relation to *Ghosts*, is one of the 'motifs' that Britton recognises as recurring in his and Bailey's approach to reimagining classic plays for contemporary audiences. As in their approach to other techniques that recur across their productions, they deploy the scenographic device in a different fashion each time – as Britton asserts, to ensure 'not to repeat ourselves too much'.⁶² In their production of *Love from a Stranger*, the female protagonist's psychological state is externalised into the domestic interior once more. However, the nature of the projection is distinct from the shadowy reflections presented in *Ghosts*.

While the shifting set in *Love from a Stranger* materialises Cecily's claim to agency in the home, in particular sequences, the lighting design is used to condition the backdrop of the domestic interior to externalise the character's perception of the unfolding events of the play. This psychological projection is epitomised by the transformation of the staged environment that takes place during Bruce and Cecily's first meeting. When he arrives at her London flat in the guise of a prospective tenant, Bruce observes:

⁶² Britton, interview with author (video call, 2nd July 2020).

Bruce: Charming atmosphere! I'm very sensitive to atmosphere, aren't you?

Cecily: I don't know.

Bruce: I'm sure you are.

Cecily: *(intrigued)* Really?

(He smiles at her. There is a little pause. She becomes slightly embarrassed again and crosses to the dining room door).

Cecily: This is the dining room.

(She opens the door and BRUCE goes into inspect).

Bruce: *(off)* Very cosy. I like that picture over the mantelpiece.

(He returns)

Cecily: It belonged to my mother too. I think it's a picture of some place in Greece.

Bruce: It's the Gulf of Corinth. I know the exact spot.

Cecily: Do you really?

Bruce: I remember waking up very early and going up on deck in the dawn. You never saw anything so lovely, the mountains – snow-capped, then pale violet and deep mauve, reflecting the sea... and the sea cold and still like jade.⁶³

During technical rehearsals, Bailey worked with Fenwick and Hammerton to project a visual interpretation of Cecily's affective response to Bruce's recollection (or, perhaps, fictional tale) of his visit to the Gulf of Corinth onto the interior of the London flat. The rehearsed action saw Frenchum lead Bradbury over to a prop of the landscape painting on the wall that divides the living space in two. As the actors contemplate the prop painting before them, Bruce's dialogue paints a verbal picture of the Greek landscape in impressionistic

⁶³ Agatha Christie and Frank Vosper, *Love from a Stranger*, p. 19. The script referred to in this study is the unpublished performance script for the 2018 production directed by Bailey for the Royal & Derngate licensed for performance by Agatha Christie Ltd.

sweeps of colour – the ‘violet and deep mauve’ mountains and the ‘jade’ sea. While Britton was unable to find a painting of the Gulf of Corinth itself, he selected a painted landscape that he felt related to Bruce’s description, particularly because the palette was ‘heightened in its colour’.⁶⁴ This image was framed and hung on the wall of the set where it was then encountered by the actors. Prior to the rehearsal, Fenwick had access to the prop painting selected by Britton to represent Cecily’s artwork and devised his lighting design using the colour and form of the image. During Bruce’s seduction of Cecily, the previously nondescript backdrop of the set was transformed from an overcast London sky as coloured light flooded onto the backcloth, enlivening it with streaks of ‘pale violet and deep mauve’. Bradbury’s dreamy gaze into the middle-distance connected the picture-object and the corresponding backdrop through a performance of the cognitive process of imagining. This was emphasised by Hammerton’s musical underscoring of the sequence with a dreamlike, wistful melody that conveyed the character’s desire to escape her ‘deadly monotonous’ flat, job, and fiancé.⁶⁵ The cumulative effect of the scenographic assemblage is one that externalised Cecily’s affective response to Bruce’s story.

The aesthetic register of the painting and corresponding lighting design is significant in forging a connection between the atmosphere of the interaction and the affective response of the characters through the staged environment of the home. Prompted by Bruce’s description of the painting in the script, the prop image and corresponding scenographic projection cite the visual aesthetics of Impressionism through a shared pastel colour palette and representation of loose brushwork. Although the artistic movement emerged in France in the late nineteenth century, Jesse Matz in *Lasting Impressions* (2017)

⁶⁴ Britton, interview with author (video call, 2nd July 2020).

⁶⁵ Vosper and Christie, *Love from a Stranger*, p. 12.

shows that the legacies of Impressionism have permeated contemporary culture, from art, literature, and film to popular models of cognition. Indeed, he asserts that ‘impressionism’s most fundamental legacy’ is the ‘conflation of a perception category [the impression] and an art movement’.⁶⁶ This visualisation of subjective perception has been central to impressionism since its formalisation in the first French Impressionist exhibition in 1874. Art critic Jules Castagnary famously wrote upon witnessing the exhibited works that they ‘render not the landscape, but the sensations produced by the landscape’.⁶⁷ For Castagnary, Impressionism was not simply a stylistic treatment of line, form, and colour, but a visual expression of affective aesthetics tied to subjective perception. This association endures in contemporary understandings of impressionist aesthetics. Indeed, it is precisely the dual signification of the impressionistic register (the aesthetic and perceptual) that is employed in the scenographic design of the Gulf of Corinth sequence, the prop painting and the lighting design. The scenography signifies both the landscape discussed in the script and Cecily’s affective response to Bruce’s tale. The precise nature of Cecily’s feelings is not depicted in a representational manner through the scenographic technique. The impressionistic imagery referenced in the treatment of the backdrop becomes a shorthand for the abstracted idea of subjective impression. In other words, the scenography visualises the immaterial phenomenon of subjective perception rather than the precise nature of the character’s cognitive expression. Even so, it is Cecily’s affective response that is

⁶⁶ Jesse Matz, *Lasting Impressions: The Legacies of Impressionism in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 21.

⁶⁷ Jules Castagnary’s review of the first impressionist exhibition was published in the French journal *Le Siècle* on 29th April 1874. Translated from the French and quoted by Linda Nochlin in *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, 1874-1904* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1966), pp. 329-30.

foregrounded in the treatment of the staged environment, centralising the experience of the female protagonist in Bailey's production of the play.

The character's experience is further foregrounded through the architecture of the performance space which, in tandem with the scenographic design of the domestic interior, aligns the audience with Cecily's perspective. Britton's design of the domestic interior in *Love from a Stranger* frames the backdrop with large, floor-length windows set along the back wall of the box-set interior. In turn, the stage is framed by a proscenium arch. The presentation of the scene brings the dynamics of spectatorship associated with the proscenium arch stage into dialogue with those relating to viewing perspectival art. Leon Battista Alberti's model of the *finestra aperta* demonstrates how the framing of an image might align the sightline of the viewer with the perspectival depiction of that which is pictorially expressed.⁶⁸ In feminist theatre studies, this perspectival mode of looking is frequently associated with representational forms, such as nineteenth-century realism, in which women are perceived to be disempowered and their experiences overlooked. In her conceptualisation of feminist spectatorship in the theatre, Jill Dolan notes that 'the strict proscenium arrangement, with its convenient frame and distanced relationship between performers and spectators', is one of 'the *most crucial*' elements in establishing 'the pleasure of the male gaze' in performance.⁶⁹ Dolan's critique (situated in the context of feminist approaches to theatre studies in the 1980s and 1990s), resonates with Mulvey's notion of the 'male gaze' in cinema outlined in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975),

⁶⁸ Alberti coined the term *finestra aperta* to theorise the unification of the perspectival view of an artistic subject matter and viewer, see Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin Texts of De Pictura and De Statua* [1435], ed. and trans. by Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972), p. 55.

⁶⁹ Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, p. 46.

albeit in relation to the distinct representational apparatus of theatre.⁷⁰ Mulvey argues that the conventions of Hollywood film encourage the spectator to identify with the active (male) character whose perspective drives the plot, establishing a male viewing position, or 'male gaze' within the representation of the narrative.⁷¹ In this model, the 'determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure' who is fetishized as an object of pleasure, and whose appearance is 'coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*'.⁷² In brief, 'pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female'.⁷³ In the distinct context of spectatorship in the theatre, the distancing of audience and performers established by the proscenium arch is comparable to the 'hermetically sealed world' noted by Mulvey. As discussed in the previous chapter, the argument follows that the illusionistic representation of action onstage naturalises the (patriarchal, heteronormative) ideologies that supposedly underpin realist drama.

However, the framing of the impressionistic backdrop in the production of *Love from a Stranger* instead centralises female experience. It is the visualisation of the female protagonist's affective perception of the play's events that is focalised by the frame of the windows in the scenic design and, thus, the frame of the proscenium arch stage. When Bradbury shifts her gaze from the framed painting on the wall to the window, the audience is encouraged to mimic the actor's gesture and direct their attention to the imagined (psychological) landscape crafted through the dynamic lighting design. The masculinist dynamics of spectatorship frequently associated with the proscenium arch are thus

⁷⁰ Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p. 17.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 19.

⁷² Ibid, p. 19.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 19.

repurposed in the production to shift the identification of the spectator with Cecily's perspective. Interestingly, Britton explains in interview that he had not intended to create this double-framing of Cecily's experience in his design of the production. He notes that '[i]n an ideal world, [the scenic transformation] would have been much more panoramic' and would 'overtake' more of the playing space. 'The idea was that the backdrop sort of bled through and illustrated the whole picture [set] as opposed to a little picture on the wall'.⁷⁴ This extension of the transformation across the scenic space was curtailed by the narrow proscenium arch stage. Wanting to achieve a more immersive experience for the spectator, Britton was disappointed that the illumination of the backdrop was contained within the windows of the set and the proscenium arch stage more broadly. The designer's ambitions resonate with the production team's approach to crafting a miraculous atmosphere for the apparition sequences in the Royal & Derngate production of *Our Lady of Kibeho*. Similarly, Britton hoped that extending the scenographic transformation would allow a spectator to share in Cecily's response to Bruce's story in an experiential fashion.

The compromise made in the staging of the scene demonstrates how the designer's vision can often be curtailed by pragmatic limitations – in this case, the architecture of the theatre. However, it also demonstrates how these compromises can, sometimes, unexpectedly enrich a production. While it was not possible to achieve a 'panoramic' extension of Cecily's subjective impression, I argue that the double-framing of the proscenium arch and windows of the London flat set aligned the spectator's gaze with that of the female character, centralising her experience of events. This resonates with the production's wider approach to staging Vosper and Christie's play – the foregrounding of

⁷⁴ Britton, interview with author (video call, 2nd July 2020).

Cecily's journey in their presentation of the play. The rest of this chapter thickens the issue illustrated here: that the intention of theatre-makers is often not manifested in production, but there are, nonetheless, creative collaborations that achieve dramaturgically satisfying effects through the transformation of the (gendered) dynamics of the staged environment. I focus particularly on the tension between the intention of the theatre-makers and the meaning-making capacities of scenographic dramaturgy. I first consider the plurality of meaning generated by scenographic practice using the example of the mobilised stage in Bailey's production of *Ghosts*.

Splitting the Stage in *Ghosts*

The mobilised sets created for *Love from a Stranger* were designed to be used throughout the production to map the shifting power dynamics between Cecily and Bruce. In contrast, in the production of *Ghosts*, the mobilisation of the set was intended to be used only once. The domestic interior was transformed to mark a revelatory moment for Mrs. Alving in the play. She builds an orphanage using the money inherited from her husband in an attempt to remove the corrupting influence of his legacy (kept secret from the other characters) from Rosenvold. The orphanage stands as a proxy architectural body to divert her husband's posthumous control over the family home. At the end of the second act, catalysed by Oswald's attempted seduction of Regina, Mrs. Alving decides she must reveal the family's torrid past – particularly the details of his father's seduction of the maid who conceived Regina to prevent the characters unwittingly pursuing an incestuous relationship. However, her intentions are stalled when the orphanage burns down. It is at this moment in the Royal & Derngate production that the set is mobilised, transforming the domestic interior.

The set was left empty as the actors exited the stage under the dramatic pretext of the characters' investigation of the fire. The fire at the orphanage was referenced in the domestic interior of the drawing-room through Fenwick's lighting design. The gloomy blue quality that conveyed the persistent fall of rain over the vast Norwegian fjords lying just beyond the family's estate shifted to a flickering red state. Theatrical (fake) smoke was pumped from the wings and ash fell from the grid suspended above the stage. Gradually the sound of timber being engulfed in flames built to a crescendo. Simultaneously, the stage floor began to split apart. The movement revealed that the set had been constructed atop two trucks that could be pivoted apart, as if on a hinge, to create a shallow, wedge-shaped chasm running horizontally across the stage. The layout of the room was reconfigured through this violent movement as a chair pre-set across the divide in the floor toppled into the crevice and a sofa was left suspended across the gap with its legs precariously set on either side of the chasm. Through the scenographic transformation, the drawing room was thrown into disarray (see Figures 33, 34, & 35).

As with the mobilisation of the box set in *Love from a Stranger*, the reconfiguration of the performance space did not depict a realist transformation of the home within the fictional context of the play – it is, after all, the orphanage and not Rosenvold that has been razed by the fire. The symbolic nature of the transformation is emphasised by the non-naturalistic scenographic design of the destruction. The flickering red light illuminated the stage with a heightened quality. Accompanied by the theatrical smoke pumped across the newly revealed split in the stage, the domestic setting is transformed into a hellish landscape – an abstraction that relates to the dramatic action on a metaphorical level. I have discussed how the reciprocity between character and environment was fundamental to the naturalism that influenced Ibsen's playwriting. The quotation from Williams asserts

the significance of the meticulously staged domestic interior in expressing the materialist context of the play which, in naturalist drama, is shown to inevitably shape the lives of the characters. In contrast, the interventions made to the domestic interior by Bailey and Britton engage with a mode of representation more closely associated with expressionism; that is, the externalisation of a character's subjective perception of events into their environment. Engaged with subjective perception, rather than verisimilitude, expressionist design is evidenced in heightened scenic environments achieved through dramatic lighting design (particularly the use of non-naturalistic colours and the casting of exaggerated shadows across the scenery), aural effects (soundscapes) and structural interventions in the performance space (including the introduction of stairs and platforms). The lighting and sound design that accompanied the splitting of the stage in the Royal & Derngate production of *Ghosts* thus shifts the relationship between character and environment from one of reciprocity (as related to naturalism) to one of expressionist projection.

When discussing the scenic manoeuvre in interview, Britton explicitly linked the splitting of the set in the Royal & Derngate production of *Ghosts* to his interpretation of Mrs. Alving's psychological state at the end of the second act when she decides to reveal the secrets of the family's sordid past; 'the room was literally fractured... to indicate her mental state, that her whole world had broken open'.⁷⁵ The design process was informed by the foregrounding of Mrs. Alving's subjective perception of the play's action through the material environment of the staged home. However, as the activities of technical rehearsals demonstrate, the correspondence between the material conditions of a production and the intention of theatre-makers can be unstable and complex.

⁷⁵ Ibid.



Figure 33 The scenic environment before the stage is split in Bailey's production of *Ghosts*. (Photograph taken by author).

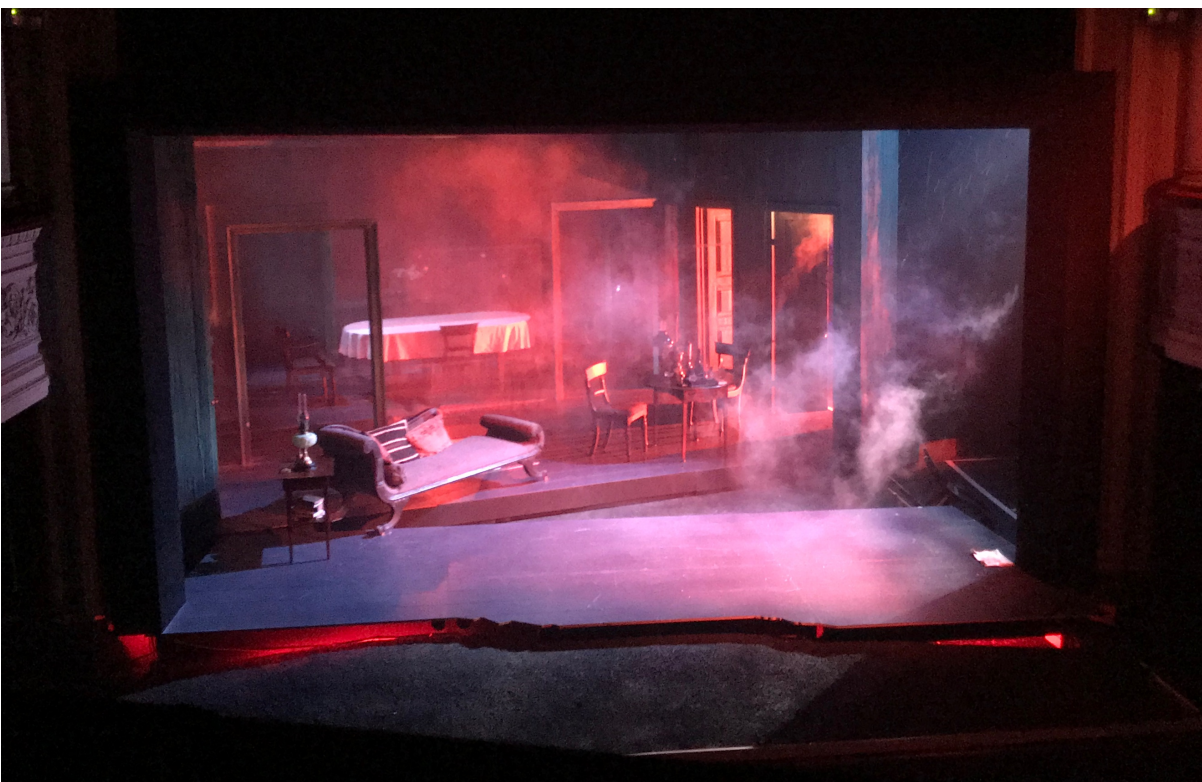


Figure 34 The transformation of the staged environment. (Photograph taken by author).



Figure 35 After the scenic transformation. The split in the stage remains for the rest of the production. (Photograph taken by author).

Troubling Intentions: The Metaphorical Nature of Theatrical Representation

When the actors and creative team were confronted with the transformation of the stage for the first time in technical rehearsals, tension emerged between the intended symbolic signification of the device (as outlined by Britton) and its physical presence onstage. Bailey also conceived of the scenic transformation as a symbolic representation of Mrs. Alving's perception of events. She therefore instructed the actors to 'ignore' the disruption to the topology of the stage and to perform the action as it had been rehearsed before theatrical production was moved to the stage.⁷⁶ Bailey's direction conceptually

⁷⁶ From observation of the activities onstage during technical rehearsals for Bailey's production of *Ghosts* made from the Royal auditorium.

dematerialised the modification made to the stage. Yet, the actors were still confronted with the challenge of navigating an actual split in the stage. Running diagonally across the playing space, it was impossible to avoid the abrupt drop in the stage level. When re-blocking the performances, they had rehearsed ahead of technical rehearsals, the actors kept looking down at their feet to ensure a smooth descent into the fissure and ascent back up to stage level. As they became more confident with the newly-configured space, they were able to minimise the disruption to their performance. However, the changing levels of the stage continued to impede their movements, either dropping the actors down below the floor of the drawing-room setting or redirecting their performance to another area of the stage.

Playing Mrs. Alving, the character whose psychological state the fissure was intended to symbolise, Downie took a distinct approach to the split stage. She wanted to make the intended connection between the transformation of the staged environment and her character's experience of the events of the play more explicit. She therefore experimented with using the newly-configured staged environment to enrich her performance during technical rehearsals. She tried to map moments of particular optimism or pessimism that she identified in her characterisation of the role onto her navigation of the chasm. For instance, when Mrs. Alving hears Oswald's conviction of the inevitability of his physical and mental deterioration due to his hereditary illness, she is thrown into a state of despair and Downie descended onto the lower level of the split stage. When, on the other hand, Mrs. Alving expresses her hopefulness that revealing her family's torrid past might free her from the corrupt legacy of her husband, Downie elevated her body by stepping out of the trench onto the main stage level (see Figure 36).



Figure 36 Downie kneeling within the split in the stage during technical rehearsals for Bailey's production of *Ghosts*. Niel-Mee as Oswald looking on. (Photograph taken by author).

While Downie tried to implement a logic to her embodied navigation of the split stage driven by characterisation, like the other actors, she had practical difficulty moving between the different levels of the stage. These problems were particularly amplified for Downie due to her costuming. The floor-length skirt and tightly fitted long-sleeved bodice gathered in at the waist were inspired by the fashions worn by the upper classes in 1880s Norway (the socio-historical context of Ibsen's play). The length, weight, and volume of the period ensemble structured the actor's movement. Her feet frequently became tangled in the floor-length skirt, making her ascent and descent into the chasm treacherous. Downie consequently had to practise hoisting up her skirt to facilitate her navigation of the split stage. This pragmatic gesture was rendered challenging due to the corset worn under her

bodice which limited the actor's ability to bend her torso forward and reach her skirt – another example of the materiality of costume co-constructing an actor's performance like that explored in relation to the Belladonna Bindweed costume in The Theatre Chipping Norton *Sleeping Beauty* pantomime. Furthermore, the act of picking up her skirt disrupted Downie's physical characterisation of the role. As the matriarch of the family, reserved in her desire to conceal her family's past until the final moments of the play when the inevitability of Oswald's future is revealed, the actor's performance was one of composure. She moved gracefully around the set. While the scenic transformation was intended to externalise Mrs. Alving's inner turmoil, the actor's hurried bunching up of her skirt in order to step in and out of the chasm instead introduced inconsistencies into her characterisation of the role.

Other pragmatic elements of staging, such as audience sightlines, also disrupted the logic that Downie tried to apply to her navigation of the split stage to tighten the association between her character and the scenic transformation. For instance, the final moments of the play present Mrs. Alving confronted with the decision of whether to euthanize her son who has succumbed to his hereditary illness. This is arguably the most pessimistic moment of the play for the character, but it was not possible to stage it in the chasm. In rehearsals, the actors had worked with Bailey to relocate Oswald's final seizure from the armchair referenced in Ibsen's script – and in which his syphilitic deterioration has traditionally been staged in the production history of the play – to the floor (see Figure 37).⁷⁷ Motivated by a desire to emphasize the intimacy of the relationship between mother and son, Bailey moved the action downstage so it was closer to the audience sitting in the auditorium of the Royal.

⁷⁷ For the role of the chair in staging the denouement of the play in the production history of *Ghosts*, see Marker and Marker, *Ibsen's Lively Art*, pp. 110, 123.

Downie cradled the body of the actor playing Oswald (Pierro Niel-Mee) invoking the iconography of the *pieta* – a reference loaded with dramatic irony as Oswald’s is a suffering from which there will be no resurrection. The action, already lowered to the floor through Bailey’s direction, would have thus been obscured from view for much of the audience (positioned below the raised stage) had it been located within the chasm. Therefore, despite attempts to foreground the symbolic nature of the scenic transformation, the physicalized split set presented a tension between the signification of the scenographic device and its materialisation onstage.



Figure 37 The climax of Bailey’s production performed downstage. Downie cradles Niel-Mee relocating the action from the infamous armchair detailed in Ibsen’s script. (Photograph taken by author).

Addressing the relationship between ‘what we see on stage and the imagined fictional world’ of a play, Dan Rebellato argues that ‘[t]heatrical representation is metaphorical’.⁷⁸ In other words, the body of the actor does not literally become that of the character in the course of performance, just as the set does not become the actual location of the fictional world of the play. The relationship between the two is, rather, metaphorical. It is the metaphorical proximity of theatrical representational that has the potential to destabilise meaning in performance: be it relating to an actor’s body, prop, costume, or set. As Rebellato explains, ‘metaphor does not prescribe in advance what sort of connection must be made between the two objects it compares’.⁷⁹ The meanings of metaphor are always multiple and ‘work precisely because we know the two objects [the apparatus of theatrical representation and the represented fiction] are not the same thing’.⁸⁰ Hann stresses that the multiplicity of theatrical signification is heightened in the context of scenography. The meaning of scenography emerges from the cumulative relations enacted between the different components of stagecraft (the scenographics) that participate in the representational strategy of a production. The intention of the director or designer is only one contributing element in this grouping (although it often plays a significant role in shaping the meaning of the scenographic assemblage). The diverse nature of the participants in the scenographic assemblage – including lighting, sound, scenery, and the performance of actors – evidences Hann’s claim that ‘the event of scenography takes place from a multi-sensory and experiential position’.⁸¹ Understanding scenography as a spatial practice, she builds upon Lefebvre’s assertion that to ‘read’ social space ‘must surely reduce

⁷⁸ Rebellato, ‘When We Talk of Horses’, p. 25.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 25.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 26.

⁸¹ Rachel Hann, *Beyond Scenography*, p. 69.

that space itself to the status of a *message*, and the inhabiting of it to the status of a *reading*, which 'is to evade both history and practice'.⁸² She accordingly critiques discourses that describe the signification and reception of performance in logocentric terms. For, to conceptualise the signification of the 'material-spatial assemblage' that constitutes scenography 'in terms of a message is to evade the nexus of potentiality innate within a spatial act'.⁸³ As with Rebellato's understanding of the metaphorical nature of theatrical representation, Hann therefore particularly foregrounds the openness and plurality of meaning emergent from the scenographic assemblage. In regard to the design of *Ghosts*, then, it is possible (and necessary) to interrogate how the split stage functions both as a physical intervention in the topology of the stage *and* as a symbolic dramaturgical tool of characterisation. This, in turn, prompts a consideration of the precise nature of scenographic dramaturgy. How might theatre-makers express their creative vision through the material representational apparatus of the stage? And how does this correspond to the question of directorial intentionality and reception implicit in the term?

Scenographic Dramaturgy

The indeterminate nature of meaning-making emergent from scenographic practice directs attention to the role of intention in the theatre-making process. Shanahan's understanding of the dramaturgical treatment of theatrical space (her notion of 'spatial dramaturgy', which has been adapted to *scenographic* dramaturgy for the purpose of this chapter) is one that places interpretative agency with the playwright and/or director.⁸⁴

⁸² Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991 [1984]), p. 7.

⁸³ Hann, *Beyond Scenography*, p. 68.

⁸⁴ Shanahan, 'Making Room(s): Staging Plays About Women and Houses', p. 87.

While she does not provide a direct definition of her term, her approach to staging classic domestic drama foregrounds the revisionist intentions of the director(-researcher) who reimagines a play through material interventions in its staging. The material resources of the stage – particularly scenic design – are here conceived as tools that might be employed by the theatre-makers to assert their interpretative vision of a play. My examination of the staging devices employed in the scenographic dramaturgy of the two domestic dramas produced by the Royal & Derngate has similarly foregrounded the creative labour of director and designer. I have argued that Bailey and Britton intervene in the realist conventions of the staged home to focalise their productions of classic domestic dramas on the experiences of the female protagonists. Yet, the new materialist framework of collaborative agency that underpins this study undermines the notion that the material elements of a production are simply vehicles for the theatre-maker's creative vision. The co-creation of performance enacted between costume, prop, maker, and/or performer evidences a form of distributive agency that is enacted through tactile and signifying relations established between participants in the theatre assemblage. Similarly, the challenges faced in staging the split stage in *Ghosts* or achieving Britton's vision for the presentation of the Gulf of Corinth sequence in *Love from a Stranger* highlight the ongoing negotiation between the different elements of theatrical representation in the course of rehearsals and performance. The meaning that emerges from scenography is thus often untethered from the intentions of director and designer. What value, then, might the notion of 'scenographic dramaturgy' – a term that might be understood to be entwined with a practitioner's intervention in a production – have in this context?

Definitions of 'dramaturgy' and an understanding of the function of the dramaturgical in theatrical production are multiple and unstable in nature. In *Dramaturgy: A*

Revolution in Theatre (2006), Mary Luckhurst traces the development of the role and its associated functions across the Western theatrical tradition. Noting the impossibility of offering a 'fixed definition', Luckhurst offers 'two common senses' of dramaturgy that are iterated across the various employments of the term in distinct historical and geographical contexts.⁸⁵ The first sense in which the term is used 'is concerned with the arrangement of formal elements by the playwright' including 'plot, construction of narrative, character, time-frame and stage action'.⁸⁶ The second sense, and more relevant to the study of scenography, is used to 'refer to the external elements relating to staging the overall artistic concept behind the staging, the politics of performance, and the calculated manipulation of audience response'.⁸⁷ While the first understanding of the term resides primarily in the textual domain of the script, the second refers to the material conditions of production and 'marks interpretation of the texts by persons now known as directors'.⁸⁸ Understood thus, dramaturgy is underpinned by the creative agency of theatre-makers.

Scenography, too, is frequently defined as the material expression of the interpretative vision of a director and/or designer(s). For instance, in *What is Scenography?* (2002) Pamela Howard describes scenography as 'the creation of stage space' that encapsulates 'the joint statement of the director and the visual artists of their view of the play... as a united piece of work'.⁸⁹ While theatre criticism conventionally privileges the intention of the theatre-maker in the analysis of performance, paradoxically, Hann notes that 'the idea of scenography' is often dismissed within English-speaking theatre

⁸⁵ Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy*, p. 10.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 10.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 10-11.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 11.

⁸⁹ Pamela Howard, *What is Scenography?* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. xix.

communities. She identifies that one reason for this discomfort with the term resides in anxieties concerning the shifting dynamics of interpretative authority, particularly the argument for the 'creative and conceptual parity' of designers with directors.⁹⁰ Similarly, Luckhurst describes how in 'the English-speaking West the history of dramaturgy exposes persistent struggles over the control of creative territories' that have resulted in the significance of 'vital figures in theatre who acted as playreaders, play-doctors, literary advisers and critical thinkers'.⁹¹ The anxieties concerning artistic control related to concepts of scenography and dramaturgy seek to underplay the collaborative nature of theatrical production. My conception of 'scenographic dramaturgy' works to reassert the collaborative practices that underpin theatre-making by foregrounding the role of the materiality of the stage in the active co-constitution of meaning in rehearsal and performance.

The claim that theatrical production is a collaborative practice is an obvious one. So, too, is the recognition that the meanings that emerge from the material conditions of production are multiple – the recognition of the subjective engagement of each individual spectator as a situated subject is a fundamental premise in reception studies, for instance. My proposed use of scenographic dramaturgy and wider call to recognise the mode of distributive agency enacted in theatrical production does not challenge this understanding of theatre-making. Rather, I argue for the value of shifting critical attention – too often focussed solely on the intention of director, playwright, and (less frequently) designer – to a fuller and more inclusive conceptualisation of the collaborative processes and participants (both human and material) that constitute theatrical production. Actively seeking to understand the meaning-making potential of the materiality of the stage opens up new

⁹⁰ Hann, *Beyond Scenography*, p. 68

⁹¹ Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy*, p. 2

areas of theatrical production that have been marginalised in accounts of theatre-making including the activities of the costume workroom and the function of props and other scenographic elements in shaping performance. The recovery of material histories in the theatre is often also a recovery of human labour – particularly that commonly overlooked due to ideological (gendered) hierarchies of production. A refocussing on the materiality of the stage is thus not an omission of the human aspect of theatre-making. Rather, attentiveness to the different ways in which participants in theatre-making might collaboratively co-create performance allows the function of stage objects and theatre professionals, and the relationships enacted between them, to be considered afresh. The new materialist notion of a distributive agency enacted between the diverse participants in theatrical production allows the particular contributions of these participants to be addressed. By not presupposing the role that a prop, performer, or director might have in the crafting of performance, the contribution made by each are considered within the specific dynamics of the assemblage engaged in theatrical production. The intention of director and/or designer is still understood as a crucial element in the development of performance. Crucially, however, it is not presupposed to be the exclusive guiding force in the processes of theatrical production, nor is it understood to determine the meaning that emerges from subsequent performance. Thus, the value of ‘scenographic dramaturgy’ is as a critical tool: a tool that redresses the imbalance of critical attention often centred on the creative vision of the individual through attentiveness to the active role played by the material participants in diverse theatrical assemblages.

Returning to the two domestic dramas at the heart of this chapter, the foregrounding of the perspectives of the female protagonists through the staged home is understood as an interpretative decision made by Bailey and Britton. I have traced how this

approach to the two plays was crafted through the materiality of the stage – namely, the mobilised sets and externalisation of the psychological states of the female characters onto the staged environment. My analysis is informed by the observation of technical rehearsals in which the perspective of director and designer are foregrounded. By watching their interactions with the other members of the production team, stage technicians, and performers it was possible to follow how the material components of the staged home were aligned with their vision for the productions. However, as I explore in the following section, the interpretation of the plays conceived by Bailey and Britton in the focalisation of action on the female protagonists is not directly conveyed through the scenographic treatment of the staged environment. As discussed in relation to Rebellato's notion of theatre as metaphor and Hann's description of the multi-sensory mode of scenographic expression, the meanings that emerge from performance are multiple and unfixed. This does not solely refer to moments of compromise in theatrical production when stage objects and scenographic elements unexpectedly shape the theatre-making processes and force practitioners to rework their conception of a staged sequence as discussed elsewhere in this study. The unfixedity of meaning also resides in the reception of a production; here, how the scenographic interventions in the staging of the domestic interior are understood by the spectator. The following section explores this tension between the interpretative agency of practitioners and the material mode of scenographic expression in the context of audience reception.

Intention, Materiality, and Reception

The intersecting issues of intention and reception at the heart of meaning-making in theatrical production are encapsulated in Bailey's reflection on the audience response to

her production of *Love from a Stranger*. An interview conducted ahead of the tour captures the director's excitement at her prediction that 'audiences [will] go to the pub talking about [the ending]'.⁹² Her comment suggests her approach to staging the play consciously left room for the interpretative agency of the spectator. Britton, too, believes that the most successful or 'appealing' design is not prescriptive, but 'leaves the audience to fill in the gaps themselves'.⁹³ Both express a mutual conviction in the importance of audience-led interpretation in the reception of their productions. However, after observing a number of performances of *Love from a Stranger* in different venues on the production's tour, Bailey noted a disparity between her interpretation of the ending of the play and the audience response to her production.

Following Bruce's seduction of Cecily in the London flat, the couple move to a remote country cottage. Through an accumulation of clues, Cecily uncovers Bruce's sinister intentions to murder her in order to secure ownership of her recently-won fortune. At the climax of the play, she overthrows Bruce's autocratic command of the home through her collaborative performance with domestic objects. With the hour of her planned murder approaching, in an attempt to appear calm and not reveal that she has learnt of Bruce's plan Cecily turns to a cigarette box concealed within a volume of *The Arabian Nights*. Through her tactile interaction with the object, she is reminded of an earlier conversation between the couple about the fate of Scheherazade – a character from *The Arabian Nights* who 'has to make up a fresh story every night' to tell the Sultan in order to save her life.⁹⁴ Inspired,

⁹² 'Love from a Stranger: Lucy Bailey and James Pritchard Interview', *Norwich Theatre Royal*, 21st June 2018, <www.news.theatreroyalnorwich.co.uk/love-from-a-stranger-lucy-bailey-james-pritchard-interview> [accessed 21st May 2019].

⁹³ Britton, interview with author (video call, 2nd July 2020).

⁹⁴ Christie and Vosper, *Love from a Stranger*, p. 26.

Cecily assumes the persona of a femme fatale and seduces Bruce with a fictional tale of how she killed her last husband to claim his fortune by exacerbating his illness. When Bruce exclaims there isn't 'a grain of truth in your story!' she remains calm. Cecily explains that she only wanted 'to hold your attention for a little while, to gain time... for the stuff to work'.⁹⁵ Pretending she has poisoned the coffee that she served to him after dinner, Cecily convinces Bruce that he is experiencing the relevant symptoms: 'Now it's taking effect, it's beginning to choke you! It's starting to paralyse you, you can't move, can you? You can't move'.⁹⁶ With the assistance of the domestic objects which become props in her story including the cigarette box and the coffee set, she is able to trick Bruce into thinking he has ingested poison. The resultant stress causes his already weak heart (the symptoms of which emerged during the action of the second act of the play) to give out, resulting in his death. The play concludes with the return of her ex-fiancé Michael, old roommate Mavis, and local GP Doctor Gribble, who plan to rescue Cecily having also realised the sinister threat posed by Bruce, only to discover her standing over his body.

In Christie and Vosper's 1936 script, despite Cecily's masterful manipulation of her final encounter with Bruce, at the conclusion of the scene she is reduced to a helpless, quivering wreck on the verge of hysteria. She is shown to be wholly dependent on the help of her ex-fiancé, Nigel, who takes her in his arms and reassures her, 'It's all right, darling, Quiet! Quiet! You're quite safe now'.⁹⁷ Coupled with Dr. Gribble's line, 'He died of fright', and Cecily's explicit reminder to the audience that she conquered Bruce using the power of

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 109.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 110.

⁹⁷ Frank Vosper and Agatha Christie, *Love from a Stranger: A Play in Three Acts* (London: W. Collins Sons & Co., 1936), pp. 81-2. The dialogue from the 1936 version was largely retained in the rehearsal script (pp. 110-111) used by Bailey and the company in 2018. The edits were made by Bailey between the first read-through of the script by the cast and rehearsals proper.

storytelling ('I was like Scheherazade'), the dialogue makes clear that Bruce's death was the result of the mind games undertaken by Cecily in self-defence. She is not a murderer, but a victim. Yet for Bailey, who privileged the psychological realism of her female characters in her productions of domestic dramas, such victimisation of Cecily seemed at odds with the character's prior manipulation of Bruce in the climactic sequence: 'the words were so clumsy and played to the expectation of a happy ending – that she's got her man [Michael] and that felt so wrong'.⁹⁸ Instead, Bailey wanted to present a complex female character whose life had been irrevocably changed by her encounter with this stranger and who was faced with the challenge of how she's going to move forward 'from the enormous stress, not only in that last half hour of her life, but the whole six months of being deceived'.⁹⁹

Bailey revised the ending of the script ahead of rehearsals to remove the spoken exposition. During technical rehearsals, a scenographic strategy was devised with the production team to replace the cut dialogue. Bailey worked with the actors and lighting and sound designers, Fenwick and Hammerton, to stage a static scene that approximated a tableau. When Cecily convinces Bruce that he has been poisoned, the scenic environment depicting the interior of the cottage was darkened. An LED strip positioned under the picture frame in the room illuminated the walls with a bright red glow and the sound of a sinister drone was played under the action. The scenographic elements created an atmosphere of suspense and fear, reflecting the uncertain outcome of the characters' interaction. Once Bruce was dead, the set – which had been shifted to reveal the cottage kitchen – reset to signify that the immediate danger to Cecily's life has ended. However, the non-naturalistic conditioning of the domestic environment was sustained. The drone

⁹⁸ Bailey, interview with author (London, 18th July 2018).

⁹⁹ Ibid.

soundscape continued to play while the colour of the LED strips changed to an electric blue. The actors playing Mavis, Michael, and Dr. Gribble were instructed to burst through the cottage door and to come to an abrupt halt to take in the scene before them. Bailey arranged the actors upstage so that they could look on at the aftermath of Cecily and Bruce's final interaction, played downstage. Bradbury was instructed to stand stationary, breathing heavily with her eyes fixed on Frenchum's body before her. The actors were all directed to hold their positions which were sustained for several beats before the lights faded down on the action of the play.

The approach was intended to sustain the production's presentation of Cecily as a psychologically complex character (rather than one simply saved by her love interest at the conclusion of the play). This was achieved, in part, by focalising her experience of events in the play through the non-naturalistic treatment of the staged environment (just as with the shifting stage and conditioning of the backdrop in the Gulf of Corinth sequence earlier in the production). The stilling of movement onstage and expressionistic scenographic state replaced the expositional dialogue and were designed to prompt the spectator to focus their attention on Bradbury's performance of Cecily's psychological turmoil following the traumatic events that culminated in Bruce's death. However, once performances of the production began, Bailey felt that many audience members interpreted the end of her production differently than she had intended. Reflecting on her decision to remove the expositional dialogue at the end of the play in interview, she explains:

I did want the audience to realise that she outwitted him not just killed him with the coffee. And that's been almost impossible to get the audience to realise – that she was more intelligent than anyone onstage. They all think she's a murderer at the end which is very disappointing.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

As no survey was given to the audience following performances of the production, it is impossible to substantiate Bailey's observation with qualitative data. However, the disparity she sensed between her interpretation of the play and its reception is significant. Bailey's disappointment reveals the complex nature of many theatre-makers' understanding of the role that directorial interpretation should play in shaping the meaning of a production.

While the comment she made before the tour suggested that she wanted to create opportunity for lively discussion in the pub following performance, her latter observation of audience response infers her hope that this will align with her interpretation of the play. Of particular interest to this study is how the non-naturalistic treatment of the staged environment at the conclusion of the play might have contributed to the perceived disparity between directorial intention and reception. How were Cecily's actions to be interpreted in the absence of the expositional dialogue cut from the original script? Is Bruce's death the result of self-defence, or a premediated act that casts Cecily in the role of a murderer? To what extent can a character's intentions be conveyed through scenographic dramaturgy?

The disparity between directorial intention and audience reception at the conclusion of Bailey's production of *Love from a Stranger* does not reflect the communicative power (or limitation) of scenography itself when applied to dramaturgical ends. Rather, it speaks to the specific dynamics established between the scenographic and textual elements of this particular production. These dynamics are conditioned by a number of factors that might include audience expectations of Christie's narrative conventions. The twists and turns of the writer's plots typically conclude with 'a clear solution' in which the murderer is identified either by a detective or through confession.¹⁰¹ Perhaps, then, a familiarity with

¹⁰¹ J. C. Bernthal, *Queering Agatha Christie: Revising the Golden Age of Detective Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 13.

Christie's approach to storytelling prompted audiences to take Cecily's fictional tale of her murderous exploits as truth: the final twist in the domestic thriller where the character thought to be the victim is, in actual fact, the murderer. The absence of the expositional dialogue at the end of the play disrupted the distribution of clear-cut 'fixed identity labels' (murderer/victim) typically associated with Christie's writing.¹⁰² Furthermore, the specific nature of the scenographic design was ambiguous in the meaning it generated. The visual register of the scenographic treatment of the stage in the Gulf of Corinth sequence referenced the widely-recognised aesthetics of impressionism that responded directly to Cecily's desire for romantic adventure. In contrast, the blue lighting and drone soundscape used in the concluding sequence do not evoke a specific set of aesthetic references connected with a particular perceptual or psychological state. There are therefore a wider range of interpretations that might be supported by the scenographic design. This might have prompted audiences to defer to the explanation of Cecily's actions offered in the dialogue.

Even while pursuing their interpretation of a play in the staging of a production, theatre-makers are acutely aware of the openness of interpretation and the role of the spectator in co-constructing meaning in performance. Directors and designers often anticipate the reception of their work by a prospective audience when devising aspects of the production in (technical) rehearsals. Such awareness of the question of reception often functions as a tool of self-regulation for the production team. The impact of this self-regulation on a production intensifies during the period of technical rehearsals when the director and creative team are first able to bring together all the elements of stage craft in

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 122.

the performance space. The pressure generated by the proximity of opening night when the production will be presented to a paying audience for the first time, combined with finally uniting the diverse elements of production onstage, can particularly heighten the production team's awareness of the question of reception. It was this process of self-regulation that prompted the reconceptualisation of the presentation of the miracle sequences by Dacre and the production team during technical rehearsals for *Our Lady of Kibeho*. Based on his extensive experience as a theatre-maker and spectator of performance, Dacre's judgement of the ineffectiveness of the video projection technology at conveying the authenticity of the Marian apparitions was informed, in large part, by his anticipation of audience response. Decisions, such as this, are made based on how practitioners imagine an aspect of performance or theatrical representation might be interpreted by a spectator engaging with a production for the first time. It is for this reason that it is customary for directors to invite other trusted practitioners who have not been involved in the creation of a production to observe the dress rehearsals – often the last run-through of performance following technical rehearsals before previews. The invitation offers the director an opportunity to respond to an impartial appraisal of the production which might prompt them to rework particular elements before its presentation before an audience.

Of course, the input of other theatre-makers may not sway a director's approach to their production. Melly Still recalls, for instance, that during the dress rehearsal for *The Lovely Bones* at the Royal & Derngate, a fellow director commented that the suspended mirrored panel made the stage appear too busy as all stage action was doubled in the reflection above the stage. Consequently, the director felt that the audience might struggle to follow the narrative of the play, unsure where to direct their gaze at any given moment.

However, Still relates that she actively embraced the multiplicity of perspectives that the scenographic device provided in the course of performance:

in theatre, we're so used to asserting 'this is where the eye goes' and that, as the director working with the lighting designer and the production designer, you're in control of it. I thought, actually, it's kind of interesting that we're distracted sometimes by people and action [reflected in the mirrored panel] – even if the distraction is quite peripheral. I think the brain can cope with a lot, and then filter out what it needs to concentrate on, even when there are gentler things going on in the background, or in the wings, or in the sides, or up above.¹⁰³

Still's approach to staging *The Lovely Bones* is one that embraces the plurality of meaning generated through scenographic dramaturgy. She is not proscriptive in asserting the signification of individual elements of the production. Of more importance to her directorial vision is conveying the overarching story which, in the example of *The Lovely Bones*, she believed was enhanced by the rich overlapping of action occurring onstage. The scenographic approach was deemed to be particularly appropriate for the play which traces Susie's observation of the aftermath of her death from multiple perspectives including heaven, earth, and the In-Between. Just as Susie has to work out her own sense of self and means of navigating the afterlife following her death, so too must the audience 'filter out' elements of the production to establish their interpretation of the play's narrative. Like Cecily's psychological projection in the Gulf of Corinth sequence in *Love from a Stranger*, the audience's perspective is aligned with that of the female protagonist through the scenographic dramaturgy of the production. Drawing upon Hann's conceptualisation of scenography, the scenographics of the sequences (including lighting, sound, set design, actors' performance) orientate character and audience in the same relational position to the fictional world crafted onstage. The two productions thus employ a similar scenographic

¹⁰³ Still, interview with author (London, 28th January 2019).

dramaturgies in their foregrounding of female experience. However, while Still's approach to *The Lovely Bones* pursues this through the plurality of meaning emergent from the mirrored installation, in *Love from a Stranger* the sequences in which the staged environment is transformed are intended to foster a particular interpretation of Cecily's psychological state; first, her romantic desire for adventure and then her shocked horror as the innocent victim of the violent conclusion to her relationship with Bruce. As in van Hove's production of *Hedda Gabler* at the National Theatre, the capacity of the staged environment to successfully convey a character's internal state through the material conditioning of the performance space is open to debate.

The process of theatre-making is demanding. It requires long hours and intensive creative exertion. The disappointment felt by practitioners when the reception of a production does not correlate with their vision, such as that felt by Bailey in regard to *Love from a Stranger*, is thus understandable. Yet, paradoxically, it is often precisely this co-production of meaning with the audience fostered in theatrical production that renders the medium so attractive to practitioners. The notion of 'scenographic dramaturgy' has been used here to encapsulate the role of material elements of theatrical production as active participants in the shaping of meaning in rehearsals and performance. While intended by the production team to externalise the female protagonists' impression of events, the material mode of expression employed in scenography is shown to have the potential to disrupt directorial intention in the process of reception. Here, then, the distributive agency enacted in theatrical production is evidenced in the discrepancies between the collaborative intention of the production team, the materialisation of said intention through the material elements of the staged sequence (scenographic dramaturgy), and audience interpretation.

Conclusion

This chapter opened with a proposition: the conventions of gendered theatrical space are reworked by contemporary theatre-makers to reconceptualise the representation of women in classic domestic dramas for twenty-first-century audiences. The interventions made by the production team to the staging of the domestic settings of *Love from a Stranger* and *Ghosts* have been understood as an expression of scenographic dramaturgy that focalises the action of the play on the experiences of the female protagonists. Non-naturalistic representations of the staged home respond to the twenty-first-century interest in psychological realism by externalising the inner lives of these characters into their domestic environments. The shifting sets and atmospheric psychological projections that recur in the collaborative staging of Bailey, Britton, and their production team align the Royal & Derngate productions with other contemporary experimentations with domestic settings, including that undertaken in van Hove's *Hedda Gabler* at the National Theatre.

While I have foregrounded the dramaturgical role of scenography in reconceiving the representation of the female protagonists in the two productions performed at the Royal & Derngate, there are, of course, other reasons for intervening in the scenic conventions of the domestic dramas. For instance, Bailey's desire to disrupt the 'old-fashioned' nature of the static domestic interior suggests an interest in cultivating moments of visual interest or spectacle. The mobilisation of the set is unexpected and reconfigures the theatrical space in moments of surprising environmental transformation. The same impetus towards spectacle in the scenography of domestic dramas is evidenced in other twenty-first-century productions of Ibsen. In Duncan Macmillan's adaptation of *Rosmersholm* directed by Ian Rickson in 2019, the script's suggestion that the mill has been gruesomely blocked by the bodies of the two suicides at the conclusion of the play was depicted by flooding the stage

at the Duke of York's theatre. This was a moment of pure theatrical spectacle facilitated by the raked stage and gutter system incorporated in Rae Smith's set design and introduced theatrical elements more familiar to nineteenth-century melodrama than realist theatre to the contemporary production. In turn, Ian MacNeil's design for Carrie Cracknell's production of *A Doll's House* at the Young Vic in 2012 saw the stage revolve slowly throughout the performance to reveal the different rooms of the Helmer household. The mobilised set signified Nora's restlessness through its perpetual motion. Here, as in the Royal & Derngate productions of *Love from a Stranger* and *Ghosts*, the 'single unit interior' of the box set was reimagined to focalise the play's action on the experience of the female character.

My concentration on the meaning-making process facilitated by scenographic dramaturgy has also highlighted the complex relationship between intention, materiality, and reception. My observation of technical rehearsals for *Love from a Stranger* and *Ghosts* demonstrates that the dual metaphorical and physical nature of theatrical representation has the potential to undermine or disrupt the signification of a scenographic element as intended by the director and designer: for example, although the chasm that split the stage in *Ghosts* was intended to symbolise Mrs. Alving's psychological rift, when physicalized, the meanings of the split stage were multiple and unfixed. The challenge presented to the actors when navigating the physical manifestation of the chasm suggests that scenographic transformations that do not physically alter the topography of the stage might be more effective in externalising the inner lives of characters. For, even while facilitated by the material properties of the set, lighting equipment, and the bodies of performers, these scenographic elements have an intangible, immaterial quality that relates more closely to the psychological (what is being represented), thus emphasising the metaphorical or symbolic aspect of their signification: for instance, the reflections in the semi-transparent

walls facilitated by Britton's scenic design for *Ghosts* and the transformation of the backdrop using lighting in the Gulf of Corinth sequence in *Love from a Stranger*. Even so, the ghostly reflections and impressionistic backdrop are both a signifying shorthand that gestures to the psychological register of the characters' experience rather than illustrating the content of their subjective response to the action. The challenge in presenting psychological complexity through the materiality of the stage is reflected in Bailey's disappointment in the disparity between her interpretation of Cecily's actions conveyed through the scenographic conditioning of the stage and her perception of the audience response to the final sequence in *Love from a Stranger*.

The notion of scenographic dramaturgy presented in this chapter offers an insight into the wider enquiry of this study. My discussion of the two domestic dramas directed by Bailey at the Royal & Derngate promotes a more inclusive approach to thinking about the kinds of collaboration that take place in theatrical production. By demonstrating the unfixity of meaning emergent from the multiple modes of signification emergent from scenography, the materiality of the stage cannot simply be understood as a vehicle for the intentions of director and designer. Rather, a collaborative expression of meaning-making takes place through the relational ties established between the different participants in theatrical production. The meaning that emerges from these collaborations, or assemblages, are contingent on the precise nature of their formulation and do not, therefore, inevitably privilege the creative vision of the theatre-maker. For this reason, while this chapter has argued for the ways in which the materiality of the stage participates in the gendering of space in contemporary theatre-making, it simultaneously addresses the complex interrelationships between intention, the material apparatus of theatrical representation, and reception.

Conclusion(s)

This study has taken the materiality of the stage as a critical lens to present a fuller picture of the collaborative nature of contemporary theatre-making. Informed by the inclusive perspective of new materialism, I have traced the active participation of the material diverse processes of theatrical production. My investigation has taken me to the workshops, rehearsal rooms, offices, and auditoria of theatres to better understand the actual processes that constitute the collaborative nature of theatre-making. This study models a form of distributive agency; props, costumes, puppets, scenographic elements, performers, practitioners, designers, and makers are all shown to collaboratively steer the activities of theatre-making – actively shaping the meaning that emerges from the assemblages in which they participate. The materiality of the stage is not understood as a direct vehicle for the intention of practitioners. Theatrical things are, instead, characterised as participants that actively shape the meaning that emerges from rehearsals and performance; costume and actor ‘hug’, while puppet, prop, and performer are entwined in the co-performance of characters’ bodily experiences.

My interest in the materiality of theatrical production has been traced through the creation of new work at The Theatre Chipping Norton and the Royal & Derngate with particular attention to the gendering of theatrical practices. At the forefront of this study have been the material strategies devised by practitioners, designers, and makers to reassess the representation of female characters in contemporary theatre. What emerges from my analysis of the five case study productions are the resonances between gender and

materiality in theatrical production. The Theatre Chipping Norton's production of *Sleeping Beauty* is used to demonstrate how costuming might be taken up as a tool of revisionism in the reconceptualisation of gendered stereotypes in pantomime (and theatre more widely). Costuming itself is also framed as a gendered practice particularly associated with women's labour as it rests on a skillset traditionally associated with the feminine and is undertaken by a female-dominated workforce. Experimentation with the co-performance of character enacted between props, puppets, and performers in rehearsals for *The Lovely Bones* is shown to disrupt conventions of theatrical representation associated with the objectification of the female body onstage. In turn, the material apparatus of theatrical production is characterised as an alternative site of authority for the female protagonists of Dacre's production of *Our Lady of Kibeho* – a process carefully negotiated through rehearsals. Finally, in the two domestic dramas directed by Bailey and designed by Britton, interventions in the staging of the domestic interior are understood as acts of scenographic dramaturgy that foreground the perspectives of female characters. It is through the treatment of the staged environment that the plays are reimagined for twenty-first-century audiences. Each chapter thus discusses a distinct manner in which the material resources of theatre-making actively construct gendered meaning. My observation of the production processes of these five productions has allowed me to trace the distribution of agency enacted in theatrical production through the dynamic relationships established between material and human agents, at times harmonious, at others, disruptive, but always inevitably collaborative.

Hierarchies Within Theatrical Collaboration

However, what has also been evidenced in my observation of theatre-making is that collaboration is seldom equitable within theatrical production. The theoretical and methodological framework of this study was formulated to be more inclusive in the range of theatrical activities it addresses and the participants (agents) perceived to participate in them. I underpinned my observation of live practice with a new materialist understanding of distributive agency to consider how interactions between diverse elements of theatre-making (inclusive of practitioners and the material resources of the stage) collaboratively shape the activities that take place in workshops, rehearsal rooms, and auditoria. Despite this focus on collaborative practice, the hierarchical nature of decision-making in the creation of contemporary commercial theatre is also evidenced in this study. Typically, the artistic director of a theatre and/or producer will hire a director to work on a project. The director's creative vision guides the development of a production. They often select their production team – accounting for ongoing director/designer partnerships such as that of Bailey and Britton – and have an authoritative voice in the casting process. The director establishes the working practices of the rehearsal room and the level of collaborative decision-making they are comfortable with when working with the performers and production team. As discussed in the Introduction of this study in relation to the ensemble, there are alternative approaches to theatrical production that seek to deconstruct these hierarchies of decision-making by distributing creative agency across the company or ensemble. However, an understanding of the collaborative practices of theatre-making is in tension with the authority of the director embedded in the mode of production commonly pursued in commercially produced theatre in Britain.

This tension does not negate an argument for the collaborative nature of theatre-making. However, the structural foregrounding of the director's authority in theatrical production highlights that the distinct contributions of participants, and impact of different collaborative acts, are often uneven. Focussing on specific processes within theatre-making illuminates the way that the labour of those underrepresented in accounts of theatrical production significantly shapes rehearsals and performance. For instance, the creative authority of the costume-maker is shown to direct the meaning that emerges from the costume assemblage through the material construction of the garments. However, the impact of this instance of creative agency is lesser than that enacted by the director who, however indirectly, ultimately oversees all processes undertaken in the course of theatrical production. They are the individual to whom decisions relating to all aspects of a production are deferred, including costume. The authority of the director is reflected in the common practice of referring to a production as belonging to the individual in this role (for instance, Bailey's production of *Love from a Stranger*).

The foregrounding of the creative vision of the director in this study is not only a result of the hierarchies of decision-making in the commercial theatre sector, but a result of the particular nature of my access to the theatres as an embedded researcher. My partnerships with The Theatre Chipping Norton and the Royal & Derngate were facilitated by the generous supervision of the artistic directors of the two organisations, John Terry and James Dacre, respectively. At the Royal & Derngate, I consulted with Dacre at regular intervals to select the productions that would serve as case studies to investigate the relationships between women and the materiality of the stage. Access to the theatre-making process was then granted by the director of each production – a freelancer invited by the theatre to lead a particular project. As I was associated with the Royal & Derngate

(rather than individual productions or practitioners), I typically began my work as an embedded researcher when theatrical production commenced within the physical space of the theatre building. Accordingly, the activities opened up to me by the director for observation were primarily those relating to rehearsals. I found the rehearsal room to be a particularly valuable site in which to observe the collaborative nature of theatre-making. It is the space in which the diverse contributions of practitioners (both intellectual and material) are enacted, often for the first time. The opportunity to observe rehearsals thus allowed me a privileged insight into the processes of experimentation undertaken ahead of performance.

Yet, in methodological terms, I recognise that my embeddedness in spaces used for the rehearsals of productions (rather than other areas of theatrical production) has shaped the kinds of activities I have observed. In turn, this has foregrounded the creative agency of certain practitioners involved in these productions – namely, directors and performers. Undoubtedly, had I embedded myself in the working practices of the lighting, sound, and stage management team, or the stage technicians working in the wings, other assertions of collaborative agency would have been evidenced. This claim is evidenced by the distinct nature of my engagement with the preparatory activities undertaken for The Theatre Chipping Norton pantomime production of *Sleeping Beauty*. The co-presence of different teams in the intimate space of the theatre meant that I was able to observe a range of theatre-making processes undertaken in the course of a single production. The opportunity to engage with the labour that took place in the costume workroom was, in large part, made possible by my own expertise as a costume professional. This, in turn, allowed me to address the creative agency of the costume team within the larger project of theatrical production. Thus, while the work of the director and performers are often foregrounded in

this study, this is not to omit the diverse contributions of other forms of theatrical labour. Rather, it reflects the nature of my own access to the activities of the two theatres and structural hierarchies within the commercial theatre sector itself.

A recognition of the uneven distribution of authority in theatrical production is particularly relevant to a study concerned with women's participation and representation in twenty-first-century British theatre-making. The structural hierarchy of decision-making within the commercial sector is gendered. A report commissioned by *The Guardian* in 2012 recorded that there was a '2:1 problem' in English theatre.¹ Researched and written by Elizabeth Freeston, the artistic director of Pentabus theatre, the report asserted that women held approximately a third of the decision-making roles in the British theatre industry, including those of artistic director, director, designer, and composer. A report was commissioned in 2019 by the influential women's theatre company, Sphinx Theatre, to determine whether this gender gap had closed. In fact, it revealed that seven years on the disproportionate representation of women in positions of authority in the theatre sector persisted. In some instances, the number of female professionals had actually decreased with women artistic directors shrinking from 36% to 31% of those theatres surveyed.² This statistic is particularly significant because evidence shows that female artistic directors tend to stage more plays by women than their male counterparts.³ In turn, Freedstone's report identifies that 'women playwrights write more roles for women than their male

¹ Charlotte Higgins, 'Women in Theatre: Why Do So Few Make It to the Top?', *The Guardian*, 10th December 2012, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/dec/10/women-in-theatre-glass-ceiling>> [accessed 3rd December 2020].

² Sphinx Theatre and Jennifer Tuckett, 'What Share of the Cake?', *Sphinx Theatre*, 2019, <<https://sphinxtheatre.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/What-Share-of-The-Cake...pdf>> [accessed 3rd December 2020].

³ Higgins, 'Women in Theatre: Why Do So Few Make It to the Top?'.

counterparts': typically '[w]omen wrote 49% of their parts for women [while] men wrote 37%'.⁴ In other words, attempts to improve representation in the industry must begin at the top with those that hold decision-making power. Indeed, Nadia Fall, artistic director of the Theatre Royal Stratford East, notes that equality is 'all about who the gatekeepers are'.⁵ Fall relates that when she was programming her inaugural season at the theatre in 2018 'I could easily have chosen female playwrights for every show'.⁶ The issue of inequitable representation, then, is not down to a lack of highly skilled female practitioners but the barriers in place that prevent these individuals from accessing platforms because of their gender (and other intersecting factors including race, ethnicity, disability, class, and age). The statistics suggest that women in positions of authority are more likely to support more diverse programming in their theatres and, thus, increase opportunities for female playwrights and performers. While the full diversity of theatrical roles was not captured in the reports, this correlation might also carry over to the representation of women in other decision-making positions including director and designer.

The findings of the reports show that a discussion of women and collaboration in contemporary theatre-making is incomplete if not considered within the particular structural dynamics of the commercial sector. In turn, working as an embedded researcher in two theatres – The Theatre Chipping Norton and the Royal & Derngate – also situates the question of gender representation within the specific activities of the two organisations. Both theatres are headed by male artistic directors. Given the correspondence between the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nadia Fall quoted in Eleanor Ross, 'British Theatre Has a Problem with Women: These Playwrights Want to Solve It', *inews*, 8th January 2019, <<https://inews.co.uk/culture/theatre-women-playwrights-national-243457>> [accessed 3rd December 2020].

⁶ Ibid.

gender of a theatre's leadership and its hiring practices reflected in the data discussed above, one might expect there to be an underrepresentation of women across the theatres' workforces. However, the Royal & Derngate recorded that between 2016 and 2018 they achieved 'a 51:49 male:female gender [*sic*] ratio across all creative teams for [their] Made in Northampton productions'.⁷ Furthermore, in the 2017/18 season of their self-produced work (when I began my period of research), the theatre commissioned new work from ten writers, seven of whom were women.⁸ While the same data was not consistently available across the period I spent with the theatre, these examples assert the theatre's ongoing commitment to championing the work of women practitioners under Dacre's leadership. This is reflected in the prevalence of female directors, lighting/sound/production/costume designers, movement directors and other members of the production teams working on the Made in Northampton productions that are featured in this study.

The gender equity pursued by the Royal & Derngate in the programming of their self-produced work intersects with their broader interest in commitment to diversity'.⁹ They acknowledge this needs to be an ongoing project of monitoring 'the diversity of our workforce, volunteers and Board' in order 'to influence our recruitment strategies, recognising the need to be more representative of the community we serve'.¹⁰ These sentiments are shared by The Theatre Chipping Norton and set out in the organisation's 'Equality and Diversity Policy'. The document asserts the theatre's 'commitment to ensure that [their] cast and creative teams are a 50/50 gender split when calculated across the

⁷ The Northampton Theatres Trust Limited, 'Report and Financial Statements for the Period Ended 25 March 2018', p. 10. The equivocal data was not included in the 2019 annual report.

⁸ Ibid, p. 10.

⁹ Ibid, p. 10.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 10.

year'.¹¹ The policy also marks a desire to achieve 'proportional diversity' in regards to their audience, staff, performers, and Trustees to better 'reflect the communities that [they] serve'.¹² This study similarly understands that a focalisation of the work of female practitioners is but one aspect of wider intersectional discussions about representation and collaborative practice in contemporary British theatre-making.

Final Reflections

The discussion here highlights the contextual and methodological factors that have shaped the findings of this study and, undoubtedly, claims made concerning the gender dynamics of collaboration in contemporary theatre-making. While each chapter has dealt with a distinct expression of the relationship between women and materiality, some overarching themes have emerged. First, an impetus within twenty-first-century British theatre-making to produce women-led narratives. This is evidenced in the programming of both theatres and the interventions made by practitioners to foreground the experiences and perspectives of female protagonists in their productions. This study has particularly highlighted how the materiality of the stage might be used as a lens to reassess the representation of these characters (through costume, props, the material apparatus of representation, and the conditioning of the staged environment). The second theme resonant in the study is the challenges faced by practitioners tasked with materialising experimental conceptions of women's experience. I discussed this explicitly in relation to

¹¹ John Terry, 'CNT Equality and Diversity Police', dated July 2020 (but under periodic review), p. 2. Available as a PDF at <<https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/media.chippingnortontheatre.com/files/Documents/Chipping%20Norton%20Theatre%20-%20Equality%20and%20Diversity%20Policy%20July%202020.pdf>> [accessed 21st February 2021].

¹² Ibid, p. 1.

the materialisation of intersubjective networks of affect in *The Lovely Bones*, but the statement also describes the treatment of the miraculous in *Our Lady of Kibeho* (understood as a site of (black) female authority), and the externalisation of the female protagonists' psychology through the scenographic dramaturgy of Bailey's domestic dramas. Third, although the collaborative nature of theatre-making is self-evident, this study points to the uneven distribution of authority within these collaborations which has often been overlooked. Feminist approaches to the stage (both in industry and scholarship) are shown to be a productive site of critique in recognising gender as one element that shapes the hierarchies of decision-making engrained in the institutional structure of commercial theatre-making. Finally, while recognising the authority of the director, observation of the production processes of the five productions featured in this study demonstrates how agency in theatrical production is decentred from the individual cast in 'the authorial role'.¹³ Instead, it is shown to be a collaborative act co-performed by the diverse participants engaged in theatre-making, inclusive of practitioners and the material resources of the stage.

Theatre is a medium that encourages us to think imaginatively and expansively about the world. Here, I recognise its capacity to facilitate a fuller and more inclusive account of the participants and collaborative processes that shape theatrical production. The particular focus of this study has demonstrated how the materiality of the stage might be taken up as a critical lens to foreground women's labour as practitioners and to unpick material processes employed in the representation of women's experiences onstage. Ultimately, the value of pursuing a new materialist approach to theatrical production is not

¹³ McAuley, *Not Magic but Work*, p. 3.

to argue for the agency or animacy of the non-human. Even while I embrace the more inclusive notion of distributive agency promoted by new materialism, practitioners remain at the heart of this study. To underplay the role of practitioners would be a failure to recognise how theatrical production is structured around human interventions in a spatial assemblage of highly-designed elements. While certain elements might perform in unexpected fashions, their spatial and signifying arrangement is primarily stabilised by the creative labour of practitioners. The value of new materialist thinking, then, is to provide a critical framework within which to think imaginatively and expansively about the processes and participants included in accounts of theatre-making. It might be employed to facilitate a de-familiarisation of what we think we know – to prompt the researcher-participant to look again at the live practices of production before them without preconceived expectations about the ways that certain participants (including those that constitute the materiality of the stage) might perform and, thus, how meaning might emerge from the theatrical assemblage. My conviction is that by looking afresh at theatre-making processes it is possible to illuminate experiences, activities, and perspectives previously overlooked or omitted from accounts of theatrical production. It for this reason that I embrace Bennett's new materialist call to be open to the 'appearance of thing-power' in my observation and analysis of the practices of theatre-making.¹⁴ Theatre-making demands that practitioners be inventive and imaginative in their engagement with resources. Designers, directors, makers, and performers are trained to look beyond the conventional or designed function of objects and materials to imagine how they might be engaged in new fashions within the context of a specific production. This study calls for researchers to share in this imaginative approach

¹⁴ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 5.

to theatrical things by reimagining the function of the material resources employed in rehearsals and performance. In so doing, a fuller and more inclusive account of theatre-making emerges centred on the notion of collaborative agency – here to accommodate new understandings of the relationships between the human and material participants in processes of gendering in theatrical production.

Postscript:

Theatre-Making in the Time of the Pandemic

My observation of live practice took place between October 2017 and November 2019. Four months later, theatres across the country were forced to close their venues as the UK entered a national lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The following year has been immensely challenging for theatres, particularly financially, as they attempted to navigate the unclear guidelines laid out by the UK Government including a series of further lockdowns. As Dacre explains in a piece published on *The Stage* in February 2021, '[r]egional theatres rely on box-office income to survive'.¹ The inability to present work to paying audiences has therefore threatened the operations – and in some cases, even the continued existence – of many theatres. The UK Government's £1.57 billion Culture Recovery Fund has offered a lifeline to a number of cultural organisations, including the Royal & Derngate who were awarded £2.1 million in October 2020. While recognising the value of the Fund, the Government has come under criticism by many for its failure to adequately support theatres in the unprecedented economic conditions of the pandemic. Theatre critic Lyn Gardner, for instance, argued that 'this money – far too little, far too late – is not a wand that will make the challenges facing theatre disappear'. Writing in October 2020, she noted that for most organisations '[t]he money received will barely touch the losses of the last few months and

¹ James Dacre, 'James Dacre and Kate McGrath: Without Action to Underwrite Risk, Touring Faces a Precarious Future', *The Stage*, 4th February 2021, <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/features/james-dacre-and-kate-mcgrath-without-action-to-underwrite-risk-touring-faces-a-precarious-future>> [accessed 21st February 2021].

do little in the face of a bleak winter ahead'.² Furthermore, the grants have been awarded to organisations, leaving many professionals within the industry who work on a freelance basis unsupported and vulnerable with little opportunity to work.

The pandemic has significantly altered the modes of theatrical production discussed in this study. When live performance has been permitted, the necessity of socially distancing spectators hugely reduces the number of audience members in each performance and, thus, the potential revenue that might be generated by ticket sales for a production. This, in turn, impacts the programming of theatres. Faced with the risk of investing money into a production that is then cancelled and unable to recoup costs through ticket sales, theatres are less likely to undertake work that necessitates complex engagements with the materiality of the stage such as those described in relation to the five productions discussed in this study. Furthermore, the need to socially distance not only audiences in performance, but performers and practitioners in rehearsals, means that the size of casts and creative teams must also be curtailed. It was for this reason that The Theatre Chipping Norton made the difficult decision to cancel their 2020 pantomime. Terry notes that '[b]ecause of the scale of our show it is just not viable, and we could not make it work within the social distancing requirements'.³ Wanting to provide something for the 'families in the area' for whom the pantomime 'is a big part of their Christmas ritual', the theatre produced a version of the one-performer adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* (2011)

² Lyn Gardner, 'The Big Test of Culture Recovery Fund Winners: Will They Use It for Change?', *The Stage*, 12th October 2020, <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/the-big-test-for-culture-recovery-fund-winners-will-they-use-it-for-change/>> [accessed 21st February 2021].

³ John Terry, quoted in Sarah Edwards, 'Even Scrooge Can't Cancel Christmas! The Show Will Go On at The Theatre Chipping Norton', *Ox in a Box*, 10th October 2020, <<https://www.oxinabox.co.uk/christmas-show-will-go-on-at-the-theatre-chipping-norton/>> [accessed 21st February 2021].

written by Simon Callow.⁴ Starring actor David Bradley and actor-musician Sophie Crawford, the performance was presented to socially-distanced audiences throughout December. To offset the risk of performance being suspended by another lockdown, tickets included a £5 donation to the theatre that would be non-refundable if the production had to be cancelled. In this case, ticket-holders would be sent a digital recording of the production that they could watch from the comfort of their homes, demonstrating the way in which theatres are responding creatively to the challenges posed to the sector by the pandemic. Happily, the performances were able to go ahead throughout December with only the last day cancelled due to a sudden rise of COVID-19 cases in the Oxfordshire region.

With lockdowns prohibiting live performance for much of the year, theatres have been forced to find new ways to continue their activities. This has necessitated new modes of theatrical production that have been particularly responsive to digital innovations in the sector. For instance, in February 2021 the Royal & Derngate released a digital musical *On Hostile Ground* created by Juliet Gilkes Romero, Michael Henry, Darren Clark and Charlotte Westenra. The musical was inspired by the stories of people affected by the devastating impacts of the UK Government's hostile environmental policy. It was released as a series of free online videos accessible through the theatre's website. The digital format of the musical meant that the performers, director, and creative team were able to devise and produce the piece without meeting in person or working in the same physical space. Thus, while collaboration remained central to the production of the work, the practices undertaken were distinct from those discussed in the body of this study. *On Hostile Ground* is one example of the diverse digital responses to the restrictions to performance caused by

⁴ Ibid

the pandemic within the theatre sector including livestreaming and online participatory performance.

Social distancing requirements and the resultant uptake in digital modes of performance have reimagined the mode of theatrical production described in relation to the five productions featured in this study. My research is consequently situated in a pre-pandemic context. While many of the practices discussed here will no doubt resume when possible, some theatre-makers predict that certain strategies adopted to face the challenges of producing theatre in the pandemic might endure. Almost a year after the forced closure of the Royal & Derngate, Dacre wrote that following ten months without revenue ‘the future is more uncertain than ever’:

Yet the storm our sector weathered last year has also made us more inclusive, collaborative and innovative in how we work together to plan that future. I believe we can emerge stronger, but to revive our regional sector and re-engage our freelance workforce we must focus above all on nurturing a healthy touring ecosystem.⁵

Without underplaying the ongoing difficulties faced by the sector, Dacre suggests that being forced to halt and then restart theatrical production offers the opportunity to redress structural inequities embedded in the industry. A reiterated commitment to inclusivity and collaboration over the last year might be used to inform the building back of the sector following the disruptions caused by the pandemic – something of particular relevance to this study’s interest in the work of female practitioners within collaborative practice. Dacre’s identification of the significance of touring asserts that not only do touring productions ‘diversify regional theatres’ programmes, bringing new voices to their audiences’, but ‘[t]hey also play a central role in engaging thousands of freelancers across our industry,

⁵ Dacre, ‘Without Action to Underwrite Risk, Touring Faces a Precarious Future’, *The Guardian*.

many of whom have been ineligible for any government support'.⁶ He recognises the particular threat that the financial pressure placed on theatres has posed to those professionals that 'have been historically underrepresented in the sector', many of whom have been left without work and, as freelancers, ineligible to the Treasury's income-support schemes.⁷ Touring perhaps provides the opportunity to 'rebuild a fairer, more sustainable and more representative sector' – a responsibility that Dacre states is a priority for the Royal & Derngate moving forward.⁸ Whether this becomes a priority in the theatre industry's recovery from the devastating disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic is yet to be seen. However, as I have argued in this study, foregrounding the collaborative nature of theatrical production has the potential to provide a fuller account of theatre-making – one that is more inclusive of experiences that are often marginalised in accounts of theatre history. A more 'inclusive, collaborative, and innovative' sector promises fruitful ground for future research into the relationships between women and the material resources of the stage in theatrical production.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ James Dacre, 'The Government's Plan for UK Theatre is Vague and Demoralising', *The Guardian*.

⁸ Ibid.

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