



**From the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre to Fast Eddies:  
Understanding contemporary Irish story theatre by  
re-reading epic theatre**

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*From the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre to Fast Eddies:  
Understanding contemporary Irish story theatre by re-  
reading epic theatre*

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**Abstract: From the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre to Fast Eddies: Understanding contemporary Irish story theatre by re-reading epic theatre**

This thesis is organised in two main sections. Part I sets out to analyze dramaturgical trends in twentieth century epic theatre, in relation to the deployment of folk narrative devices which include the mask, carnival, storytelling and folk singing. Perspectives from French philosophy, in particular those of Roland Barthes and Alain Badiou, will inform an analysis of the epic theatre as an oppositional, dialectical strategy, that relates to the revolutionary masks of folk and popular performance traditions. The thesis will argue for a reconsideration of Alfred Jarry as the forefather of the epic theatre tradition, in the context of the first production, in 1896, of *Ubu the King*. Following this, the dramaturgies of Bertolt Brecht and Dario Fo will be discussed, with particular reference to Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechuan* and Fo's *Accidental Death of An Anarchist*.

Part II analyzes trends in contemporary Irish drama which reflect a re-emergence of the epic storyteller as a key figure in recent dramaturgies. Three strands of story theatre will be nominated and discussed in terms of their epic narrative qualities (or otherwise): a conversational mode, a presentational mode and a testimonial mode. Textual and performative analyses of the dramas of Dermot Bolger, Patrick McCabe, Mark O'Rowe, Enda Walsh and Gerard Mannix Flynn will set out to clarify the extent to which these plays enable or disable a critical spectatorship of the Irish State. Finally, there will be an analysis of my own work, as director/dramaturg between 2000 and 2007, with Be Your Own Banana Theatre Company (BYOB). Two BYOB productions will be discussed as examples of the testimonial mode of Irish story theatre, *The Self-obsessed Tragedy of Ed Malone* by Edward Malone, and *Thailand: What's Love Got To Do With It?* by Máirtín de Cógáin and Brian Desmond.

## **Dedication**

**To my mother Anne and in memory of my father Tim, for all their support over the  
years**

## Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Ph.D. is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: -----

Student Number: -----

Date-----

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## An Afternoon in the Theatre

***De Bogman*, by Brian Desmond and Máirtín de Cógáin, presented in Coláiste na Sceilge,<sup>1</sup> Cahirciveen, Co. Kerry, November 2001.**

We were scheduled to give a performance in a local theatre in rural South Kerry, as part of an unorthodox first national tour – of theatres, art galleries, arts centres, more or less anywhere that would have us – of a new work.<sup>2</sup> The lady from the South Kerry Development Partnership, the community initiative that was facilitating the performance, phoned to say that there were no bookings for the event, and that it might be best to cancel the show. I mentioned that we had performed the show to secondary school audiences and that, if possible, we could do a performance for senior students (aged 16-17) if a school was able to accommodate us. I also agreed to give drama workshops to students as this would make for a more meaningful engagement with the company's visit, and this was agreed.

During one of these workshops, a student asked me who the Bogman was, to which I responded that he was a storyteller. Another student then asked if he was going to merely sit there and tell them a story. I replied that the Bogman was also a comic actor (the term clown may have been misunderstood) and that the performance would be very energetic, and they were satisfied with this. Moments later, another student pointed through the window and asked if that was him (the Bogman) walking across the school gardens, and indeed it was the storyteller-clown, Máirtín de Cógáin. I suggested that bogmen prefer to walk cross-country rather than on footpaths (Máirtín was, despite signage, walking on the grass), and the students were naturally dubious of this information. They marvelled at de Cógáin's enormous dark hair and beard, and towering physique. Their comments revealed that they found him at once wild, silly, terrifying and comical.

The performance was during a Friday afternoon, with about one hundred and fifty students crammed into a double classroom. The atmosphere was predictably edgy, considering its time in the school week, and the students' anticipation of the weekend.

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<sup>1</sup> Coláiste is the Irish word for college. Coláiste an Sceilge is a secondary school/high school.

<sup>2</sup> *De Bogman* was first performed in the Granary Theatre, Cork, in October 2000.

It was evident that, even if they were not going to find the performance enjoyable, the students were at least going to enjoy the afternoon exempt from normal classes: in other words, they were boisterous. The supporting cast (myself and voice-over artist, Eddie Cash) announced the entrance of the Bogman in gladiatorial style, and the storyteller exploded into the room, shadow boxing like a man possessed and performing prodigious pratfalls on the concrete floor (the play is a parody of the rags-to-riches, Hollywood boxing movie).

Over the next forty minutes, de Cógáin narrated the action, embodying twenty character roles, and guiding the spectator through Declan the Bogman's tale of village brawling, his fleeing from the law in Ireland after committing manslaughter during such a brawl, his career as an illegal prize fighter to make a living in the United States, a spell in jail on the grounds of participating in this illegal trade, and a prisoner reform programme that means he can box professionally in Philadelphia. Following this, the storyteller places a bench centre-stage, and presents an episode where he performs the roles of Declan, the Bogman, and his trainer, Dónal Ó Rí.<sup>3</sup> During this episode, Donal attempts to seduce the Bogman, and the audience anticipates a violent response from the pugilist (boxing movies are notoriously homophobic). Instead, the Bogman consents to intercourse, and an unexpected love affair begins, which inspires the boxer to a rapid rise in the heavyweight boxing rankings, and a title bout against the world champion. De Cógáin announces that the title fight is about to take place, against a boxer known as the Beekeeper.

At this point, I enter at the back of the classroom, wearing boxing gloves and a full beekeeper's outfit. Dozens of students rise to their feet and jeer the Bogman's nemesis: in other words, over a hundred Irish teenagers (traditionally as homophobic as Hollywood boxing movies) stand in the corner of the gay boxer. Ten minutes later, courtesy of a banana skin/*deus ex machina*, the Bogman is world champion, and the spectators are ecstatic. In the following episode, the Bogman is assassinated, but nobody in the audience sheds a tear. Rather, the fact that the Bogman was world champion for a mere hour and a half is a source of great hilarity. The narrative draws

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<sup>3</sup> Dónal Ó Rí translates as Don King, and refers to the renowned celebrity boxing promoter.

**to a close and the spectators, realizing that they can go home from school about fifteen minutes earlier than usual, vacate the auditorium promptly.**

## Introduction

[The rambling house] would be the residence of some honest to God farmer that was pulling the devil by the tail,<sup>4</sup> or the house of the postman, the carpenter or the tailor ... as far as I can remember, were a cross between the Dáil<sup>5</sup> and the Cork Opera House! There you'd have debates, old 'statesmen' would answer questions and try to unravel the mysteries of the universe and the economy. You'd have stories and riddles, songs, music and an occasional dance. In the long summer evenings, the Dáil would adjourn! Go to the country! The company would sit on a mossy bank under a shaped hedge by the roadside, and passers-by could add a note to the general hilarity. (Éamon Kelly, *Collected Stories* 351)

In this extract, Éamon Kelly describes his experiences of rambling houses as a boy growing up in South Kerry in the first half of the twentieth century. The rambling house (also known as the visiting house) was, as the extract suggests, the principal site of rural Irish entertainment in the early part of that century.<sup>6</sup> A semi-formal social event, the rambling house was where members of the immediate community could enjoy, as performers/participants or spectators, folk traditions such as storytelling, singing and dancing, while also exchanging the news of the day and debating the vicissitudes – political or otherwise – of the nation. Kelly's contemporary, the playwright Michael James Molloy (born 1917), has similar recollections of the rambling houses of his native Galway, in the west of Ireland. In the first act of his play, *The Visiting House*, the uneducated seanchaí (or storyteller) Mickle relates at length the variety of tales one could expect to hear at these social gatherings. Mickle's extensive list includes: ancient, heroic tales from *The Táin*;<sup>7</sup> the later, heroic tales of Finn, Oisín and the Fianna; stories of Irish saints, such as St. Brigid and St. Patrick; tales from the Bible, such as the Massacre of the Innocents; fairy tales

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<sup>4</sup> The saying, 'to pull the devil by the tail', means that one is too poor to do anything about one's vicissitudes.

<sup>5</sup> The Dáil is the Irish House of Parliament.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly was born in 1914, which would suggest that this memory belongs somewhere between 1920 and 1930.

<sup>7</sup> The heroic tales would include those of Cúchulainn and the warriors of Ulster. *The Táin* is an epic poem, which dates from the eighth century, and many of the tales therein are still popular as material for children's story books.

relating to magical creatures in Irish folklore; historical tales relating to the colonization of Ireland and the Battle of the Boyne; and the humorous tales of Dean Swift and his clever servant boy. Mickle completes the survey of his repertoire with the following:

... I can read you the Blakes and the Bodkins that were landlords over this parish before now, with every oul' moll and bully in the county like merry-men in and out to them. I can give you the three men that are standing this night in the pits of Hell – Gorman the Bailiff, and Dennehy the Bailiff, and Bailiff Hynes. I can give you the man that freed us out from all bailiffs and landlords at last – Michael Davitt from Straide (*taking off his hat*),<sup>8</sup> may Heaven be his rest!  
(48)

Molloy's dramatized memory of the rambling house describes, alongside ancient stories and supernatural tales, a narrative engagement with the island's recent political past, as is evident from Mickle's reference to tales of oppressive landlords, unscrupulous bailiffs and anti-colonial resistance. As Lawrence P. Morris notes, tales about "the evils of landlordism and the villainy of particular landlords abound in the [Irish] folkloric corpus" (308). Kelly's memoir also attests, through its reference to attempts by the gathering to 'unravel the mysteries of the universe and the economy', to an engagement with the political present alongside fantastical folk narratives, such as ancient Irish heroic tales and fairy stories. In the site of the rambling house, therefore, there is a co-existence between folk narrative and narratives of the State, narratives about the State, or, significant to this thesis, narratives about the state of the State.

Jeffrey Gantz states that the "tension between reality and fantasy is ... an innate characteristic" of Irish heroic tales, in which the "pride and energy of reality are allied with the magic and beauty of fantasy – and the result is infused with a rare degree of idealism" (2-3). In the heroic tales, "regeneration themes are never far from the narrative surface", and Gantz suggests that "in their ubiquitousness is apparent their power" (24). For Gantz, therefore, the tension between fantasy and reality is bound

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Davitt (1846-1906) was from Straide in County Mayo, which a county bordering Molloy's native Galway. Davitt was known as the 'Father of the Land League', because of his work with the League in securing land ownership for the peasantry during colonial times.

up with regeneration and idealism. Both terms relate to processes of transformation: the former in a material sense, the latter in terms of aspiration. J.R.R. Tolkien notes, in relation to fairy tales generally, that if the author “achieves the ‘inner consistency of reality’, it is difficult to see how this can be, if the work does not in some way partake of reality” (155). He states that fairy stories “open the door on Other Time ... [which] if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself, maybe” (129). For Tolkien, therefore, folk narrative catalyzes an atmosphere of contemplation for the listener, a distancing of the spectator from the familiarities of his/her everyday lived experience. To reconcile both perspectives, it may be argued that folk narrative is innately transformative, and formally characterized by the critical or aesthetic distancing of the spectator.

In Section I, this thesis argues that the epic theatre is most productively considered as a form of folk narrative, and that its dramaturgical strategies are reflective of the transformative quality of folk narrative forms. Because the epic theatre aspires to social transformation, beginning with a transformation of the social function of the theatre, its strategy is bound to a consideration of relationships between politics, aesthetics and State power. Because the epic theatre opposes the hegemony of the State, it also opposes the State’s chosen forms of representation, deploying popular theatre forms towards an enabling counter-cultural narrative, critical of the State. The epic theatre re-introduces the mask to the twentieth century stage, for this thesis, the term mask includes: the mask of the medieval/Renaissance carnival, or carnivalesque; the mask of the Italian, medieval *guillaire*, or minstrel; and, central to its analysis of Irish drama, the mask of the storyteller.

In Section II, this thesis applies insights gleaned from the analyses in Section I towards an understanding of developments in contemporary Irish dramatic narrative. Ireland’s colonial past sets the terms for this analysis, in the context of Ireland’s present as a complex, hyper-globalized society. The analysis reflects Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s aspiration for the neo-colonial artist to “find the appropriate ‘fiction language’ ... [identify] his relationship to the [art] form ... and his relationship to the material, that is to the reality before him” (75). Reflecting Wa Thiong’o’s argument, this thesis analyzes contemporary Irish dramatic narrative through its relationship with, appropriation of, and interrogation of indigenous, folk and popular cultural

traditions and devices. It is argued that a consideration of the nature of this negotiation can provide a framework through which contemporary Irish narratives can be deciphered as enabling (or disabling) modes of dramatic storytelling.

Chapter One sets out an analytical framework, beginning with a discussion of Roland Barthes' thesis on myth (or metalanguage),<sup>9</sup> and developing by means of insights from Richard Kearney, Robert Scholes, Robert Kellogg, Roberto Calasso and Friedrich Nietzsche in an effort both to inform and critique Barthes' perspective. This critique will be supplemented by a consideration of the theories of Alain Badiou, in particular his perspectives on drama and representations of the State (by artists and by the State itself). Insights drawn from Badiou, as a supplement to those derived from Barthes, transform the framework from an exercise in semiology, or deciphering, to a philosophy of theatre praxis. Barthes' domain is that of semiology, and the exposure of the mythologies of the bourgeois, capitalist State. Badiou's domain, however, relates to agency, and the aspiration to a revolutionary praxis. The discussion of metalanguage, in relation to Badiou and others, will provide a framework within which to read developments in twentieth century European and Irish drama, in relation to the conventions of codified genre and its opposition, the radical dramaturgy of the epic theatre. This radical dramaturgy will be considered as both parody and pastiche. It is argued that the epic theatre's parody of dominant dramatic forms is an act of deconstruction that creates a liminality through which it reconstructs, through a pastiche of dramatic and folk narrative elements, a radical counter-cultural dramaturgy. The devices of parody and pastiche will be discussed as a dual strategy of the epic theatre, as one necessitates and informs the other. A distinction will be made between the deployment of these devices in epic dramaturgy, and Fredric Jameson's binary construction of the terms in the context of postmodernist aesthetics.

This thesis argues that the epic theatre evolves as a dialectical, dramaturgical strategy, beginning with the theatre of Alfred Jarry. Its dialectical mode, as informed by Badiou, is fundamentally divisive: however, in mathematical terms, its strategy also

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<sup>9</sup> *Metalanguage* refers to Barthes' particular "second-order semiological system" (Barthes 114), which outlines his approach for reading and deciphering myth.

has elements that may be seen as both subtractive and additive. The subtractive relates to the notion of de-mythology, in the sense that the epic dramaturgy sets out to expose the cathartic qualities of dominant, bourgeois genres. This exposure is achieved through the parody, and deconstruction, of genre codifications (or conventions). By parodying the devices of bourgeois genres such as Greek tragedy (Brecht), Naturalism and the Shakespearean heroic (Jarry) and bourgeois farce (Fo), the epic dramaturg reveals the mythologies (catharses) of bourgeois appropriations of these dramatic forms. What the epic theatre subtracts from the bourgeois stage is its preoccupation with catharsis, or closure. This act of subtraction creates a contingency, a space for thought, or critical spectatorship. This liminality, achieved through the subtractive act of de-mythology, opens up a space (or dialectic) where the epic dramaturgy becomes additive, or re-mythological. This additive quality relates to the protagonists of the epic theatre, and how these are encoded according to the duality of the mask. The distinction between the subtractive and the additive corresponds to the deployment of both parody and pastiche in epic dramaturgy. Parody (the subtractive) is deployed in order to antagonize established, bourgeois dramatic forms, while pastiche (the additive) puts forward an alternative social function for the art form through what the thesis will argue is the 'dubious' nature of the mask, or epic role. The mask, it is argued, explains how the epic theatre relates to folk narrative, for all three cultural elements (mask, folk, epic theatre) are bound up with the notion of transformation. Essentially, it is argued that it is the masks of the epic theatre that provide the critical spectator with something to think about.

The second section of this thesis interrogates developments in contemporary Irish drama in the context of divisive, dialectical strategies in twentieth-century epic theatre. It argues that epic theatre strategies, in opposition to the projects of (initially) Naturalism and (latterly) the avant-garde, are counter-generic both in terms of narrative form and the social function of the theatre. It is argued that the epic theatre originates with the first production of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu The King*, at Aurélien Lugné-Poe's Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris in 1896, as an antagonism to André Antoine's radical experiments in Naturalism in Paris's other 'small theatre', the Théâtre Libre. If the epic theatre originates as an opposition to the naturalistic project of the nineteenth century, then the formal and social structures of this movement need to be identified.



As the naturalistic movement represents a neo-Aristotelian obsession with the formal characteristics of the 'well-made play', this thesis investigates both the narrative forms and social function of its forefather, Greek drama. Ways in which story-content (or *mythos*) is appropriated and formalized by the genres of Greek drama will be discussed, in the context of Friedrich Nietzsche's "The Birth of Tragedy", and Roberto Calasso's *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*. Alain Badiou's analysis, in *The Century*, of contrasting dialectical philosophies that emerged during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, will inform this reading of Greek drama as a false dialectical form (or dialectical semblance), and as a social function which enabled the repressive state apparatus of fifth-century Athenian democracy. Badiou's binary of the "semblance" of representation and "the real" (*Century* 47) of lived experience will be discussed, as it informs an understanding of how collaboration between drama and State ideology, both in Greek drama and in nineteenth-century Naturalism, reflects Roland Barthes' theory of metalanguage.

Chapter Two includes a textual and performative analysis of the first production of Jarry's *Ubu The King* in 1896, in the context of his creative appropriation of the mask of the medieval/Renaissance carnival. Ways in which Jarry deploys the atmosphere of the carnivalesque and the physical logic of the stock characters of the *Commedia dell'Arte* will be discussed, as well as his parodic assault on the gravitas of nineteenth-century, bourgeois productions of Shakespearean drama. It will be argued that the manner in which Jarry unleashes the clown upon the stage of the Parisian avant-garde inaugurates a dramaturgy opposed equally to the gravitas of the mainstream, bourgeois stage, and its alternatives, the Naturalist and Symbolist avant-garde theatres of fin-de-siècle Paris. Jarry, it will be argued, introduces a 'complex layering' – which relates to the duality of the mask - that may be seen to evolve in later developments in epic theatre, namely in the plays of Brecht and Dario Fo.

The argument for considering Jarry a forefather of the epic theatre is developed in Chapter Three, by an analysis which links the dramaturgy of *Ubu the King* with the practice of Bertolt Brecht, with particular reference to *The Good Person of Setzchuan* (1943) and *Antigone* (1948). Distinctions will be drawn between the folk narrative devices which Brecht and Jarry deploy. It is argued that for Brecht's epic dramaturgy,

the mask of the storyteller displaces the clown of Jarry's drama. Included in this chapter is a comparative analysis of a storytelling performance by the Irish seanchaí, Éamon Kelly, with the storytelling mode which Brecht deploys in *The Good Person of Szechuan*. A focused analysis of Brecht's conception of *Gestus*, in the context of his studio practice, will expose how this concept relates to Jarry's notion of the mask as 'effigy', as discussed in Chapter Two.

In Chapter Four, Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechuan* will undergo a comprehensive analysis as a dialectically divisive, dramaturgical response to the form of Greek tragedy, with particular attention to the ways in which Brecht's play parodies the conventions of this genre. The dualities of the storytelling mask in *The Good Person of Szechuan* will be discussed, as a means of outlining how Brecht's dramaturgy develops the system of complex layering introduced by Jarry in *Ubu the King*.

The first production of Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* in Milan in 1969 will be the subject of analysis in Chapter Five. Fo's appropriation of the mask of the medieval *guillaire* will inform this analysis, and this production's documentary, epic theatre strategy will be read as a progressive dramaturgical development of the practices of Jarry and Brecht, both in terms of complex layering and in its development of an appropriate physical site for the epic theatre.

Chapters Six and Seven apply the discussion of formal, dramatic strategies in the service of a critique of contemporary Irish drama. Chapter Six discusses a development, since the 1990s, of a *new storytelling* movement in Irish theatre. This trend will be discussed in the context of traditional Irish folk storytelling and its influence on twentieth century Irish dramatists as diverse as Brendan Behan, Flann O'Brien, MJ Molloy, Dermot Bolger, Enda Walsh, Mark O'Rowe, Gerard Mannix Flynn, Edward Malone, Máirtín de Cógáin and Brian Desmond.

In Chapter Seven, two productions on which this author worked as director/dramaturg will be discussed: *Thailand: What's Love Got To Do With It?* (2007) by Máirtín de Cógáin and Brian Desmond, and *The Self-Obsessed Tragedy of Ed Malone* (2005) by Edward Malone. These texts will be analyzed in the context of epic theatre as a

counter-generic strategy, and as enabling dramaturgical strategies which oppose reactionary dramaturgies that emerged in Irish theatre during the 1990s, as discussed in Chapter Six.

## Chapter One

### Myth, Genre and Folk Narrative: Epic Dramaturgy as a Divisive, Dialectical Strategy

What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality. And just as bourgeois ideology is defined by the abandonment of the name 'bourgeois', myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things. (Barthes

142)

Myth – or metalanguage –, according to Barthes, distorts the history of the subject, rendering it, semiologically, “a speech wholly at the service of the concept” (123).<sup>10</sup> The subject is, therefore, “deprived of memory”, but “not of existence” (123). “What the concept distorts” is, according to Barthes, “what is full, the meaning” (122), and, by ‘meaning’, he is referring to the history of the subject. Deprived of its history, the subject becomes a pretext, susceptible to textualisation, the process through which myth-making “transforms history into nature” (129). Barthes asserts that myth “prefers to work with poor, incomplete images, where the meaning is already relieved of its fat, and ready for a signification, such as caricatures, pastiches, symbols, etc” (127). Myth, therefore, is the perpetual encoding of new archetypes, or the expedient re-casting of stereotypes. Recent historical examples on these islands, in terms of signification, include how the ‘new lad’ of the 1990s makes way for the emotionally sensitive, ‘new man’ in the Zeitgeist of male culture.<sup>11</sup> Reality talent shows encode cosmetic, girl/boy-band stereotypes as the prototype for young people with musical ambition, obscuring a vibrant ancestry of politicised expression in

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<sup>10</sup> Speech is used in this context to denote any form of language open to signification – articulated, visual, etc.

<sup>11</sup> This ‘new man’ is not to be confused with the Nietzschean version, referred to regularly throughout the remainder of this thesis. The ‘new man’ of contemporary Britain and Ireland represents a fashionable rejection of ‘new laddishness’, in favour of a more androgynous, introverted masculinity. The ‘new man’ combines an interest in traditionally female pursuits (or obligations) like the culinary arts and fashion with more traditionally male pursuits, such as watching football, drinking lager and a reluctance to talk about one’s emotions. These traditional male pursuits are essential to the identity of the ‘new man’: however, what is ‘new’ is that he tempers his masculinity by watching less football (and more Jamie Oliver), drinking less lager (and more wine), and discussing his emotions more freely than previous generations. The ‘new man’ represents a temperate citizen, fashionable and consumerized, and self-reflective rather than pro-active.

British and Irish music culture, most notably in folk, punk and reggae music. And, in the mythology of the besieged State, the turban replaces the balaclava as the signifier of terrorism.

Barthes' reading of myth as narrative form is pessimistic, as form imposes an aesthetic whereby bourgeois ideology conditions a consumer culture "at the cost of [political] immobilization and an impoverishment of consciousness" (141). In Barthes' dystopic view of popular media, bourgeois ideology (reinforcing bourgeois hegemony and negating socio-political consciousness) is ubiquitous. It substitutes myth in place of the realities of lived experience through a wide range of cultural products, which include (amongst infinite others) newspaper headlines, advertisements, television serials like *Desperate Housewives* and reality television.<sup>12</sup> Through ephemeral myth, he argues, "the bourgeoisie is constantly absorbing into its ideology a whole section of humanity which does not have its basic status and cannot live up to it except in imagination" (Barthes 141). By projecting role-models (or prototypes) of fashionable behaviour (the 'new man') or careerism (the girl/boy band), bourgeois myth encodes a cosmetic, politically disengaged, monoculture of temperance: a monoculture tempered by what Badiou calls "the comfort of repetition" (*Century* 66).

Barthes' description of bourgeois myth offers little to the progressive artist in the way of solutions: however, it at least offers ways in which the artist can approach the counter-political consequences of what Badiou calls "the century of the triumph of capitalism and the global market" (*Century* 2). Barthes suggests, as consolations rather than solutions, two strategies through which one can counter bourgeois myth-making. The first strategy is semiological, and is concerned with reading, deciphering, and unmasking the mechanics of bourgeois myth-making (Barthes 128): in other words, it is for the spectator. The second strategy has to do with Barthes' notion that language "is a form, it cannot possibly be realistic or unrealistic. All it can do is either to be mythical or not, or perhaps ... counter-mythical" (136). This second

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<sup>12</sup> This is, indeed, an anachronism but, as an example, one which seems in keeping with Barthes' analysis.

strategy implies, and requires, agency, and has implications for the progressive artist, or 'counter-mythologist'.<sup>13</sup>

Barthes' strategy for deciphering myth requires a focus on "the mythical signifier as an inextricable whole made of meaning and form" (Barthes 128). In this instance, 'meaning' is taken to denote the full history of the subject, and 'form' as the subject with this history removed (or suspended). Barthes' strategy, in terms of deciphering, inverts the mythic process of appropriation, which is selective and expedient to the intention of the myth-maker. It allows the reader to receive "an ambiguous signification" (Barthes 128), to "respond to the constituting mechanism of myth" (Barthes 128), and to return to the subject its 'meaning', or complex history. With this schema, Barthes invites in the reader a complex critical readership, which goes beyond (legitimate) aesthetic concerns, such as historical accuracy, characterization and so on. What he is asking the reader to do, essentially, is to identify the 'intention' behind the myth, the ideology it endorses and re-inforces: bourgeois ideology. What he hopes the reader will achieve, by corollary, is a movement from the stance of critical reader to that of critical (and active) citizen.

Barthes also proposes a counter-mythological strategy, which involves the narrative encoding, by the author (or counter-mythologist), of a third-order semiological system, as a means of interrogating a regressive mythology already encoded therein. This strategy, Barthes suggests, confronts the apolitical through, echoing Brecht, the encoding of narrative forms that demand critical spectatorship. If we are to consent to Badiou's view that a "Second Restoration" began in western Europe around 1980, and that a restoration is "above all an assertion regarding the real; to wit, that it is always preferable to have no relation to it whatsoever" (*Century* 26), then a contemporary audience, in its "wisdom of mediocrity" (*Century* 3), is a difficult beast to engage.<sup>14</sup> With this in mind, it is worth noting that Barthes' schema yields insight on narrative (or textual) form, and its consequences in terms of critical authorship and, by corollary, critical spectatorship.

<sup>13</sup> In this context, a counter-mythologist is seen as a deliberate agent, consciously contesting issues to do with representation in bourgeois myth.

<sup>14</sup> In this instance, Badiou uses the "real" in relation to his concept of the "passion for the real", his analysis of how "the real" of hegemony - bourgeois, fascist or totalitarian - may be read in relation to its "semblance": that is, how it encodes itself through representation (*Century* 32).

Barthes' counter-mythological schema is exemplified through his reading of Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, where the myth (the bourgeois rhetoric of the protagonists) is exposed "due to Flaubert himself, to Flaubert's gaze on the myth which Bouvard and Pécuchet had built for themselves" (Barthes 136). Flaubert encodes his eponymous protagonists as ineffectual and solipsistic, presenting them as analogues for the (similarly ineffectual and solipsistic) bourgeois philosophy and rhetoric they espouse. Counter-mythology, therefore, requires a form of self-interrogation, a self-imposed gaze, or a critical subjectivity on the part of the author (and/or text). This critical subjectivity in the theatre of Brecht will be discussed, in Chapter Three, in the contexts of Peter Thomson's concept of "meta-text" (106) and Badiou's schema of the "dialectic 'at-play'" (*Rhapsody* 194).

The problem with Barthes' pessimistic stance on narrative is his suggestion that its principal potential in the contemporary world is to disable bourgeois myth, rather than to develop enabling, progressive narrative forms. Kearney writes:

This pessimistic attitude towards our new cyber and media culture is canvassed curiously by critics of both the left (Benjamin, Barthes, Baudrillard) and the right (Bloom, Steiner, Henri). Their bottom line is that we are entering a civilisation of depthless simulation inimical to the art of storytelling. (10)

Kearney challenges "the faddish maxim that 'in narrative no one speaks', or worse, 'that language only speaks to itself'" (5). It is informative that in Barthes' own counter-mythological paradigm, Flaubert's text is described as an allegorical satire, where a bourgeois double-act, through their ineffectuality, is encoded to emblemise bourgeois smugness and rhetoric with all its pretension. And if Barthes' paradigm is based upon the nature of allegory and satire, then perhaps it is worth reflecting for a moment on the nature of these narrative forms.

Allegory was, as Scholes and Kellogg point out, "developed as a mode of thought and a mode of story-telling that was ideally suited to the purposes of narrative artists who conceived their obligation to instruct to be at least as binding as their obligation to delight" (111). In Flaubert's text, this most didactic of forms is married with satire, which depends "on the ability to convince the reader ... that the social and moral types

of the real world are being represented more truly as caricatures" (Scholes 112). Caricature, previously cited by Barthes as a regressive device of bourgeois myth, is in this case endorsed as a legitimate device of counter-mythology. The devices available to the counter-mythologist, therefore, are often identical to those available to the makers of bourgeois myth. The difference between their representational strategies is the ideological uses to which these devices are put. The difference is, essentially, decipherable through an analysis of choices in narrative form.

The satiric (or moral) implications of Flaubert's literature were never likely to inspire the revolutionary fervour whose absence Barthes laments in the latter stages of his thesis on myth (146-7). Flaubert's satire was, much like Wilde's, a satire from within, about those within and for those within. However, if one considers that, more than a century later - and in the same year as the second French edition of Barthes' thesis was published - Dario Fo could employ that most bourgeois of forms, farce, in an effective, revolutionary, theatrical initiative against the neo-fascist Italian bourgeoisie, then perhaps Barthes' counter-mythological schema would benefit from a more flexible approach to the relationship between form and content, and the potential of this relationship in terms of making meaning.<sup>15</sup> After all, as Kearney asserts, "Mythos is a two-way street. It can lead to perversion (bigotry, racism, fascism) or to liberation (the reactivation of a genuine social imaginary open to universal horizons)" (89).

In Barthes' schema, there are two forms of story: one that reinforces bourgeois ideology, and one that contests it. The latter narrative, the counter-myth, restores history to the subject. If a counter-myth can restore its history to the subject, then perhaps the net effect of this formal act is not, by rule, negation. Kearney says, "If we need to de-mythologise, we also need to re-mythologise. And this double process requires a discrimination between authentic and inauthentic uses of mythic storytelling" (89).

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<sup>15</sup> This refers to the first production of Fo's defining progressive, political text, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, first produced in Italy in 1970.



Kearney provides a more optimistic framework with which to look at the progressive potential of myth-making, and the notion of 're-mythologising' at least gives the author a *raison d'être* beyond the counter-mythological struggle. Critical to Kearney's binary of 'authentic' and inauthentic' uses of mythic storytelling, as in Barthes' dialectic of myth and counter-myth, is the relationship between narrative and history. Kearney warns that "we need to keep our mythological memories in critical dialogue with history". By extension, he asserts that "every culture must go on telling stories, inventing and reinventing its inherited imaginary, lest its history congeal into dogma" (90). Kearney's notion of congealment echoes Barthes' warning that, through bourgeois myth, history becomes "frozen, purified, eternalized" (124). Kearney proposes a solution through narrative or, rather, through encoding new narrative approaches to established stories (historical or otherwise). While Barthes proposes a narrative approach in order to disable bourgeois myth, Kearney argues for an enabling, "re-creative" (8) narrative strategy. To prevent what Barthes calls the 'frozen' or 'eternalized' myth, Kearney argues for the story to be told again and, most importantly, to be told in a different way, through a different lens. In anticipation of the analyses, in Chapter Two, Chapter Three, Chapter Four and Chapter Five, of developments in twentieth-century European epic theatre, an analysis of the dialectical strategies at work in fifth-century Greek drama is now required. Incorporated in this analysis is Badiou's reflection, in *The Century*, of conflicting dialectical philosophies that emerged during the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

Kearney states:

... myths are neither good nor bad but *interpretation* makes them so. It's not usually stories in *themselves* that transfigure or disfigure, but the uses and practices to which we put them and the interests and aims we have them serve.  
(89)

Primordial or foundational myths are, as Kearney points out, "re-creative" (8), both in their original culture and in aesthetic (or philosophical) interpretation. This thesis argues that, in the context of grand and micro-narratives, the re-creative act of re-telling is essential to understanding the "interests and aims" (Kearney 89) the stories are made to serve. A comparative analysis of two readings of classical myth, by Roberto Calasso and Friedrich Nietzsche, illustrates ways in which *mythos* can be

appropriated to serve philosophical meaning, either as an assertion of the progressive, enabling power of myth, in Calasso's case or, in Nietzsche's, as a pretext for an anti-dialectical affirmation of objective truths.

Calasso draws attention to a recurring dynamic, in Greek myth, where the "human melodrama must cover up for the silent substance of the divine pact." (55) The 'divine pact' he refers to is that between Apollo and Dionysus, a complicit game they weave, as deities, with the mortal world. These gods "are often to be found along the edges of that borderline, on the divine side and the human" (59). Unlike the other gods of the pantheon, they sometimes surrender their aloofness and participate more fully in the human (or heroic) melodramas of Greek myth. While Athena and Aphrodite also participate in the mortal world of heroes, their visits are fleeting, and they never compromise their unattainably remote status in relation to mortals. Apollo and Dionysus, however, transgress this privilege, and are always liable to go beyond "the limit of what is laid down as acceptable" (59).

In Calasso's mythosphere, Apollo and Dionysus "provoke that back-and-forth in men, that desire to go beyond oneself, which we seem to cling to even more than to our humanity, even more than to life itself" (59-60). Apollo, who prostitutes himself to a mere mortal, Admetus, out of love for him, "plays around the borders of death" (76), constantly antagonizing the rules laid down by his father, the despotic Zeus. Dionysus is also destructive, "not a useful god who helps weave or knot things together, but a god who loosens and unties" (45). He visits the house of the Attican gardener, Icarius and, as a reward for his hospitality, he presents the humble farmer with "something that no one had ever known before: wine" (38).<sup>16</sup> It was, according to Calasso, "exactly what had been missing from life, and what life had been waiting for: intoxication" (36). In this instance, the provocation does not lie in the act (of giving), but in the licence the gift, when unleashed, gives to provocation.

Nietzsche's reading of the relationship between these co-conspirators has a more static sense of form, and a pseudo-Platonic objectivity. For him, Apollo is "the god of all plastic energies ... ruler over the beautiful illusion of the inner world of fantasy"

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<sup>16</sup> The character Icarius is not to be confused with Icarus, the architect of the Minotaur's labyrinth in Cretan myth.

(899), a “symbolical analogue of the soothsaying faculty and of the arts generally” (899). In contrast to this Apollonian, objectified aloofness, the Dionysian aesthetic is one where “everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness” (899). The Dionysian spirit initiates an aesthetic, through celebration and intoxication, whereby “nature which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her lost son, man” (899).

According to Nietzsche, the Apollonian sensibility engenders a robust, ordered sense of form which, when married with Dionysian abandon, completes the recipe for that most noble of narrative forms, Greek drama. Of course, in Nietzsche’s anti-dialectical philosophy, the Apollonian is employed as a servant to form in order to accommodate the Dionysian as a pretext to the subject: Nietzsche’s obsession with “individuation” and “free will” (900). Essentially, Nietzsche appropriates from myth only what serves his own project: what Badiou calls “the idea of changing man, of creating a new man” (*Century* 8). This project, “‘To change what is deepest in man?’ was a revolutionary project” (*Century* 9). In Nietzschean thinking, however, the myth is, as Barthes describes, “somehow frozen, purified, eternalized” (124), a Hellenophilic cartoon of the author’s idealist philosophy.

Calasso’s structuralist reading of the significance of the same two characters in the Greek mythosphere, employs a felicitous form, that of repetition, “necessity’s seal” (33). The actions of Apollo and Dionysus are not explored psychologically, but rather in terms of consequences (rupture and renegotiation of the cosmic order). The narrative form is re-creative, as the author recalls the individual tales in their various guises, drawing connections between separate stories, while also gleaning significances from alternative versions of the same tale (for example, he tells the Europa myth through six alternative versions). The order of things is defined by the changeability of things, by the necessity of a barely evolving but ever-evolving ecology. The grand narrative (emblematised by the despotic hegemony of Zeus) remains in place, but only tentatively so, and is signified through acts of “rape ... the sign of the overwhelming power of the divine” (53). “Rape is at once possessing and possession”, (53) and this is Zeus, the oppressor’s, totalitarian device.

Zeus' aloofness, however, is haunted by the "ancient prophecy, the secret of Prometheus: the prediction that Zeus would one day see his throne usurped, by his most luminous son" (76). While Apollo and Dionysus are dabbling in the affairs of mortal men, "Zeus is watching from on high. He knows that, if ignored, his son's game will bring about the advent of a new age, the collapse of the Olympian order" (76-77). Calasso locates, in the Greek mythosphere, a latent sense of revolution, visible also in both Percy Shelley's revolutionary dialectic<sup>17</sup> and also in Marxian dialectical materialism.<sup>18</sup> Although the usurpation of Zeus by Apollo does not take place in the narrative of Greek myth, its precedent is there (in Zeus' usurpation of his own father, Cronos). Apollo, forever dabbling in the mortal world, emblematises this latent sense of revolution, but, unlike Nietzsche's Apollo, he is not encoded here as a frozen symbol. The Apollo of Calasso's narrative is not a psychological force, but an ecological one, defined by his actions and their consequences. Every action is relative to the other personages in the drama, to the ever-shifting order of things. The multiple narratives that Calasso encodes are overwhelmingly inter-referential, drawing attention to the subject as pretext, constantly metamorphosing through re-interpretation. The pretextual quality of the characters engenders possibilities for transformation, both in the subject and in the radicalized world, or social order, of the narrative.

Essentially, Calasso's narrative form is a marriage of story and interrogation, whereby these ancient stories are allowed to breathe, and the subject (whether Apollo, Dionysus or Zeus) is always visible as a pretext to meaning. Through the process of encoding and re-encoding within the same narrative, Calasso re-invigorates Greek myth as a pretext for complex narrative. He affirms the power of myth through an interrogation of what he calls the "minimal difference" (24):<sup>19</sup> the catalyst which

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<sup>17</sup> See Shelley's "The Triumph of Life" (*Poetry and Prose* 453-72) or "Prometheus Unbound" (*Poetry and Prose* 130-209).

<sup>18</sup> Part of the significance of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu the King*, in its historical context is in its anticipation of the twentieth century as a "voluntarist century" (Badiou, *Century* 14). If, as Badiou states, the twentieth century "fulfils the promises of the nineteenth" (*Century* 19), then the dialectical philosophies of the Romantics, Marx, and Greek drama are essential to understanding the context of Jarry as a playwright operating in the *fin-de-siècle* of late-nineteenth-century Paris. These connections will be teased out in more detail in Chapter Three.

<sup>19</sup> Badiou also uses the term "minimal difference" to define an artistic stance which he exemplifies with reference to Malevich's painting, *White on White*, whereby "the difference of the Same – what we could call the vanishing difference" represents a subtractive, aesthetic "proposition in thought that opposes minimal difference to maximal destruction" (*Century* 55-6).

disrupts the order of things, transforming the mythical world. In Calasso's mythosphere, this 'minimal difference' originates in the story of Zeus' betrayal of his wife, Hera, with the mortal Io:

... it was in the Heraion that the story of Zeus' first betrayal, origin of all vendettas, began. To betray Hera, Zeus chose one of her priestesses, the human being closest to her, since it was she held the keys to the shrine. Her name was Io. In looks and dress it was Io's duty to re-create the image of the goddess she served. She was a copy endeavouring to imitate a statue. But Zeus chose the copy: he wanted that minimal difference which is enough to overturn order, to generate the new, generate meaning. And he wanted it because it was a difference, and her because she was a copy. The more negligible the difference, the more terrible and violent the revenge. All Zeus' other adventures, all Hera's other vendettas, would be nothing more than further heaves on that same wheel of necessity Hera set rolling to punish the woman most like herself. (24)

The chauvinistic laws of Greek heroic agency, according to Calasso, originate in the story of Zeus' conquest of Io. The male heroic gesture is destructive, and the male hero defines himself either as a "slayer of monsters" (68) or through "copulation, *mixis*, [which] means *mingling* with the world" (52). On the other hand, the "heroic gesture of women is betrayal" and "its influence on the course of events is just as great as the slaying of monsters" (69). When the male hero (Theseus, Jason, Achilles) acts, he "clears a space, [and] leaves an evocative vacuum where before there was a clutter" (70). Because the male hero is characterized by obstinacy, by the "following of one path and no other" (70), his actions need to be complemented by a form of negation, the female heroic act: the act of betrayal. Calasso asserts that the act of betrayal (Ariadne, Medea, Clytemnaestra) "does not alter the elements in space but rearranges them. The influence of certain pieces on the chessboard is inverted. White attacks white. Black attacks black. The effect is confusing, above all disturbing" (70). It is this confusion, or re-negotiation of power relations and ideologies, that provides the pretext for Greek tragedy.

It is the female heroic gesture, the act of betrayal, that, as Howard Barker states, "makes illegality" tragedy's "obsessive subject, putting morality into play as a conjuror keeps chrome rings revolving in the air" (293). Calasso's 'minimal

difference' informs how we understand the catalyst (the act of, or response to, betrayal, often intertwined) that inspires the dramatic action in Greek drama, while also explaining the convention of narrative closure in this dramatic form. Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is an illustrative example of how the act of betrayal represents a chain of, rather than individual, acts. Clytemnestra's betrayal of her husband (to Aegisthus) is a response to what she perceives to be his act of betrayal (the sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia). Orestes' subsequent matricide of Clytemnestra is at once a betrayal of his obligations, in divine law, to his mother, and a vitalistic act of revenge for the murder of his father, justifiable under a separate thinking of divine law, that of his obligations to his father. The female hero, through the act of betrayal, "completes the [male] hero's work", that of rupture, as her actions set in motion a logical chain of events that brings the story "to its conclusion and winds the story up" (70). The 'minimal difference' is, therefore, equally essential to the end as well as to the beginning of the tragic plot, as befits philosophies that see 'revolution' as a 'turning of a wheel', or the notion of the circularity of fate, or "korónē" (Calasso 58), in Greek myth. It initiates the displacement of Oedipus for the latent despot, Creon (in Sophocles' *King Oedipus* and *Antigone*). It sets in motion the mutation from an aristocracy in imperial triumph, when Agamemnon returns from Troy, to an aristocracy in decay, after Orestes' pardoning (in *Oresteia*), through the intervention, or deus-ex-machina, of Athena.

The 'minimal difference', in Greek drama, however, is appropriated from mythos and rendered as a logical extension of the unquestioning ideology of the Athenian city-state: the superiority of Athenian democracy. Athenian drama may be understood as an interrogation of the popular, rhetorical philosophies of fifth century Athens, mainly the Sophistic and the Platonic, and their uses as oratorical strategies in Athenian political life. If sophistry was the philosophical (and oratorical) art of persuasion, susceptible to abuse by the ambitious and amoral,<sup>20</sup> then Greek drama, through its chorus, was obsessively concerned with close analysis of the ethical merit of what the

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<sup>20</sup> Sophistry, at its basic level, involved instruction in the art of oratory and public debate and, practically, taught its student the ability to make his point to the electorate with clarity and brevity. At its most cynical, sophistry taught the art of persuasion as an end in itself, regardless of the ethics of the point being put forth.

orator puts forth as reasonable logic.<sup>21</sup> By reflecting on the relation between the art of sophistry and Greek tragedy, we see the impregnability of this dramatic form to a radical political aesthetic. It is the Greek chorus, emblematic of Athenian democracy, which controls the sophistic impulse for rupture, by means of its commentaries.

The chorus is the fixed term in Greek tragedy, and the unchangeable social order of the Homeric world (*mythos*) serves, in this dramatic form, as a metaphor for the robust structures of Athenian democracy. The political structures of the city-state are therefore positioned outside history, omnipotent and unchangeable, and leadership is dramatised as an act of succession based on reasonable attitudes to Athenian democracy. Antigone is not a revolutionary in Sophocles' tragedy, but rather an upstanding citizen who brings other citizens to their senses through her tragic fate (and good example).<sup>22</sup> Any revolutionary potential in Greek myth remains latent and is subsumed by the grand narrative of the Athenian city-state. Greek tragic form conceals, in Barthesian terms, the rigidity of the state apparatus. A consideration of this apparatus in relation to the art form, on the other hand, reveals the regressive, disabling quality of the dramatic form of Greek tragedy.

Platonic dialectics, on the other hand, purports to be an objective mode of reasoning, whose project is meditation on the nature of divine truths. It is a philosophy of reason, and achieves its insights through a subtractive reasoning, an elimination of errant possibilities. It is the dominant philosophy of Greek tragedy, because its concerns are abstract and distanced from the materiality of fifth-century, Athenian life. It cannot contemplate another social structure, because the one in which it exists is, according to Plato, a corrupted version of the objective reality (and social order) of the divine. For Plato, the 'minimal differences' dramatised on the Greek stage merely draw attention to the relative difference between the earthly, corrupted version of (for example) justice, and the objectified, 'true' version of justice that belongs to the

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<sup>21</sup> A common index of hubris in the tragic hero is a steadfast and despotic insistence on collective submission to his precepts, and a failure to consider the advice of the chorus leader or other advisors. A lack of dialogue, or dialectical thinking, for the Greek hero, means tragic consequences.

<sup>22</sup> After all, Antigone (in Sophocles' *Antigone*) does not take sides politically with her brother Polyneices, the revolutionary, but rather demands that the state respect his absolute right to burial.

divine, and which cannot be described completely by words, because words are corporeal.<sup>23</sup>

Greek tragedy presumes prescriptive fate, and its narratives are, therefore, philosophically vitalistic. Platonic philosophy, obsessed with form and idealization, is evident in the Aristotelian tragic model, whereby tragic form serves the grand narrative of Athenian democratic structures. The latent revolutionary quality of Greek myth, suggested by the “melodramas” (55) of Calasso’s narrative, is crystallised in Greek tragic form into a “metalinguistic signified (or concept)” that is “at once historical and intentional” (Barthes 118). As for “the motivation which causes the myth to be uttered” (Barthes 118), it is the politics of imperialism, and the ideological consolidation of the metropolitan centre of the Athenian empire. The themes of Greek tragedy (justice, morality, citizenship), explored dialogically through sophisticated dialectical reasoning, serve a metalinguistic signified that is “in no way abstract” (Barthes 119). The negative quality of Greek tragedy is embedded in its rigidity as a form in service to the apparatus of the city-state,<sup>24</sup> whereby *mythos* is appropriated and “it is a whole new history which is implanted in the myth” (Barthes 119).

Similarly, the apparatus of Greek comedy serves to endorse and consolidate the foundations of Athenian imperialism. Aristophanic comedy satirises individuals, generally State figures and influential personages in Athenian life, through caricature and the association of legislative incompetence with the logic of low social status figures. *Lysistrata*, for example, is encoded according to the misogynistic notion that the Athenian government was handling the Peloponnesian War so badly that even women could do a better job.<sup>25</sup> In *Knights*, the Magistrate Cleon is defeated in a public debate by a Sausage-Seller, who displaces the (real-life) political leader in the

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<sup>23</sup> The similarity between the Platonic theme of the inadequacy of language as a means of attaining objective truth, and the recurrence, in Romantic poetry, of the use of fantastical imagery to draw attention to the limitations of poetic imagery, is important in the sense that Nietzsche’s post-Romantic appropriation of myth as a metaphor for the ‘new man’ mirrors Greek drama’s conservative rigidity of form.

<sup>24</sup> I use the term ‘apparatus’ here to invoke Brecht’s use of the term to critique what he calls “[the theatre apparatus] social function”, the manner in which the bourgeois theatre is a robust social structure which endorses conservative values and refuses “to discuss those [formal innovations] which threaten to change its function” (*On Theatre* 34).

<sup>25</sup> In Aristophanes’ time, women had no suffrage, were not considered full citizens, and had a social status equivalent to slaves.



satiric world of the drama.<sup>26</sup> In *Clouds*, the teachings of the prominent schools of rhetoric and philosophy are lampooned, mainly through the caricature of the philosopher, Socrates. One of the grey areas regarding Athenian Old Comedy, the question of how seriously its audience regarded its satiric content, is crystallized in the caricature of Socrates. Superficially, the representation of Socrates is light-hearted and seems to be a vehicle for uncomplicated humour rather than a serious engagement with the philosopher and his ideas. However, in Plato's "Apology", a dialogic account of the trial where Socrates is sentenced to death for corrupting the minds of the young people of Athens, the philosopher cites the Aristophanic caricature as a factor which turned the sentiments of the Athenian *polis* against him (41-2).

It is in Athenian Old Comedy that the audience are, apparently, flattered as aficionados of the oratorical arts. This is best exemplified by *Lysistrata*'s famous speech (204), which outlines a strategy for negotiating a truce with Sparta. In this speech, she describes Athenian women's system for treating corrupted wool in the weaving process, employing this practice as a metaphor for effective political diplomacy. *Lysistrata*, written in 411BC, is haunted by memory of the recently failed Sicilian Expedition (413BC), an ill-advised naval engagement led by the ambitious (and somewhat hubristic) general Alcibiades. *Lysistrata*'s speech lampoons the rhetoric of prophetic politics, and critiques the failed promises of Athens' political and military leaders during the ill-fated Peloponnesian War. Although easily read as an anti-war satire, *Lysistrata* is far more acerbic in its critique of the competence of the Athenian military than in its interrogation of the justifiability of involvement in the war itself. Aristophanic comic form, therefore, in collaboration with the poetics of Greek tragedy, serves not to question the apparatus of the Athenian empire, but to consolidate it.

Like Sophocles' *Antigone*, the plays *Lysistrata* and *Knights* obsessively interrogate the oratorical arts, encoding contradictions in the logic of the protagonists and demanding a forensic, critical spectatorship on the part of its audience. As Brecht

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<sup>26</sup> The Sausage-Seller represents another low status figure in the Athenian social hierarchy. The political credibility of politicians like Cleon was, in this society, largely dependent on their rhetorical skills.

noted, "Greek drama uses certain forms of alienation, notably interventions by the chorus" (*On Theatre* 210), and these formal devices served to critically distance the spectator in both tragedy and comedy. If the foundation of Athenian democracy is political debate, and the susceptibility of political leaders to the ever-shifting favour of the polis is the safeguard against despotism (hence the dramatized depositions of Oedipus, Creon and, in comedy, Cleon), then Greek drama is the formal process through which progressive social dynamics like critical spectatorship, critical citizenship and moral concerns are staged in the Greek classical world.

It is one of the great contradictions of Greek drama that it at once has a progressive form, in terms of spectatorship and critical citizenship, and a regressive project that consolidates, unquestioningly, the apparatus of the State. From the point of view of the privileged full citizens of the Athenian city-state, Greek dramatic form exemplifies Athenian democracy and its finest principles. From the point of view of everybody else – women, slaves, Athenian colonies – it is a regressive, suppressive form, because changeability (the 'minimal difference') is contemplated only with regard to *dramatis personae*, rather than to form itself (whether that of Greek drama or Athenian democracy). The Platonic crystallisation of form, therefore, in both Athenian politics and Greek drama (and latterly, through Aristotle, in Greek literary theory), suppresses the sense of rupture that is characteristic of the revolutionary power of myth. The narrative content of Greek drama undoubtedly retains a sense of the radical, progressive, regenerative quality of classical myth, as notable modern adaptations have illustrated.<sup>27</sup> Its dialectic, however, is less a conversation with itself than a conversation within itself, as the sense of rupture begins and ends in the dramatic world, tending towards introspection rather than sociology.

Greek dramatic form, as an extension of oratory, exemplifies Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's assertion that "Drama is closer to the dialectics of life than poetry and fiction", in the sense that "Life is movement arising from the inherent contradiction and unity of

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<sup>27</sup> Examples of this can be found, once more, in contemporary adaptations of *Lysistrata*, which range from radical feminist versions to productions engaging with the story from the point of view of the body politic. Similarly, Athol Fugard has radically engaged on several occasions with Sophocles' *Antigone*, including a three-hour, largely silent adaptation based on the techniques of Grotowski, his meta-theatrical critique of apartheid in *The Island* (devised and co-written with John Kani and Winston Ntshona) and numerous productions of the original when deemed topical by the South African author-director.

opposites” (54). As a social event, it reflects the fact that, as Jean-Louis Barrault states, “We are double”, that “the human being has the possibility of living and seeing itself live” (qtd. in Lecoq 57). For Badiou, “theatre is above all the art of the mask, the art of semblance” (*Century* 47), an intrinsically presentational art form propelled, in narrative terms, by opposites, and decipherable by its negotiation of “semblance” (representation) and “the real” (the reality that semblance distorts). To return to Kearney’s statement that “myths are neither good nor bad but *interpretation* makes them so” (89), it is important to consider ways in which theatre, as an art form, may be decipherable in terms of “the uses and practices to which” stories are put, “and the interests and aims we have them serve” (89). In order to establish an analytical framework, this thesis considers the art form in terms of its dualities and opposites, and discusses drama in relation to contrasting philosophies of dialectics, both progressive and regressive.

In *The Century*, Badiou discusses conflicting dialectical philosophies which emerged during, and largely defined, the Chinese Cultural revolution, from 1965 up to the accession to power of Deng Xiao-ping in 1976. During this period, Chinese intellectuals debated the essence of dialectics in terms of political philosophy, and Badiou analyzes the conflict in mathematical terms. On one side, there were those who argued that “the essence of dialectics is the genesis of antagonism, and that it is given in the formula ‘one divides into two’” (60). On the other side, it was argued that “the essence of dialectics is the synthesis of contradictory terms and that consequently the right formula is ‘two fuse into one’” (60).

The first position emphasizes division - ‘one divides into two’ - and declares itself to be philosophically (and politically) leftist. It embraces Mao’s progressive belief that a socialist State “must act as a stimulus for the unleashing of politics, under the banner of the march towards real communism” (61). It asserts that, in “order to be a revolutionary activist in the present”, it is “obligatory to desire division” (60). It associates progressive Marxism with division, (an almost wilful) antagonism and active political citizenship: essentially, it is a dialectics that foments radical dialogue and sees the apparatus of the State as ever-evolving and subject to critical, progressive scrutiny. It promotes the notion of the State apparatus as a mutable and transparent structure. The maxim of division does not presume a synthetic narrative of the State:

rather, it sees historical determinism as regenerative or, for the purpose of this thesis, as a progression of ruptures and the necessary 'minimal differences' they effect.

Against this, the maxim of synthesis is declared rightist, in its conviction that dialectics is "the synthesis of contradictory terms, and that consequently the right formula is 'two fuse into one'" (60). It embraces historical determinism through the "theme of total emancipation" (63), and Deng's project, towards a despotic politics and a neo-capitalist Chinese state, requires the synthesis of the 'two', a dialogue about the apparatus of the state, into the 'one', a "collectivizable thought" (63), docile to a "programme of development and socialist construction [which was] diametrically opposed to Mao's innovative collectivist project" (62). Deng Xiao-ping and his followers believed that, "since economic management is the principal aspect of things – popular mobilizations are more nefarious than necessary" (61).

Badiou describes the maxim of synthesis as a "restorative" dialectical philosophy, because the "One it covets is not even yet thinkable, which means that *under the cover of synthesis, this desire is calling for the old One*" (60). The 'One it covets' is, as referred to earlier, the notion of 'real communism', an annihilation of class systems and the 'total emancipation' of workers. This is distinct from the "old One", the real aim of Deng's project, a prolonging of the despotism of the Communist Party. Deng's project, which exemplified the maxim of synthesis, was restorative because it produced a neo-capitalist (or neo-feudal) State apparatus, and it achieved this under the pretence (or semblance) of "the banner of the march towards real communism" (61). A dialectics that moves towards synthesis, therefore, disables dialogue on the apparatus of the State: its ideologies, its social structures and the means (or semblances) through which it encodes its regressive (or bourgeois) mythologies.

There is, in the conflict between the maxim of division and the maxim of synthesis, "an equally violent antagonism between two ways of considering and thinking antagonism" (59). In Badiou's reflection on twentieth century thinking, this is an antagonism "between communist and fascist thinking, or projection of thinking" (59). Badiou describes how a politics of synthesis, like Deng's, "when it exists, grounds its own principle regarding the real, and is thus in need of nothing, save itself" (63). The closer that a State apparatus develops towards 'the one', the more hostile it is to the

progressive antagonism of 'the two'. This explains the persecution of the revolutionary (thinker, artist or otherwise) in the autocratic state, and the hostility towards the revolutionary in the modern, euro-centric, capitalist state. Hence, the need for a progressive dramaturgy, that is a rupturing of both bourgeois dramatic form and the theatre apparatus (as it is also a part of the conservative State apparatus).

Greek drama provides an illuminating case-study of what Badiou sees as the relationship between 'the one' and 'the two' in terms of the development of a progressive poetics. Superficially, it embraces dialectical reasoning as progressive, through the presentation, as Fintan O'Toole says, of "two ways of understanding the world, two human frameworks, two sets of terms of reference for how we should live" ("John B Keane and the Ireland of his Time" 35). Its narrative pretext is an antagonism, a division into 'two'. Its over-riding aesthetic, however, is cathartic, which "is about a sense of inevitability ... a sense that something is happening which cannot happen otherwise" ("John B Keane" 53). The cathartic aesthetic form, which institutionalizes and venerates narrative closure, is a formal movement towards 'the one', and therein it reveals itself as a poetics that employs the 'semblance' of 'the two' as a means of distorting its 'real', its role as a function of 'the one' of the State apparatus. Because the Athenian State apparatus is an anti-dialectical synthesis, the form of its drama must distort this through an appropriate genre of representation. This genre, Greek drama, performs its social function through a meta-linguistic distortion of 'the one', through what may be called *a semblance of dialectics*.

Chapter Two analyzes the first production of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu the King* at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris (1896). The analysis will set out to identify how Jarry, as the originator of the twentieth-century epic theatre, deploys parody, pastiche, and the duality of the mask towards an oppositional, dramaturgical strategy. Subsequent analyses will seek to situate Jarry's practice in relation to that of Bertolt Brecht (Chapter Three and Chapter Four) and Dario Fo (Chapter Five). Chapter Five will conclude the first section of this thesis with a summary of what constitutes an epic strategy, in the contexts of the readings offered of all three epic practitioners.

## A Night in the Theatre 1

***Ubu the King*, by Alfred Jarry, presented at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre,  
Paris, December 9<sup>th</sup> 2007.**

With the script of the play having been published some months in advance of the première, the audience of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre may have thought that they had a good idea of what was to come. Aurélien Lugné-Poe was credited as director in the publicity, and the audience may have assumed that the Symbolist theatre guru would impose some level of order on Jarry's eccentric parody of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The casting of celebrated comedian Firmin Gémier, borrowed from the Odéon for three nights, in the title role was likely to ensure a respectable standard of comic performance, and the event promised at the very least an interesting contrast to the habitual solemnity of productions at the 'small theatre' of the Symbolist avant-garde. Certainly not all of the audience underestimated Jarry's talent for provocation to this extent, but it is likely that many did (why else the explosion?). Present was the Irish writer, William Butler Yeats, who had insufficient French to understand the dialogue, but understood that there was a provocation at work in the craft of representation. Also present was André Antoine, manager of the Théâtre Libre, the other 'small theatre' of the Parisian avant-garde, associated with radical experiments in Naturalism, as both director and actor, and, arguably, the first psychological realist actor of the modern stage. The rest of the audience included critics, artists, patrons of the theatres, and an apparently open-minded mixture of students and theatre-goers. Dotted around the audience were members of Jarry's coterie, and their role was essential. They were to play the role of anti-claquers,<sup>28</sup> and were under instruction to counter any audience applause with boos and hissing, and to applaud enthusiastically if the congregation were to take exception to the presentation (which, of course, they did).

The audience was for the most part unaware that Jarry had cuckolded the advertised director, as it were, and taken control of the rehearsal process himself. Lugné-Poe,

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<sup>28</sup> A claquer, in French theatre, is a professional audience member, who encourages other spectators to respond 'in the right way' to the dramatic action. For example, in comedy, the claquer will laugh or applaud at a pre-planned moment. Or, in a melodrama, the claquer will dab a handkerchief to his/her face at a moment of tragic exposition.

the theatre manager, was made a spectator of his own, undeserved directorial credit. Before the performance, Jarry walked onstage, cross-dressed as a streetwalker, and delivered an ambiguous, ten minute preliminary address which instructs the audience to draw 'whatever allusions' they like from the play, and announced that the play is set in Poland, which means 'anywhere'. On his exit, the curtain opened to unveil a backdrop painted at once with a range of locations: indoor and outdoor, sunny and snowy, city and country. A man in evening dress skipped across the stage (and did so between each episode) to hang a placard on a nail, indicating where the subsequent action would be located.

The celebrity comedian Gémier entered and unleashed the mask of Père Ubu upon the audience. He curses profusely, mainly through the familiar *merde* (shit), or the coined *merdre* (shite or shitter), and the action that ensued contemptuously ruptured many established conventions of stage representation: the Polish army was performed by one actor; Gémier screamed expletives directly at the audience, toilet-brush in hand; props were optional, and were often akin to items produced in a kindergarten arts and crafts class. By Act Three, the 'excessive' use of expletives drew vocal protests from the audience. Following this, an actor simulated opening an unseen castle door (an affront to Naturalism), and the performance was interrupted by fifteen minutes of protests, both for and against. The protest was initiated by Antoine, guru of the Naturalist Théâtre Libre, outraged, one assumes, at the affront to verisimilitude. Gémier restored order through some slapstick foolery, and the remainder of the performance was uninterrupted.

During the protest, there are three sets of alternatives at work. Firstly, there is the avant-garde, as alternative to the mainstream theatre. Secondly, there is the Symbolist avant-garde Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, as alternative to the Naturalist avant-garde Théâtre Libre. Then there is Jarry, sniggering behind the gauze and celebrating the provocation with his collaborators until the early hours. Jarry opposes them all.

## Chapter Two

### Opposing Avant-garde Alternatives: Alfred Jarry and *Ubu the King*

In the coming chapters, this thesis will argue for a reconsideration of the genealogy of twentieth-century European epic theatre, beginning with an analysis of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu the King*, continuing with an analysis of the theatre of Bertolt Brecht, with particular reference to *The Good Person of Szechuan*, and finishing with a discussion of the practices of Dario Fo, focussed on an analysis of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. It will be argued that Jarry's practice re-introduces residual cultural elements to the European stage, relating to performance traditions of the mask and storytelling, towards a dramaturgy that opposes the innate conservatism of the 1890s French avant-garde and its modes of representation. This opposition, via the eventual performance of *Ubu the King*, interrogates two characteristics of the dominant Parisian avant-garde theatres of his contemporaries, André Antoine and Aurélien Lugné-Poe: firstly, the subject-matter of their dramas and, secondly, the ethics of their modes of representation. Jarry's dramaturgy will be argued, in dialectical terms, as at once subtractive (of the catharses of codified genre), divisive (as it opposes the representational conventions of the avant-garde), and additive (in the sense that a new dramaturgy emerges).

This emergent dramaturgy will be argued, in philosophical terms, as an oppositional cultural element, which defines the epic theatre in ways which are further developed in the subsequent dramaturgical strategies of Brecht and Fo. Jarry, it is argued, anticipates Walter Benjamin's aspiration for a poetics whereby the "sterile dichotomy of form and content [in drama] can be surmounted" (*Understanding Brecht* 87-88). It will be argued that the mode of pastiche which Jarry deploys in *Ubu the King*, which disdains rather than respects the codifications of genre, becomes a significant element in subsequent developments in epic dramaturgy. Also, the significance of the mask and the storyteller in Jarry's play will be linked to how these elements are deployed in the practices of Brecht and Fo in the following chapters.

An analysis of the first production, in 1896, of *Ubu the King*, is the focus of this chapter, arguing for a reconsideration of the playwright as the originator of epic



theatre as a mode of thought, rather than as the forefather of the surrealist and absurdist theatres, as he is habitually classified. It will be argued that this particular production, as a social event, may be viewed as the assertion of epic theatre as an aesthetic strategy, rather than as a theatrical genre or movement in itself. Epic theatre will be discussed as a strategy that is continually appropriative (as opposed to revisionist) of folk cultural elements, and wilfully counter-generic in the sense that epic theatre consciously seeks to alienate (or distance) the spectator from the catharses of genre (the dramatic forms of bourgeois mythology). Epic theatre will, therefore, be seen as counter-mythological in the sense that its dialectical strategies seek to negate the codifications (and therefore semblances) of bourgeois myth.

Jarry's text is traditionally (and correctly) viewed as a parody of the Shakespearean historical (or heroic) drama, and a formal assault on the high-art, bourgeois pretensions of late nineteenth-century western theatre. For this thesis, the play is also a pastiche that incorporates the parody of elements of the Naturalist and Symbolist avant-gardes of 1890s Paris. Its performance is argued as a form of cultural insurgency, set in opposition to the emergent independent theatres of Jarry's contemporaries, André Antoine and Aurélien Lugné-Poe (who was also Jarry's colleague at the time of production). Antoine's Théâtre Libre (meaning 'Free Theatre' or 'Independent Theatre'),<sup>29</sup> which functioned between 1887 and 1896, and Lugné-Poe's Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, which operated as an independent art theatre between 1893 and 1899,<sup>30</sup> are the acknowledged sites of the Parisian avant-garde theatres of the late nineteenth-century, and it is in this milieu that Jarry emerged in 1893, "like a wild animal entering a ring" (Braun 51).

Bettina Knapp locates the emergence of the "reign of the theatrical director" (19) in the French avant-garde theatres of the 1890s. Antoine, a scholar of recent innovations

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<sup>29</sup> Antoine's initiative inspired numerous independent (or 'small') theatres internationally which, following his lead, attempted to operate free of the artistic constraints imposed by the economic apparatus of the commercial or subsidized, mainstream theatre. Independent theatre groups founded elsewhere included "an experimental theatre founded by Strindberg in Copenhagen in March 1889 ... the Freie Bühne, which opened in Berlin in September of that year under the direction of Otto Brahm ... [and] the Independent Theatre (subtitled 'Théâtre Libre') under J.T. Grein opened in London with *Ghosts* in March 1891" (Braun 32).

<sup>30</sup> The Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, in fact, operated as a producing venue until 1929. However, for financial reasons, Lugné-Poe was forced to terminate its existence as an independent art venue in the summer of 1899, after which it functioned more as a conventional theatre running on commercial lines.

in the naturalistic theatre as developed by Duke Georg II's Meiningen Theatre, "was deeply impressed by the crowd effects in [the Meiningen's version of] Schiller's *William Tell*,<sup>31</sup> and shortly afterwards applied similar methods to his own productions at the Théâtre Libre" (Braun 15). In 1880, one German critic observed of the Meiningen company that "the virtuoso actor has now given way to the virtuoso director" (Braun 21). The iconography and movement, rigorously conceived by Duke Georg II, and realized in meticulous naturalistic detail via Ludwig Chronegk's direction, was to have a significant impact on Antoine's subsequent approaches to directing for the stage.

Braun describes the Meiningen approach to theatrical production:

The artistic relationship of the Duke and Chronegk was an unusual yet harmonious one: whilst the overall interpretation and visualisation of the play was the Duke's, Chronegk had the job of running the company, conducting rehearsals, and translating Georg's impressionistic instructions and illustrations into the language of stage action. (13)

It is telling that, when the Meiningen performed in London in 1881, their work was subjected to mixed, and sometimes hostile, criticism. Some of this criticism, Braun explains, was because "a country that still spoke of the 'stage manager' rather than the producer or director, saw the actors' theatre under threat" (16). It is in the symbiotic relationship between Duke Georg (as designer) and Chronegk (as director marrying these designs with carefully choreographed movement) that the prototype of the modern theatrical director as dramaturgical auteur may be located. During the 1890s, the development of the role of the modern director by Antoine and, latterly and simultaneously, by Lugné-Poe, had a crucial influence on Jarry's development as author-designer, author-director, author-dramaturg or, most significantly, as a dramaturgical strategist.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Meiningen denotes the noun, while Meiningen as the adjectival relates to the ensemble of the Meiningen Theatre.

<sup>32</sup> Although Lugné-Poe was credited as the director of the production of *Ubu the King* at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in 1896, Jarry took an active role in rehearsals, and contributed to the direction, design and, via his preliminary address to the audience at the première (which he presented dressed as a streetwalker), as a performer. In a manner - if not an aesthetic spirit - not unlike Duke Georg, he also outlines a clear dramaturgical approach to the production in "A Letter to Lugné-Poe, 8 January 1896". The multi-faceted immersion both of Antoine (director, actor, producer, theatre manager) and Lugné-

Influenced by the Meininger's ensemble approach, Antoine established the Théâtre Libre and "abolished the star system". Antoine's company "worked as a unit – a cohesive whole" (Knapp 19), not unlike a contemporary, small-scale repertory theatre company. Despairing of the commercial theatre, which he felt was "vapid, arid and sterile" and "wallowed in mediocrity", his aim was to "create a theatre that would be meaningful to his audiences, stir and perhaps even shock them into a new state of awareness" (Knapp 20). Braun documents how his "repertoire embraced farce, melodrama, historical pageants, verse, drama, mime, even a shadow-play". However, "most representative of the theatre's style was the *quart d'heure*, the brief one-act 'slice of life'" (28), which defined the director's radical approach to the naturalistic theatre.

Knapp notes that Antoine's "*slice of life* production[s] ... brought audiences face to face with themselves and with their environment. Decors followed the patterns of reality. A revolutionary acting technique [emerged, where] actors and actresses no longer declaimed in stiff and studied ways, as with the style in state-subsidized and boulevard theatres" (19). The Théâtre Libre originated from what Antoine saw as the need "for a playwright's theatre" (Braun 26), as there was little or no outlet for the work of new playwrights who wrote texts unsuited to the conservative, "after-dinner diversion[s]" (Braun 23) of the commercial theatre. The Théâtre Libre successfully staged the French première of the works of many hitherto unknown French writers and numerous, innovative, international playwrights. In the case of Jarry, however, one of the significant innovations (and lasting influences) of Antoine's theatre was its foregrounding of a concern with the actor's technique, and a focus on developing a specific performance language that attempted to radicalize the exchange mechanism between performer and spectator for the modern theatre.

Antoine embraced Emile Zola's desire for translating "naturalistic technique into stage terms, of reconciling the scientific objectivity achieved in the novel with the degree of artifice unavoidable in the theatre" (Braun 24). In response to the commercial theatre, he advocated and endorsed new writing that would "no longer be based like its predecessor on five or six agreed [character] types who are always the

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Poe (director, producer, theatre manager) in their productions, explains Jarry's licence to become actively involved in several roles in the production of *Ubu the King*.

same”, and would require a ‘new actor’ flexible enough to embody “the multiplicity and complexity of the stage characters” (xvii) of the ‘Free Theatre’. He called for the “art of the actor” to “gain its life from truth, observation, and the *direct* study of nature” (xvii), for an “intimate drama”, with “credible settings” and “unaffected gestures” (xviii).

Antoine’s obsessive search for verisimilitude defined his approach both to scenography/mise-en-scène and acting. Famously, in the stage design for his production of Zola’s *Jacques Damour* (first produced in 1887), he was frustrated at having to use *trompe l’oeil* to locate the drama in a butcher’s shop, although this was a technique “which he would rarely use in future productions” (Knapp 20). He preferred, as in his 1888 production of *Les Bouchers*, to hang real carcasses of mutton on hooks to signify the location of a butcher-shop: “for great theatre to be born, Antoine believed, truth alone – and not idealism – must live on stage” (Knapp 22). While offering patrons “a preponderance of naturalistic, realistic, and psychological dramas” (Knapp 20), Antoine’s theatre effectively configured a laboratory through which to explore the role of what he saw as the ‘new actor’ or, in contemporary terms, the psychological realist approach to performance.

Ironically, although the Théâtre Libre rejected the ‘star system’ of the commercial theatre, the character roles, in the psychological realist ancestry, for which the Théâtre Libre is renowned, were those performed by Antoine himself. In *Jacques Damour*, Antoine (in the title role) famously “underplayed the highly emotional situations on stage, thereby increasing the impact of his character’s inner tension” (Knapp 20). Antoine intensified the subtextual quality of his performance to the point where, as Knapp reports, “Jacques Damour walked the planks at the Théâtre Libre” (20). Knapp also remarks how “Antoine portrayed Jacques as a stern and grim man: tragic, like many a Greek hero destroyed by destiny” (20), suggesting a cathartic aesthetic, whereby audience identification with the protagonist is achieved through the intimacy and sub-textual qualities of the production. Knapp also notes that the Théâtre Libre’s production of Tolstoy’s melancholy *The Power of Darkness*, which Antoine directed successfully in 1888, “like Greek tragedy ... bore within its plot and characterization mythic and mystic qualities” (22). The introspective quality of Antoine’s approach to verisimilitude and subtext, therefore, suggests that the radical Naturalism of the

Théâtre Libre had more in common with the deterministic aesthetics of Greek drama than with the moral choices presented on the medieval, Renaissance or epic theatre stages.

Antoine's theatre, for all its formal innovation in terms of its *mise-en-scène*, its intimate relationship with audience and its radical approaches to acting and characterization, reflected the reactionary, deterministic convictions of two of his main influences, Emile Zola and the Meiningen Theatre. Zola's work was, as Braun notes, "generally characterised by a moral indignation at prevailing conditions in society, yet he [was] reticent in identifying causes beyond the imperfect nature of the human species" (25). Similarly, "with its preoccupation with the external elements of environment and its effect on the individual, plus the significance of that individual in relation to the crowd, the Meiningen came to embrace what was in effect a deterministic view of human behaviour" and it was "determinism that was the founding principle of naturalistic art" (Braun 21). Antoine's obsession with 'truth', as he called it, involved a deliberate attempt to obscure the artifice of his artefacts. His hyper-introspective approach to character representation, therefore, underlines how the main concern of the project of Naturalism was the interrogation of the selfhood of the individual in the context of a 'given' society. The notion of society as changeable, and the individual as social agent, is a project for a more progressive, radical approach to the art form, initiated, according to this thesis, by Alfred Jarry and the first production of *Ubu the King*.

Antoine embodied the multiple roles of manager, producer, director and actor at the Théâtre Libre, and was ideally suited to the task of establishing the modern theatrical director as at once an auteur, a dramaturg and a radical strategist in approach to dramatic form. Antoine's dramaturgy, however, as a cultural element, will be argued as alternative rather than oppositional. But, firstly, this thesis must undertake a brief analysis of the activities at the other significant site of the Parisian avant-garde theatre of the 1890s, the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre.

The Théâtre de l'Oeuvre emerged as the natural successor to Paul Fort's independent Théâtre de l'Art, which closed in the spring of 1893. Fort's theatre, which dissipated largely due to financial mismanagement and the poor quality of its productions,

significantly “broke the hold of Naturalism and caused a revolution in stage design” (Braun 44), mainly through its collaboration with the poets and visual artists of the Symbolist movement. Fort’s productions were characterized by their lengthy, almost cabaret-style programmes, including short and full-length plays, recitations and poetry readings. The Théâtre de l’Oeuvre extended this collaboration between the Symbolist movement and the theatrical avant-garde. Lugné-Poe, however, simplified Fort’s programming formula, and specialised in producing, generally, one full-length play per evening, with minimal Symbolist or impressionist *mise-en-scènes*.

Much as the Symbolist poets “used words not as signs to fix and define experience, but as evocations of a reality beyond that perceived by the senses” (Braun 38), Lugné-Poe’s “vision of the theatre went beyond the visible world, directly into the occult, sometimes nightmarish, transcendental domains” (Knapp 24). Stéphane Mallarmé’s rejection of “the vague need for individuality” (qtd. in Braun 38) in the literature and dramas of his contemporaries (including the plays produced by Antoine) reflects the fact that the Symbolists’ “ultimate belief was in a cosmology contingent not on moral or mathematical but on aesthetic principles” (38). The Symbolist theatre rejected naturalistic modes of audience identification, favouring a more presentational approach to characterization over a sub-textual focus on a nominated protagonist. The desired aesthetic impact was, however, in the case of Antoine, a cathartic one.

Knapp’s account of two productions at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre – Henri de Régnier’s *La Gardienne* (1894) and Maurice Maeterlinck’s *Intérieur* – illustrates the nature of Lugné-Poe’s dramaturgical engagement with the relationship between character and spectator. In *La Gardienne*, the physical stage action was presented in “slow pantomimic movement” (24), while the written text was recited by actors hidden in the orchestra pit.<sup>33</sup> Allied to the fact that Régnier “wrote verses in *La Gardienne* that were virtually unintelligible” (24), Lugné-Poe was clearly asserting a presentational, or alienating, approach to character representation, challenging his audience’s expectations of the dramatic experience as passed down through the conventions of

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<sup>33</sup> It is worth noting that the production was not altogether successful in achieving the atmosphere appropriate to its transcendental themes. At times, the vocal and physical actions were apparently out of synch, “inviting waves of laughter to ripple forth at the wrong times” (Knapp 24). Of significance to this thesis, however, is the nature of Lugné-Poe’s dramaturgical strategies, rather than the critical or popular success or otherwise of the production.

Naturalism. Knapp notes how “such vocal and visual dichotomies increased the already intense sense of remoteness and mystery inherent in the play” (24), asserting the poetic quality of the text (and art form) as an alternative to the illusionist pretensions of Naturalism.

Lugné-Poe extended this experiment to his production of *Intérieur*, a “meditation on death” where “the dissociation of speech and action” broke “to a certain extent the conventional empathy existing between actor and audience” (Knapp 24). In this text, the dialogue is exclusively spoken by four characters sitting in a garden, which is foregrounded before a house, visible through three ground-floor windows. The dialogue is all concerned with the inhabitants of the house, who are visible in the background, and their presence as characters is elusive, almost spectral. The montage between visual scenes of peaceful family life (depicted by the inhabitants of the house), and the conversation in the garden (the character of the Old Man must eventually tell the inhabitants that their daughter has drowned), created an eerie aesthetic effect. Significantly, this effect is exaggerated by the annihilation of conventional modes of audience identification with character, as the victims with whom an audience traditionally empathised/sympathised were back-grounded, silent and never developed dramatically as characters, psychologically or otherwise.

For Braun, Lugné-Poe’s dramaturgy defined the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre as “a theatre of conscious convention in which the spectator is not distracted by any divergence from external reality because no attempt is made to sustain an illusion of it” (41). These conventions included, as stated previously, the associative use of minimal, abstract scenery, and a rejection of psychological approaches to characterization. The cathartic aesthetic of Symbolist drama is, therefore, not filtered through audience identification with character, but rather through the ‘mind’s eye’, and the spectator’s response to the complex, poetic imagery of the drama. According to Pierre Quillard, “The ruling principle of Symbolist theatre ... was as old as the drama itself: the willing complicity and collaboration of the spectator in the play” (qtd. in Braun 42). The spectator’s part in this collaboration was “to adopt the play as a projection of his *own* imagination” (Braun 41), engaging with its poetic elements as a filter through which to achieve a personal, spiritual meditation or experience. Much like the strategy of

Antoine's radical Naturalism, therefore, the dramaturgy of the Symbolist theatre was concerned with achieving an introverted, cathartic experience for its audience.

Jarry, who became administrative assistant to Lugné-Poe at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in June 1896, was evidently influenced by the Symbolist theatre convention whereby the "spectator is placed in an active role", rather than the naturalistic "theatre of illusion [where] he is no more than a passive recipient" (Braun 41). For the Symbolists, this 'active role' was an intellectual, rather than a sociological role, a distinction Jarry would later confront (practically) through *Ubu the King* and (theoretically) in the article "Theatre Questions". Jarry's contempt for the passivity of audience members, as evidenced by his insulting assault on the intelligence of theatre audiences in "Of the Futility of the 'Theatrical' in the Theatre", meant that he readily embraced the notion of the 'active' (or critical) role for the audience in the theatre. Jarry was to adapt the anti-illusionist tendencies of the Symbolists to his own dramaturgical ends with *Ubu the King*, as well as employing another cultural element appropriated by the artists of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, the puppet-show.

For the Symbolists, the shadow-play and the puppet-show were seen as "serious alternatives to the all-too solid human actor" (Braun 40). Paul Margueritte's theories affirmed that "the puppet demonstrates that it has no need of the *outer* truth of external appearance in order to convince the spectator of the *inner*, spiritual truth" (Braun 41), and Symbolist playwrights like Maeterlinck, in plays such as *La Princesse Maleine* (1890), exploited the masks of puppetry towards their own anti-psychological approaches to characterization. Jarry, who had been practising (and experimenting with) the art of puppetry since his teenage years,<sup>34</sup> was innately aware of the "dynamic expression", or "ever changing, playful, undefined forms" that characterize the folk masks of the medieval/Renaissance grotesque (Bakhtin 11). While Jarry's theories, as outlined in "Of the Futility of the 'Theatrical' in the Theatre", may easily have been read (at least before the production of *Ubu the King*) as an endorsement of the devices of the Symbolist theatre,<sup>35</sup> the dramaturgical

<sup>34</sup> *Ubu the King* is based on *Père Ebe*, a show for marionettes devised by Jarry with the brothers Henri and Charles Morin in 1888. *Père Ebe*, who would later be renamed *Ubu*, was based on the boys' physics teacher, Monsieur Hébert.

<sup>35</sup> It is plausible that Jarry wrote the article with two purposes in mind. Firstly, he would have been eager to establish himself, much like the Symbolist writers resident at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, as a



strategies employed in *Ubu the King* revealed an affinity with the latent (or potential), satirical quality of folk cultural elements rather than the transcendentalist concerns of the Symbolists. While, for the Symbolists, devices such as masks and puppetry were appropriated as a means of achieving an alternative, cathartic aesthetic to that produced at the Théâtre Libre, Jarry restored to the mask the carnivalesque laughter that is “directed at all and everyone, including [or in the case of *Ubu the King*, especially] the carnival’s participants” (Bakhtin 11).

Jarry’s article reads (deceptively) as an endorsement of the Symbolist theatre because of its assault on the dubious, representational strategies of Naturalism. He presents a two-pronged attack on Naturalism, decrying, firstly, its focus on and use of décor/ mise-en-scène and, secondly, its approach to characterization. Jarry considers absurd the convention of “trompe l’oeil” (xxv), and finds naturalistic sets “a hybrid, neither natural nor artificial”, surmising that even if they “were exactly like nature it would be a superfluous duplication” (xxiv). He endorses the device of the placard, a convention of puppetry which he used as an alternative to scenery to denote location in *Ubu*, claiming it “saves the onlooker from being regularly reminded of base ‘reality’ through a constant substitution of conventional sets which he really only sees properly at the moment the scene is being shifted” (xxv). On character, Jarry accuses the naturalistic and commercial theatres of pandering to audiences, giving them “characters who think as they do” (xxiii) rather than “effig[ies]” which “indicate the nature of the character”(xxvi) as emblematic assertions of, as he states in “Theatre Questions”, the right of the author “to consider the public from [his/her] point of view” (xxxv). As an alternative, Jarry asserts the “impassivity of the mask” (xxvii), which he claims is comparable “with the solid structure of the skeleton” (xviii). The skeletal metaphor refers to Jarry’s belief that, “deep down under its surrounding animal flesh”, the “tragicomic qualities” of the mask exist, a subtle hint that the *Ubu the King* project would assert the mask as a complex mechanism through which to interrogate the contradictions, both of bourgeois ideologies, and the avant-garde theatrical strategies of the theatres of Antoine and Lugné-Poe that endorsed them. For Jarry, the mask as inherited from the Symbolist theatre was not a convention (of

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playwright-theorist who wrote as often ‘about’ the art form as they did ‘for’ it. Secondly, Jarry would have been careful not to offend the precious sensibilities of the Symbolists. After all, *Ubu* had yet to be produced, and an assault on the pretensions of the Symbolist theatre would have been ill-advised if Jarry wanted his play to be performed later that year at Lugné-Poe’s theatre.

transcendental inquiry) to be aped, but rather a pretext through which dramatic writing must evolve, because, in his own words, “it is mad to try to express new feelings in a ‘mummified’ form” (“Twelve Theatrical Topics” xli).

Jarry claimed that the small-scale, independent or “little” theatres, as established by Antoine and Lugné-Poe, would “become regular in the worst sense of the word unless they remember that their whole point is not in being but in becoming.” (“Theatre Questions” xl). As Eugenio Barba points out, the avant-garde defends itself “in the name of necessity to transcend tradition”, and advertises itself as “open to novelty in the artistic field and within society” (*Beyond the Floating Islands* 193). The irony of theatrical avant-gardes, such as those housed by the Théâtre Libre, the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre and, many years later, Barba’s own Odin Teatret, is that what was once an emergent and alternative cultural element becomes, at best, (in Jarry’s terms) a ‘mummified’ (or predictable) producer of cultural artefacts or, at worst, (in relation to Odin Teatret) an elitist brand that (again ironically) commercially advertises its monastic approach to the art form with expensive workshop subscriptions for the privilege of experiencing that very monasticism.

Jarry’s antagonism to the naturalistic theatre was aligned with a realisation that the Symbolist project, as an incestuous school of thought sited in the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, developed into an exercise in ‘being’ rather than a strategy of continual ‘becoming’. It is well documented that responses to the 1896 production of *Ubu* were divided to the point that, during the first performance of the play “for a full fifteen minutes the whole theatre was in uproar and near to blows, both for and against the play” (Braun 55). Significantly, as Simon Watson Taylor points out, in Jarry’s lifetime “neither producers nor publishers were anxious to invest their money and reputation in the subsequent developments of the Ubu theme” (Introduction to *The Ubu Plays* xv), suggesting that the avant-garde theatres of 1890s Paris were uniformly affronted by (and resentful of) the ‘audacity’ of Jarry’s assault at their sense of theatrical propriety.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> This assault will be analyzed and qualified later in this chapter.

This thesis argues that Jarry transgressed the innate conservatism of the avant-garde through a dramaturgy (practically exemplified in *Ubu the King*) that asserted a formal, dramatic strategy that was wilfully oppositional as well as, according to the pretext of avant-gardism, alternative as a cultural element. Jarry acknowledged the alternative aesthetic impulse as 'semblomatic': after all, Antoine's naturalistic theatre emerged as an alternative to the 'well-made play' of the commercial theatre, with the domino effect of the Symbolist theatre of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre emerging as an alternative to Antoine's radical approach to Naturalism. Both alternatives engendered a cathartic, introspective relationship between audience and artefact, rendering the Parisian avant-garde an 'alternative' endorsement of bourgeois self-absorption in different formal clothes. Jarry (like Eugenio Barba in the twentieth century) observed the avant-garde and the mainstream theatre as equally self-perpetuating and subject to codification. Recognizing the conservative, incestuous quality of Antoine and Lugné-Poe's 'alternative' theatre, Jarry's project was informed by a keen awareness that what "the avant-garde does not tolerate about the bourgeoisie is its language, not its status" (Barthes 139). Importantly, Jarry's re-appropriation of the mask asserts one of the fundamental strategies of epic theatre: to reclaim folk narrative devices as a means of interrogating the semblances (and structures) of bourgeois ideology.

Badiou states that it is "the twentieth century that invented the notion of the *mise en scène*. It transformed the thinking of representation into an art in its own right" (*Century* 40), turning "what was merely the placement of representation into an independent art" (40). Regarding Brecht, he adds that "the twentieth century returns to the question of the chorus and the protagonist, showing that its theatre is more Greek than Romantic" (41). With this in mind, it is worth considering ways in which the counter-mythological strategies (Barthes 136) of epic theatre compare, in terms of the dialectical 'one' and 'two', with the apparatus of Greek dramatic mythologizing. For, while epic theatre marks a return to the theatre of the mask, Greek theatre, in terms of dialectical philosophy, appears more to anticipate Romantic and post-Romantic movements in Gothicism, Naturalism/realism and Symbolism.

Greek drama, after all, is the first in a long history of theatrical genres, developed through a Platonic sense of order and, anticipating Eugène Scribe's theories,<sup>37</sup> an obsession with the 'well-made play'. Epic theatre, however, is not a theatrical genre but rather an artistic strategy. It counters regressive appropriations of myth through a passion for rupture, in the sense that it seeks to eliminate genre and genre conventions (which move towards the dialectical 'one'). Its first principle, therefore, may be defined as anti-generic. John McGrath castigates the trappings of the bourgeois stage apparatus:

The tradition created among the European bourgeoisie by Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Shaw,<sup>38</sup> Galsworthy, Anouilh, Cocteau, Giraudoux, Pirandello became a strong and self-confident tradition. It declared, without too much bother, that the best theatre is about the problems and the achievements of middle-class men and sometimes women, is performed in comfortable theatres, in large cities, at a time that will suit the eating habits of the middle-class at a price that only the most determined of the lower orders could afford, and will generally have an air of intellectuality about it – something to exercise the vestiges of one's education on and to scare off the Great Unwashed. There will be critics to make it more important by reviewing it in the important newspapers, and learned books written about it to prove that it is really 'art'.  
(15)

McGrath's description of the self-obsessed, introverted social world of late nineteenth/early-twentieth-century, bourgeois drama marries with his description of the self-obsessed, introverted protagonists of its dramatic worlds. As in Greek drama, the dramatised world maps precisely – and uncritically – on to the apparatus of European imperialism (or, in the contemporary world, capitalist imperialism). As Bakhtin states, the "Romantic genre acquired a private 'chamber' character ... an individual character ... transposed into a subjective, idealistic philosophy" (37), and the development of nineteenth century dramatic realism(s) developed this introverted protagonist as the embodiment of the myths and desires of its bourgeois patrons.

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<sup>37</sup> Eugène Scribe's (1791-1861) pseudo-Aristotelian formula for the 'well-made play' (*pièce bien faite*) basically called for a five stage structure, including 'exposition', 'complication and development', 'crisis', 'denouement' and 'resolution'. Other typical ingredients of the 'well-made play' include dramatic crisis and coup de Théâtre.

<sup>38</sup> Shaw is an unfortunate inclusion as, like Jarry, his theatre attempted to rupture the foundations of the bourgeois theatre from within its very own apparatus.

The Romantic ‘individual in conflict with society’ at once influences the hero of melodrama, the transcendental meditations of the Symbolists, the Chekhovian victim of the emancipated serf, and the protagonist as catalyst for Ibsen’s discussions of bourgeois values, on the bourgeois stage, for a bourgeois audience.<sup>39</sup> Ibsen’s dramas are perhaps the most defining, as his fourth wall best illustrates the introspection of nineteenth century realism.<sup>40</sup> Ibsen’s almost photographic representations of real life conditioned a singular, cathartic audience response, while the Symbolists’ theatrical “evocations of a reality beyond that perceived by the senses” (Braun 38) sought a more meditative, but nonetheless introspective spectator engagement. And, if the progressive, dialectical response to singularity is that ‘one divides into two’, then a challenge to this mono-aesthetic required a formal device that could simultaneously draw attention to the semblances of ‘catharsism’, while also exposing the ‘social function’ of the bourgeois theatre apparatus, through the rupture, and critique, of its genre/movement conventions. Hence, the origins of epic theatre may be found in Jarry’s deployment of the duality of the mask, and the rediscovery of the counter-hegemonic potential of popular theatre and medieval/Renaissance clowning.

If the origin of twentieth-century epic theatre resides in the restoration of the mask to the European stage, then the history of this dramatic movement (or strategy) may be dated to 1896: in performative terms, with the first production of Jarry’s *Ubu the King* at Lugné-Poe’s Théâtre de l’Oeuvre in Paris, and critically, three months previously, with the publication of Jarry’s article, “Of the Futility of the ‘Theatrical’ in the Theatre”, where he discusses the function of masks and characterization in his own dramaturgy. Jarry’s mask, however, is not the mask of the Greek drama, but rather the mask of the “grotesque”, or the “carnavalesque” (Bakhtin 19). Bakhtin describes the mask of the medieval/Renaissance grotesque as follows:

[It is] connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to

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<sup>39</sup> It is true that, in his time, Ibsen was regarded as radically subversive and celebrated by radical feminists. However, Jarry’s practice illustrates that, in order to interrogate bourgeois values, the artist must also interrogate bourgeois modes of representation.

<sup>40</sup> Despite the controversy surrounding, for example, *A Doll’s House*, the play mirrors the ethical concerns of Greek drama, but does not engage in any way with the apparatus (and exclusivity) of the bourgeois stage.

oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. (39-40)

The masks of the medieval/Renaissance grotesque, therefore, are an assault on uniformity, and their functions are re-creative, regenerative and transformative. The laughter inspired by the medieval/Renaissance grotesque “frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities” (Bakhtin 49), unleashing what Artaud calls “the anarchic, dissolving power of laughter” (32). Bakhtin laments the way in which laughter, in Romanticism, “was cut down to cold humour, irony, sarcasm”, how it “ceased to be a joyful and triumphant hilarity”, and how its “positive regenerating power was reduced to a minimum” (38). He marks how, in the seventeenth century and following, “some forms of the grotesque began to degenerate into static ‘character’ presentation and narrow *genrism*”, and that “This degeneration was linked with the specific limitations of the bourgeois world outlook” (52).

Once again, a critical link is here found between bourgeois, ‘Eternal Man’ and a regressive appropriation of myth (the folk traditions of the medieval grotesque), through the introverted aesthetics of Romanticism and what Bakhtin calls ‘genrism’. Jarry’s assault on the bourgeois stage sets out to invert this process of ‘genrism’, by re-appropriating the transgressive spirit of the medieval/Renaissance mask and unleashing a carnivalesque in - of all places - an indoor theatre, and within the sacred stage enclosed by the four walls of the cathartic, avant-garde theatre of 1890s Paris. Regarding the development of naturalistic acting and approaches to psychological realism, Joel Schechter points out that “Before actors were placed behind an imaginary fourth wall by French director André Antoine in the nineteenth century, it was impossible to break through the fourth wall separating actor from audience; it did not exist.” Before this, the “illusion of being a character in a separate world, in a space cut off from the audience, was not actively pursued or sustained” (qtd. in Wilson 47). Significantly, it was in Lugné-Poe’s Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, where *Ubu the King* premiered in 1896, that the auteurs of the Symbolist theatre had challenged Antoine’s obsession with verisimilitude. Jarry extended this challenge, although his extroverted approach to narrative was at odds with the introverted strategy of the Symbolists.

Jarry's satire targets the Romantics' (and, latterly, the Naturalists' and Symbolists') failure to attribute "to the grotesque a purely satirical function" (Bakhtin 42).

Grotesque images, as Bakhtin states, "preserve their peculiar nature, entirely different from ready-made, completed being" (25), largely because grotesque masks, as Rudlin explains, have "no individualised past ... only a present presence as a mask" (35).<sup>41</sup>

By re-introducing the medieval mask to the French stage in 1896, *Ubu the King* represents a progressive, dialectical assault on bourgeois man, through an exposition of the pretences (or semblance) of the cathartic narrative strategies of the Parisian avant-garde theatres, and the grotesque characterization of Nietzsche's voluntaristic, 'new man', through the character mask of Père Ubu.

Significantly, Père Ubu is an "auguste" clown, which Staveacre describes as "the pedantic petit bourgeois, bossy and indignant" (177).<sup>42</sup> For Jacques Lecoq, "Today's clown is above all [the] Auguste" (116) rather than the pierrot or the hobo, as he best reflects the lived experience of the western world's movement towards modernity. The auguste clown emblematises bourgeois man and his preoccupations, or "Eternal Man, who is neither proletarian nor bourgeois" (Barthes 140). Barthes refers to a symbiosis, the "political allegiance of the bourgeoisie and the petite-bourgeoisie" (141), stating that petit-bourgeois "norms are the residue of bourgeois culture ... [that] they are bourgeois truths which have become degraded, impoverished, commercialized, slightly archaic, or shall we say, out of date" (140-141). The petit-bourgeois, "which does not have its [the bourgeoisie's] basic status and cannot live up to it except in imagination" (141), nonetheless collaborates in the economic project of bourgeois capitalism, through uncritical citizenship and, in the twenty-first century, its daily aspirations to be the next self-made, celebrity everyman.<sup>43</sup> Auguste clowns play

<sup>41</sup> Rudlin is here referring to the masks of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Braun refers to how "Ubu himself recalls both Pulcinella and the Capitano from the traditional *commedia dell'arte*, as well as their Shakespearean cousins Falstaff and Pistol" (52).

<sup>42</sup> This relates to Staveacre's description of The Fratellini Brothers, who comprised the perfect example of the *pierrot-auguste-hobo* clown trio. Staveacre rightly identifies Francois Fratellini as the *pierrot* of the troupe, the "elegant, unflappable whiteface", and Paul Fratellini as the *auguste*, "the pedantic petit bourgeois, bossy and indignant". However, he awkwardly refers to Albert Fratellini as the "grotesque", a term with too many other connotations (Artaud, Bakhtin, Fo) to be useful here. A more accurate term, I believe, is that of "hobo", which refers to the lowest social order in *Commedia* (for example Arlecchino and the basic Zanni), in early Silent Cinema (Harpo Marx, Chaplin) and also in recent television comedy (most notably the character of Manuel in *Fawlty Towers*). Staveacre describes the grotesque/hobo as "down at heel, much put upon" (177).

<sup>43</sup> The auguste clown has most recently been appropriated and re-invented, by reality television, as a means of endorsing bourgeois, capitalist values. Acts such as Gordon Ramsey, Simon Cowell and

prominent roles in the world of the medieval/Renaissance grotesque, and the character of Père Ubu could, arguably, be seen as a hybrid of two *auguste* masks of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, The Capitano and Brighella. To understand the significance of Jarry's chosen performance language for *Ubu the King*, it is necessary to consider the nature of the *Commedia* mask, in terms of its logic of physicality and its contrast (in terms of narrative) to psychological realism. In Jarry's play, this grotesque performance language is not employed simply as an alternative to psychological realism, but as a satiric response to the bourgeois, mono-aesthetic of catharsism.

The physicality of *Commedia* masks take into account the very factors that shape how human physicalities are formed in lived experience. There are two factors that influence how the human body moves, in *Commedia*, in other grotesque forms, and in lived experience. These factors are: firstly, work obligations (or lack of), and, secondly, ambition. Work obligation is presented, in *Commedia*, through the stance and basic movement of the mask, and could also be used to denote, in later developments in epic theatre, Brecht's notion of "social role" (*On Theatre* 59), physicalized through "Gestus" (*On Theatre* 36). Ambition, however, is more often concealed (or suggested) by the character stance, and is unleashed (fully revealed) in moments of agency, aggression and crisis.

Rudlin here describes Brighella, whose ambitions are fuelled by the thirst for profit and the thirst for power:

He is always the first zanni – he's the boss. In the social scale only a little boss, the keeper of an inn or the proprietor of a shop, but in the *Commedia* world, the very fact that he has managed to better himself to that extent gives him high status. (84)

Brighella's stance is alert, with "Flat feet, ballet first position, knees slightly bent, belly forward" (85). He is the archetypal small businessman, paranoid of his employees and over-eager to chastise them, petrified that their incompetence will infringe upon his profits. His walk is aggressive, "in which the torso bends from side

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Alan Sugar are *auguste* in the way that they project themselves as unashamedly commercialized, ambitious, rich and above social graces. These characters are "neither proletarian", because they are all millionaires, "nor bourgeois" (Barthes 141), because they project an everyman quality to which their audience are presumed to 'relate'.



to side, but the head stays vertical” (86). His stance, therefore, is a function of his occupation, the alert and in-control supervisor. His walk, in contrast, is a radicalized manifestation of his violent ambition, or motivation (profit), and his miserly terror of a lower-order zanni dropping a plate.

The Capitano is, like Père Ubu, “self-appointed”. He pretends to be a military man, but if “he ever held the rank of captain, he was long since stripped of it” (Rudlin 119-120). The Capitano is at once a lecher, a profiteer, an impostor, a braggart and a coward. Rudlin describes his walk:

Mountain walk: the heels of his high boots come down first, then the foot rolls on to the ball. Straight back, unlike zanni. Big strides. Step off on ball of foot giving lift and bounce to step. Feet on ground, head in clouds. (Rises up with each step so head comes above clouds in order to see!) The actual steps are small (he is in no hurry to go to war, but wants to do so with maximum effect).

Promenade walk: toes down first, strutting and preening with the head.

Chest walk: a side-to-side movement of the trunk, the shoulder commences.

Used in confined spaces. (121)

The strut of Capitano is not unlike that of a Renaissance Basil Fawlty in terms of physicality. As Tony Staveacre notes, when Fawlty walks he “seems to slant backwards, usually because his brain has not caught up with the fact that his legs are on the move again” (64). The leather mask of Capitano enforces this slanting process, as the elongated nose demands a feat of balance on the part of the actor. Also, Capitano masks allow mainly for peripheral rather than direct vision: therefore, Capitano is often distracted by the (mainly female) scenery around him, and is susceptible mainly because he is rarely aware of what is directly in front of him.<sup>44</sup> Just as Brighella’s violence contradicts his social status, so The Capitano’s cowardice undermines (and unmask) his grandiloquence and narcissism. As he is “never indigenious to the town where the scenario is set ... [he] is able to pretend to high status as a result” (Rudlin 120). The exposition of his true social status is, as Rudlin

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<sup>44</sup> Part of this analysis is drawn from experimentation with Capitano masks that the author undertook with Be Your Own Banana Theatre Company, and also with practical workshops the author attended with Olly Crick (2005) and Pegasus Theatre, Wiesbaden, Germany (2006). In 2006, the author performed in an open-air Commedia performance in Fitzgerald’s Park, Cork, playing the role of one of two duelling Capitanos.

points out, “an essential part of the denouement” (120) in scenarios involving The Capitano.

The auguste masks of Commedia, therefore, present a contradictory quality, reflecting Bakhtin’s assertion that mask is “the most complex theme of folk culture” (40). This connects to Phillip Thompson’s reference to the “abnormal” in terms of the grotesque character, and, in his “basic definition of the grotesque”, to “the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response”. Thompson refers to the way in which grotesque characters “excite both our laughter and our disgust”, engendering an “ambivalently abnormal” (26) exchange between character and spectator. The grotesque mask is at once capable of revealing its social role or Gestus (its semblance) and its motivation or ambition (its real). The grotesque mask, in terms of physicality and agency, is drawn from lived experience, but does not attempt to mirror it. One of the reasons it annihilates subtext, one of the key semblances of Naturalism/realism, is because, to repeat Rudlin’s assertion, the grotesque mask has “no individualised past ... only a present presence as a mask” (35).

The duality of the grotesque mask, therefore, relates to its incompleteness, to the fact that theatre is the “art of semblance” (Badiou, *Century* 47), and that the dynamic of the mask is subtractive, in terms of lived experience. The grotesque mask, in Jarry’s poetics, is also subtractive, in that it subtracts from (and mocks) the semblance of reality (and singularity) that is the naturalistic/realist stage of his contemporaries. It also subtracts, through its flippancy, the reverie of the Symbolist theatre. Therefore, if the epic theatre originates with the re-birth of the grotesque mask, then, as an aesthetic strategy, its dialectical mode is subtractive. In *Ubu the King*, Jarry at once subtracts from the bourgeois stage the verisimilitude of psychological realism, the pompous abstractions of the Symbolists, and the introspection of the deterministic world outlook. By “restoring to the theatre the clown and his license to confront the world with all his brutishness” (Braun 52), Jarry dramatises the Nietzschean ‘new man’ while, ironically, presenting him in reconstructed visage, in the spirit of the medieval/Renaissance mask.

The narrative of *Ubu the King* is mapped out as a parodic take on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, following the Renaissance five-act structure and chronicling the rise and fall

of the eponymous hero and his wife, Mère Ubu. In Act One, Mère Ubu convinces her husband to plot the murder of King Wenceslas of Poland and, in Act Two, the assassination is successfully followed through, staged in a manner redolent of the slaying of Caesar (in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*). The narrative then diverges wilfully from the Renaissance tradition, and the remainder of Act Two involves Père Ubu amusing himself by throwing gold coins into the crowd in order to watch people fighting amongst themselves, organizing races among the people with gold coins as prizes and, finally, inviting the whole city into the palace for an orgy. In Act Three, Père Ubu and Mère Ubu decide to execute all of the Polish nobles, magistrates and financiers, and to appropriate their wealth and property. Père Ubu plans to reform the national finances but, typically, hasn't considered the fact that he has purged all of the government workers and has to collect the taxes himself on a door-to-door basis. In Act Four, Czar Alexis wages war on Poland with the assistance of Père Ubu's former ally, Captain Brubbish. The Ubus are vanquished and Buggerlas, son of the late King Wenceslas, is returned as king. In Act Five, the Ubus escape via a ship on the Baltic Sea and the play ends with Père Ubu vowing to become 'Master of the Finances' in Paris in order to begin the whole sordid process again.

On one level, Jarry's play may be read as a mindless, adolescent parody of Shakespearean tragedy, or possibly as a practical joke on the aficionados of the Parisian theatre intelligentsia. However, Jarry's project may also be deciphered according to its very deliberate approach to the relationship between performance and spectator. Jarry explains:

I intended that when the curtain went up the scene should confront the public like the exaggerating mirror in the stories of Madame Leprince de Beaumont, in which the depraved saw themselves with dragons' bodies, or bulls' horns, or whatever corresponded to their particular vice. It is not surprising that the public should have been aghast at the sight of its ignoble other self, which it had never before been shown completely. This other self, as Monsieur Catulle Méndes has excellently said, is composed of 'eternal human imbecility, eternal lust, eternal gluttony, the vileness of instinct magnified in tyranny; of the sense of decency, the virtues, the patriotism and the ideals particular to those who have just eaten their fill'. ("Theatre Questions" xxxiv)

The character of Père Ubu, therefore, is conceived as an exposition of 'the real' ambition of bourgeois man, his essence revealed through the subtraction of 'the semblance' of bourgeois sophistication. Jarry reconceives and presents the 'new man' as a Dorian Gray-like portrait, painting a mobile, grotesque physicalization of his ambitions, appetites and violence through this character mask. Jarry states that, as an approach towards an emblematic form of characterization, "The actor should use a mask to envelop his head, thus replacing it by the effigy of the CHARACTER", and that this mask "should not follow the masks in the Greek theatre to indicate simply tears or laughter, but should indicate the nature of the character: the Miser, the Waverer, the Covetous Man accumulating crimes" ("Futility": xvi). Although this would suggest a stock characterization, like the masks of Commedia or Molière, Jarry's mask theory rather employs the logic, in terms of physical characterization, of Commedia, while his 'effigies', like Père Ubu, are regenerative, original masks devised according to how the author understands the 'new man' and his relationship with the contemporary world. In this sense, Jarry's use of mask represents a creative appropriation of folk tradition, a recurring theme in epic theatre practices, and the demand for a continual development (or 're-becoming') of dramatic form to rupture the sterility of codified genre and the bourgeois mythology it serves.<sup>45</sup> This use of mask also prefigures Brecht's theory of Gestus, which will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Three.

The anti-illusionist dramaturgy of *Ubu the King* also reflects how Jarry "deployed style and form in order to disorientate his audience and shake them out of their preconceptions" (Braun 58). In "A Letter to Lugné-Poe, 8 January 1896", outlining his dramaturgical vision for the production, Jarry describes a series of distancing effects for the production, including the use of a cardboard horse's head for an actor to hang around his head, the abolition of crowds or crowd scenes, and the use of placards to denote setting. Jarry claims that the idea for the horse's head comes from the traditions of the medieval English stage, and is another example of how his art is selectively appropriative of folk tradition. The "abolition of crowds", he writes, is due to the fact that they "are an insult to the intelligence" (xxii) of the audience,

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<sup>45</sup> See the analyses, in Chapter Three, of Brecht's theatre in the context of storytelling traditions and, in Chapter Five, of Dario Fo's assumption of the mask of the *guillaire* in *Mistero Buffo* and *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*.

especially when the details of a slaughter or battle can be communicated through an actor onstage describing what happens through dialogue.<sup>46</sup> Jarry explains that the use of placards reflects his belief that “a descriptive placard has far more ‘suggestive’ power than any stage scenery” (xxi). Both of these latter contentions are best summed up in his declaration that “No scenery, no array of walkers-on could really evoke ‘the Polish army marching across the Ukraine’” (xxi-xxii).

Jarry’s dramaturgy, significantly, employed devices that would later become synonymous with the epic theatre, in particular the use of dialogic (or monologic) storytelling as a means of commenting on action, and of persistently re-asserting theatre as a presentational art form. Dramaturgically, these devices reflect a development of the Symbolists’ affirmation of the theatre as a site for interrogating the exchange relationship between performance and spectator. For the part of Père Ubu, it is significant that the celebrated comedian, Firmin Gémier, was employed for the first production. Gémier’s improvisational skills were essential to the production, as the first performance was interrupted for fifteen minutes as the audience “was in an uproar and near to blows, both for and against the play” (Braun 55).<sup>47</sup> Braun’s account of how Gémier restored order through the use of a motor-horn and some musical-hall clowning (55-6) anticipates the licensed foolery of Dario Fo’s ‘The Maniac’ over seventy years later in the first production of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* in Milan in 1970. As in Fo’s text, Gémier’s performance shows how the improvisational skills of the clown (or storyteller) are essential to a poetics “where theatre carries the function of being part of, rather than a part of, life” (Aston 112). In epic theatre, “spatial boundaries tend to be less formal, less fixed” (Aston 112), and this is a reflection of the socio-political strategies of its proponents. In the case of *Ubu the King*, as Braun states, “Ubu-Gémier-Jarry was using his toilet-brush to assail not so much the Palcontents on the stage as the public and critics in the theatre” (56). This complex stage presence, where the stage mask of Ubu is at once the character

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<sup>46</sup> This is a storytelling strategy that recalls the Renaissance dramatic conventions of pointing and the aside, reflecting the character of *Ubu the King* as a parody of the Renaissance tragedy. In Chapter Four, Brecht’s theatre will be analyzed as a storytelling form, informed by theatrical modes of storytelling such as the Greek choric commentary, and Shakespeare’s use of soliloquies, asides and pointing.

<sup>47</sup> Braun notes how, ironically, the protest was initiated by André Antoine, “the champion of Naturalism” (55), who was horrified at the excessive amount of expletives spoken onstage.

Ubu, the comedian Gémier and the provocateur Jarry, initiates the recurring device in epic theatre of characterization as a form of complex layering.<sup>48</sup>

The Père Ubu mask is a counter-hegemonic conceit, whereby Jarry's 'effigy' of 'bourgeois man' is visibly manipulated onstage by Gémier, a celebrity comedian who, in the Parisian artistic milieu of 1896, already signifies an actor-mask that negates the possibility of the character Père Ubu evolving beyond the status of pretext. This is further enhanced by the social status of Jarry as a provocateur obsessed with projecting himself as a celebrity of the Parisian artistic world, a status much enhanced by the *succès de scandale* of *Ubu the King*. Jarry, of course, controls the actor-mask (Gémier), and is therefore the chief protagonist of the theatrical event. His audacity as a personage of the social world enhances the sense of Jarry as auteur of this theatre event. If the grotesque character inspires an "ambivalently abnormal" (Thompson 26) audience response, then the triple-layered character mask of Père Ubu is the ideal assault on the cathartic project, and its demand for the spectator to identify with the protagonists of its dramas.

Braun argues that, although Jarry may have written the play "as a satire on bourgeois manners, he stood little chance of directly offending the moral sensibility of his highly sophisticated public" (55). However, by managing "to assail them ... through their sense of theatrical propriety" (Braun 55), Jarry decolonises the theatrical space and asserts the medium as a site open to satirical intervention. For Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, satire is "one of the most effective weapons in oral traditions" (81) and, through an artistic sensibility that feeds off the grotesque traditions of the medieval/Renaissance period, Jarry imposed himself as the first licensed fool of the epic theatre. Jarry's artistic strategy with *Ubu the King* prefigures Wa Thiong'o's determination to "tell the story of evil that takes pride in evil", to "tell the story of robbers who take pride in robbing the masses" (81).<sup>49</sup> For the authors of bourgeois myth, this is perhaps the most frightening quality of epic theatre: the fact that it is at once a re-writing of

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<sup>48</sup> Examples include characters like Fo's 'Madman' in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Brecht's eponymous 'Good Woman of Setzchuan' or Fugard's 'Lavrenti' (in *The Coat*). The notion of mask and complex layering will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five through an analysis of Fo's text.

<sup>49</sup> Wa Thiong'o is here describing how he conceived of his novel *Devil on the Cross*.

bourgeois myth, and that it is also a writing *about* bourgeois myth-making. The epic theatre demands transparency, and it does so by emphasising its own transparency.

Bakhtin identifies two strands of twentieth-century performance in which the medieval/grotesque is present, and locates Jarry in “the modernist form ... connected in various degrees with the Romantic tradition and evolved under the influence of existentialism” (46). Jarry’s life and poetics were characterized by “an absolute disdain for survival, both social and biological” (Braun 51-2), which supports Bakhtin’s attributing to Jarry the symptoms of later, pessimistic developments in twentieth-century existential thought. The nihilistic elements of his personality and professional life in some way account for his being championed by the surrealists, the futurists and other avant-garde movements in twentieth-century performance, but to trace an ancestry from the Romantics, through Jarry, to Sartre and Camus, oversimplifies the relationship that exists between Jarry’s practice and Romantic and post-Romantic notions of individuation and introverted man. From the point of view of this thesis, Jarry belongs more to “the realist grotesque”,<sup>50</sup> which includes Brecht and “is related to the tradition of realism and folk culture and reflects at times the direct influence of carnival forms” (Bakhtin 46). As exemplified by his approach to the mode of spectatorship expected of the peer audience of the Parisian avant-garde theatre that he knew intimately, Jarry’s relationship to Romanticism was not as a function of, but clearly an antagonism to its policies of introspection and semblance.

In *The Century*, Badiou identifies two distinct ways of understanding antagonism, in the first half of the twentieth century. The “antagonistic thesis” of radical fascism, relates to “the confrontation between nations and races” (59), an imperialistic antagonism where, once again, ‘the two’ synthesises into ‘the one’. Against this, the communist “antagonistic theses on [fascist] antagonism” relates to the conviction that “planetary confrontation is in the last instance the confrontation between classes”

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<sup>50</sup> A distinction needs to be drawn here around the term realism, and how its meaning evolves from associations with the naturalistic theatre of the nineteenth century. When this thesis refers to realism in the context of nineteenth century Naturalism/realism, it does so in relation to the development of a theatre of verisimilitude and semblance: the theatre of psychological realism, the introverted protagonist and bourgeois mono-culture. In terms of twentieth century practices, the term realism is more flexible in meaning and in terms of the latitudes available to the realist dramaturg. The term realism, in the twentieth century, is often qualified by an adjective. Examples of progressive realisms include the theatre of Brecht, Brendan Behan and Fugard (social realism), Federico Garcia Lorca (tragic realism) and Dermot Bolger (poetic realism).

(59), and opposes concepts of identity that relate to projections of nationalism, race, religion or family. The antagonism of the communist thesis, therefore, is a response to fascist imperialism: in other words, it is an antagonism that responds to an original antagonism and, mathematically, is an example of how 'the one' divides into 'the two'.

Jarry initiates the epic theatre strategy as an antagonism or, as Badiou describes, as a way of "thinking antagonism" (59). This antagonism is, philosophically, in opposition to 'the one' which, in Jarry's thinking, is the mono-cultural, introspective, cathartic narratives of bourgeois myth-making, supported by the semblances of the avant-garde. If the progressive, leftist thinking of antagonism calls for "the escape from family, property and state despotism" (*Century* 66), then Jarry's effigies of the despotic Père Ubu and his collaborators (most significantly Captain Brubbish) are a performative example of this response. Imperialist nationalism and its veneration of Aryanism is blatantly satirized through Père Ubu's tautological descriptions of national identity:

Père Ubu

That savage and inhospitable water which laps against the country known as Germany, thus named because the inhabitants of this country are all cousins german.

Mère Ubu

That's what I call erudition. They say the country is most fair.

Père Ubu

Ah! Gentlemen! however [sic] fair, it can never match Poland. If there were no Poland, there would be no Poles! (5.4, 147)

Also, the encoding of characters as wilfully expedient (Brubbish's defection to the Tzar) and selfishly obsessed with money, Père Ubu's absurd taxation policy (3.7, 103-5), his sadistic purging of the nobles (3.2, 90-6) and his compulsive use of the word 'finance' in the oddest contexts (5.1, 130-40)<sup>51</sup> deliberately ridicule French narratives of the State, and present war and politics as forms of profiteering (prefiguring

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<sup>51</sup> In act five of the play, Père Ubu refers to his horse as "my Horse of the Finances" (5.2, 141). He titles himself "Lord of the Finances" (5.2, 142) and his attendants "gentlemen of the finances" (5.2, 142). Mère Ubu employs the oath "by my finance" (5.1, 138) to extend the motif, and his followers chant "Up with Père Ubu, our great financier" (5.2, 141) from offstage.



Brecht's *Mother Courage*), enacted under the semblance of racial 'brotherhood', or notions of 'fatherland'.

The epic theatre, therefore, at once presents its audience with the 'real', as well as the 'semblance' which distorts it. It achieves this through a subtractive performance language, that of mask and clowning, and dramaturgical modes of distancing. As Badiou says, "distancing ... is the display – within the play – of the gap between the play and the real. More profoundly, it is a technique which dismantles the intimate and necessary links joining the real to semblance, links resulting from the fact that semblance is the true situating principle of the real" (Badiou, *Century* 48).<sup>52</sup> In this sense, Jarry's epic theatre inverts the dynamics of bourgeois Naturalism, where the *mise-en-scène* imposes a 'semblance' of reality and, through verisimilitude, draws attention away from its own representational strategy. Similarly, *Ubu the King* mocked the high-art pretensions of the Symbolists' poetic theatre, most evidently through a backdrop which parodies the abstract nature of the conventional Symbolist scenography.<sup>53</sup> In his antagonism to the formal 'mummification' of avant-gardism, Jarry initiates what Benjamin later identified as the key presentational strategy of epic theatre: that it "does not reproduce conditions but, rather, reveals them" (*Understanding Brecht* 4). Jarry's 'revealing' of conditions creates, dialectically, 'the two', contesting the 'reproducing' hegemony of the cathartic aesthetic, formerly 'the one'.

In the dramatic world of *Ubu the King*, the reality of imperialism is explored in terms of its semblances, most significantly the semblance of nationalistic allegiance. This exploration complements, dramaturgically, the fact that Jarry's text exemplifies Benjamin's assertion that "the supreme task of an epic production is to give expression to the relationship between the action being staged and the staging *per se*" (*Understanding Brecht* 11). Jarry's anti-illusionist dramaturgy, therefore, represents an assault on the bourgeois theatre, and the apparatus through which it dramatises its own, introverted, self-obsessed concerns with life's finer, existential details.

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<sup>52</sup> In this instance, Badiou is referring to 'distancing' in terms of Brecht. However, I believe the definition could equally have been written of Jarry's anti-illusionist dramaturgy.

<sup>53</sup> Braun describes how, for the production of *Ubu the King*, "the scenery was painted to represent, by a child's conventions, indoors and out of doors, and even the torrid, temperate and arctic zones all at once" (54).

To return to Benjamin's aspiration that the "sterile dichotomy of form and content can be surmounted" (*Understanding Brecht* 87-88), a distinction needs to be made between the conflicting strategies of epic theatre and codified genres (in particular Naturalism). As Wa Thiong'o rightly states, "Content is ultimately the arbiter of form" (78), as without the former (*mythos*) the latter (dramaturgy) is redundant. Codified genres strive, through familiarity, to make dramaturgy invisible and, therefore, not subject to meaning, or deciphering. By drawing attention to its dramaturgy, epic theatre renders form visible, and available for interrogation. Epic theatre, as a presentational form, presents form and content with equal visibility and, as in the case of *Ubu the King*, exposes the conventional gap-relation between them in genrified drama.

By exposing this gap, Jarry's text makes visible the 'emperor's new clothes' of bourgeois mythology, whether dramatized by the commercial or avant-garde theatres. In doing so he re-asserts the theatre as a potentially unpredictable space, and modernist drama, politically, as a stance on genre. Unlike the regressive, Platonic subtraction of Greek drama, Jarry's poetics proposes a dramaturgy of subtraction that ruptures the hegemony of genre and confronts the strategies of bourgeois mythology. The 'minimal difference' of Jarry's theatre is not the introverted, meditation on life's finer details in Greek or naturalistic drama. It is an extroverted, publicized interrogation of the 'social function' of the theatre apparatus, and a divisive strategy that sought to divide its audience on the subject of the ethics of stage representation, and its intimate relationship to the social world.

Chapter Three will set out to link the constituent parts of Jarry's dramaturgical strategy with the practice of Bertolt Brecht. Badiou's article, "Rhapsody For The Theatre" will cast light on how, dialectically, Brecht's practice differentiates from, as well as develops, that of Jarry. The manner in which the 'effigy' masks of Jarry's drama are re-defined as the *Gestus*, or social role masks of Brecht's theatre, will also be discussed.

## A Night in the Theatre 2

***The Mother*, by Bertolt Brecht, presented in a hall in the Berlin suburb of Moabit, February 1932.**

In a community theatre in the working-class suburb of Moabit, twenty-seven actors sit in a semi-circle and read the lines of *The Mother*, an adaptation of the novel by Russian author Maxim Gorky. The story deals with the tactics of the proletariat in the failed revolution of 1905, and the aim of the play is to teach the audience certain tactics of class war and revolutionary praxis. The story is delivered through direct audience address, songs and the role-playing of episodes. Its style is cool and candid, and the action is reported in a sort of documentary style to the spectator.

Since the company arrived in Moabit, there has been a constant police presence at the venue. Firstly, the authorities cited fire regulations as a reason for stopping the performance. Following this, the police claimed that there was no demand for the event, despite the fact that the performance was sold out in advance. Apparently, safety regulations meant that the company could not construct a set, use props or draw the curtain to indicate the performance was about to begin. The company, therefore, decided that all they could do was to sit on the stage and recite their lines and hope that the story would still communicate well enough.

In Moabit, a working-class audience watches a play about how the State puts the working-class under surveillance. While they are watching the play, they are also watching the performance company being watched by the State, represented in the theatre by the police, who will deploy any excuse available to stop the performance-reading. The audience watches the performance company being watched by the police, and the nature of the narrative changes. The narrative, set in Russia but encoded by Brecht as a metaphor for the international tactics of class struggle, becomes a play about Moabit in Germany in 1932, one year before the Nazi Party comes to power and purges the nation of communism and communist thinkers. In Moabit, the State performs their surveillance of Brecht's company. Through a process of refraction, the epic theatre enacts a counter-surveillance.

### Chapter Three

## From Jarry to Brecht: Epic Theatre and the Counter-surveillance of the State

**“Everywhere the Philistine, who suddenly recognized his own image, took offence and forced play after play off the stage”,  
Sergei Tretiakov, referring to Brecht. (23)**

This chapter sets out to extend the analysis, begun in Chapter Two, of the first production of *Ubu the King*, and to link Jarry’s dramaturgical strategy, as a prototype of twentieth-century epic theatre, to the ever-evolving theatre practice of Bertolt Brecht. This extended analysis will employ Badiou’s concept of “Theatre” as a “dialectic”, or “dialectic (at play)” (“Rhapsody” 194), as a means of exposing the constituent elements of Jarry’s oppositional, dialectical strategy that this thesis argues are critical components in the emergence of epic theatre. These constituent elements, once identified, will then be applied in reading Brecht’s theatre practice and the development of his epic theatre praxis. It will be argued that what Jarry achieves, dialectically, with the grotesque mask, is philosophically linked with what Brecht subsequently achieves with the mask of the storyteller.

In “Rhapsody For The Theatre”, Badiou uses the term “Theatre” (capitalized) to describe a politically engaged or “evental” performance situation, which engages the spectator in dialectical thinking towards a philosophical “Ethics of play”, via the “provocation of the presentation” (194). This creates a binary with what Badiou calls “its orthodoxy ‘*theatre*’” [lower case, italicized], “an innocent and prosperous ritual, from which Theatre declares itself as a rather implausible lightning bolt” (187). Essentially, *theatre* refers to a non-dialectical mode of performance, engendering a consensus of opinion, rather than Theatre’s intention to provoke the spectator’s engagement with thought. For Badiou, “all true Theatre is a heresy in action”, and this heresy sets itself against the “vigilant concern of the State” (187). “*theatre*”, on the other hand, is “of the State, though it has nothing to say about this” (200). Instead, “it perpetuates and organizes the easygoing and grumpy subjectivity that is needed for the State” (200). The *theatre* “of established meanings ... induces a convivial

satisfaction in those who hate truth" (198) and, through its "passion of ignorance" (195), is "the inversion of Theatre" (198). "*theatre*" embodies the "nonspirit of our times", whereby the "public is affected, or infected, by laziness" (195). Laziness, however, "is the only vice that [T]heatre ... cannot accommodate" (195), because Theatre, as a "figurative reknitting of politics" (193), "always has something to say about the State, and finally about the state (of the situation)" (200).

The Theatre event [analogous to a progressive, revolutionary political gathering] "refuses the existence of a politics that would be unanimous, undivided, monolithic" (191) and requires "a special convocation and a willingness to respond" (190) on the part of the spectator. The "impasse of [T]heatre allows us to devise a *disorientation* of laziness" (195) and the spectator, who "corresponds to the taciturn and haphazard visitor" (189), through fidelity of response to the provocation of the spectacle, becomes "an indiscernible and atypical subtraction from what Mallarmé calls the crowd" (198). Badiou reflects on Mallarmé's claim that, in his time, there is a "lack of a Crowd's declaring itself", and therefore a "lack of a self-declared political collective". He points out that Mallarmé's two axioms of the theatre are that, firstly, there is "no such thing as a present" and, secondly, that "action does not go beyond the Theatre" (*Rhapsody* 189). Badiou further develops this line of thought in *The Century*, through his discussion of the artistic "passion for the real ... [which] opposes minimal difference to maximal destruction". This subtractive "construction of a minimal difference" (56) relates to his idea of the poet (or playwright) as "exile ... as secret, active exception", who "ignored [as a political voice], stands guard against perdition" (21). The negative, pessimistic stance of the twentieth-century poet/exile, manifests itself as "a desire for pure art, an art in which the only role of semblance would be to indicate the rawness of the real" (53). Theatre is not, therefore, a vehicle towards political change, but rather a medium through which the spectator is encouraged to consider the act of representation (theatrical, political or otherwise). As Barthes and Badiou point out, representation (or semblance) is intrinsically linked to political-cultural hegemony. By drawing attention to the nature of representation, the twentieth-century dramaturg, therefore, makes possible thinking, by the spectator, about the nature of this relationship.

When Badiou states that, in Theatre, a “representation is then the inquiry into the truth of which the spectator is the vanishing subject” (194), he is distinguishing between the spectator as consumer (in *theatre*) and the desired spectator as thinker (in Theatre). Badiou’s binary employs a borrowed distinction, much discussed in cultural theory (and in the previous chapters of this thesis): the distinction between the role of the spectator in the conservative, bourgeois theatre, and his/her role in an alternative, oppositional theatre. Through the binary of Theatre and *theatre*, Badiou attempts to discover what he calls “the *generic nature* of [T]heatre” (194).<sup>54</sup> Theatre, essentially, catalyzes a ‘dialectic at-play’, which invites critical spectatorship as a response to the representation. The critical seeing that Badiou describes requires that the spectator be provoked by, and interrogative of, both the act of representation and the representation itself. Theatre invites a revolutionary thinking of the art form and, by corollary, the social world of the spectator.<sup>55</sup>

Badiou distinguishes between the “analytic”, which refers to the constitutive elements of the art form – “place, text, director, actor, décor, costumes, public” - and the “dialectic”, or “at-play” which has at its heart the “Ethics of play”, which refers to the “provocation of the presentation” (194), or the provocation of thought in the spectator. As Bruno Bosteels (his translator) explains, in Theatre, the performance event “sublates the ‘analytic’ of the constituent elements ... into the concept of a ‘dialectic’”, and this “move from the analytic to the dialectic corresponds to the passage from a theatre text or piece to the event of its performance” (184). If the analytic relates to “the assemblage of the seven elements” (Badiou, “Rhapsody” 194), it belongs equally to both Theatre and *theatre*. It is by the “traversing of its elements (analytic) by an evental occurrence (dialectic)” (194) that truth (or thought) is activated. The dialectic (at-play) itself has three constitutive elements: the “State”, or “situation of representation”; the “Spectator”, or “possible support of Truth”; and finally, the “Ethics of play”, which is the dialectical gap for thought provided to the spectator to engage with both “the State” and the “state of things” (194). The dialectic, significantly, “conjures the seven constituent elements of every analytic of

<sup>54</sup> The use of the term ‘generic’ is unfortunate in the context of this thesis. Suffice to say, its use here has no connotations in terms of theatrical genres like melodrama, tragedy, etc.

<sup>55</sup> There is an allegorical link here between revolutionary thinking in terms of active politics, revolutionary thinking about theatre/representation and, by proxy, revolutionary thinking about the arts as a means towards political consciousness.

Theatre ... in such a way as to pronounce itself about itself and about the world ... such that the knot of this double examination interpellates the spectator at the impasse of a form of thought" (197).

Just as Badiou thinks about Theatre as a mode of thought that is 'about itself' and 'about the world', so the epic theatre strategist perpetually negotiates dramaturgically between these two pronunciations. In 1927, Brecht drew attention to this negotiation, stating that it "is not the play's effect on the audience but its effect on the theatre that is decisive at the moment" (*On Theatre* 22). At an early stage of his praxis, he anticipated Benjamin's "concept of technique [which] represents the dialectical starting-point from which the sterile dichotomy of form and content can be surmounted" (*Understanding Brecht* 87-88). Brecht added that the "*radical transformation of the theatre* can't be the result of some artistic whim", and that it "has simply to correspond to the whole radical transformation of the mentality of our time" (*On Theatre* 23). The reason the epic theatre by its nature must perpetually battle for the means of its own production is because, as Badiou states, "every productivist society probably counts intellectual laziness, the loathing of thought, as its dominant passion" ("Rhapsody" 195). These "certain publics manifest their hatred of Theatre by the fervour of their attending '*theatre*'" ("Rhapsody" 198), and also through the obstruction of epic theatre spectacles. The change in the 'mentality of our time' (through Theatre) that Brecht aspired to is at odds with the fact that theatre, as the art form of the State, is "essentially under surveillance" ("Rhapsody" 202).

Badiou's analogy of theatre and politics is useful in understanding, on one hand, the surveillance of the epic theatre and, on the other, its revolutionary potential. In the following, he outlines the three elements that define a political event:

... when three things form a knot: the masses, who are all of a sudden gathered in an unexpected consistency (events); the points of view incarnated in organic and enumerable actors (subject-effects); a reference in thought that authorizes the elaboration of discourse. ("Rhapsody" 190)

The analogy between the constituent parts of a political event and Badiou's aspiration towards an evental theatre recalls the proposal, made in Chapter Two, that the *Ubu* project was an exercise in decolonising the theatre space from an 'opinion space' to a

'thinking place'. Of course, Jarry didn't initiate the riot that took place at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in December 1896, but was rather the 'provocation' of this most eventful of theatre performances. The initiator, as previously mentioned, was André Antoine, inventor (as a director) of the fourth-wall of the naturalistic stage, and pioneer (as an actor) of the psychological realist approach to acting. The (uncivilised) 'elaboration of discourse' that night in Lugné-Poe's theatre may be described as responses, by its 'enumerable actors', to Jarry's questioning of the ethics of representation on the Parisian stage. This intervention reflects Jarry's own theoretical writings on the subject, and specifically anticipates Brecht's thoughts on a play's effect 'on the theatre'. Significantly, the eventful quality of *Ubu the King* in performance relates to the surveillance of those who control the means of production. In the absence of an official state presence, as such, the petite-bourgeoisie of the Parisian avant-garde revealed themselves, in this case, as protectors of the *theatre*. The theatre managers were to the forefront of this surveillance: Antoine as the audible voice of dissent that disrupted the performance; and Lugné-Poe, despite the full houses that attended *Ubu the King*, as the silent censor who never again produced one of Jarry's plays.

Jarry's brief theatrical career, it may be argued, has everything to do with the means of production, and Badiou's assertion that "Theatre is of all art forms the most hated" ("Rhapsody" 198). Jarry's provocative "mirror" ("Theatre Questions" xxxiv) to the Parisian petite-bourgeoisie is, according to this thesis, the first in a chain of mirrors held up to theatre audiences by twentieth-century epic theatre, which "organizes a consciousness separated from the real that it nevertheless expresses" (Badiou, *Century* 49).<sup>56</sup> The fact that Jarry's *Ubu*-mirror was the catalyst for a riot in the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre evokes Badiou's assertion that "the essence of [real] theatre lies in the existence of the opening night" ("Rhapsody" 189). By this statement, Badiou acknowledges that, in performance, each event is unique, and that the text (or script) is in fact a pretext to the dramaturgical choices made by the director and production ensemble. The "temporal precariousness of theatre ... disquieting to playwrights and directors alike" ("Rhapsody" 193), was for Jarry the licence for a theatre of "becoming", rather than a theatre of "being" ("Twelve Theatrical Topics" xl). On the subject of the ethics of representation, there were, evidently, great numbers of

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<sup>56</sup> Badiou is, in this instance, referring to the "Brechtian theatre of distancing" (*Century* 48).



“subtraction[s] ... from the crowd” (“Rhapsody” 198) that night in Lugné-Poe’s theatre. Perhaps the subsequent marginalization of Jarry as a dramaturg may be explained by the fact that the bourgeois passion for consensus must be satiated, and Mallarmé’s crowd restored, with the exception of a few permanent ‘subtractions’. These spectators, or ‘subtractions’, catalyzed by Jarry’s ‘provocation’, are for *Ubu the King* the ‘minimal difference’ effected by this epic theatre event.

If, for Badiou, the opening night is the essence of ‘real theatre’, then perhaps this maxim can assist in understanding the performance masks deployed by the epic theatre: the folk performance masks of the clown and the storyteller. For Jarry, the clown is dominant, although his clown also employs storytelling devices, connected to the Renaissance convention of ‘pointing’. For Brecht, the storyteller is always present, even in the dialogues, or episodes. In the storyteller, however, Brecht also identifies qualities of the clown, or fool. For Fo, these two performance masks are more seamlessly fused, through the figure of the medieval *guillaire*, revived and unleashed as an oppositional figure of the Italian stage. The storyteller/clown, as the actor of the epic theatre, reflects the importance of unpredictability in its dramaturgical strategy. On one hand, the epic theatre embraces unpredictability as an alternative to the (unattainable) striving for fixity that is characteristic of the bourgeois theatre (Naturalism, melodrama, West End musical). Epic theatre also embraces unpredictability because, by acknowledging the ephemerality and artifice of the art form, it also acknowledges the singularity of the evental ‘dialectic (at-play)’, recognising that the spectacle “is perishable by nature” (“Rhapsody” 193). No performer understands this perishability better than the storyteller/clown.

Badiou’s dialectic (at-play) emerges from “the singular need for the *spectator* to be summoned to appear in the tribunal of a *morality* under the watchful eye of the *State*” (“Rhapsody” 194). It acknowledges the physicality, not just of the performer, but of the entire event or gathering. He describes Theatre as “a material, corporeal, machinic assemblage” (“Rhapsody” 189), whereby the “public power, morals, and the collective are put on hold, if not endangered” (“Rhapsody” 190). Such is the latent power of the opening night, where the pretext (script, rehearsals of script) is physicalized before the general public. The opening night has a liminality attached to

it, as the unpredictability of a première is open to the kinds of radical spontaneity characteristic of folk forms.

But the potential of this latent power is not the exclusive domain of the epic theatre: it is also fully grasped by its opposition, as is attested by the Nazi Party's obstruction of Brecht's premières (and often of subsequent performances), before his exile from Germany in 1932. Badiou suggests that the "second night" is "so feared by the actors" because it touches on the State" ("Rhapsody" 189). This relates to the opening night which, if it is "scandalous, it is because the State does not keep watch over itself enough" ("Rhapsody" 203). The actors of the epic theatre, therefore, suspiciously await the response of the State and its collaborators to the 'scandal' of the event of the opening night. Badiou concludes with the thought that "[the fact that] there is a third [night] presupposes that Morality did not prevent it from happening" ("Rhapsody" 189). The term 'Morality' here refers to the morality of the State. In the case of *Ubu the King*, which in Jarry's lifetime enjoyed a mere three-night run at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre (as was the theatre's policy for every new show), it is clear that the scandal (of the opening night) did not prevent the production completing its brief programming slot in Lugné-Poe's theatre. The State and its collaborators, clearly, were quite happy to tolerate a scandal, and thereby advertise its semblance of progressive thinking through a toleration of a second and third night onstage for Ubu-Gémier-Jarry.

Having let its guard down on the opening night, via the protests of Antoine et al, the Parisian avant-garde endured the subsequent performances with passive rather than vocal disdain. Significantly, this disdain exercised itself in the fact that Jarry was never again afforded the means to stage an opening night. His solitary opening night exemplifies the fact that "Representation *takes place*", that it is "a circumscribed event" and that "there can be no permanent theatre" ("Rhapsody" 192). Badiou expands his point to state that the "fact that immediately the spectacle is played a second time changes nothing in this regard" and that, mathematically, the second night makes "two times One, with no access whatsoever to any permanence" ("Rhapsody" 192). Epic theatre acknowledges this ephemerality, partly because the epic strategy is always under the surveillance of State morality and its advocates. It also embraces unpredictability because of its employment of latent, subversive

properties of popular (or folk) cultural elements. This is why its actors employ the mask of the storyteller, or the clown.

It is now necessary to discuss in some depth the nature of the mask of the epic actor, thereby linking the dramaturgies of Brecht and Jarry, and informing subsequent analyses of case-studies from the theatres of Brecht and Fo. But firstly, a brief review on the main insights gleaned from the analysis, in Chapter Two, of the *Ubu the King* project. Dramaturgically (and dialectically), *Ubu the King* represents an oppositional stance against the catharses of genre. Its dialectic was, primarily, subtractive, at once dissolving and lampooning the representational conventions and social proprieties of the bourgeois stage, and thereby exposing the 'semblance of dialectics' that was the theatrical avant-garde of 1890s Paris. This 'semblance of dialectics' is inextricably linked to the (dishonest) gap between the choices made, by Jarry's contemporaries, in terms of dramatic form (Antoine's semblance of verisimilitude, or the Symbolists' semblance of metaphysics) and content (carefully constructed pseudo-tragedy). By exposing this gap (or semblance), Jarry essentially exposed the avant-garde stage as the workspace of the artisans of bourgeois myth-making. By making carnival in this workspace, via Gémier and Père Ubu's toilet-brush, Jarry transgressed the temple of what his contemporary, Romain Rolland, called "the sufferings and doubts of the 'cultured'" (455). Essentially, Jarry anticipated what Badiou calls "an axiom of the [twentieth] century's art", its "fact of regarding the efficacy of semblance as real" (*Century* 49), a concept brought to its meta-theatrical limit, as will be discussed in Chapter Five, in the theatre of Dario Fo.

*Ubu the King*, therefore, was at once an exercise in exposition (of bourgeois myth-making) and in the re-enumeration of the properties of the theatrical space. The former point is by now, I believe, explained sufficiently. The latter point is mathematical, and follows the logic that epic theatre is at once a subtractive, a divisive and an additive dialectical strategy. Epic theatre is subtractive in the manner that it distorts and rejects the conventions of contemporary, dominant genres. It is also subtractive because, by making the ethics of representation a theme in itself, it dissolves the representational semblances of the bourgeois stage. It is divisive because it sets itself out as an alternative cultural element to both the mainstream and avant-garde theatres of 1890s Paris. In this sense, its strategy is no different to that of

the avant-garde. A distinguishing factor between epic theatre and the avant-garde is that epic theatre objects, not only to the “language” of the bourgeoisie, but also to “its status” (Barthes 139), because epic theatre recognizes that the bourgeoisie “should be understood” as a “synthesis of its determination and its representations” (Barthes 139). The *Ubu the King* project unglues, as it were, this synthesis of ideology and semblance in bourgeois mythology. By lampooning the reverie of the theatres of Antoine and Lugné-Poe, *Ubu the King* subtracts from the avant-garde stage its introverted, “intellectual stoicism” (Rolland 456). Jarry unmasks the gap between ‘the semblance and the real’, and the mask of Père Ubu de-crowns the hitherto foregrounded stoical hero of the naturalistic and Symbolist stages. This de-crowning creates a vacuum for new modes of representation. A crucial part of epic theatre’s subtractive strategy, the opening up of this hypothetical space takes a great deal of dramaturgical effort and perseverance. It is through the encoding of its protagonists that the epic theatre, through a mixture of mask and pastiche, manifests its additive, dialectical quality. Père Ubu is, therefore, the first term in the ancestry of unlikely masks through which meaning is filtered by the epic theatre.

The mask of Père Ubu is at first a parody and, by extension, a pastiche. It is through the synthesis (or journey) through this distinction that the epic theatre re-contextualises its appropriated popular (residual or dormant) cultural elements within the modernist sphere. Père Ubu is, according to Jarry’s mask theory, an “effigy” (“Futility” xvi), an emblematic representation of modern, petit-bourgeois man in all his “ignoble” glory (“Theatre Questions” xxxiv). Père Ubu is a re-write of the role of Macbeth: however, the re-write has in mind the actor more suited to playing the role of the bawd, in particular the gluttonous, expedient grotesque, Falstaff. Père Ubu parodies the role of Macbeth, while also fusing the role of the Shakespearean bawd with that of the Shakespearean tragic hero. This fusion is not uncomplicated, as the role of Père Ubu therefore contradicts the Shakespearean fixity of social role, which requires that the bawds (servants, inn-keepers, etc.), heroes (kings, queens, thanes, etc.) and villains (illegitimate sons of aristocrats, entrusted servants, etc.), plot vicissitudes aside, are inevitably reminded of (and re-located to) ‘their place’ by the

end of the drama.<sup>57</sup> Père Ubu, therefore, emblematises an untying of the fixity of social role intrinsic to the feudal society, and reflects a fluidity of distinctions in social class present in a Parisian society negotiating its social transformation from nineteenth-century French imperialism to twentieth-century, capitalist modernity. He also reflects a consideration of the protagonist as a voluntarist, rather than as the deterministic hero of cathartic genres.

Frederick Jameson, attempting to identify how pastiche relates to the regressive qualities of post-modernist aesthetics, draws attention to the similarities between the terms (and practices of) pastiche and parody, affirming that both “involve the imitation, or, better still, the mimicry of other styles and particularly of the mannerisms and stylistic twitches of other styles”. The difference, he claims, lies in the fact that pastiche “is a neutral practice of such mimicry” and, choosing not to highlight its inter-textual referent,<sup>58</sup> pastiche is “without parody’s satirical impulse” (911). While this may be true, Jameson’s distinction fails to recognize how, as exemplified by the progressive modernist dramaturgy of the epic theatre, pastiche contains its own latent, satirical potential. Also, it is worth considering that a narrative may be decipherable (depending on who the spectator is) as a parody, as a pastiche or, alternatively, as a combination of both. This hybrid of parody and pastiche may be linked to Jarry’s modernist stance in opposition to genre conventions, and his strategy of re-writing the role of the protagonist for the modernist theatre. This strategy may be described as a process of deconstruction-reconstruction. The parody (of Macbeth, Falstaff and Renaissance/heroic drama generally) is a deconstructive mechanism, which deflates the traditional hero (or protagonist), rendering him/her laughable and anachronistic. The pastiche (Père Ubu as a hybrid of Macbeth and Falstaff), is a reconstructive agent, and displaces the established (or

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<sup>57</sup> It is worth noting that the character of Père Ubu escapes all such poetic justices. By the end of *Ubu the King* he has escaped and is on a boat on the Baltic Sea, plotting to go to Paris to wreak political havoc similar to that he has just acted out in Poland.

<sup>58</sup> An illustrative example of this is the manner in which Quentin Tarantino’s films often borrow from a referent, without actually acknowledging the source or making clear what his narrative is mimicking. In *Pulp Fiction*, Harvey Keitel plays ‘The Cleaner’, a mobster who uses detergents and sponges to clean the blood out of a car after an accidental shooting. This refers to the film *The Assassin*, where Keitel also plays a character called ‘The Cleaner’, who in this instance is a hit-man sent to murder the protagonist. The inter-textual link develops further, as *The Assassin* is, in fact, a remake of the French movie, *Nikita*, where this character also appears. The laws of pastiche mean, in this instance, that the spectator has no need to understand all these inter-textual links to enjoy the narrative. However, it is essential knowledge for devotees of such cult narratives.

reigning), introverted protagonist of the European stage. The satire is double-layered: the parody satirises (and deconstructs) the old forms, while the pastiche interrogates its bourgeois authors, through constructing the mask of Père Ubu.

Kenneth Pickering, describing Derrida's concept of deconstructionism and how it relates to drama, notes how:

Language operates ... by silencing or negating the opposites to which it in fact refers. So texts are often about what they seem *not* to be about and in the process of "deconstructing" a text we can find points where otherness of what a work is about may become evident. (229)

Pickering explains how Derrida believes that "in the West, knowledge is structured around a *centre*", and that the 'centre' (agent or agents) of this subtle structuring does not "immediately, draw attention to itself" (229). The epistemological hegemony bound to grand-narratives asserts a "certain truth, or *logos*, that presents itself beyond contention and as absolute" (229-230). Traditional dramatic texts reinforce this 'logos' by claiming that "definitive interpretation[s]" (230) of texts are decipherable, that irrefutable meanings are robustly encoded by the authors of dramatic (or literary) works. Derrida, therefore, draws attention to the unwritten (or unperformed) meanings (or 'othernesses') to make a philosophical point regarding the function of semiology. Through analysing what the author (or performance company) chooses not to represent, Derrida affirms that there are contradictions that may be decipherable in any given text.

Barthes asserts that semiology "knows only one operation: reading, or deciphering" (114). However, in conceiving of *Ubu the King*, Jarry identified an 'otherness' of late nineteenth-century drama: the non-representation of the voluntarist, or petit-bourgeois man, who emerges during that era. According to Barthes, the bourgeoisie "is defined as *the social class which does not want to be named*", having "obliterated its name in passing from reality to representation" (138). This representation is, according to the European stage, the anachronistic hero of Greek or Renaissance drama, a historical figure, bound to antiquity, to objectivity, to genre and, through historical distance, to the deterministic certainties of grand-narratives. What Jarry appears to have noted is the invisibility, on the European stage, of the agents (and supporters) of bourgeois

mythology: the petite-bourgeoisie. In order to encode the voluntarist and his contradictions, Jarry deconstructs, through dramaturgy rather than criticism, the stoic of the Naturalist/Symbolist/classical stage. This deconstructive process, through the properties of the character of Père Ubu, dances on both sides of the fine line between parody and pastiche that Jameson describes, with parody linked to the deconstruction of the protagonist of the European stage, and pastiche the means through which the semblances of bourgeois myth are exposed. Jarry's project, therefore, may be seen as a form of deconstruction, perhaps best described as *deconstructionism as praxis*.

Père Ubu, as a pastiche of the traditional protagonists of the European stage, clearly did show Jarry's audience a side of itself "which it had never before been shown completely" ("Theatre Questions" xxxiv). In order to interrogate the darker side of the Nietzschean 'new man', Jarry recognised that a new kind of protagonist was required. This new protagonist is not, however, a codified archetype, but rather an anti-generic subject-agent. The term 'agent' is significant here, as the protagonist of the epic theatre, although at odds with the social-political forces with which he/she must contend, is unchained by the determinist outlook of Naturalism. The epic theatre subject is changeable, just as Père Ubu the defeatist (1.1) transforms into Père Ubu the tyrant (3.1). The epic theatre mask is also the agent of change, whether it be on the grand scale of Père Ubu's State purging of the Polish nobility, or on the more local scale of Shen Teh's distributing free rice to the poor of Szechuan (in Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechuan*).

The epic theatre protagonist is neither the archetypal everyman of the medieval stage, nor the cathartic hero of the Greek and nineteenth-century dramas. He/she is rather an 'anyman': an unpredictable, uncodified mask that both parodies and rejects the archetypes and stock characters of the European stage. This 'anyman' is changeable and therefore has a pre-textual quality, which explains the duality of the mask of Shui Ta/Shen Teh in Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechuan*, or the "histrionomania" (1.1, 127) of the mask of The Maniac in Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*.<sup>59</sup> This pre-textual quality inverts the 'semblance of nature' in the naturalistic representation of verisimilitude, and re-affirms the art form as, in Badiou's

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<sup>59</sup> A more extensive analysis of the complex-layering at work with the mask of The Maniac will be discussed in Chapter Five.

description, the “outrageously artiginal operation” (“Rhapsody” 189) that it is. It also inverts the ‘semblance of nature’ that is the psychological realist approach to character, as initiated by Antoine, revealing not only the character role as a construct, but the actor – in collaboration with the author and director – as a co-collaborator in its construction.

In epic theatre, as Benjamin states in *Understanding Brecht*, “the actor is no longer a mime who must embody a role, but a functionary who has to make an inventory of it” (2), and it is through this re-positioning of the role of the actor that epic theatre “derives a lively and productive consciousness from the fact that it [unashamedly] is theatre” (4). This consciousness enables epic theatre “to treat elements of reality as though it were setting up an experiment, with the ‘conditions’ at the end of the experiment, not at the beginning” (4). Because epic theatre “does not reproduce conditions but, rather, reveals them” (4), its protagonist must be encoded as a function of the conditions the dramatist/company wishes to interrogate. Hence the ‘anyman’ quality of the epic theatre protagonist, a quality emphasised by the visibility of the actor or, in the case of the complex-layered mask of Ubu-Gémier-Jarry, of the actor, author and, by extension, the company around them. This visibility is crucial, as the ‘anyman’ does not serve an aesthetic of audience identification or catharsis. This is the role of the ‘everyman’ or the hero of tragedy/melodrama. The ‘anyman’ inverts the nineteenth-century, deterministic stance on character/role (or man) as at the whim of the world’s vicissitudes, instead establishing a conversation between character/role/man and the social/political/economic structures with which he must contend. For Père Ubu, these social structures present him with choices: it is for the actor Gémier, through slapstick, to create a dialectical commentary on these grotesquely nihilistic choices and their ethical qualities and consequences. This is why the actor of the epic theatre is essentially a storyteller, a conveyor of folk narrative, because “storytelling is based on reported action”, as “even when the storyteller enacts part of the action, the audience is always aware that they are seeing a demonstration of the events, rather than a pretence that here are the events as they are actually happening” (Wilson 54).

In 1929, Brecht wrote that epic acting should be:



Witty. Ceremonious. Ritual. Spectator and actor ought not to approach one another but to move apart. Each ought to move away from himself. Otherwise the element of terror necessary to all recognition is lacking. (*On Theatre* 26)

This quote recognizes what this thesis argues is the dubious mask of the storyteller, a concept introduced in the anecdote of “De Bogman in Cahirciveen” at the beginning of the thesis. According to Benjamin, “it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it” (*Illuminations* 89). Benjamin elaborates to say that a good story contains “that chaste compactness that precludes psychological analysis”, and that “the more natural the process by which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story’s claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely it is integrated into his own experience” (90). Of course, a relationship between character role and psychological interpretation is inevitable, as even the grotesque masks of the *Commedia dell’Arte* are informed by lived experience, as discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis. As Carl Weber notes, when Brecht the director collaborated with his actors in the development of character role, “psychology was not left out, but was developed from the social relations” (88), because rather than eschewing psychology, the epic actor de-prioritises it in favour of a sociological reading of character. This is because the epic protagonist is presented from the perspective of his/her relationship with the world rather than as a function of it.

The relationship between the actor and role, in the epic theatre, relates to the manner in which its dramaturgy inverts the deterministic approach of the bourgeois theatre. In Brecht’s dramaturgy, the epic actors report the protagonist, and they do so in two ways: firstly, through physicality, or role-play, and, secondly, through spoken report, or storytelling. The second point requires closer analysis, and relates to one of the apparent paradoxes of Brecht’s practice: that in order to develop a radical approach to ensemble performance, the dramaturg appropriates the devices of a solo, folk performance tradition: the craft of the storyteller.<sup>60</sup> A brief digression is now necessary into the nature of this craft, and a brief discussion of the art of Ireland’s traditional, fireside storyteller, the *seanchaí*.

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<sup>60</sup> In Chapter Five, there will be a discussion of the influence of the medieval *guillaire* – the grotesque, performing minstrel who is also a solo performer – in the context of Dario Fo’s practice.

The nature of the 'dubious mask' of the storyteller, in folk tradition, may be exemplified by an example from Éamon Kelly, the Irish seanchaí, and his rendition of 'The Tay-man' (*Collected Stories* 341-3).<sup>61</sup> In this short anecdote, the eponymous travelling salesman is forced, due to adverse weather, to stay the night in the one-roomed house of a farm labourer and his wife. As there was only one bed in the house, all three are forced to sleep together in it (as was the tradition of hospitality in the area), with the farm labourer in the middle, his wife wedged in by the wall and the Tay-man on the outside. Before the light is put out, the woman of the house takes from the oven a fresh-baked bread cake, the scent of which arouses such a hunger in the Tay-man that she offers to cut him a slice. The farm labourer objects and insists that the cake be allowed to cool, as was the custom, and that they would all have their first slice of it in the morning for breakfast. During the night, the farm labourer – who has a weak bladder – must visit the out-house regularly, and jealously insists that his wife accompany him, so as not to leave her alone in the bed with the Tay-man. The story ends as follows:

Around six in the morning, the storm got so bad it began to rip the boards off the shed, and the husband in his excitement to get out to tie it down, forgot all about the tay-man. When he was gone, the wife turned to the tay-man and said, 'Now is your chance!'

He got up and ate the cake! (342)

In performance (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzP4FM3WqwY>), Kelly chooses to foreground, mainly through syllabic emphasis, the sexual innuendo quality of the narrative in order to ambush the audience's expectations at the end of the story with the punch-line about the bread-cake. A risqué tale of extra-marital desire in clergy-policed, rural Ireland is transformed, through the punch-line, into an innocent intrigue about a forbidden bread-cake and a hungry man's desire to eat it. What is interesting, when the written text is transformed by Kelly into performance, is to observe the game that is 'at-play' between the seanchaí and his audience. The seanchaí, naturally, addresses his audience directly, as if a member of their community, albeit a member

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<sup>61</sup> Kelly (1914-2001) is the most famous 'traditional' storyteller to emerge in twentieth-century Ireland. A 'tay-man' was a travelling salesman who would sell tea-leaves (tay) to homes around the countryside in the time before local shops were widespread in the country. The pronunciation stems from the Irish language word for tea, which is 'tae' (pronounced 'tay').

with an ascribed role. The exchange mechanism is complicit: the audience at once distrusts the seanchaí (as a young boy doubts the truth of an uncle's tall-tales), but nonetheless trusts that the end will justify the narrative. The inflexions and intonations of the narrative are not to be taken literally, as a sign-post towards meaning, as it were. Rather, there is an 'at-play', or a game, in which the audience and actor are complicit in an exercise in deciphering.

There are multiple perspectives available for deciphering in 'The Tay-man', and the seanchaí skilfully conjures up each one, while ensuring that each perspective is, as it were, dubious. Firstly, he conjures up the perspective of the storyteller. The story he is about to report relates to an incident at which he was not present, so essentially he is reporting a version of a report that he received from another storyteller or someone who was present at the original event. Of course, there is no mention of how many times the story has been passed on, so the tale may have been revised, or re-encoded, on dozens of occasions. In other words, he confesses the latitudes afforded him by his narrative craft. Secondly, he conjures up the perspective of the seanchaí as interpreter, through a foregrounding of the sexual content in the story. Thirdly, and this perspective is linked to the second, there is the perspective of the seanchaí as trickster, which only emerges at the end of the tale, via the unforeseen punch-line. Fourthly, the *seanchaí* conjures the perspective of the woman of the house. The way in which Kelly reports her point-of view during the story, it appears as if she may be a promiscuous character. However, the punch-line suggests that she is simply a generous character who wants to supply the guest with a slice of cake. Fifthly, there is the perspective of the man of the house, suspicious of male guests. The sixth perspective, that of the tay-man, the apparent protagonist, is perhaps the most significant. The role of this character (or the character of this role) is as a catalyst in the narrative that is brought to life by the storyteller. The seventh and final perspective is that of the audience, daily living with the conservatism of the Catholic Irish Free State. This is the perspective the seanchaí mediates, as he cannot conjure it. The 'at-play' that Kelly catalyzes with his audience echoes Schiller's contention that a "dramatic plot will move before my eyes; an epic seems to stand still while I move around it" (qtd. in Brecht, *On Theatre* 210). The storyteller, or epic actor, is, just like the epic protagonist, a catalyst (or filter) who coerces the audience to engage (or be at play) with the complexity of the narrative.

Brecht believed that “the very artifice of story invites the audience to question, interpret, evaluate and judge” (Wilson 122). The epic actor/storyteller is not a didactic figure, but rather an artisan in the sense that, as Benjamin writes, stories contain “the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship” (*Illuminations* 91). It is ironic that the accusation of didacticism is so often levelled at Brecht when in fact the only real insistence his practice makes on an audience is that they consider the theatre above all as a ‘thinking place’, rather than a site whereby a “collective entity is created in the auditorium for the *duration of the entertainment*, on the basis of the ‘common humanity’ shared by all spectators alike” (*On Theatre* 60). The example of Kelly’s story in performance supports Wilson’s assertion that for Brecht “theatre was an act of collective storytelling” (121) as, in “The Tay-man”, the seanchaí exemplifies two key properties of the art of storytelling: the conspicuousness of the storyteller and, by extension, the semiotic ‘at-play’ with the audience. The first property implies the presence of what Brecht endorsed as the “extraordinary weapon” in Shaw’s “brand of terror”: that is, “humour” (*On Theatre* 10). The second property exploits the liberating power of laughter (or humour) towards a counter-hegemonic cultural exchange between audience and performance: in other words, it relates to narrative.

Peter Thomson states that “Whatever is exclusively of the theatre is of no interest to Brecht and little benefit to humanity” (100). This, perhaps, explains why epic theatre proposes narrative in favour of plot, which relates to the codified genres of the bourgeois stage, and why it opposes Naturalism’s “fundamental dishonesty concerning its own nature” (Wilson 121). Thomson notes how Brecht’s work with actors “displays aspects of a counter-practice” (109) to developments in psychological realist approaches to acting. Brecht encouraged his actors to “work on the audience in such a way as to rob the familiar of its inconspicuousness”, under the assumption that “it might help if the familiar text could be made conspicuous to the actors” (105). Just as the traditional storyteller informs a reading of Brecht, Thomson’s reading of Brecht informs an understanding of the nature of the storyteller. In order to make the familiar seem conspicuous, the storyteller must first of all perform (character, narration, circumstance: the narrative) in a manner that is conspicuous, or dubious. The audience, ‘at-play’ with the narrative, themselves become conspicuous: alert and interrogative of the elements of the story.

Just as the conspicuous nature of Éamon Kelly's seanchaí invites his audience into a semiological 'at-play' with the narrative presentation, Brecht's actor "both presents and scrutinises the behaviour of the character in such a way as to invite the audience's interrogation" (Thomson 107). The epic actors are, therefore "double-agents, sometimes self-employed and sometimes employed by the character", and it is "such contradictory juxtapositions [that] are the typical ammunition of *Verfremdung*", according to Thomson (106).<sup>62</sup> Redolent of the art of the seanchaí, for Brecht "the actor's emotion does not need to coincide with that of the character" (Thomson 107), in opposition to the dramatic actor who, according to Brecht himself, "has his character established from the first and simply expresses it to the inclemencies of the world and the tragedy". The epic actor, in contrast, "lets his character grow before the spectator's eyes out of the way in which he behaves" (*On Theatre* 56).

Wilson notes how Brecht was drawn to the fact that "the concept of change and transformation is inherent in the folktale", that folktales "do not simply present life as it is (or was), but as it might be, often alongside a social critique of reality" (122).<sup>63</sup> It is unsurprising that Brecht, as a Marxist intellectual, was instinctively drawn to folk narrative forms, which are by nature transformative, ethically dubious and anti-psychological.<sup>64</sup> As Scholes and Kellogg state, in narrative "the psychological impulse tends toward the presentation of highly individualized figures who resist abstraction and generalization, and whose motivation is not susceptible to rigid ethical interpretation" (101).<sup>65</sup> Psychological realism in narrative, therefore, obstructs ethical enquiry in the spectator (or reader), because its psychology is concerned with deduction rather than interrogation, and favours explanation over a suggestion of alternatives: in other words, it privileges opinion over thought. In Brecht's approach

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<sup>62</sup> Thomson borrows the metaphor 'double-agent' from Joseph Chaikin's analysis of Brecht's approach to acting in *The Presence of the Actor*.

<sup>63</sup> Wilson's comment on the folktale actually echoes a succinct outline of the dramaturgy of Brecht's *Life of Galileo*.

<sup>64</sup> Because the term folktale is quite far-reaching, it is worth clarifying that, in terms of this analysis, the pagan folktales of Ireland (in particular The Táin and stories from Douglas Hyde's *Beside The Fire* collection) and the Grimm Brothers stories are of particular interest here. Characters in these tales are, generally, serving of narrative, morally ambiguous and, significantly, continually confronted with choice, moral or otherwise. Excellent examples include, from Hyde's collection, "The Tailor and the Three Beasts" (2-14) and "The King of Ireland's Son" (18-46).

<sup>65</sup> Scholes and Kellogg are not referring here to drama specifically, but rather to approaches to psychological characterization in narrative generally.

to character/acting, “the answer to a question is another question; the end of interrogation is interrogation” (Thomson 104). Also, while the “Stanislawskian actor will locate in character the explanation for behaviour ... the Brechtian actor will look for it in circumstance” (Thomson 107). Brecht’s approach echoes Scholes and Kellogg’s assertion that as “characters move in a narrative plot their meanings change, just as the meanings of words change in different grammatical situations and in different contexts... The character created to illustrate a philosophical position [can] become involved in a situation quite at variance with that position” (104). Hence, there is a tension (and contradiction) between Galileo the idealist, emblematic of how science can serve progress, and Galileo the pragmatist, who must recant in order to eat/sleep/work in material comfort.

Brecht’s Galileo exemplifies how the epic protagonist, as a contradiction with both egoistic and altruistic tendencies, is analogous to the adventurer of the folktale tradition. Galileo’s journey through Brecht’s narrative presents a negotiation between the pragmatic, relating to socio-political circumstances, and the philosophical, relating to ethical choices. The dialectical ‘at-play’ created between the spectator and the epic actor/storyteller, by the art of the epic actor/storyteller, facilitates the site which considers the dialectic ‘at stake’, the ethical analysis of the role of Galileo, and the choices he makes as the narrative unfolds. This is why, for Brecht, the actor must “learn how to show that the choice made was not the only available choice”, and that through the dialectic ‘at stake’, the audience can identify other possible choices Galileo has available to him and therefore “may be encouraged to choose for change” (Thomson 107) in their own circumstances. According to Thomson, Galileo’s recantation is “For Brecht ... less a matter of psychology than of history. The fact that Galileo recants does not make his recantation historically inevitable”. Thomson reads Galileo as exemplifying the fact that “Brecht’s consistent project, both as writer and practitioner, was to destabilise facts and interrogate the necessary” (104). In this sense, Brecht is what Badiou describes as a uniquely twentieth-century brand of poet, a “custodian of lost thought”, a “protector, in language, of a forgotten opening” (*Century* 20-21). As Badiou suggests, the theatrical mask may be read as “the symbol of a question that is often designated, quite erroneously, as that of the importance in the [twentieth] century of the lie” (*Century* 47). Hence, the restoration of the mask to the European stage, by the epic theatre.

Brecht recognized that storytelling can be “a means of effective cultural empowerment... as a way of building community, challenging existing power structures and questioning the perceived inevitability of current injustices” (Wilson 24). Brecht was also suspicious of traditions: hence storytelling, as a tradition, is not for him “an artefact in its own right, a fixed entity” (Wilson 25), but an ever-evolving cultural resource, with latent revolutionary properties. As Benjamin states, the storyteller “is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself” (*Illuminations* 107), and storytelling “is itself an artisan form of communication”. (*Illuminations* 91). Brecht appropriates and exploits this most ancient of cultural elements in much the same way that Jarry re-awakens the subversive figure of the clown, the artisan of stage business, in opposition to the bourgeois stage. Wilson notes a connection between the figures of the clown and the storyteller, with reference to Joel Schechter’s research into clowning traditions. Schechter’s definition of clowns “includes storytellers through the link with the historical figure of the Fool, a clown-cum-storyteller who challenges and subverts conventional wisdom and attitudes through humour” (17). In epic theatre acting, the duality of the mask (referred to in Chapter Two of this thesis) encompasses both the craft of the storyteller and that of the Fool. Père Ubu-Gémier-Jarry employ the Shakespearean storytelling mode – that of pointing – to literally point out the moral choices that face Ubu and, satirically, the moral vacuum that defines his prophetic (in terms of twentieth century political regimes) brand of voluntarism. The following is from the scene where Père Ubu the tyrant purges the Polish nobility and government:

Mère Ubu

I beseech you, be reasonable, Père Ubu.

Père Ubu

I have the honour of telling you that to enrich the kingdom I shall put all the Nobles to death and confiscate their goods.

NOBLES

Oh, horror! Help us, populace and soldiers!

Père Ubu

Bring forward the first Noble and pass me the Nobles’ hook. Those who are condemned to death, I will push them through the trapdoor, they’ll fall into the

dungeon of the pig-pincher and of the money-chamber, where their brains will be extracted. (*To the Noble*) Who are you, nincompoop?

THE NOBLE

I am the Count of Vitebsk.

Père Ubu

How much are your revenues?

THE NOBLE

Three million silver dollars.

Père Ubu

Condemned to death!

(3.2, 90-1)

The scene progresses, predictably, with the (premeditated) condemnation of all of the nobles by Père Ubu, regardless of what they say in their defence. When the final noble has been condemned, Mère Ubu intervenes:

Mère Ubu

You're too savage, Père Ubu

Père Ubu

Well, I'm getting myself rich. Make them read MY list of MY possessions.

Clerk, read me MY list of MY possessions.

(3.2, 93)

Père Ubu's logic is grotesque in that it is excessively nihilistic, and it underlines the notion of moral choice in its excessive amorality. The contradiction, in anticipation of Brecht, hinges on Père Ubu's unambiguous presumption that power renders the notion of ethics unnecessary, and that legislation is an expedient rather than a moral choice for the legislator. Père Ubu's dialogue is calm and matter-of-fact because he has already considered the notion of moral choice, and his conclusion is that he is diplomatically (or despotically) immune from any appeal to ethics. The pomp, ceremony and public appeasement that are the semblances of benevolent statesmanship - already lampooned in act two, scene seven - are no longer necessary, and have facilitated Père Ubu's transition to despotism, in the sense that *Ubu the King* is, in many respects, a parable of despotism. The sense of contradiction is achieved through Gémier who, via the role of Père Ubu, assumed the role of the 'clown-cum-



storyteller'. Gémier parodied the devices of the licensed storyteller of the bourgeois stage: that is, the technique of pointing (and the aside) in Shakespearean drama.

The aside is a device through which the Shakespearian villain – and the Vice in mystery plays – courts the audience's penchant for knavery, and makes intimate to the audience the dark ambition of the usurper. Well known characters associated with this use of the aside include the characters of Edmund in *King Lear*, Iago in *Othello* and Borachio in *Much Ado About Nothing*.<sup>66</sup> However, Père Ubu was encoded as immune to the prescribed laws of (Shakespearean) poetic justice, an inter-textual message that was double-encoded through Gémier's effete abandon in performance. A dialectic (at-play) for the spectator may emerge from some of the following thoughts: (i) 'if this is the grotesque state of contemporary statesmanship (or imperial government), in what way may the citizens of imperialist France be, according to Immanuel Kant's binary of action/ inaction, its silent advocates?'; (ii) 'these citizens, by proxy, were also its cannon-fodder, as the trenches of World War One made evident a decade after Jarry's production'; (iii) 'perhaps the imperial agenda and its potential consequences for the citizens of the State are worth considering'; (iv) 'as a member of the bourgeoisie with a wooden leg, I am unlikely to be conscripted, so why should I care?'; (v) 'why did I assume that the good would "end happily"?', and so on.

Brecht's theatre, having had a longer life-span than Jarry's, appropriates a far wider range of storytelling devices – direct address (including the use of chorus), musical, poetic – than are evident in the Ubu cycle. Perhaps the most significant distinction between Brecht and Jarry was the former's development of epic theatre as an ensemble performance aesthetic (and production process) rather than a celebrity-driven one (after all, Gémier was a celebrity and Jarry was a self-celebrity of sorts). Thomson argues that, "in socio-political terms at least", Brecht's theatre "remains the most sophisticated application of semiotic principles to the preparation of actors" (109-110). He links this thought to the fact that, "before semiotics became a recognised focus of theatrical criticism or performance theory, *Gestus* guided the

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<sup>66</sup> The same logic applies to the medieval Morality plays, where often the agent of temptation makes the audience complicit with the fall of the protagonist, through the use of humour and of asides. Examples include the mask of Mischief in *Mankind*.

productions of the Berliner Ensemble” (109). It is through *Gestus*, the semiotic principle of Brecht’s praxis, that the craft of the story-teller becomes transposed to the rehearsal room of the twentieth-century epic theatre. Brecht, unlike Jarry, was fortunate enough to be able to develop his craft over three decades and more, both as a director and as a dramaturg or, perhaps, as a dramaturg who directs.

Brecht said that “the grouping and movement of the characters has to narrate the story, which is a chain of incidents, and this is the actor’s sole task” (*On Theatre* 213). Hence, the primary task of the epic actor is to narrate, or encode, the story. Braun notes that “nothing in the theatre was more important for Brecht than the story (*Die Fabel*)”, and explains the unconventionally lengthy rehearsals for Brecht’s 1924 production of Christopher Marlowe’s *The Life of Edward II of England* at Munich’s Kammerspiele, by the young director’s insistence “on making the story of the play plain in order that the audience should understand precisely what the characters were doing and what was happening to them” (164). Thomson notes how Brecht “admired the narrative drive and psychological sparseness” (101) of Marlowe’s original, while Braun reports how he “was attracted by its loose chronicle form with rapidly shifting scenes and discontinuity of mood and action” (163). The young playwright ruthlessly adapted the “sensuous rhetoric” of the original for a “harsher mode of expression and jerky, irregular speech rhythms”, and the working script eventually contained “no more than one-sixth” (Braun: 163) of Marlowe’s original lines. This forensically ruthless approach by Brecht, as an author-editor, to the adaptation of the Renaissance text was to be mirrored by the young director’s artisanal approach to the minute details of the stage action.

The early development of what Thomson calls Brecht’s “visceral poetic voice” (101) is often linked to the 1924 production of *Edward II*, and Braun identifies two significant moments in the rehearsal of this production which would inform the development of the epic theatre and, therefore, *Gestus* as its mode of communication. The first example relates to the betrayal, by the character Baldock, of his friend Edward to enemy soldiers. Brecht “objected to the haste and the insignificance” of the gesture which the actor was employing, and explained that the action “must demonstrate the behaviour of a traitor”, going about “the betrayal with friendly outstretched arms, tenderly and submissively handing [Edward] the cloth with broad

projecting gestures". This is because Brecht believed the spectator "should note the behaviour of a traitor and thereby pay attention" (164). The second example which Braun refers to relates to the hanging of the character Gaveston. Similar to the scene of Baldock's betrayal of Edward, Brecht insisted that the hanging be carried out "with the same attention to detail – 'professionally', as he put it". This insistence that the actors hang Gaveston "like experts" related to Brecht's conviction that the audience "had to get pleasure from seeing them put the noose around the fellow's neck" (164).

Brecht's use of the term 'pleasure' here is ambiguous, and potentially misleading. By pleasure, I would suggest that the dramaturg is referring to the 'pleasure' for the audience in a story well-told, rather than any sadistic satisfaction on their part in the witnessing of a character being publicly hanged. Significantly, both examples cited by Braun refer to physical acts, and this aids in understanding how epic theatre considers stage action as a physical means of storytelling. By emphasising these physical acts (the Janus-face of the betrayer Baldock, the expertise of the hangmen), Brecht insists that the actor of the epic theatre, when in character role, physically underlines the significant moments in the story, much as the traditional storyteller foregrounds significant narrative moments through tonal emphasis. While Éamon Kelly's seanchaí reports story-content in the third person from the fireside of the rural Irish community, the epic actor may also report action through physical gesture. And, much like Kelly's dubious narrative voice, the epic actor does not sign-post a desired emotional response from the audience, but rather makes these actions (betrayal, hanging) ethically conspicuous by inviting the audience to take pleasure in their reporting. What the traditional storyteller achieves through tonal emphasis, the epic actor achieves through what Brecht calls "stylization", which means "a general elaboration of what is natural, and its object is to show the audience, as being a part of society, what is important for society in the story" (*On Theatre* 213).

Carl Weber, as a long-serving assistant director to Brecht at the Berliner Ensemble, comments on the importance of 'blocking' in Brecht's methodology:

[Blocking] was the backbone of the production: ideally, he thought, the blocking should be able to tell the main story of the play – and its contradictions – by itself, so that a person watching through a glass wall unable to hear what was

being said would be able to understand the main elements and conflicts of the story. (86)

Brecht, therefore, was attempting to transpose an element of the poet's craft, the meticulous construction of each individual image, to the rehearsal room of the Berliner ensemble. This partly explains Brecht's long-lasting, productive collaboration with designer Caspar Neher, whom Brecht described as "an ingenious story-teller" who knew "better than anyone that what does not further the narrative harms it" (qtd. in Braun 165). Braun notes how Neher's design sketches "did much to concretise Brecht's imagery" (165), and the director would frequently refer to his designer's sketches (which also developed during the rehearsal process) to develop new ideas for blocking the actors. Brecht lauded how, in Neher's designs, "essential detail is most lovingly carried out", and that he never allowed "inessential detail or decoration" to distract from the action. Also, Neher's designs provided "no 'décor', frames or backgrounds, but constructs the space for 'people' to experience something in" (qtd. in Braun 165). Neher embraced Appia's warning that the purpose of theatre is not to serve as a gallery for a beautiful design, but rather that the design should serve the movement of the actor (14-5). Neher's approach to design prefigures Peter Brook's notion of an effective set design as "the skeleton of what the play needed" (*Between Two Silences* 78). Brook's ideal set design depends "on finding a physical basis that was like the key to the play ... a shape or series of shapes that was like the blueprint that an architect uses", a skeleton which would "allow the play to grow" (*Between Two Silences* 77) in a rehearsal room. This growth, in Brecht's performance praxis, is achieved through collaboration – with designers, actors, audience – and the fact that the dialectic (at-play) was instilled in the director's rehearsal room as a means of production.

Weber describes Brecht's rehearsals as a "long exploration of the intricate social relationships of the characters and the behaviour resulting from them" (88). The careful attention to detail in individual character physicality was aligned to a rigorous approach to stage composition in terms of relationships between characters, as Brecht "was mainly concerned with the play as the telling of the story to an audience, clearly, beautifully, and entertainingly" (Weber 85). As Thomson notes, the "aim of rehearsal exercises will not have been to embed action in individual psychology, but to place it

in the social transactions of the group”, as Brecht intended that the “outcome for the audience should not be psychoanalysis but moral debate” (107).

Braun’s examples from *Edward II* also draw attention to *Gestus* as an ensemble practice, and the epic cast as an ensemble of story-tellers. In both examples, the physical actions interrogated by Brecht and his cast were not the actions of the protagonist, but rather those of the ensemble that surrounded the protagonist, Edward. Even in the scene where Gaveston is the focus of the action, it is the behaviour of the most emblematic of the masks onstage, the hangmen, which concerns the director as story-teller. This is because, as Thomson states, *Gestus* relates to “the social heart of an episode” (105). Benjamin notes that the storyteller “takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others”. In turn, he “makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale” (*Illuminations* 87). The epic actor makes physical this reportage: hence, as Weber observed of Brecht’s rehearsal room, the “most meticulous attention was paid to the smallest gesture” (86). Weber noted that, in Brecht’s rehearsals, “particular attention was devoted to all details of physical labour”, based on the theory that a man’s work “forms his habits, his attitudes, his physical behaviour down to the smallest movement” (86). This forensic attention to physical detail is a key component of what Benjamin calls the epic actor’s “inventory” (*Understanding Brecht* 4) of his/her role.

Thomson affirms that Brecht’s “approach to actor training cannot be properly divorced from his campaign to change the world” (98), and his semiotic approach to the physicality of performance relates to his “mature conviction that an effective revolution, political or theatrical, must be achieved through reason and scientific reason” (99). Weber notes how Brecht’s “whole view of the world was that it was changeable and the people in it were changing; every solution was only a starting point for a new, better, different solution” (85). Hence, there were “no discussions in rehearsal”, and all ideas “would have to be tried” (85) rather than discussed. Weber offers several anecdotes to attest to “the loose way Brecht often worked, of his experimental approach and of the teamwork the Ensemble was used to” (85). Because, as Thomson notes, Brecht “had no training, nor was there any tradition of actor training in Germany” (100), the development of the director’s methodology was through experience, the benefits of collaboration and, logically, through ‘reason’. For

Brecht, the “tendency of historical enquiry is almost inevitably towards astonishment in the enquirer” (Thomson 102-3), and this astonishment was required on a daily basis of all the members of the collaboration. Hence, these rehearsals took place “in an atmosphere of humor” (Weber 87).

Weber notes how Brecht “liked to have people around him when he directed” (88) and that the rehearsal room was generally open to practically anyone interested in observing the process. Weber explains that the rehearsal room was generally open to outsiders because Brecht “wanted actors to get used to spectators, to get laughs, to be in contact with the people down there as early in the process as possible, to work *with* an audience” (85). The notion of ‘working with’ an audience is illustrative of how the story-teller’s craft is transposed into the preparation, in rehearsal, of the epic actor. Kelly’s ‘The Tay-man’ is a perfect illustration of this notion of ‘working with’, as the seanchai is visibly tempering the rhythm of the narrative through a ‘listening to’ his audience, ensuring clarity in communication. The story-teller, as a craftsman, would regularly ‘try out’ new material before an audience, albeit sandwiched between more tried and tested (and trusted) material. The story-teller would experiment with this new material over several tellings, eventually settling on a ‘way of telling’ the individual tale or, in the case of a highly skilled story-teller, a range of ways of telling. Weber’s account of how Brecht introduced the policy of multiple dress rehearsals and previews to the Berliner Ensemble (86-7) reflects how he aimed to develop an ensemble ‘way of telling’ that best communicated the narrative to an audience.

So, in Brecht’s theatre there is no secrecy from the general public. In Brecht’s policy of an ‘open rehearsal’ space, contradicting the convention of a closed rehearsal room, mysterious to the general public, the notion of contradiction emerges once more.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Weber’s description of Brecht’s open rehearsal room begs a comparison with Wa Thiong’o’s account, in chapter two of *Decolonising The Mind*, of the Kamariithu community theatre project in Kenya in 1977. Wa Thiong’o describes how, in collaboration with the economically and theatrically impoverished community, the company held the majority of their rehearsals in an open air theatre, with locals regularly spending their lunch-breaks or spare time observing rehearsals and often contributing to the dramaturgical process. The neo-colonial masters of the State, predictably, banned these ‘gatherings’, and Wa Thiong’o was arrested for his role in the project in December 1977 and spent the whole of 1978 in a maximum security prison.

Thomson writes about this notion of contradiction, linking it to what he describes as Brecht's "metatext":

By contradicting a text, the actors might gain new insights into it. Such contradiction is not designed to open access to what Stanislavski termed a subtext, but to surround a text with metatext linking it to the outside world, the world that is in need of transformation. (106)

The episode of the hanging of Gaveston is useful in understanding what Thomson calls 'metatext'. It is also significant, in the ancestry of the epic theatre, because, in the medieval/Renaissance world, a hanging was a social event, a demonstration of the 'vigilance of the State', played out before an audience of the general public. Perhaps this is why, in the epic theatre, there is a recurring dynamic whereby the spectator is shown an episode involving an audience watching a public event. The first example of this is in *Ubu the King* (2.7), where the public violently compete for gold coins that Père Ubu sets up as prizes to celebrate his inauguration. Père Ubu is not the agent of this mass cat-fight over gold: rather, his arch commentary on the action emphasises the grotesque docility and brutality of an impoverished public fighting over some gold coins. The violent public event, as encoded by Jarry, indicts the docility of the public, who are also the spectator of *Ubu the King*. This is the 'inverted mirror' that Jarry talks about, the mirror that encourages the public to see itself, even if it does not really like what it has to see. The storyteller of Brecht's epic theatre demands that his/her audience, or the public, observe 'a public audience' in the context of a public event. He/she ensures that the behaviour of the epic character is demonstrated as clearly as possible, so that the spectator can consider the meaning of his/her observations. It is by the *staging of a public staging*, that Brecht's epic theatre confronts the spectator with the consequences of citizenship and makes the spectator critical of his/her own behaviour and social role. It makes the spectator critical of spectatorship itself.

Thomson's definition of 'metatext' suggests that the epic theatre's is an extroverted performance strategy, in opposition to the introverted strategy of the psychological realism of Stanislavski et al. It is not the 'metatext' of Pirandello, whose meta-theatrics merely offer an alternative approach to psychoanalysis to that of the Stanislavskians. The metatext – or *staging of a public staging* – of the epic theatre relates to the craft of the skilled story-teller. The skilled story-teller reports a story,

which has been handed down to him/her, and he/she makes evident the fact that it is not his/her story and that it has been told many times before (probably by many storytellers). S/he reports the story by conjuring the necessary information for the audience to decipher and evaluate the material. S/he ensures that the story is entertaining or fresh, even if s/he has told it dozens of times before, and this relates to what Brecht calls 'pleasure': that is, the pleasure an audience takes in observing the epic storyteller's conjuring of the narrative. The nature of this conjuring relates to what the story-teller deems to be 'at stake' in the narrative. His/her tonal emphasis emphasises this 'at stake'. In the case of "The Tay-man", Éamon Kelly insinuates several stakes (the wife's fidelity, the husband's honour, the bread-cake, and so on). However, what is 'at stake' for the epic theatre, apparently, is the epic theatre itself: hence, the *staging of a public staging*.

If, as this thesis argues, the epic theatre begins with the opening night of *Ubu the King* and develops through the experiments of Brecht, Fo and others,<sup>68</sup> then the early history of this philosophical approach to dramatic narrative was riddled with censure. Opening nights of the dramas of the epic theatre, up until Brecht's exile from Germany in 1932, owed much of their eventual quality to the 'at stake' of the epic dramas themselves. The most eventful of these opening nights include: *Ubu the King* (1896) courtesy of the riot initiated by André Antoine; Brecht's *In the Jungle of the Cities* (1923) performed amid "attempts to disrupt performances by members of the newly-formed Nazi Party" (Braun: 163); Brecht's *Baal* (1926) and "the now predictable scenes in the auditorium" (Braun: 167) initiated by Nazi Party protests; and Brecht's *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1929) which was censored after its opening performance. Most interesting of these State interventions was during the production of Brecht's *The Mother* (1931), which was performed as a rehearsed reading to an audience in Moabit after the authorities managed to obstruct the staging of the play through the expedient imposition of random regulations in an attempt to stop the performance. Braun writes:

The performance went ahead regardless, without setting, props and costumes – whereupon the police declared even the use of the curtain illegal. Finally, the performers sat in a semi-circle on stage and recited their lines. (177)

<sup>68</sup> Others, according to this thesis, include Athol Fugard (particularly his workshop plays), Federico Garcia Lorca, Brendan Behan and Joan Littlewood.



Braun cleverly deduces that, by their intervention, “the police had unwittingly lent a whole new dimension of *Verfremdung* to the performance” (177). The event of the (meta)staging of *The Mother* in Moabit exemplifies Badiou’s notion that “Theatre is essentially under surveillance” (“Rhapsody” 202). The fact that the performance took place regardless, visibly under the surveillance of the State authorities, suggests that Badiou is correct in saying that “while being under surveillance, [Theatre] also does some surveillance of its own” (“Rhapsody” 203). As exemplified by its difficult early history, the epic theatre is by its nature an endangered dramaturgy. As Badiou’s reasoning suggests, because the epic theatre is under surveillance, it must invert the gaze of the State and at the same time expose its surveillance. If the ‘real’ of the State is masked by its representations, and the epic theatre proposes to expose the ‘real’ of the State, then it must stage the mechanics of this surveillance. Braun’s anecdote of the Moabit performance of *The Mother* exaggerates this process of inverting the State’s gaze.

The meta-textual quality of the epic theatre’s ‘staging of public stagings’ works as follows. The first public staging is the performance itself: if the performance is of an epic nature, then the story-tellers assume they are being surveyed. Within the performance, the story-tellers stage a public staging, an episode where they demonstrate the act of staging (often an act of government),<sup>69</sup> and also demonstrate the behaviour of a staged audience. The ethical questioning of this dramaturgy relates to the ethics of staging itself, through the staging of an act of representation. Onstage, the audience is presented with three questionable acts of representation: firstly, the manner in which the State represents itself; secondly, the manner in which the story-teller represents this representation of itself by the State; and thirdly, the representation of the staged audience, and its relationship with the State, its

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<sup>69</sup> Often these episodes take place in courtrooms, most notably the courtroom of Azdak in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, the trial of Shui Ta in *The Good Person of Szechuan* and the trial of Paul Ackermann in *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. Other examples include the workers’ demonstration in *The Mother*, the boxing match in *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, and the recantation of Galileo in *Life of Galileo*. For the aforementioned playwrights of the epic theatre (see previous footnote), examples would include: the staging of Sophocles’ *Antigone* by the prisoners in *The Island* by Fugard, Kani and Ntshona; the wedding scene, in Lorca’s *Blood Wedding*; the lags howling at the march of the condemned man to his death in Behan’s *The Quare Fellow*; and the staging of acts of legislation by the pterrots in Littlewood’s *Oh! What a Lovely War*.

relationship with the epic theatre, its relationship to the process of legislation and, perhaps most importantly, its relationship with history.

The 'metatext' which Thomson refers to is essentially the 'dialectic (at-play)' of Badiou's definition of 'Theatre', a category into which the epic theatre fits, in terms of its dialectical (and dramaturgical) strategies. Epic theatre is, after all, the event whereby the spectator is asked to become "the interpreter of the interpretation" ("Rhapsody" 199). The 'metatext' also admits the terror under which the epic theatre operates, as it is prone to State censure (as in the case of Brecht's early practice) and also prone to ostracism (as in the case of Jarry). This terror of censorship relates, dramaturgically, to the craft of the story-teller: just as the story-teller offers a story to an audience, so the epic theatre offers to an audience, through story, a possibility of a 'thinking place', or 'thinking space'. Brecht's epic theatre performs this sense of offering through its dramaturgy, and this is the main distinction between *Ubu the King* and the theatre of Brecht. While Jarry foisted his satire upon an unsuspecting petit-bourgeoisie, Brecht openly admitted his intentions before and during performance. Hence, the Nazi protests at Brecht's premières were staged, in contrast to the spontaneous reaction of Jarry's antagonists. The epic theatre is at once terrified (because it is terrorised) and wilfully antagonistic. Perhaps this explains why its actors embody both the innocence of the clown and the sagacity of the story-teller.

To conclude this analysis, it is worth setting out the properties of the epic theatre, in the context of how Badiou enumerates his distinction between Theatre and *theatre*. He states that:

... there is Theatre (and not '*theatre*') only in the conjunction of the following elements: [1] the text it elicits and thus makes contemporary; [2] the division it effects; [3] the haphazard thought of a stage director for whom the text ... becomes the filter of a divination; [4] actors capable of unfolding the real point of departure that they and they alone constitute rather than showing off the rhetorics of body and voice; [5] and at least one spectator. ("Rhapsody" 199)

For the epic theatre, it is argued, Badiou's model may be distilled from five to three elements. The first two terms, for Badiou, are the 'text' (script or pretext), and the ability of this text, in performance (or representation), to divide an audience through

provocation, to abstract the individual spectator 'from the Crowd'. Both of these relate to what has already been described, in this analysis, as the 'metatext'. In this sense, the 'metatext' relates to the appropriation, by the author, of story content, and for this story content to be written, with an appropriate dramaturgy in mind, so that the representation may engage the spectator with 'thought' that connects the representation with the politics of everyday life. The third and fourth terms of Badiou's model relate to the roles of the director and the actor. In epic theatre, these terms are inter-twined and often obscured by the nature of the collaboration, most notably in the roles adopted by Dario Fo in the first production of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, which will be discussed in Chapter Five. For the epic theatre, the term 'story-tellers' - relating to the full collaboration of author, script-editor, director, designer, performer - may serve as a more useful general term. It is on these agents that the successful realisation of the 'metatext' depends. Badiou's fifth term, the 'spectator', is distilled enough for the purpose of this analysis.

So the three properties - and, by corollary, the three agents - of the epic theatre are: the 'metatext', the story-tellers, and the spectator. And it is these three agents which collaborate in the three dialectical strategies of the epic theatre in performance: the subtractive strategy, which dissolves the conventions (and therefore catharses) of genre; the divisive strategy, which opposes conventional modes of representation and divides the audience on the ethics of its representational choices; and the additive strategy, which offers a protagonist who is at once a parody and a pastiche, presented via modes of audience disidentification, and who asks the audience to observe the dramatic world around him/her rather than psychoanalyze him/her.

The notion of 'metatext' will frame the analysis, in Chapter Four, of Brecht's *The Good Person of Sezchuan*, with particular attention paid to the complex layering of the roles (or masks) employed by (and demanded of) the epic actor in this play. This analysis will anticipate a further analysis, in Chapter Five, of Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*.

## Chapter Four

### The Dubious Mask of the Storyteller: Double-emphasis and Ironic Montage in Brecht's *Good Person of Szechuan*

In advance of the analysis, in this chapter, of Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechuan*, it is necessary to summarize what has been distilled thus far from the discussion regarding the epic dramaturgies of Jarry and Brecht. It has been argued that the epic theatre is a deconstructive praxis, which positions itself in opposition to the State, and also to the devices through which the State chooses to represent itself. Epic dramaturgy deploys both parody and pastiche: the former, as an antagonism to the codifications of dramatic genre (bourgeois myth), and the latter as a means of encoding an unpredictable, satiric narrative about the State. In terms of pastiche, therefore, the epic dramaturgy is also a reconstructive praxis. The epic theatre, through Jarry and Brecht, re-introduces the mask to the twentieth century theatre, as it is the transformative quality of folk masks that is a key weapon in the armoury of the epic dramaturg. For Jarry, the duality of the mask is defined as 'effigy', and is informed by the medieval carnivalesque and the auguste clowns of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. For Brecht, this duality relates to *Gestus*, which includes both the mask of the storyteller and the mask of social role (on stage and in lived experience). The duality of the mask reflects the dual purpose of the epic dramaturgy, that of deconstruction/reconstruction. It also reflects the dialectical 'at-play', or thinking space, which is the evental site of the epic theatre.

The epic dramaturg deploys folk narrative strategies because of their transformative qualities, as the ambition of the epic theatre is social transformation, and the provision of an evental site which interrogates the social world. This thesis argues that the duality of the mask, as deployed in Jarry's practice, represents a dramaturgy of complex layering that is further developed in the practices of Brecht, as will be discussed in this chapter, and developed further again in the theatre of Dario Fo, which will be analyzed in Chapter Five. The aspiration for social transformation, as a component of both Marxist theory and folk narrative, represents a major paradox of the epic theatre, a compatibility of apparently incompatible cultural elements. This apparent paradox will inform a discussion – beginning in this chapter and concluding

in relation to Fo in Chapter Five – of what, for the epic theatre, may be understood by the term realism.

This chapter sets out to identify how Brecht's dramaturgy demands of the ensemble of epic actors a tonal complicité that relates to a negotiation between the epic actor's double role as storyteller and role-player. The two main functions of the epic actor, which shall be called *double-emphasis* and *ironic montage*, will be discussed in the context of the masks of *The Good Person of Szechuan*, as a means towards achieving what Hans Schweikart calls the "balladesque" (qtd. in McDowell 81) atmosphere of Brecht's productions. The notion of the 'balladesque' will inform an analysis of how Brecht's play opposes the deterministic atmosphere that underpins bourgeois dramatic narrative. With this in mind, the manner in which Brecht's play parodies and, by corollary, pastiches the devices of Greek tragedy will be discussed, as a means of re-configuring this established dramatic form that is the originary form of western, deterministic drama. To support the analysis, reference will also be made to Brecht's 1948 re-interpretation of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Intrinsic to Brecht's storytelling mode is, as Thomson's definition of the 'metatext' suggests, a dramaturgy that offers contradictions in the mode of telling, as well as in what is being told. The action that exemplifies this contradictory quality occurs in episode eight, through the narration (or parable) delivered by the mask of Mrs Yang.

At the beginning of the episode, Mrs Yang goes to see Shui Ta, and pleads with the tobacco manufacturer not to sue her son, the ne'er-do-well Yang Sun, for the 200 silver dollars which he stole from Shui Ta's counter-mask and cousin, Shen Teh, to whom Yang Sun was engaged. Shui Ta agrees to drop the lawsuit, on the condition that Yang Sun works in his tobacco factory for exploitative wages, out of which the 200 silver dollars which he owes will be deducted in instalments. Yang Sun grudgingly agrees to the arrangement, and he follows Shui Ta into the factory to begin work, encouraged by Mrs Yang's assertion that "honest work will make you fit to look your mother in the face again" (84). The narrative continues:

[Yang] Sun follows Shui Ta into the factory. Mrs Yang returns to the front of the stage.

MRS YANG: The first weeks were difficult for Sun. The work was not what he was used to. He had little chance to show what he could do. It was only in the

third week that a small incident brought him luck. He and Lin To who used to be a carpenter were shifting bales of tobacco.

*Sun and the former carpenter Lin To are each shifting two bales of tobacco.*

THE FORMER CARPENTER *comes to a halt groaning, and lowers himself onto one of the bales:* I'm about done in. I'm too old for this sort of work.

SUN *likewise sits down:* Why don't you tell them they can stuff their bales?

THE FORMER CARPENTER: How would we live then? To get the barest necessities I must even set the kids to work. A pity Miss Shen Teh can't see it. She was good.

SUN: I've known worse. If things had been a little less miserable we'd have hit it off quite well together. I'd like to know where she is. We had better get on. He usually comes about now.

*They get up.*

SUN *sees Shui Ta coming:* Give me one of your sacks, you old cripple! *Sun adds one of Lin To's bales to his own load.*

THE FORMER CARPENTER: Thanks a lot! Yes, if she were there you'd certainly go up a peg when she saw how helpful you were to an old man. Ah yes!

*Enter Shui Ta.*

MRS YANG: And a glance is enough for Mr Shui Ta to spot a good worker who will tackle anything. And he takes a hand. (84-5)

The narrative mode immediately switches back to the dialogue/sub-episode involving Yang Sun, Lin To and Shui Ta, with the latter complimenting Yang Sun on his ability to fulfil his work duties (with interest). Mrs Yang as narrator interjects again, introducing the scenario where Yang Sun (again with Shui Ta as witness) corrects the character of the 'Overseer', the man who pays the wages, when he is about to pay Yang Sun a wage in excess of what he has earned that week. Shui Ta again compliments Yang Sun's devotion to the firm, and accepts the latter's ruthless suggestion that he be allowed replace the Overseer in his more senior role in the company, with Yang Sun affirming that his "brains are worth more to the firm than the mere strength of my muscles" (86). Mrs Yang then interjects with her fourth narration:

MRS YANG: They were bold words, but that evening I told my Sun: 'You are a flying man. Show that you can get to the top where you are now! Fly my eagle!' And indeed it is remarkable what brains and education will achieve! How can a man hope to better himself without them? Absolute miracles were performed by my son in the factory directed by Mr Shui Ta! (86)

The audience are then presented with a scenario of Yang Sun on the factory floor, but this time he embodies the mask of the abusive, tyrannical foreman. The 'miracles' of which his mother speaks include the miracle of increased productivity, which he inspires through verbal abuse and the clapping of his hands to indicate that the workers need to work faster. Mrs Yang concludes her parable with the following:

MRS YANG: And no enmities, no slanderous allegations by the uneducated – for he was not spared that – could hold my son back from the fulfilment of his duty. (86)

This episode, framed by Mrs Yang's narrations, formally exploits the parable form towards an ironic and contradictory exposition of the social conditions which engender a petit-bourgeois consciousness. The narrator, Mrs Yang, is dramaturgically disembodied from the episodes of Yang Sun's rise to the position of foreman in Shui Ta's factory, and this disembodiment reflects the temporal distance which the traditional storyteller places between him/herself and the narrative, most conventionally through the opening lines of 'Once upon a time ...' and also through less clichéd narrative introductions. The form of the parable is recognizable through the use of metaphor – "Fly my eagle" (86) -, the age of the narrator (associating sagacity with number of years spent in the world), and the cosy explanation which concludes the narrative – "[nothing] could hold my son back from the fulfilment of his duty" (86). Ironic effect is achieved, however, because this *Parable of the Petit-bourgeois* is not, as expected, narrated as a critique of abstract concepts conventionally derided by bourgeois ideology, such as greed and betrayal. Rather, Brecht parodies the parable, with the storyteller endorsing the nihilism of petit-bourgeois ambition and self-advancement. This narrative of ambition recalls the duality of the Commedia masks, as appropriated by Jarry and discussed in Chapter Two. For Brecht, however, the binary of work obligation and ambition is both presented, through the dramatization of the parable, and narrated, from Mrs Yang's

perspective. In the genealogy of epic theatre, this reflects how Brecht uses storytelling in order to encode a dramaturgy of complex layering that represents a development of the dualities of Jarry's masks. Essentially, Jarry's mask of Père Ubu comments on his own narrative, via Gémier. Brecht's masks, likewise, reveal their ambition: however, there is also the mask of the storyteller, detached narrator of the episode, who comments on the duality of the mask in the dramatic world.

It is through parody that Brecht exposes the conditions that engender bourgeois ideology, through a contradictory montage of Mrs Yang's spoken narrative and the embodiment of this narrative, through the dramatizing of the key stages of Yang Sun's accession to the petite-throne of the foreman. Mrs Yang is at first the 'conversational' storyteller which Wilson describes, and her narration is written as if she were merely boasting about her son to another proud mother in the everyday, casual, conversational tone of a marketplace or other public gathering space. Secondly, however, her mask is also the mask of an actor in a Brecht play: in other words, she is a professional storyteller, and her storytelling mask is emblematic, asking the audience to consider it dubious. This dubiousness is compounded because there is a disjunction between the optimism and pseudo-sentimentality of her story, on one hand, and its contrast in tone with the brutal expediency evident in the dramatization of Yang Sun's rise in social role, on the other. The 'dialectic (at-play)', arguably, is formed between the bourgeois ideology which the storyteller endorses, and the nihilistic, petit-bourgeois behaviour which the role-players demonstrate.

Philip Auslander notes how, in Brecht's theatre "the material life of the body is expressive of oppression because the body itself, its actions and gestures, are determined by ideological relation" (103). Mrs Yang's parable exemplifies how the storyteller, by means of a kind of choric commentary, draws attention to the shifting *Gestus* of the petit-bourgeois Yang Sun. Initially, Yang Sun is akin to Lin To, groaning and shirking his work load: he is essentially a proletarian dissatisfied with his lot in an exploitative economic situation. Then, noticing that Shui Ta approaches, he adopts the *Gestus* of the betrayer, recalling the mask of Baldock, and his betrayal of Edward in *Edward II*, as described in Chapter Three. The *Gestus* of humility (the mask of 'the lie'), which he falsely assumes, characterizes the exchange with the Overseer and the pretence of selfless commitment to the firm. Yang Sun's *Gestus* of



ambition is cautiously shown in his appeal to Shui Ta for a more elevated position. This caution is short-lived, however, as the episode where the audience witnesses Yang Sun in the role of foreman demonstrates. The *Gestus* of the ruthless, self-serving petit-bourgeois is fully revealed in this final sub-episode in Mrs Yang's parable.

Kurt Weill describes how music can "reproduce the *Gestus* which illustrates the action on stage, [how] it can even create a kind of basic *Gestus* which forces the actor into a definite attitude which precludes every doubt and every misunderstanding concerning the relevant action", and how it "can set down the basic tone and the basic *Gestus* to the extent that a wrong interpretation can be avoided" (62). This clarification, or double-emphasis, of story content which Weill refers to as the function of music in the overall *Gestus* of the epic theatre in performance, provides the key to understanding the primary role of the storyteller of the epic theatre in the overall *Gestus* of the production: that of *double-emphasis*. Because the epic actor is both storyteller and role-player, he/she embodies the combination of these roles as well as their distinction. But this distinction between epic story-teller and epic role-player is deliberately blurred, if one considers the performative philosophy that underpins the nature of epic role-playing.

Hans Schweikart, who performed the role Baldock in the 1924 production of *Edward II*, states that Brecht "wanted everything very exact and matter-of-fact" (qtd. in McDowell 81). Schweikart goes on to say that Brecht "didn't like emotional situations. He seldom had need for them. Rather he usually played direct feelings indirectly. He let the feelings be stated, so that the same feeling is presented from a standpoint critical to the feeling" (81). The notion of role-playing 'direct feelings indirectly' is critical to achieving the complicité that Brecht's dramaturgy demanded in terms of performance language. The indirect play of emotion suggests that the epic role-player is encouraged to report the emotion of the role rather than fully inhabit the dramatic moment (in a psychological realist manner). This 'indirect' playing of emotions is, of course, akin to the contemplative, tonal quality of the traditional, fireside (and epic) storyteller. The epic role-player, essentially, forms a tonal complicité with the epic storyteller, and this 'coolness', or contemplative quality, double-emphasised, accounts for what Erwin Faber (who performed the role of

Edward in *Edward II*) calls the “balladesque” (qtd. in McDowell 83) atmosphere of Brecht’s plays. The ‘balladesque’, according to Faber, relates to Brecht’s “plastic use of language and staging” (83). ‘Balladesque’ is a significant choice of description, as the ballad is where the narrative disciplines of folk music and poetry most closely intersect with the reportage, or craft, of the storyteller. Faber’s term asserts the artisanal quality of Brecht’s dramaturgy and also, significantly, associates his drama with a folk tradition (the folk song) which demands clarity in narrative reportage and a playful, interactive exchange mechanism, or ‘at-play’, with its audience.<sup>70</sup>

In his theoretical writings Brecht may have “always disclaimed any interest in psychology” (Willett 83), but, as discussed in Chapter Three, in a rehearsal process, “psychology was not left out, but was developed from the social relations” (Weber 88). As Esslin notes, Brecht’s approach to acting was a reaction against the “orgies of vocal excess and apoplectic breastbeating” (150) that was the prevalent form of German acting in the 1920s. His approach to psychology was not as a means of explaining human behaviour per se, but as a way of understanding why a character *may* make a certain choice in a certain situation: in other words, psychology may aid the audience’s (and storytellers’) understanding of a certain moral action in the narrative, but Brecht anxiously refused psychology as a deterministic explanation of human behaviour. Schweikart, referring once more to the episode of Baldock’s betrayal of Edward, states that Brecht “depended very much upon the moralistic judgements of his characters” (82). Essentially, Brecht presents to his audience the character’s ‘moral judgement’, upon which the audience in turn must make its own moral judgement. This judgement, by the spectator, of the character’s actions, requires a ‘balladesque’ atmosphere of detachment, which is facilitated by the ‘balladesque’ narrative mode, that of reportage. The epic actors, through a complicité of storytelling and role-playing, double-emphasise the tone of reportage to achieve this atmosphere, which perhaps explains Ossip Brik’s remark that Brecht’s plays “are usually in the form of court proceedings” (Tretiakov 21). His plays put on trial before an audience the choices that his masks make in certain social situations.

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<sup>70</sup> Folk ballads are notoriously bawdy and playful, and are regularly narrated from the point of view of characters of low social status, such as unlawful characters, lecherous travellers or sailors, general rogues and misfortunate lovers. The dubious quality of the narrative voice is analogous to that ascribed to the seanchai performances of Éamon Kelly in Chapter Four.

Brecht's plays, in translation, have traditionally been susceptible to mistranslation, not so much of the spoken language of the text, but in the negotiation with the established performance language of the company performing the translation. Esslin, referring to George Devine's 1956 production of *The Good Person of Szechuan*,<sup>71</sup> claims that it failed "largely because it missed a truly Brechtian style and emerged as a somewhat larmoyant melodrama" (151). There is no doubt that the text is susceptible to melodramatic interpretation or, rather, that certain masks, if performed through a psychological realist approach, can obscure the aesthetic that Brecht's storytelling strives for. A recent example of this very British (and Irish) error in translating Brecht's play into performance was to be found in the Manchester Library Theatre's in-house production of *The Good Person of Szechuan*, directed by Chris Honer, in 2009.<sup>72</sup>

The performance language of Honer's production, generally, embraced the epic style. The role-playing was generally characterized by a presentational quality, with the dialogue and physical actions appropriately stylized and communicated with clarity and precision. The sense of many choruses (a theme that will be returned to later in this chapter) was evident, with the actors role-playing Wang the Water-Carrier, the gods, Shen Teh's ensemble of relations, and the prostitutes demonstrating a solid understanding of role and, significantly, their roles as commentators within the ensemble. Particularly impressive was the signifying quality through which these actors foregrounded the significant actions of the narrative, seamlessly and casually negotiating the transitions from epic storyteller to epic role-playing. Even the scenery changes, which the actors negotiated themselves, had a clear casualness and a choric sense of purpose. The actor role-playing Yang Sun, ingeniously, performed as if there was nobody else onstage worth the audience's (or other characters') consideration, and his apparent upstaging had the required, gestic effect of exposing the self-serving projects of the petit-bourgeois mask. The production faltered, however, due to one

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<sup>71</sup> Devine's production, which used Eric Bentley's translation, was titled *The Good Woman of Szechuan*.

<sup>72</sup> Honer's production, entitled *The Good Soul of Szechuan*, was based on the Santa Monica version of 1943, rather than the John Willett translation of the original, on which the analysis of this chapter is based. The Santa Monica version is, however, structurally and philosophically so close to the original, with the two major differences being that Brecht decided to depict Shui Ta as a manufacturer of opium rather than tobacco in the latter stages of the text and the omission of scene eight, which this thesis has already analyzed. Importantly, the scenes which I refer to in this analysis of the Manchester production are all present in the original text.

critical error in translation: the aestheticization of Shen Teh as the protagonist of the drama.

There are three crucial choices which contributed to this aestheticization of the mask of Shen Teh and, by proxy, the melodramatization of the play. The first of these elements takes place in episode seven, during Shen Teh's monologue (73-4), where she imagines her future role as the mother-protector of Yang Sun's child. In this monologue, the mask of Shen Teh role-plays her future role as mother-of-child, whom she imagines as "an airman" (73), an idealized, innocent child version of Yang Sun and his ambitions to be a successful pilot. She then fantasizes a scenario where she walks the streets with the child, during which they steal cherries from an orchard and act inconspicuously so as not to attract the suspicion of a policeman passing by. What begins as a scenario straight out of a sentimental Broadway musical (the narrative of rags-to-riches aspiration), therefore, is set against the reality of Shen Teh as a single mother and the scarcity of means that will be available to her in the unjust society of Szechuan. The actor, in Honer's production, as the very able dramatic actor does best, expressed the emotional anxiety of the future mother, fretting over her future responsibilities, to the utmost. The actor demanded identification, and her device was an externally emotionalized Naturalism. If the actor had, as Schweikart described, reported the emotional state of the mask indirectly, the audience would have had space to contemplate the contradiction encoded in the narrative: that is, the disjunction between the bourgeois myth (rags-to-riches sentimentality) and the realities of capitalism (for single mothers). For this dynamic to take place, the audience needed to disidentify with the mask.

The second questionable choice of this production also happened during episode seven, and relates to Shen Teh's closing monologue (77), after which she exits to restore the mask of Shui Ta. In this monologue, she responds to the physical presence of Lin To's son scavenging for food in the dustbins in the yard behind her tobacco shop. The monologue begins as a scathing attack on the "*fate of poor children*" (77), and then progresses onto a chilling vow that she will stop at nothing to prevent her unborn child experiencing such depravity. The vow reads as follows:

... Henceforth I

Shall fight at least for my own, if I have to be

Sharp as a tiger. Yes, from the hour  
 When I saw this thing I shall cut myself off  
 From them all, never resting  
 Till I have at least saved my son, if only him.  
 What I learnt from my schooling, the gutter  
 By violence and trickery now  
 Shall serve you, my son: to you  
 I would be kind; a tiger, a savage beast  
 To all others if need be. And  
 It need be. (77)

The issue here, in performance, relates to how the actor negotiated the transition from the lament of the first half of the speech, to the ruthless avowal of the second half. Consistent with her previous monologue, the lament was performed with a maudlin quality, once again encouraging the audience to identify with the pathos of Shen Teh's social situation. Again, a more sober delivery would have encouraged the audience to contemplate the situation rather than identify with the psychology of the protagonist. The delivery of the vow, however, was extremely contentious. The actor sustained the maudlin, weeping melodrama of the lament, and grudgingly made the avowal as if Shen Teh had no other option, and was being compelled by circumstances into re-assuming the mask of Shui Ta. This is not the case, as a closer examination of the passage above reveals. The words of the vow are, in fact, according to the logic of Shui Ta and it is significant that, just this once, Brecht's dramaturgy requires that they are spoken through the mask of Shen Teh (after this she exits to re-assume his mask). Essentially, Shen Teh re-assumes the mask of Shui Ta through choice rather than through tragic circumstances. The mask of Shui Ta is not a thing of oriental mysticism which entrances her in the role of the petit-bourgeois. It is, in fact, a disguise (not unlike the disguises of Shakespeare's comedies), through which she chooses to enact (and justify) her materialistic ambitions. It is crucial that Shen Teh's re-assumption of the mask of Shui Ta is demonstrated as a moral choice rather than a tragic inevitability as, to repeat Schweikart's avowal, Brecht's dramas "depended very much upon the moralistic judgements of his characters" (82). It is in failing to demonstrate this act as a moralistic judgement that Honer's production simplifies the dialectic to the point of annihilation, and the encoding of a didactic,

deterministic meaning. The simplification of an otherwise well conceived production occurred because it does not consider that Brecht's epic theatre, "with its wholly different attitude to the individual", aspires to "do away with the notion of the actor who 'carries the play'; for the play is no longer 'carried' by him in the old sense" (*On Theatre* 55).

The third contestible choice of this production, which follows on from the first two, relates to episode nine, where the spectator witnessed a heavily pregnant Shen Teh, disguised as her cousin and attempting to conceal her condition despite her ever-expanding waistline. In this instance, the actor barely acknowledges the mask of Shui Ta, so intent is she on expressing the emotional trauma of Shen Teh beneath the mask. Once again, the episode is emotionalized to the point that the comedy of the scene,<sup>73</sup> an essential disidentification device (and the main distancing effect) in this scenario, is completely missed. The performance language employed, that of the dramatic actor, therefore disables the playfulness of the 'balladesque' which the text demands. These three aesthetic choices (individually and collaboratively) encourage the audience to believe, according to the traditions of bourgeois drama, that the text is first and foremost about the problems and vicissitudes of the protagonist and, fatally, that her choices are not her own but are tragically prescribed. This is the consequence when a production of the *The Good Person of Szechuan* displaces the conspicuous quality of the epic actor with the emotional expressiveness of the psychological realist. By corollary, 'the meta-text' is also displaced as, instead of reporting the contradictions encoded in the counter-mask of Shen Teh/Shui Ta, the actor melodramatizes and interprets the situation for us.

In summary, the primary role of the epic storyteller is that of double-emphasis: that is, that the reportage of his/her storytelling clarifies the atmosphere of the epic play, which can be described as 'balladesque'. The epic storyteller relies on a complicité with the epic role-player, who must demonstrate emotion indirectly: in other words, the role-player physicalizes and vocalizes the role in tonal sympathy with the storyteller, as *Gestus* is, essentially, a form of storytelling. There is also a secondary function of Brecht's epic storyteller, which is integral to Mrs Yang's parable. As well

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<sup>73</sup> The comedy in the scenario very much depends on the notion of disguise, and is redolent of how this element contributes to the comic situations of Renaissance and Restoration comedies.

as supporting the epic role-play through a montage of clarification (or double-emphasis), the epic storyteller supports the *Gestus* in the narrative through an *ironic montage*.

In episode eight of *The Good Person Of Szechuan*, this parody combines the apparent incompatibility of the parable, associative of mystical or religious objectivity, with the haunting realism of the rise of the petit-bourgeois, Yang-Sun. This conciliation of apparent incompatibles is a grotesque narrative device, but it is also a form of pastiche, and the realism of Brecht's theatre (like that of Jarry) hinges on the re-configuration of the conventions of genre, the representational tools of bourgeois mythology. "Realism," Brecht writes, "presupposes latitude, not limitation ... [and] does not exclude the creation of characters and situations which are improbable from the point of view of ordinary plausibility ... [and] fantasy and invention are completely legitimate methods for a realistic artist" (qtd. in Fradkin 103). Brecht's realism exploits the transformative power of the storyteller as a device towards opening up a 'latitude' of dramaturgical possibilities. The 'fantasy and invention' which his storytellers perform do not embrace the "universal, classless, moral categories" (Fradkin 100) of bourgeois mythology, but rather, through parody, embody an oppositional narrative of unpredictability to - and exposition of - the dialectical semblances of bourgeois drama.

John Willett states that "[m]uch of the interest in Brecht's theatre lies in [the] combination of barely reconcilable features: lesson and entertainment, individualism and collective; scepticism and myth, the fake world and the real" (83). Willett's identification of the conciliation, in Brecht's practice, of scepticism and myth, is significant. This conciliation relates to the fact that Brecht's scepticism is directed *against myth*, in particular bourgeois myth, rather than *for myth*. Fradkin notes that the deceit of bourgeois mythology "always elicits from him [Brecht] an ironically sceptical grin and a sharp, infallibly aimed response" (100). Fradkin also notes that "Brecht often clothes this response in the dress of parody" (100). Esslin observes that, in *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* (written 1929-31), "the heroic blank verses are a *parody* of Shakespeare, Schiller and Goethe" (152). In *The Round Heads and the Peak Heads*, according to Dick Geary, Brecht parodies "ludicrous Nazi racial theory and policy" (8). Regarding *Round Heads*, Fradkin observes how Brecht parodies the

“subject matter” (100) of Shakespeare’s *Measure For Measure*, keeping “the plot outline of Shakespeare’s comedy almost intact” (101). Fradkin affirms that Shakespeare, the “humanist of the era of the Renaissance, composed [with *Measure For Measure*] a passionate hymn to universally significant, lofty passions and moral concepts – love, honor, justice” (100). Brecht, however, refuses “to recognize universal meaning free of class distinctions in the feelings or moral categories advertised in bourgeois society” (101). Brecht aspires, with *Round Heads*, towards a “reconception in parody of a traditional subject; [and] using this method he develops and sharpens their [the audience’s] sociocritical thinking” (101).

The final point is crucial to understanding the purpose of parody in Brecht’s drama, and relates to how it eases for his audience, through parodic association (and the familiarity of his audience with the elements parodied), the manner in which his narratives re-configure the constituent parts, or established dramaturgical conventions, of bourgeois drama. Fradkin asserts that Brecht’s parody, as “a form of social satire”, has as its object “not essentially literature, but bourgeois society” (101). He seeks, with *Round Heads*, not to discredit the author of the original, but explicitly to set himself a different task, as is also the case with his re-interpretations of *Antigone* and *Edward II*. Brecht, as a progressive dramatist of the modernist era, represents a humanistic stance that does not oppose that of Shakespeare, but rather recognizes that, historically, twentieth century drama requires a different stance on humanism, and an appropriate dramaturgy through which to express it.

Willett notes that Brecht managed “to shed an unfamiliar light on our moral and social behaviour, illuminating, in his personal way, that interesting and largely neglected area where ethics, politics and economics meet” (79). This ‘unfamiliar light’ is, to a large extent, illuminated by the at once familiar (through parody) and unfamiliar (through pastiche) dramatic form(s) of Brecht’s play(s). That Brecht would attempt, through dramatic form, to combine previously unreconciled dramatic elements is unsurprising, as Ladislaus Löb’s survey of German theatre from the eighteenth century to Brecht, *German drama before Brecht: from Neo-classicism to Expressionism*, reveals. Löb’s account of Brecht in relation to the eclectic trends in eighteenth and nineteenth-century German theatre is useful in understanding the development of Brecht’s dramaturgy of pastiche.



Löb notes how “each point in the tradition of German drama is marked by a different combination rather than mutual exclusion of ‘dramatic’ and ‘epic’ elements” and that “Brecht has more in common with many earlier dramatists than his black-and-white dichotomy might suggest” (27).<sup>74</sup> Löb’s survey of early modernist and pre-modernist drama attempts to trace a lineage of formal experimentation in German drama that explains, at least partially, that it is “through its structural inconsistencies” that Brecht’s epic theatre “distances the audience from the play and thereby promotes critical thinking and the will to change the world” (11). The term ‘structural inconsistencies’ is, according to this thesis, misleading and could be seen as hinting at a clumsiness of dramatic form that is not altogether intentional on the part of the playwright. More appropriate terms to describe Brecht’s drama could include ‘deliberate rupturing of genre expectations’, ‘anti-generic antagonism’ or, simply, ‘unpredictable, episodic structure’.

In terms of characterization, Löb identifies clear precursors to the Brechtian anti-hero in the German dramatic tradition: firstly, in George Büchner’s *Woyzeck* (1837), with the eponymous anti-hero described as “the first proletarian anti-hero of German drama” (20), and secondly, in Gerhart Hauptmann’s *The Rats* (1911), a drama which affirmed that “the truthfully portrayed existence of ordinary people is as worthy of drama as the heroics of elevated characters” (24).<sup>75</sup> In the expressionistic dramas of Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller,<sup>76</sup> Löb notes that characters are frequently described by “generic abstractions rather than individual names” (26), prefiguring the emblematic quality of the masks of the epic theatre. However, Löb notes that Büchner “sees a ghastly fatality at work in individuals and masses alike” and determinism is “the keynote of his” major plays (20), and that Hauptmann’s dramas also contain the “‘dramatic’ illusion of ineluctably determined reality” (23). The expressionistic dramas of Kaiser and Toller are equally deterministic in their “spiritual idealism and

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<sup>74</sup> In the article, Löb challenges the clear distinctions between the ‘dramatic’ and ‘epic’ theatres that Brecht sets out in his 1930 notes to *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (Löb 11).

<sup>75</sup> Of course, it is arguable that the realist dramas (and fiction) of the Russian authors Leo Tolstoy (discussed in the context of French realist productions in Chapter Three) and Maxim Gorky (in particular *The Lower Depths*), and indeed the naturalistic avant-garde productions of André Antoine (also discussed Chapter Three) equally contributed to the emergence of the proletarian (anti-) hero in twentieth century drama.

<sup>76</sup> Löb dates the significant dramas of these two playwrights as occurring from 1910 until about 1925.

... tragic fatalism" (27). In terms of character, Brecht embraces this challenge – pioneered by Büchner, Hauptmann and the Expressionists - to the convention, in western drama, of staging the problems of middle-class and aristocratic heroes. Unlike them, however, he opposes the deterministic outlook of the neo-classicists, Realists/Naturalists and Expressionists.

In terms of pastiche, Löb notes how Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832), as the flag-bearer of the *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) movement in drama, denounced the classical Unities as "intolerable curbs on the imagination" and "repudiate[d] neo-classical distinctions to the degree of enjoining dramatists to write tragicomedies" (14).<sup>77</sup> He also notes how Michael Lenz (1751-92) took on Goethe's call-to-arms, and that his "mingling of the tragic and the comic, his diffuse actions and his abrupt ungrammatical prose anticipate the grotesque and absurd traits of twentieth-century drama" (15). The Romantic playwright, Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853), wrote Romantic comedies (not to be confused with the popular, contemporary, Hollywood cinema genre), which withdraw from reality "into fairy-tales or satirical literary feuds and asserts poetic freedom through the deliberate inconsistencies in the sequence of events, overt role-playing by the actors, addresses to the audience and other methods of underlining the fictitiousness of plays, known as 'Romantic irony'" (18). The realist Christian Grabbe (1801-36) mixed "prose with verse and colloquialism with turgid hyperbole, sketching broad vistas of society in disconnected snatches, and revelling in grotesque contrasts in moods" (20), while Frank Wedekind (1864-1918) combined "techniques of the *Sturm und Drang*, Grabbe and Büchner with those of fairground entertainment, puppet-play and cabaret" with characters "who are caricatures", actions that "disintegrate into incoherent episodes", language which "mingles colloquialism and rhetoric", episodes of "sultry sensuality and cynical wit", and atmospheres which carry harsh dissonances of the burlesque and the melodramatic" (25). Through each of these examples, there is a sense of a dramatic tradition that wilfully disrupts audience expectations of form (or genre), and an

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<sup>77</sup> The Unities refers to the neoclassical assertion, put forward by Christopher Gottlieb (1700-66), that "the tragic dramatist must observe the three Unities of time, place and action restricted to one day, five acts, story content drawn from history". The comic dramatist "must also observe the Unities, but since he is to edify through amusement ... he may include everyday expressions in his verse and depict the ludicrous quandaries of characters from the middle and lower classes" (Löb 12).

advocacy of the formal and aesthetic 'latitude' which Brecht asserts as the licence of the realist author. Most interesting is Löb's description of the drama of Wedekind, a known influence of Brecht who, with his friends, used to "sing his [Wedekind's] songs to the guitar as we stormed down the Lech under the star-dusked sky" (*On Theatre* 3).<sup>78</sup> Significant in this description is the reference to Wedekind's appropriation of folk and popular narrative traditions (fairground entertainment, puppetry, cabaret, the grotesque), and a parody of an established, deterministic genre (melodrama).

Löb asserts that Wedekind's "anti-bourgeois iconoclasm is close to Brecht's sentiments, and [that] his formal innovations pave the way not only for Expressionism but also for Brecht's 'epic' theatre" (25). Löb's description, however, would suggest that Wedekind's dramas have more in common with the carnivalesque qualities of Jarry's epic theatre than with the 'coolness' of Brecht's. Significant to this thesis, however, is the fact that Wedekind's iconoclasm, as well as the hybrid qualities of the dramas of Goethe, Lenz and Tiek, are evidence of a dialectical tendency in German drama that is antagonistic to the Zeitgeists of dramatic genres and movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The main difference between the antagonism of Brecht and that of the Romanticists, Naturalists and Expressionists, however, is that Brecht's drama, like Jarry's, opposes the myth of determinism and parodies the genres of bourgeois drama as a means of exposing this myth, as the epic theatre is also 'about theatre' in the sense that it insists on exposing what other forms of theatre are 'about'. This is why, in *The Good Person of Szechuan*, Brecht parodies the very origin of determinism in western drama: that is, the semblance of dialectics that is the spine of western, bourgeois drama: Greek tragedy.

Brecht asserts that what "the ancients, following Aristotle, demanded of tragedy is nothing higher or lower than that it should entertain people" (*On Theatre* 181) and

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<sup>78</sup> Brecht, in his own theoretical writings, is always elusive in the degree to which he admits the level of influence a particular artist has had on his own work. Even in the article "Frank Wedekind", which Brecht wrote to commemorate the subject's death in 1918 (*On Theatre* 3-4), Wedekind is largely eulogised for his vivacity and likeable personality, and for the entertaining quality of the academic lectures he gave in Germany and which Brecht had witnessed. "His greatest work was his own personality" (4) goes the final line of the eulogy. In the afternote, however, John Willett notes how *Baal*, which was written in 1918, "includes a number of songs to the guitar which, like Wedekind, he set to tunes of his own devising and was in the habit of singing himself" (4).

that catharsis for the spectator is “a purification which is performed not only in a pleasurable way [a story well told], but precisely for the purpose of pleasure” (181). He goes on to state that, regarding distinctions between high and low art,<sup>79</sup> art “wishes to fly high and low and to be left in peace, so long as it can give pleasure to people” (181). Scorning that “these particular Greeks” of the fifth century, observing a tragic play, would “amuse themselves with the inevitability of divine laws where ignorance never mitigates the punishment” (182), he asserts the possibility of “stronger (complex) pleasures which the theatre can create”, pleasures which “are more intricate, richer in communication, more contradictory and more productive in results” (181). With this in mind, Brecht chose not to disregard the elements of Greek tragedy, but rather to appropriate these elements towards the more ‘complex’, dialectically philosophical purposes of the epic theatre. Towards an anti-cathartic aesthetic, Brecht wilfully re-deployed the devices of the cathartic theatre (chorus, mask, prologue/epilogue). He also appropriated and re-deployed the story-content of the cathartic theatre, as in his translation of Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Brecht describes his core dramaturgical philosophy for this production:

As for the style of presentation, we agree with Aristotle in holding that the story is the kernel of the tragedy, even if we disagree about the purpose for which it should be performed. The story ought not just to be a jumping-off point for all kinds of excursions into soul-probing or elsewhere, but ought to contain everything and be the object of all our attentions, so that once it has been told the whole thing is concluded. The grouping and movement of the characters has to narrate the story, and that is the actor’s sole task. The stylization by which his acting becomes art must not in the process destroy naturalness, but has on the contrary to heighten it. Obtrusive temperament or speech of outstanding clarity are to be discouraged. Stylization means a general elaboration of what is natural, and its object is to show the audience, as being a part of society, what is important for society in the story. (213)

Within this passage, Brecht suggests two ways in which his translation, both in terms of the re-write and, consequentially, its dramaturgy, opposes the cathartic, bourgeois

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<sup>79</sup> This reference to ‘high and low’ art does not, in this case, specifically refer to Aristotle’s distinctions between tragedy and comedy (although this is implicit), but is more generally put forward and, as is always the case with Brecht, casts an eye on contemporary contexts.

theatre. Brecht's first opposition to the cathartic theatre relates to his translation of Sophocles' original, and how the 'grouping and movement of the characters has to narrate the story'. This is grounded in Brecht's attitude to the ensemble, or complicité, of epic actors. In the Aristotelian theatre, one of the prime functions of the ensemble is, at the appropriate moment in the narrative, to foreground the protagonist, emphasising his/her tragic fate through staging and, vitally, sign-posting the atmosphere of catharsis which the audience expects and to which it is accustomed. Brecht's dramaturgy relates to how, in his theatre practice, the "act of creation has become a collective creative process, a continuum of a dialectical sort in which the original invention [Sophocles' *Antigone*], taken on its own, has lost most of its importance" (211). For Brecht, "there can be no question of using the Antigone story as a means or pretext for 'conjuring up the spirit of antiquity'" but, rather, what is most important is to "let the play do something for us" (211). Brecht regarded the "really remarkable element" of the play to be the theme of "the role of force in the collapse of the state (211)". Therefore, in Brecht's version, the tyrannized masks of Antigone, Hamon and Teiresias are all actors in opposition to (as opposed to thinkers about) this tyranny. The chorus, significantly, admits its complicity in this tyranny through its docility – "We are used to the law and are lawless" (63) – accepts that its inactions have consequences – "Our violent hand shall now be cut off so that it shall not strike again" (64) – and, in its closing lines, undermines the assumed sagacity of patriarchal thinking:

... it isn't enough  
 just to live unthinking and be happy  
 and patiently bear oppression  
 and only learn wisdom with age. (64)

Brecht's second opposition relates to the dramaturgy, in particular the performance language, of his production. He objects to 'excursions into soul-probing': in other words, he refuses to foreground the protagonist in isolation to the dramatic world, as is the case in the original. He precludes this through disallowing the sign-posted 'speech of outstanding clarity', and by disallowing 'obtrusive temperament', through role-playing emotion indirectly. Also, Brecht prescribed that "the tempo of the performance was very fast" (214), asking that the mask of Antigone be read as an 'actor' in the social (and political) chain of events, rather than as a melodramatic

victim of the whimsical, divine laws of the Olympian gods. In other words, he asks that the audience regard the mask of Antigone as decipherable rather than pathetic.

Richard Kearney notes, in relation to the “originary stories from Greece, Rome and other formative cultures”, that they at best “invite us to reimagine our past in ways which challenge the status quo and open up alternative modes of thinking” (90). At worst, he counters, “they engender revivalist shibboleths of fixed identity, closing off dialogue with all that is other than themselves” (90). Brecht’s engagement with the elements, story-content and cathartic quality of Greek drama, essentially, represents an oppositional cultural element that, in Kearney’s terms, both de-mythologizes and re-mythologizes the Sophoclean tragedy, and the ideology it purports. As discussed in Chapter One, Sophocles appropriated *mythos* (story-content), and dramatized it in line with the unself-critical ideology of the Athenian city-state. The story-content that Sophocles appropriates is drawn from the pre-Homeric world and, for the fifth-century Athenian audience, is already historically remote in its antiquity. For the twentieth-century translator, the cultural capital of neo-classical, Romantic and other Hellenophilic sensibilities (artistic, philosophical, political) must be considered as additional baggage that associates the Antigone story with high art pretensions of abstraction and objectivity.

Brecht’s translation requires a de-mythologizing of the Sophoclean (and bourgeois) aesthetic of objective truth-saying. To displace the Sophoclean elements in the text, Brecht repeats the action of Sophocles, the appropriator of myth, by re-encoding the myth as re-encoded by Sophocles. In Brecht’s version, Antigone’s closing speech begins with the words “I beg you don’t talk about fate; I know all about that. Speak of him who kills me, although I am innocent; he has a shove coming from fate” (48). What, in Sophocles’ version, is a doleful, thoughtful speech on the themes of truth and justice, delivered with the inner serenity of one who has obeyed divine law, is transformed by Brecht into a vicious description of what retribution *may* fall upon the collaborators in Kreon’s tyranny (48-9). Rather than poeticizing her fate in the context of abstract philosophy, Brecht’s Antigone demonstrates the *Gestus* of the doomed revolutionary: defiant, bitter and unapologetic. Essentially, Brecht’s Antigone lets the spectators do the thinking for themselves, sardonically scoffing at the whole notion of the ‘shove’ of ‘fate’. Brecht’s Kreon (and remember Kreon is

also a tragic figure in Sophocles' original) responds to his 'fate' with a similarly bitter point-of-view, affirming that Thebes, now that it has fallen, (a play on words) "should fall with me, should be done with and left with the vultures. That's how I want it" (64). Brecht's fallen Kreon bears no resemblance to the penitent mask of Sophocles' original. Brecht observes that, for the fallen despot, there really is nowhere left to go (except perhaps the UN Supreme Court), and so stripped of his/her various masks of power, s/he retains only the mask of arrogance and unapologetic defiance. Unlike Sophocles' tragedy, where ideology interrupts realism, for Brecht's theatre the philosophy emerges from the realism, and concerns the moral judgements made by the spectators. Because, as the etymology of the term philosophy suggests (philo = 'love of', 'sophia' = 'thinking', 'philosophy' = 'love of thinking'), the theatre of ideology (that of Sophocles, Aristotle, Naturalism) is not always a theatre of philosophy, or thought.

By re-configuring the nature of the tragic hero in *Antigone*, Brecht makes redundant the aesthetics of the Aristotelian model – peripeteia, anagnorisis, hubris, catharsis – and exposes the formalized and codified response which the genre demands of its spectator. He parodies the form of this genre through a carefully adjusted imitation of a classic or, as discussed through the myth of Zeus and Io in Chapter One, the "minimal difference which is enough to overturn order, to generate the new, generate meaning" (Calasso 24). The 'minimal difference' of Brecht's version exposes, as Sartre notes, that the bourgeois theatre is "subjective" in the sense that "the bourgeoisie wants a representation of itself which is subjective" and that "it wants produced in the theatre an image of man according to its own ideology and not man seeking through this sort of world of individuals who see one another, because then, the bourgeoisie would be contested" (52). Brecht's epic theatre contests the subjectivity of the bourgeois narrative, offering as an alternative a courtroom of unpredictable moral judgements, including the expedient despotism of Creon in *Antigone*, the expressionistic trial of Paul Ackermann in *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, the whimsical, carnivalesque judgements of Azdak in *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and the *laissez-faire*, no-judgements of the gods in *The Good Person of Szechuan*. Unlike the Greek drama, which privileges the divine laws over the secular, the epic theatre offers no *deus-ex-machina* to the disjunction between objective morality and the practicalities of living that characterizes the laws of imperialist,

bourgeois capitalism. This is why the action of *The Good Person of Szechuan* concludes with a parody of the *deus-ex-machina*, the originary get-out-clause of imperialist ideology, as encoded through the dramas of the Greeks. In his re-write of *Antigone*, Brecht opposes the cathartic theatre through imitation and a 'minimal difference' in form. In *The Good Person of Szechuan*, on the other hand, this opposition is expressed through a 'radical difference', and a satire that borders on the bathetic.

Sartre notes how, in Brecht's epic theatre, the drama does not offer an understanding of the world we live in, but rather "explains what one doesn't understand" (57) about it. Willett notes that, after 1933, Brecht's plays became "less like a story, [but] more and more like a court of investigation" (72). Throughout his plays (including those written before 1933), Brecht dramatizes court proceedings, not in order to judge the dramatic action but rather to bring forth for the audience the notion of judging the dramatic action. The balladesque quality of these episodes is achieved through the unpredictability of the judgements administered by the judge or jury as presented onstage. These judgements must jar the audience, challenging at once their sense of morality while also defying their expectation of what could (or would) conventionally happen in the dramatic situation. Hence, Ackermann's trial is haunted by an exaggerated, capitalist mindset, and is notably devoid of a Christian sense of charity and mercy. Azdak's courtroom is highly entertaining, mainly because it appears farcical that a corrupt and unscrupulous official would choose to amuse himself by protecting the weak rather than the powerful in a turbulent political world. When the gods of *The Good Person of Szechuan* are confronted with the paradoxes of the world they claim to oversee, they hastily retreat to the heavens, incapable of resolving the problems of the mortals, unlike their counterparts in Greek drama. Perhaps the gods best exemplify the notion of what the epic theatre 'doesn't understand', as it is through their ideology that Brecht "satirizes the fraudulence and self-deception of idealism divorced from action" (Sokel 130). It is not that Brecht doesn't understand the disjunctions between bourgeois mythology and capitalist society: rather, he doesn't understand why these disjunctions cannot be represented and, thereby, interrogated. Hence, his theatre both represents them and interrogates them.



The unsynthesizable disjunction of Greek drama (as philosophical) and Greek society (as structurally immutable), which Greek drama smooths over through its *deus-ex-machina* and references to an unattainably remote Olympian authority, relates to the irreconcilability of the laws of man with those of the gods. *The Good Person of Szechuan* stages this disjunction, through the masks of Shen Teh and Shui Ta, with the former attempting to enact the ideology of the gods and the latter embracing the laws of the free market. However, whereas the Greeks dramatize the omnipotence of the gods, in Brecht's drama they are unable to effectively regulate the actions of the mortal characters. In Brecht's play, the laws of free market economics more powerfully influence the characters' circumstances and the nature of the choices they make, and this is effectively a displacement of the omnipotence of the divine with that of the secular laws of capitalism. Brecht allocates the majority of choral odes to the gods, rendering them commentators on, rather than agents involved in, the main action of the drama, which also represents a reversal of the roles of the divine and the secular figures in Greek drama. The redundancy of the gods is completely affirmed in episode ten, during their ascent to heaven, which is of course a parody of the *deus-ex-machina*, and consigns them to an unattainably remote position characterized by ineffectuality rather than by omnipotence.

According to Sokel, in Brecht's plays, one pattern of Greek tragedy always prevails, that of "Necessity, the condition of human existence, [which] defeats the aspirations, nobility, and greatness of man" (133). Sokel also affirms that this 'necessity' is "an external necessity", which acts "as a destructive barrier to his [the character's] desire" (131), and that there is a tragic quality in Brecht's plays which relates to how they present the "defeat of aspirations which represent the best in man" (135). The schizophrenia of the counter-mask of Shen Teh/Shui Ta, according to Sokel, "reveals man's tragic condition" because the play "shows that tragedy results from the contradictory relationship between ends and means" (135). This 'contradictory relationship' between 'ends and means' is described as follows:

As Shui Ta she adjusts to and manipulates her environment which victimizes Shen Te. As Shui Ta she assures her survival which Shen Te recklessly endangers. As Shui Ta she safeguards her livelihood but cripples her life; as Shen Te she fulfils her life but forfeits her livelihood. (128)

Sokel summarises his insightful description of the conundrum of the Shen Teh/Shui Ta mask as follows:

[Without] Shui Ta's cruelty Shen Teh's goodness would be completely ineffectual and therefore nonexistent. In order to realize his goodness man must renounce his goodness. His tragedy is that he can never effectively be what he naturally is. (129)

Sokel's analysis brilliantly achieves a tragic reading of the play, and one which could easily be achieved through a thus inclined dramaturgical approach to a production of the text. His reading is apparently deterministic, replacing the Greek notion of the hero's 'tragic fate' with that of the 'tragic condition' of Brecht's characters.

However, his analysis also borders on the angst of existentialist thinking, and this is an important distinction. For, just as existentialist thought reveals the conditions of society in order to oppose them through the practicality of existentialist living, so Brecht's theatre employs exposition as a means to an alternative human consciousness. Unlike the existentialists, however, whose philosophy is romantically geared towards individual behaviour in isolation from the conditions of the world, Brecht's thinking relates to the collective engagement of individuals with changing these conditions. Brecht's theatre asks an audience to consider the disjunctions between the conditions of western capitalist society and the bourgeois mythology which supports it, not to resign themselves to them.

As Benjamin states, the epic theatre "does not reproduce conditions but, rather, reveals them" (*Understanding Brecht* 4), and "the conditions speak for themselves, so that they confront each other dialectically" (8). In *The Good Person of Szechuan*, this act of revealing relates to the multiplicity of narratives contained within the text, and also to the re-creative quality of these micro-narratives, or the manner through which they are repeated. As stated previously, the parable of Mrs Yang evokes the capitalist, narrative myth of the 'rags-to-riches' tale. This myth is evoked repeatedly during the play: from episodes three to six, when Shen Teh offers to support Yang Sun's ambition to be an airman; in episode seven, when Shen Teh dreams of her unborn child's future; and, as discussed previously, in the parable itself. The 'rags-to-riches' fable also defines the counter-mask of Shen Teh (Shui Ta), and the reversals of fortune which their presences effect on the tobacco business (or, in the case of the

mask of Shui Ta, the tobacco empire). The narrative of Yang Sun is incomplete or, rather, cannot be completed, as for the petit-bourgeois poverty and wealth are relative statistics, and the relief of Mrs Yang in her son's reversal of fortune is set against the insatiable quality of Yang Sun's ambition. In the case of Shen Teh/Shui Ta, the narrative likewise cannot be completed, as the dramatic world does not contain a synthesis to the dialectic that this counter-mask presents. Essentially, what the play presents us with is a series of narratives without endings, or a series of parodies without conclusions. A play that exposes a multiplicity of sociological and socio-economic problems, parodically, only becomes a problem play at its very end, a fact that is bathetically underlined by the epilogue delivered by the pseudo-sage that is the mask of 'The Player':

There's only one solution that we know:

That you should consider as you go

What sort of measures you would recommend

To help good people to a happy end.

Ladies and gentlemen, in you we trust:

There must be happy endings, must, must, must! (108)

Brecht's play is, in many senses, a practical joke at the expense of bourgeois aesthetic sensibility and, in place of a tragic or comic ending, offers no conclusive end to the action at all. By re-configuring the elements and conventions of tragedy (comedy, the parable, melodrama and the morality tale),<sup>80</sup> he exposes the role of dramatic genre in capitalist ideology, through dramatizing the collaboration between bourgeois mythology and the 'real effect' of exploitative capitalism. Badiou states:

There is ... something almost theatrical about ideology. Ideology stages figures of representation that mask the primordial violence of social relations (exploitation, oppression, anti-egalitarian cynicism). As in the Brechtian theory of distancing, ideology organizes a consciousness separated from the real that it nevertheless expresses. (*Century* 48-9)

<sup>80</sup> An alternative reading of Mrs Yang's parable could argue that it borrows, in form, the structure of the medieval morality tale, with the penitent Yang Sun accepting, after drinking the 200 silver dollars gifted him by Shen Teh, that the true path to salvation is only found through hard work, selfless devotion to the firm and an undermining of your fellow workmen. Mrs Yang, as the character who persuades him to beg Shui Ta's mercy, may be read as his veritable 'Good Deeds' (from *Everyman*).

By parodying its 'figures of representation', Brecht's drama displaces bourgeois ideology in favour of a philosophical consciousness. By representing, in tandem with these parodies, the 'real effects' of bourgeois capitalism, he proposes that this alternative consciousness must, surely, be a consciousness of opposition. The epic theatre's act of representation is at once a 'semblance' (representation) of an oppositional consciousness (as the 'latitude' of Brecht's realism incorporates a representation of this act of representation), and is also a 'real' oppositional consciousness, because it is staged and an audience observes it. The 'metatext', as discussed in Chapter Three, is achieved through a deletion of the gap between the semblances (myths, genres) and real effects of bourgeois, capitalist ideology, and a dramatic world which represents both the 'semblance and the real' through the ironic montage of epic storytelling.

In Chapter Five, an analysis of Dario Fo's political farce, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* will reveal a movement, in epic theatre, that replaces the philosophical, 'nowhere/everywhere' landscapes of Jarry and Brecht in favour of a hybrid dramatic landscape of documentary and popular theatre. Strategies through which Fo's practice resembles the theatres of Brecht and Jarry will be discussed, alongside an analysis and enumeration of the extensive, complex layering employed by Fo in the masks of *Accidental Death*.

## Chapter Five

### The *Guillaire* as Epic Actor and Interventionist in Dario Fo's

#### *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*

**The epic style derives from realism, but it is characterised by the self-aware detachment of the actor; the actor is critical of what he acts. He does not confine himself to conveying information, to telling something and then letting the audience sort it all out. He seeks to provide the audience with the necessary data for a reading of a piece. (Fo, *Theatre Workshop* 6)**

In Chapter Three of this thesis, it was argued that what is 'at stake', primarily, for the epic theatre, is 'the epic theatre itself'. The argument proposed that the epic theatre, antagonistic to the mythological representations of the State, and susceptible to its censors, both unmasks the 'real' of these 'semblances' (representations) and stages the mechanics of the surveillance through which the State seeks to obstruct the epic theatre event. The 'staging of a public staging', most literally exemplified in examples from Brecht's epic theatre, is the signature episode of this counter-surveillance, achieving what Peter Thomson refers to as the 'meta-text ... linking the [dramatic action] to the outside world' (106), which for Badiou is a provocative 'Theatre' as revolutionary event or, for Barthes, signifies a de-mythologizing, through a 'third-order semiological system', of bourgeois ideology as encoded through counter-mythical representation. This chapter sets out to analyze Dario Fo's 1970 production of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* in the context of this framework, and to link the dramaturgical strategy of this drama with the epic theatres of Brecht and Jarry. It will be argued that Fo extends the 'meta-textual' quality of Brecht's epic theatre, through processes of complex layering that are encoded both in the nature of the grotesque masks that he assumes in performance, and also in the extra-performative signs which inform this reading of the production. These processes of complex layering will be related to Fo's appropriation of the devices of the medieval *guillaire* (or minstrel),<sup>81</sup> and the dramaturgical latitudes afforded to him by deploying these devices in performance. A textual analysis of this dramaturgy of complex

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<sup>81</sup> In terms of the references used to support this analysis, the term 'minstrel' is employed only in Joseph Farrell's translation of Fo's *Tricks of the Trade*. Elsewhere, the terms *guillaire* (singular) and *guillairi* (plural) are conventional.

layering will be followed by a discussion of what, in Fo's epic theatre, may be understood by the terms farce and realism.

Fo describes how, in collaboration with his company, Le Commune, he came to develop the script for *Accidental Death*:

During the spring of 1970, the comrades who were coming to our shows – workers, students and progressives – were asking us to produce a full-length piece on the Milan bombings and the murder of Pinelli, a piece which would discuss the political motives and consequences of the events. (*Postscript to Accidental Death of an Anarchist* 207)

David L. Hirst notes how, in the twelve months prior to the production, there had been “173 bomb attacks in Italy”, and how Italian society was experiencing a “double strain of terrorism”, with bombs being planted by both right-wing and left-wing extremists (42). As a play, *Accidental Death* reflects the paranoia inherent in a society where terrorist violence was rampant, with responsibility often diverted from its real source through State-media propaganda.<sup>82</sup> Left-wing activists and sympathisers were aware that much of this violence was perpetrated by the State as a strategy of *agent provocateurism*, as a means of justifying a clampdown on the Left during a time “dominated by a mass movement of workers who fought for and, in most cases, obtained better wages and better working conditions” (Taviano 21). According to Tony Mitchell, *Accidental Death* was Fo's response to what became known as the “strategy of tension”, where “the new Christian Democrat government, having deposed the centre-left coalition, tried to crack down on the left and dissipate its forces” (*Dario Fo: People's Court Jester* 59). The incidents surrounding the Milan bombings provided the pretext for the dramatic narrative, which interrogated both the ‘accidental death’ of Giuseppe Pinelli,<sup>83</sup> and its significance regarding this ‘strategy of tension’ generally.

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<sup>82</sup> The play carefully encodes this information in the second act, when the mask of the Journalist, played by Franca Rame, Fo's collaborator and wife, notes of the 173 bombings that “at least 102 have been proved to have been organised by fascist organisations, aided or abetted by the police, with the explicit intention of putting the blame on left-wing groups” (193).

<sup>83</sup> The term ‘accidental death’ appeared in one of the police reports on Pinelli's death, an ambiguous term which jarred with the evidence given by the police witnesses who claimed that the anarchist railwayman had committed suicide.

The most notorious of the Milan bombings was the 1969 explosion at the Piazza Fontana, which killed seventeen people and injured one hundred. Pinelli, along with fellow anarchist Pietro Valpreda, was charged with the Piazza Fontana bombing, as well as placing bombs in a separate incident at the Milan railway station. Valpreda remained in prison for ten years, but, as Hirst notes, Pinelli “was less fortunate ... [and] was killed when his body flew out of the fourth floor of the police headquarters when he was being interrogated” (43) on December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1969. The failure of the Milanese media to meaningfully interrogate the details that led to Pinelli’s death,<sup>84</sup> along with the farcical (and contradictory) accounts of his ‘accidental death’ published by the police, reinforced the belief amongst the Left that the State’s media propaganda machine was malevolently mobilized against, and arrogantly censorious of attempts at counter-information. Hence, it was no surprise that the people sought an alternative means of cultural expression and that Fo, as an established actor-activist, was approached to write the play.

The role of the audience, in the first production of *Accidental Death*, therefore, was highly active, and a series of open rehearsals and previews was organized where spectators could comment on the text and, if dubious of particular elements, be invited to suggest changes. This inclusive approach continued through the performances, mainly through Fo’s convention of a ‘third act’, where audiences were invited to freely respond, in a forum situation, to the events depicted onstage. The script was also encoded with documentary information provided by sympathetic lawyers and journalists, and this collaboration continued through the production stages:

Each performance incorporated the latest court findings, whilst Fo and his collective were further assisted by lawyers and journalists who provided them with photocopies of unpublished evidence and documents relating to the judicial inquiry into the case. (Hirst 43)

Significant to this radical approach to a collaborative creative process is the fact that *Accidental Death* emerged not from an artistic choice by the author, but rather as a ‘request’, or ‘moral commission’ on the part of his previously established audience

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<sup>84</sup> A group of journalists were, ironically, the first to encounter the corpse of Pinelli, as they had just left the Milan police headquarters where they were gathered for a police statement on developments in the investigation into the Milan bombings.

(and, by proxy, patrons). Arguably, the success of *Accidental Death* as a complete act of drama as counter-hegemonic practice, suggests that the natural habitat of the epic theatre is the site of popular theatre, as characterized by Tim Prentki and Jan Selman. Prentki and Selman argue that popular theatre “implies that the *process of making and showing the theatre piece* is owned and controlled by a specific community”, and that there is “also an implication that the communities involved are little heard from in the mainstream media, that they are in some way disenfranchised or powerless ... [that] ‘popular’ refers to ‘of the people’, *belonging to the people*”. Furthermore, popular theatre “seeks radical change. It questions the social and political structure, and presumes that there is a more egalitarian social makeup possible” (9). Most significant to an analysis of Fo’s project, is the contention that popular theatre refers to a situation where “space is created where groups and individuals can afford to work on dangerous issues” (8).

In Chapter Three, it was emphasised that the epic theatre is a cultural element that is ‘about itself’, in the sense that what is primarily at stake is the very existence of the ‘thinking space’ that it provides in its counter-surveillance of the State. In *Accidental Death*, Fo chose not, à la Brecht, to ‘stage a public staging’, but rather to dramatize a farcical, behind-closed-doors interrogation of the documentary facts surrounding the play. Fo, however, retains the epic convention of ‘staging of a public staging’ in different dramaturgical clothes, in its aim of “providing ‘counter-information’ through its theatre” (Taviano 23). *Accidental Death* is visibly encoded as a ‘public staging’ in itself, emphasizing the function of theatre as “a public arena for the collective exploration of ideological meaning”, and openly defining the production as “an ideological transaction between a company of performers and the community of their audience” (Kershaw 137). The dominant signification of the production is the event of the production itself, emphasised through its extra-performative (or meta-theatrical) elements. Because the production was an exercise in counter-information, opposing the information put forth by the State and its media collaborators, the main theme of the drama became the democratic need for a site of counter-information practice. The act of producing *Accidental Death*, dialectically, in Badiou’s terms, represents a site where “one divides into two” (*Century 60*) points of view on contemporary political events. Redolent of Gramsci’s theories of counter-hegemonic practices, Fo’s philosophy of praxis reflects Badiou’s assertion that, dialectically, in “order to be a



revolutionary activist in the present, it is ... obligatory to desire division" (*Century* 60).

The nature of Fo's 'public staging' may be defined as a combination of elements already deployed in the epic theatre strategies of both Brecht and Jarry. In contrast to Brecht's 'court-room episodes', where the contradictions of bourgeois and State ideologies are largely allowed to de-construct themselves, Fo's courtroom licenses the foolery of the *guillaire* as its de-constructive agent. The mask of the Maniac,<sup>85</sup> the licensed *guillaire* of Fo the author/Fo the actor, much like the complex mask of Ubu-Gémier-Jarry, is encoded according to a sense of the carnivalesque. However, Fo's protagonist, unlike Jarry's ('mirror-image' of the petit-bourgeois, 'new man') is not the subject of the dramatic interrogation. Rather, the role of the Maniac mask is catalytic, almost an exaggerated version of Brecht's convention of the protagonist as 'anyman', or filter through which the audience views the dramatic action. In the opening scene of *Accidental Death*, the Maniac defines his mask as a fictional, medically diagnosed condition:

I have a thing about dreaming up characters and then acting them out. It's called 'histrionomania' – comes from the Latin *histriones*, meaning 'actor'. I'm a sort of amateur performance artist. With the difference that I go for 'Théâtre Vérité' – my fellow performers need to be real people, but people who don't realise that they're in my plays. (127)

The Maniac is essentially a protean mask, a pretext through which Fo the actor adopts, through disguise, four sub-masks during the play. These sub-masks – Anghiari (Milan police inspector), Malipiero (investigating Consul to the High Court), Piccini (forensic specialist) and Bernier (Vatican ambassador to the police forces) – each represent a different tier of the Italian State system which *Accidental Death* sets out to interrogate. Medically defined as a compulsive impersonator, the Maniac adopts new sub-masks in a manner, according to himself, that appears arbitrary and beyond his control. Apparently, he is wholly unscrupulous and solely bent on causing havoc, and satisfying the drives of his illness through his disguises. The Maniac is,

<sup>85</sup> The mask of the Maniac, in the original Italian, is named '*Il Matto*', which may be more accurately translated as 'Madman'. The convention of translating the character as 'Maniac' springs from Gillian Hanna's adaption of *Accidental Death* for the Belt and Braces production in London in 1980.

therefore, definable as a protean shell – or pretext – at the service of Fo’s satiric masks or, perhaps more significantly, as an actor at the service of a production. Significantly, in the original production, the actor-pretext who plays the mask is Fo himself, a fact which distinguishes the epic protagonist in this production from the ‘anyman’ of Brecht’s ensemble by virtue of Fo’s social status as a celebrity actor-activist.

A clarification of the strategy of *Accidental Death* emerges from the complex layering which the mask of the Maniac represents on his self-introduction in act one, scene one. The scaffolding of this complex mask has at its core Fo’s social mask, that of actor-activist, which is inseparable from his established performance mask of subversive, political clown.<sup>86</sup> The protean mask of The Maniac, for the audience, is analogous to the established performance mask of Fo. The Maniac’s fictional intervention, through disguise, in the police cover-up of the murder of Pinelli, allegorizes Fo’s intervention, through theatre, in the State-imposed ‘strategy of tension’ and censorship of meaningful commentary around the events of the Milan bombings. Throughout the drama Fo as celebrity, via the mask of the Maniac, embodies the request of his audience: the request for counter-information. In this sense, Fo locates the role of the celebrity within the wider aims of the revolutionary collective, exploiting his celebrity status as a means of clarifying the dramatic content. This innovative positioning of the celebrity, maximizing his potential as servant of the collective, exemplifies how, as Marco Gehlardi points out, “Fo uses Marxism, but he is not used by it” (224).<sup>87</sup> It also reflects an exploitation by Fo of the latitude of the celebrity as actor sign, as he is omnipresent in (and dominates) each adopted role. Redolent of the mask of Ubu/Gémier, as discussed in Chapter Two, Fo clearly

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<sup>86</sup> Fo’s performance mask contains a further duality in that, in *Mistero Buffo*, he performs “trans-historical masks of oppression” (Ghelardi 224) and largely philosophizes on the *raisons d’être* of popular theatre, while in other plays leading up to the production of *Accidental Death*, such as *Fruit of The Loom* and *The Boss’s Funeral* (analyzed in Mitchell, *People’s Court Jester* 56-8), more immediate, documentary-based issues are interrogated. Suffice to say that the roles of Fo’s recent career were eclectic in scope and synonymous with multiple role-play, and, by proxy, his established performance mask is definable as protean in itself.

<sup>87</sup> Fo and Rame had, on their initial break from the mainstream theatre in 1968 to form the *Nuova Scena* theatre company, forged close links with the Italian Communist Party (PCI) as a means of reaching their target audience of workers and left-wing sympathisers. Frustrated with the Marxist orthodoxy, demands and interference of Communist Party senior members, they abandoned this project in 1970 to set up *Le Commune*, a theatre company independent of the PCI.

exploits his celebrity status to signify a blurring of roles, demanding a critical reading of the satiric masks he assumes.

*Accidental Death* is set in the Milan police headquarters, the scene of Pinelli's death. Apart from the masks of the Maniac and the Journalist (performed by Rame), all of the masks presented onstage represent different tiers of this insular and intimidating State institution. Placing Fo, thinly disguised as the Maniac, in a dramatization of this setting, allows him to satirize the State on what would have been regarded as one of their impenetrable and most feared terrains. Through impersonating high-ranking police officials, the Maniac manipulates the situation – the play opens with him being interrogated on a charge of impersonating a psychiatrist – so that he assumes control and, in turn, interrogates the Milan police on the facts surrounding the death of Pinelli. The Maniac constantly outwits and humiliates the police, questioning the false contents of their published statements, through disguise and complex word-games. The function of the laughter that the Maniac brings about at the expense of the police masks is deflationary: it dissolves the State's control mechanism within the dramatic world, rendering it penetrable and susceptible to counter-interrogation. For Fo, therefore, the subtractive dialectic relates to laughter's "anarchic, dissolving power" (Artaud 31), to the satiric, deflationary power of the mask-bearer.

Fo's drama, in the epic tradition of Jarry and Brecht, represents a philosophy of praxis that is appropriative of folk tradition, and oppositional to the catharses of bourgeois dramatic genres. In Fo's epic theatre, there are two performance traditions that dominate his approach to performance language: the tradition(s) of clowning, and that of farce. These traditions inform an understanding of what this chapter will argue may be understood by the term realism in Fo's epic dramaturgy. For Fo, these traditions are not merely sources for appropriation of style, but also traditions that must, in the service of an oppositional, revolutionary theatre, be re-appropriated and reclaimed from the appropriative mythologies of bourgeois culture. Generally, philosophizing on the craft of the performer, Fo offers the following advice to young practitioners:

'The first rule in theatre is that there are no rules.' That does not mean that you can go on the rampage; it means that each individual is free to choose a method

that will allow him to attain style, that is, to attain an effective, dialectical rigour. (*Tricks of the Trade* 52)

Echoing Walter Benjamin's employment of 'style' as a term that represents a synthesis of the elements of form and content (as mentioned in previous chapters), Fo's professional journey towards this synthesis involved in-depth historical research into traditions of clowning (and storytelling) as a means of further understanding his own training and practice, and thus informing his subsequent work with *Le Commune*. As Ghelardi states: "Fo did not create a theoretical method, but he analyzed his own practice, developing it, finding parallels with it, and so on" (225). Joseph Farrell notes how, in *Tricks of the Trade*, "one of Fo's aims was to sketch the outlines of one sort of theatre" (2). By this, Farrell means that Fo does not explain his practice as a methodological prototype to be followed by aspiring political satirists, but rather that what young practitioners need to consider is Fo's determination to understand his own practice, in the context of historical examples of oppositional theatre and how these may inform the development of his polemic.

Of twentieth-century trends in clowning, Fo remarks: "Today's clown has lost both his ancient capacity to shock and his political-moral commitment", setting against this the contention that "In other times the clown used satire as a vehicle against violence, cruelty, hypocrisy and injustice. Centuries ago, he was an obscene, diabolic figure" (*Tricks* 172). Farrell notes how Fo had been "willing to wander down some untrodden by-ways in order to locate forms of people's theatre that no-one else considered worthy of notice" (3). Through a deep analysis (and re-thinking) of medieval, Renaissance and post-Renaissance traditions, such as *Commedia dell'Arte*, the *guillaire*, the theatres of Molière and the Elizabethans, conversational storytelling traditions that he had enjoyed as a young boy growing up in Lombardy, as well as developments in nineteenth-century Naturalism and the bourgeois theatres of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Fo's practice incorporates, as Farrell notes, a search to "identify the relationship between power and dissent throughout history", and to see "what could be rescued from the culture of other times and what was serviceable in the theatre of today" (4).

Of the craft of the clown, Fo says that “A clown’s act is made up of a collection of elements from diverse, often conflicting, sources” (*Tricks* 171). Fo chooses to explain his own practice – or collection of elements – in the context of *Commedia* and, more importantly, with the craft of the medieval *guillaire*, antecedents of the *Commedia* clowns and the inspiration for *Mistero Buffo*:

As Muratori says: ‘The *guillaire* was born of the people, and from the people he took their anger in order to be able to give it back to them, mediated via the grotesque, through reason, in order that the people should gain a greater awareness of their own condition’. (1)

It is via *Mistero Buffo* that Fo recalls the *guillaire*, although it was to be with *Accidental Death* that he virtually revives him, transposing the minstrel act of satiric mediation from exposition, in the lecture-demonstration format of the earlier work, to the agency of carnivalesque intervention in the dramatic world of *Accidental Death*. Fo notes, in *Tricks*:

[The *guillaire*] was a mime who, in addition to gestures ... improvised and worked from memory ... [and] always performed as themselves... they had a penchant for disguise. In the course of market day, for instance, they would jump up on a bench, in the guise of a guard, a doctor, a lawyer, a priest, a merchant and the performance would get under way immediately. (84)

It is easy to identify, in the above quote, the influence of Fo’s research into the *guillaire* in the encoding of *Accidental Death*, and the role of the body politic in the text, with Fo assuming, through disguise, the masks of the political oppressor. As Joel Schechter observes, the “capacity of Fo’s buffoon to impersonate policemen, anarchists, judge, and bishop fosters a comic, carnivalesque vision of society where, as Bakhtin said of the carnival in Rabelais’s world, people became interchangeable in their mass body”. Through inverting, in the dramatic world, the State’s control system, Fo “becomes a one-man carnival” (qtd. in Mitchell, *File on Dario Fo* 47). This inversion is mirrored in the theatre event itself, as the independent nature of the production enhances the sense of an alternative cultural element, which opposes the trappings of the State-subsidized, mainstream theatre.

Fo also invokes, in *Accidental Death*, an element he associates with the clowns of Commedia: namely, that “the actor-performer is author, producer, storyteller, director” (*Tricks* 13). The robust dramatic structure of the play, as encoded by Fo and company, gives Fo the *guillaire* total control to satirize (to use Jarry’s term) the effigies - or masks - of power presented onstage. The ‘public staging’, in Fo’s play, is of course the play itself, an event radicalized by the audacity of the clown and his collaborators – fellow actors and audience – staging the play in the first place. Fo notes how the *guillairi*, in the Middle Ages, were known to be “burned to throw up the barricades” (*Tricks* 85), or “killed with such abandon”, flayed alive or prone to having their tongues cut out (*Mistero Buffo* 2). In the political climate of Milan in 1970, of course, the susceptibility of the activist to police harassment, arrest, interrogation, brutality, and so on, was obvious, as Pinelli’s case exemplified, as did the production history of *Accidental Death*, with performances regularly delayed due to bomb threats and police searches. The production brilliantly exemplifies Badiou’s assertion that “the essence of theatre lies in the existence of the opening night”, and that the event of future performance “touches upon the State”, upon the fact that State “Morality did not prevent it happening” (“Rhapsody” 189). As with Brecht’s Moabit production of *The Mother* in 1930, the State performed its role brilliantly in confirming the potential of the epic theatre to both expose State terror and also to tease out the State’s terror of the epic theatre. Perhaps this is because, as Fo notes, “Power cannot put up with the laughter of other people, of those who are without power” (*Tricks* 47). Fo states that:

Power bends over backwards to ensure that people’s native imagination atrophies, that they eschew the effort involved in developing alternative ideas on what is occurring around them from those purveyed by the mass media, that they cease to experience the thrill of opposition, abandon the vicious habit of searching a reasoned detachment from immediate things, foreswear the tendency to sum them up, reconsider them and above all to portray the essence of them in styles that are different. (*Tricks* 118)

The ‘thrill of opposition’ that Fo refers to is, perhaps, the term which best describes the ‘atmosphere’ of his epic, popular theatre, much as the term ‘balladesque’ best described that of Brecht, as discussed in Chapter Four. Interestingly, Fo’s theatre attempts to reconcile two apparently incongruous elements: the exaggerated, comedic

elements of farce, and the 'reasoned detachment' on the part of the audience (and actor) that is redolent of Brecht's theories and practice. However, as Brecht notes:

It is easier to act in this epic way in comedy because a strong measure of distancing is essential. The epic style is much easier to understand in this context and so it is advisable to mount comic pieces regularly. (qtd. in Taviano 226)

Fo's theories and practice reflect an understanding of the technicalities inherent in the craft of the comic actor. In *Tricks*, he comments in great depth on the technicalities of acting with masks, on improvisation, and on the necessity of complete communicative clarity in the performance of the grotesque actor. He states how the purpose of the mask is to "magnify and simultaneously give the essence of the character" (35), that the mask "obliges you to widen and develop your gestures, which must not be arbitrary if you want the audience, your immediate mirror, to follow you and to grasp the flow of the piece" (35-6). The development from Jarry's notion of the mask as 'effigy', and Brecht's concept of *Gestus* and the social role of the character, is evident here.

Fo, like Jarry, appropriates the logic of the Commedia masks, as a means of encoding new masks, with a clearly expressed social role. Arlecchino is, for Fo, the Commedia mask most closely aligned to his own style. According to Rudlin, Arlecchino is a "shape-shifter" who "adopts disguises and cross-dresses without demur". He is "[n]ever pathetic, always *knows* ... [is] never the loser" and, in more quick-witted versions, "responds to everything ... in a way that is taken to apocalyptic proportions and then forgotten entirely" (77-9). As Fo notes, there is "no way of knowing exactly when the activity of the minstrels was replaced by the activity of the Commedia players" (*Tricks* 70). Arlecchino, the trickster who drives the dramatic twists of traditional Commedia scenarios, is arguably the direct descendent of the *guillaire* in the ensemble form of Commedia. In *Accidental Death*, Fo inverts the ancestry, with the hitherto solo-performing *guillaire* (as mask satirist) deploying the ensemble devices of Arlecchino (as plot catalyst) in order to control the various twists and transformations in the dramatic world.

Fo is also appropriative in how he deploys *Gestus* in his dramaturgy, and in how this signifies meaning in terms of the meta-text of *Accidental Death*. For his first disguise in *Accidental Death*, the mask of Malipiero, Fo actually performs the construction of the *Gestus*:

Let's see now, first of all, find a walk ... (*He tries a walk with a slight limp*) No, that's the clerk of the court. (*He tries another*) Arthritic, but dignified! There, not bad, with a bit of a crick in the neck ... like a retired circus horse ... (*He tries it but then decides against it*) ... (137)

The rehearsal goes on for some time, until eventually the Maniac settles for the following physicality:

No, I think I'd prefer something different: cold, detached, short-shrift, bit of a drone, slightly shortsighted, gloomy sort ... has glasses, but only uses one lens ... (137)

In this representation, Fo practically demonstrates the social role of the *guillaire*, or epic actor. The thrill of opposition is linked to the process of assuming the mask of the oppressor, magnifying the essence of the mask, and controlling how the mask is represented. The act of 'counter-information' that is the production of *Accidental Death* is aligned with the act of counter-representation, by the *guillaire*, of the agents of the State. The art of counter-representation, as Fo identifies, is a powerful device of the *guillaire*. As Taviano notes, "Fo joins the sheer joyful energy of popular theatre with the precision of craft in the same way as Brecht united a distancing purpose on the part of the performer with the concept of *Spass* (fun)" (227). And much as Brecht's storytellers, as discussed in Chapter Three and Chapter Four, embody a dubious quality which generates a critical 'at-play' with the audience, so Fo's *guillaire* generates an atmosphere of unpredictability to encourage critical spectatorship. Fo states, regarding the traditional *guillaire*, that "Ambiguity, with a denial of all established values – that was the real minstrel" (*Tricks* 85). This 'ambiguity' relates to the revolutionary *guillaire*'s penchant for disguise,<sup>88</sup> and the carnivalesque quality through which he assumes the masks of the oppressor.

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<sup>88</sup> In *Tricks*, Fo distinguishes between the oppositional *guillari* and the reactionary version: "The minstrel is not to be seen as the activist given over heart and soul to the emancipation and education of the people. There were minstrels who took the people's side, but there were others who were



In *Mistero Buffo*, Fo performs a traditional *guillaire* routine, through the mask of an employer, who rejoices at the way in which Church propaganda encourages the peasant to remain humble and poor. The extract is from "The Birth of the Villeyn":

Tell him to go to Mass,  
 Because in church he will find shelter,  
 And he can pray,  
 Pass his time praying,  
 Because anyway it won't do him any good.  
 Because anyway the peasant doesn't have any soul, And God cannot listen to  
 him.  
 And how could a stupid peasant have a soul,  
 Given that he was born from an ass, blown out by a fart? (62)

Fo's interpretation of the piece follows:

Now, why this rejection of the soul? Because it is one of the greatest blackmails that the bosses can use against us. In a moment of desperation one might come to the point of saying: 'So what do I care, let's have at least a minimum of dignity. I am going to stab that bastard boss of mine!' So then the boss, or rather the boss through the medium of the priest, comes along and says: 'No! Stop! Do you want to ruin yourself? You have suffered all your life and now, shortly, you are going to die. You have the possibility of going to heaven now, because Jesus Christ told you that since you are the least among men you shall enter into the kingdom of heaven. And now you want to ruin everything? Think what you're doing, don't get rebellious! And wait for the after-life!' (63)

Fo's interpretation of the extract is clearly his own, focussing on the themes of class oppression and corrupt authority which dominate his work in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, the content of his interpretation does highlight the implicit quality of the *guillaire*'s routine, and the subtle irony through which the speech is encoded. The target audience of the original routine, of course, was the peasant of the medieval

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reactionaries and conservatives, shoulder to shoulder with the powers that be; some were agnostic, others burned to throw up the barricades; there were some on every side. In other words, it was all a bit like today" (85).

market-place, and clearly not the boss-men whose ideologies the piece satirizes. The ironic detachment that characterizes the craft of the *guillaire* is achieved through the duality of the performance or, rather, its double-duality. The first duality is that of the mask, and the complex layering which characterizes the act of representation. There are two masks onstage: the core mask of the minstrel and the mask of the boss that he assumes. The second duality relates to the intentions of these masks. The intention of the *guillaire* is to do with the act of revealing: that is, with revealing the intention of the boss. The core mask of the *guillaire* is omnipresent: otherwise, the audience would most likely enact violence upon the mask of the boss. This is how the *guillaire* 'mediates' the anger of the audience, and attempts to align this anger with 'reason', offered through the detachment engendered by the dualities of his performance language. A clear exchange mechanism, or contract, exists between the spectator and the *guillaire*. The 'ambiguity' of his masks relates to the 'latitude' this contract affords him in terms of how he represents and mediates reality. Then, there is the third duality of the *guillaire*: the duality of representation.

Ideologically, the *guillaire* represents a representative: that is, he is a representative of the people. He represents the people (who are oppressed), mainly, through representing those who are not the people: that is, their oppressors. The ideology of the boss is revealed through the duality of the mask, and the mask is the device through which the *guillaire* de-constructs the myths of the oppressor, as in "The Birth of the Villeyn". The ambiguity emerges through the tension between the social role of the *guillaire*, which is tacitly assumed by the spectator, and the *Gestus* (dialogic and physical) of the assumed mask of the boss. This ambiguity is akin to what was referred to, in the Introduction, as the 'dubious' quality of the seanchaí and, by extension, the actor-storyteller of Brecht's epic theatre, and demands that the spectator engage in the semiotic at-play of deciphering the meaning of the representation.

In *Accidental Death*, the *guillaire* is transposed to the ensemble, dramatic world of political farce and, therefore, the latitudes afforded his craft are altered and extended. Fo's *guillaire* is encoded so as to exploit a potential latitude afforded by this transposition: that is, that the mask of the Maniac, through impersonation, can present the ideology of the mask of the oppressor(s) while demanding, through asides (or

pointing) that this ideology be interrogated by the spectator. In other words, the social role of the original *guillaire*, that of 'people's court-jester', was implicit in the masks of his original performance context of the Middle Ages. In Fo's dramatic world, this social role is made physical and is integral to the complexity of the sign-system – and *Gestus* - employed in the drama. Recalling Jarry, the aside is deployed as a distancing device that provokes the audience into critical spectatorship (ironically, Fo's use of the device was more terroristic than Jarry's). The episode that best illustrates this exposition, and extension, of the role of the *guillaire* in *Accidental Death*, is in act one, scene two, where the Maniac impersonates Malipiero, First Consul to the High Court, sent to the Milan police headquarters in order to enquire into the handling of the scandal of the Pinelli affair. Typical of the way the Maniac's sub-masks are encoded, Fo ensures that the core Maniac mask, and the mask of the *guillaire* (Fo himself) are both transparent:

SUPERINTENDENT: This gentleman is Professor Marco Mario Malipiero, first Consul to the High Court ...

MANIAC: I wouldn't insist on the 'first' ... Let's just say 'one of the first'!

(144)

The Malipiero mask presents, firstly, a likely intention behind the Consul's enquiry into the Pinelli case: that is, to collaborate with the Milanese police to contrive a false report that will absolve them of blame for the murder of the anarchist:

SUPERINTENDENT: I'm really grateful to you ... It is good to know that the judiciary is still the policeman's best friend!

MANIAC: You might even say 'collaborator' ...

SPORTS JACKET<sup>89</sup> and SUPERINTENDENT: Of course. (159)

The relationship between the police force and the judiciary is presented as underhand and incestuous at this stage of the text. The unscrupulous nature of the Consul's enquiry comes as no surprise to the masks of Sports Jacket and the Superintendent, who are expediently bent on protecting their own skins. What Fo achieves, through this assumed identity of purpose, is an exposition of what, for the audience of the

<sup>89</sup> The mask of 'Sports Jacket' is based on Luigi Calabresi, the police inspector "from whose fourth-floor office the anarchist railwayman Giuseppe Pinelli fell to his death ... Italian audiences would have been familiar with a newspaper photograph showing Calabresi wearing a polo neck sweater and sports jacket" (Fo, notes to *Accidental Death* 211).

Left, was regarded as one of the system's most contemptible practices: the deployment of the State's public relations machine to cover up elements of police corruption. The fact that the State mobilized this PR machine in support of the Milan police, therefore, becomes the focus of the satire at this stage of the text. The Malipiero mask, playing devil's advocate to the crisis of absolutism,<sup>90</sup> parodies the attempts of the State to falsely present the police as acting in the interests of the people:

MANIAC: Do you know what people are going to think of you? That you're a bunch of bent bastards and liars ... Who do you think is going to believe you ever again? And do you know why? Because your version of the facts, as well as being total bollocks, lacks humanity. Not a shred of fellow feeling ... You never let yourselves go ... Let rip ... Laugh, cry ... Sing! (163)

The Malipiero mask's interrogation of the police reports works on two levels, as is evident from the speech above. On one level, we witness Fo's Maniac exploiting the Malipiero mask to describe the people's distrust of the police – and State – system. This distrust is factual and the drama advocates the dubious perspective of the audience – in lived experience – as a response to the dubious quality of the State's accounts of its own practices. The second level on which the interrogation works is as a satiric commentary on the acts of the State system. The higher agents of the State are parodied through the Malipiero mask and his attempts to undo the PR damage caused by the contradictory police reports. The Malipiero mask's attitude is unscrupulous in the conviction that, despite the damage to the credibility of the police force done by the initial, published reports, the people can still be fooled with a new, more credible draft of events. Fo mocks this hubris with the Malipiero mask's theory that a more humane-seeming police force would win back the sympathy of the people.

The speech is at once an aside and a dialogic interaction with the masks of the police force. As a dialogic interaction, it presents the hubristic "farce of power" (Fo, qtd. in Hirst 44) which characterizes how the State operates. By dramatizing the laboratory

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<sup>90</sup> The difficulty of enumerating the levels of complex layering at work in the masks of *Accidental Death* is, perhaps, best exemplified by the 'devil's advocate' quality of the Malipiero mask. Already, present are, as layers, the mask of Fo the actor-activist-*guillaire*, the mask of the Maniac, and the mask of Malipiero. The 'devil's advocate' quality of this mask could, arguably, be seen as a mask of Malipiero, thus rendering the sign-system more complex again.

through which the State plots its own mythology, the episode is a physicalized presentation of the 'gap' between the 'semblance' of legitimacy which the State desires, and the expedient 'real' of its malpractices. As an aside, the speech demands the spectator's critical analysis. The ambiguity, or the complex physicality, of the *Gestus* created by the ironic association of the masks of the trickster (The Maniac) and the *guillaire* (Fo the actor-activist) with the words spoken by the Malipiero mask, demands an interpretive rather than a receptive response on the spectator's part. The mask of the Maniac demands not the audience's sympathy, but rather that they laugh at his humiliation, through dialogue, of the masks of the State.

The aside is where the mask of Fo the *guillaire* peeps out and asks the audience to stretch its critical faculties. It is the power of this ironic, associative quality of the *guillaire*'s masks which requires that the sub-masks of the Maniac, in *Accidental Death*, are never allowed to out-stay their stage time. The Maniac never 'inhabits' his sub-masks, as such, but rather enjoys them, much as Arlecchino enjoys his role in the comic mischiefs and intrigues of the scenarios of the Commedia dell'Arte without consideration of personal consequences. Although these sub-masks represent effigies, like Père Ubu, they are transformative in terms of their carnivalesque quality. For, in the gap between the desired semblance of the State and the real of their propaganda, the mask of Fo the *guillaire* asserts itself, in the theatre, as the conductor of the enquiry.

Even within the Malipiero mask, this transformative quality is evident. The second possible purpose of the Consul's visit, which the Maniac plays out, is that of a hierarchial figure intent on scapegoating the police officers in order to preserve the State's credibility. Once again, the police officers are totally credulous of the Maniac's role-play:

MANIAC: You're done for: the Ministry of Justice has decided that you must be made an example of, and that you must be dealt with the full severity of the law, so as to preserve the public's lost faith in the police ... People have got very upset about the death of our defenestrated anarchist ... they want someone's head on the block, and the government's going to give them yours! (152)

This transformation presents the State as an insidious, efficient and ruthless force working at the service of its own interests, and prepared to sacrifice its servants in the cause of its own survival. This development signifies an expansion of the sphere of reference in the text. Through embodying the ruthless nihilism that existed at the highest levels of the State system, the Malipiero mask renders all levels of Italian society susceptible to the satire. Also, through positioning this malevolent characteristic in relation to the brutality of the murderers of Pinelli, this situation locates the social function of the police force at its correct level in the State system: that is, as disposable pawns at the service of a much larger infrastructure of corruption. The Malipiero mask, through emblemizing this tacit quality of the State infrastructure, renders the unspoken real of the State system visible, susceptible to representation and to dramatic interrogation.

This inversion of the power structures of the Italian State is an act of transformation which relates to the transformative potential of Fo's carefully constructed dramaturgy of counter-information for this oppositional, revolutionary cultural event. By exploiting the latitude available to the hierarchical status of the Malipiero sub-mask, the Maniac asserts the transformative power of farce as a tool of socio-political enquiry. The transformative quality of the act of counter-interrogation is evident in the episodes where (in act one, scene one) the Malipiero mask insists on a reconstruction of the interrogation of Pinelli that preceded his murder. At this point, the masks are discussing the 'raptus'<sup>91</sup> which, according to their reports, explains how the death of Pinelli was 'accidental':

MANIAC: So we need to find out who or what it was provoked this anxiety, this desperation. I suspect that the best way would be if we do a reconstruction.

Superintendent, the stage is yours. (146)

What ensues is an episode where Malipiero coerces the police officers into re-enacting their exact movements and dialogue, as it was recorded in the published reports. Malipiero, significantly, corrects any deviation from the actual reports, and this is an effective device through which Fo recalls attention to the documentary

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<sup>91</sup> According to the published police reports (faithfully read out by Malipiero in *Accidental Death*), Pinelli was "seized by a 'raptus' and went and threw himself to his death from the window" (145). Malipiero also defines a raptus as "a heightened form of suicidal anxiety which can seize even people who are psychologically perfectly normal" (145-6).

nature of the source material (and the fabricatory quality of the reports).

Significantly, Malipiero stands in for the role of Pinelli:

SUPERINTENDENT: My dear railway shunter, not to mention subversive ...

You'd better stop making fun of me ...

MANIAC: No, no ... Stick to the script, please. (*He waves the statements*) No censorship here, if you don't mind ... That wasn't quite what you said!

SUPERINTENDENT: Well, I said: 'Have you quite finished taking the piss?'

MANIAC: Well done. And then what did you say?

SUPERINTENDENT: We have evidence to prove that you were the ones who planted the bombs at the station.

MANIAC: What bombs?

SUPERINTENDENT: (*In a lower tone, more discursive*) I'm talking about the bomb on the twenty-fifth ...

MANIAC: No, no, use the same words you used that evening. Imagine that I'm the anarchist railwayman. Come on, let's have you: 'What bombs?'

SUPERINTENDENT: Don't play dumb with me! You know very well what bombs. The ones you planted on the train at the Central Station eight months ago.

MANIAC: Did you really have this evidence?

SUPERINTENDENT: No, but as the Inspector was explaining just now, the police use these ploys every once in a while ...

MANIAC: Aha, shrewd move! (147)

Within this sequence, Fo deliberately blurs the distinction between the masks he physicalizes onstage, although the mask of Fo the *guillaire* is highly visible as the conductor of the enquiry, or court-room of the counter-interrogation. Significantly, Fo repeats the question 'What bombs?' as a means of asserting this sense of counter-interrogation. The first time the question is asked, the Superintendent doesn't recognize that Malipiero is quoting what Pinelli is alleged to have said in the report. Malipiero then clarifies that he is quoting from the report, and assumes the role of Pinelli as he repeats the question. The Superintendent, who has warmed to his role (as himself) in the reconstruction, then vents the false accusation levelled at Pinelli directly at Malipiero. The face-off is deeply significant, as it signifies the very essence of the dramatic representation that is *Accidental Death*: the locking of horns

by the progressive, theatre wing of Milan (socially represented by Fo), and the arrogance of power that it interrogates (dramatically represented by Fo's ensemble). Fo as *guillaire* then immediately recovers control of the investigation through the status of the Malipiero mask, and proceeds to draw out and comment upon the inconsistencies and malpractices evident in the reports. Malipiero identifies the absurdity of suspecting Pinelli – a member of a disorganized, “fairly pathetic group of anarchists” – of planting the bombs at the Milan railway station, which would have required “the skill and experience of professional” (*Accidental Death* 190) military personnel:

SUPERINTENDENT: ...Since the suspect was the only anarchist railwayman in Milan...there was a good chance it was him.

MANIAC: Absolutely – I agree...crystal clear. Since it's obvious that the bomb on the railway must have been planted by a railwayman, by the same logic we can say that the bombs at the Law Courts in Rome were planted by a judge, the bombs at the monument to the Unknown Soldier were planted by a soldier, and the bomb at the Bank of Agriculture was planted by either a banker or a farmer. (147-8)

Malipiero's inquiry continues into the first section of act two, by which time Fo has exhausted the expositional and comic potential of the situation. The stage time of this sub-mask draws to a close with the dialogue regarding the implausibility of Pinelli being able to scramble, single-handed, to the elevated window from which he was reported to have leapt, in the presence of half a dozen police officers who were apparently interrogating him (171-3). In desperation, the Constable claims to have grabbed one of his feet, but was unable to hold on to the anarchist, as the shoe came off in his hand (171):

MANIAC: Just a minute ... something doesn't quite fit here. (*He shows the POLICE OFFICERS a sheet of paper*) Did our suicidal friend have three shoes?

SUPERINTENDENT: Three shoes?

MANIAC: That's what I said. One ended up in the hands of this officer here ... We have his statement to that effect, a couple of days after the event ... (*He shows them the sheet of paper*) Look, here. (171-2)



Malipiero goes on to reveal that, according to further documentary evidence, the corpse of Pinelli was found to be still wearing both shoes. This evidence, dramatically, closes the case regarding the plausibility of the police reports. As Hirst notes, "Fo's ridicule of police logic can go no further, and at this point the farce undergoes a further development with the entry of the journalist Maria Feletti" (49). Hirst elaborates to state:

Fo has deliberately organised the drama so that the most serious part of the play – the lengthy discussions which follow between Feletti and the Maniac and which expose ... the wider corruption of the establishment – precisely coincides with the most comic: the inevitable realisation by Bertozzo that the forensic expert is the Maniac and the attempts of the others to silence him [Bertozzo] on the mistaken assumption that he [The Maniac] is the Judge in disguise. (49)

The mask of the Maniac adopts a further layer in response to the arrival of the mask of the Journalist, Maria Feletti. The Maniac assumes the sub-mask of Captain Piccini, a forensic specialist, as a disguise assumed to protect the identity of Malipiero from the Journalist. As with the Malipiero mask, the mask of Piccini is unpredictable, and responds to the Journalist's questions in such a way that his logic alternates between condemning the actions of the Milan police and absolving them. When the Journalist questions the fact that bruising was found on Pinelli's neck which could not have been the result of his fatal fall, Piccini invents an explanation where he matter-of-factly states that "one of the officers present started to get impatient, and he came over and gave him a mighty wallop on the back of the head" (181). He goes on to explain that, in order to revive Pinelli, the police officers leaned the anarchist out the window and, with both assuming that the other was holding on to the suspect, Pinelli accidentally fell to his death. The explanation is eerily plausible, despite its overt comic tone. It also works on a metaphorical level, representing as it does the ruthlessness with which the Italian police went about its business. The Journalist then questions why the police destroyed a bomb found unexploded at a Milan bank. Piccini brilliantly refutes, through technical jargon, the Journalist's implication that the police destroyed the bomb in order to cover up the real perpetrators, who clearly had a military background. In this episode, the Piccini mask presents a farcical image of the State expediently employing complex, forensic hypotheses in order to cover up its real

motives: in this case, the factual destroying of a bomb in order to hide the fact that it had been planted by its own agents.

As Hirst notes, the seriousness of the content discussed by Piccini and the Journalist is juxtaposed with the high farce which ensues when the mask of Bertozzo, the inspector who interrogates the Maniac at the beginning of the play, attempts to expose the histrionomaniac.<sup>92</sup> Fo, who previously performed the construction of *Gestus* in his assumption of the mask of Malipiero, now inverts this process through the disassembly of the costume mask of Piccini. For Piccini, the Maniac assumes an exaggerated costume mask of "a false moustache, a black patch over one eye, and a brown leather glove on one hand" (176). The glove conceals a false hand, the patch a glass eye, and the mask also reveals a wooden leg as the situation develops. The costume mask pushes the farce to its absolute limit, and anticipates the end of the dramatic action through the Maniac allowing his disguise to dismantle in front of the Journalist. Firstly, the glass eye falls out when the Superintendent slaps him on the back. Then, the false hand comes off when Sports Jacket shakes his hand. These actions suggest the eventual unmasking of the Maniac as an impersonator, but the false handshake also serves as a sign that his expedient collaboration with the police characters is at an end.

The fact that, at this point in the performance the Maniac is inviting detection, signifies that his dramatic and comic potential has been exhausted. At this point, Fo completes the unmasking, and assumes the role of commentator:

SUPERINTENDENT: Not at all ... In fact you might be interested to know that we have one or two [informers] right here in the audience tonight, as usual ...

Watch this.

*He claps his hands. We hear a number of voices from different parts of the auditorium.*

VOICES: Sir ...? Yessir ...? Sir ...?

*The MANIAC laughs, and turns to the audience.*

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<sup>92</sup> The comic situation plays on the fact that Bertozzo, recognizing the Maniac, tries to tell the other police officers that he is not Piccini, but is an impersonator. The other officers, believing that the Maniac is really Malipiero impersonating Piccini so that the Journalist doesn't know that there is an investigation taking place, try to silence Bertozzo, thus instigating the slapstick which ensues.

MANIAC: Don't worry – they're all actors. The real ones sit tight and don't say a word. (191)

This meta-theatrical action underlines the satiric achievement of the performance event up until this stage of the text. It extends the representative power of the presentation to expose the presence of informants who were sent by the police as monitors in the auditorium for the performances. It is deeply ironic that, in *Le Commune's* site of performance, the actors were able to impose a silence upon the agents of the censorious State. The performance achieves this through the meta-theatrical staging of an act of State surveillance which was an actual part of the conditions of performance.

The dramatic action after this point is characterized by the thinly veiled presence of Fo as expositor, largely through duologues with the Journalist, of further information relevant to the themes of the performance. Fo and Rame practically lecture the audience on documentary statistics about the bombing situation (193), and their implications on the strategy of tension generally. As the dramatic action draws to a close, Fo also puts forth his views on the need for social action rather than social indignation (194-6), and the danger of allowing public scandals to be aestheticized rather than used to catalyze social transformation (201-2).<sup>93</sup> The assumption of a further sub-mask to replace the dismantled mask of Piccini, that of Father Augusto Bernier (199), further emphasizes the foreclosing of the dramatic action, and represents an in-joke between Fo and his audience. The assumption of the Papal sub-mask recalls Fo's satires of Church corruption and propaganda in *Mistero Buffo*, and also the Vatican's public condemnation of the show. *Accidental Death* doesn't interrogate the complicity of the Church in Italian right-wing politics: however, the presence of Bernier does complete the contextualization of the Pinelli murder within the wider system of Italian State corruption. Also, by stretching the boundaries of dramatic representation with the absurd definition of this mask – "Vatican *chargé d'affaires* responsible for relations with the Italian police" (199) – Fo defines the satiric range of his performance masks as limitless.

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<sup>93</sup> These views, and their relationship to catharsis and dramatic genre, will be discussed in the concluding section of this chapter.

The Bernier mask does, however, bring a celebratory tone to the performance (of course, the Italian Left would have been receptive of any satire of the Vatican), and this is best exemplified in the episode where Fo forces the police characters to bend over and kiss the ring of the Vatican delegate (200). This is the zenith point of the subtractive process which the performance achieves, cartooning the State hierarchy and satirizing its allegiance to the archaic, oppressive ideologies and hypocrisies of established fascism and religion. The action draws to a close following the unmasking of the Maniac by Bertozzo. As the drama ends, the Maniac re-assumes control of the situation one final time, courtesy of a bomb he has re-commissioned during the drama and threatens to activate. He reveals a tape recording of the entire dramatic action, which he threatens to pass on to Italian journalists and politicians as a means of creating further political scandal. The tape which he holds aloft, of course, is the dramatized analysis of the documentary material, which the audience has just ingested. Fully mediated, the *guillaire* returns to the audience the reasons for their anger, and invites them to remain in the auditorium for the third act of the performance, the forum discussion.

The analysis now sets out to identify what, in the context of the dramaturgy of complex layering in *Accidental Death*, may be understood by the terms farce and realism in Fo's epic theatre. Of course, *Accidental Death* is a farce because the evidence put forth by the authorities couldn't reasonably be described as anything else. Fo, reflecting on the success of the production, stated: "the great and provocative impact of this play was determined by its theatrical form: rooted in tragedy, the play became farce – the farce of power" (qtd. in Hirst 43-4). As Mitchell notes, the play is "a grotesque farce about a tragic farce" (*People's Court Jester* 59). Ghelardi observes that the "miracle of Fo is that we laugh at tragic events" (229), and this relates to the author's contention that "in laughter, in the grotesque humour of satire resides the maximum expression of doubt, the most valid agent of reason" (qtd. in Hirst 38). Ghelardi observes that the balance between farce and tragedy is a "very particular key of Fo" (229). For Fo, farce is not a bourgeois form,<sup>94</sup> but relates rather to traditions of grotesque performance and popular theatre. As Hirst notes, farce, "according to Fo, is an ancient dramatic form, traceable to the Greeks and much used

<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, in his earlier career, Fo himself wrote farces for the bourgeois stage, including *The Virtuous Burglar* and *One Was Nude and One Wore Tails*.

in classical Rome" (39). Fo states that masks and, "associated with them, the use of disguise date from the very dawn of human history" (*Tricks* 18). He asserts that "political satire is a component of Commedia dell'Arte" (*Tricks* 47),<sup>95</sup> and that "Commedia has never died", that he is "still aware of its presence" (*Tricks* 88).

Fo's practice emphasises a distinction between farce as a popular theatre form and bourgeois farce, and this distinction mirrors how he distinguishes between the epic and bourgeois theatres. For Fo, the bourgeois theatre "is conceived in such a way as to lull the viewer into a state of total passivity", beginning with "the darkness in the auditorium, a precondition for a kind of psychic vacuum, but which, on the contrary has the effect of producing attention of an exclusively emotional order" (*Tricks* 73). As Hirst notes, "Fo's farces are not safe. He does not see the aim of his theatre as one of liberating his audience through the purgative force of comedy" (40). For Fo, the term farce relates to the act of transformation, as opposed to the bourgeois farce (or bourgeois drama generally), which is a cathartic act of confirmation (of bourgeois ideology). Like Jarry, Fo's dramatic worlds are unpredictable, and eschew dramatic closure and genre codification. For Fo, the term farce is bound up with ideology for, as Ghelardi observes, in Fo's drama the "ideological moment is the foundation of the whole theatrical architecture" (229). Fo states:

What do I mean by ideological? To have an understanding of why people move in particular ways, what lies behind their style of gesture, the way they use their voices, etc. also why one would choose one particular text to perform rather than another. And why one would choose to perform a given piece in an epic style rather than naturalistically. (*Theatre Workshop* 1)

Fo insists, like Brecht and Jarry, that dramaturgy is bound up with ideology, and that farce as epic theatre is not, as such, a dramatic form, but rather a dramaturgical licence. The epic dramaturgy, in *Accidental Death*, licenses a foolery that aligns the transformative quality of the carnivalesque with a Marxist strategy that aspires for an extended political consciousness and, eventually, social transformation. Reflecting on *Accidental Death*, Fo states that:

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<sup>95</sup> It is worth noting the use of the term 'component' here to ensure that Fo is not misunderstood as saying that all Commedia troupes were bent on political satire.

... [Theatre] must be a vast mechanism that makes people laugh at what they see on stage, avoiding the liberating catharsis that can result from watching the drama enacted. A riotously funny, satirical show doesn't permit you that liberation; when you laugh the sediment of anger stays inside you; the laughter doesn't allow you to be purged. (qtd. in Wilson 27)

Farce, mediated through satire and the grotesque, for Fo, is therefore an anti-cathartic dramaturgy. The epic actor must combine "method, rationality and an emotional force, but one kept under control" (*Tricks* 136). His/her craft must have a constant "concern for the spectator and an effort to discover on every occasion exactly what kind of camera he carries in his head" (*Tricks* 136). The balancing act between the elements of farce and tragedy is conducted through the epic actor, who must sustain "a balance between the intellectual and the emotional, and to transform that balance into something not static but dynamic" (*Tricks* 15). This balancing of the intellectual and the emotional, which relates to the craft of the epic actor, is by extension passed on to the spectator, for it is his/her anger which the epic actor, like the *guillaire*, mediates.

Regarding public responses to the death of Pinelli, Fo reflects that an "important thing that we noticed in explanations of the story was indignation ... [and that] we [the company] realised that indignation is really a means of catharsis, liberation and letting off steam" (qtd. in Mitchell, *File* 44). The contradictions which *Accidental Death* reveals about the death of Pinelli (and the Italian State system generally), move the audience towards a sense of grievance and indignation. Fo's drama diverts this movement towards a cathartic aesthetic, through counter-balancing the didacticism of the dramatic expositions with regular re-assertions of the 'thrill of opposition', through the transformations of the protean mask of the Maniac. Hence, the ambiguity of the *guillaire*: bent solely on mischief, Fo's Maniac opposes the spectator's conditioned predilection for resolution. The *guillaire* is, therefore, an agent of exposition or, in Fo's dramaturgy, a device of dialectical division.

The transformative strategy, in *Accidental Death*, precludes a "documentary theatre of cold information ... [which] gets to the bottom of things" (Fo qtd. in Mitchell, *People's Court Jester* 59). The getting to the bottom of things relates not only to the

third act, the forum discussion which involves the audience after the performance, but also to the nurturing of (and demand for) a socio-political consciousness that the theatrical event, ideologically, represents. The 'ambiguity' of the *guillaire* is also key to understanding what, for Fo, and indeed for the epic theatre, is to be understood by the term realism, which in Fo's theatre is bound to a dramaturgy of farce. To understand what Fo understands by the term realism, one must consider how he positions himself in the ancestry of Italian dramatic writing.

Hirst notes how, historically, all four major Italian playwrights (Goldoni, de Filippo, Pirandello and Fo) "have been concerned with the ambiguous distinction between theatre and life, concerned to explore the relationship between improvisation and the written text" (22).<sup>96</sup> Goldoni is synonymous with the "why and how Commedia died" (Rudlin 4) point of view of a certain form of scholarship: that is, the process through which the stock routines of Commedia were made literature by Italian playwrights of the late eighteenth century, and its stock characters crystallized (or naturalized) in set scripts for the Italian bourgeois stage. For Fo, however, "Commedia has never died" (*Tricks* 88), and the grotesque comedies of de Filippo – "whom Fo describes as his father-figure in theatrical terms" (Farrell 4) – show "the inexhaustible inventiveness" of the tradition (*Tricks* 88) in a twentieth-century context. In the avant-garde dramas of Pirandello – for Fo, the "greatest theatre writer" of the twentieth century (*Tricks* 154) – the duality of the mask is employed largely towards a form of existential meditation: however, in *Henry IV*, there is an intentional disjunction in the stylization of the masks based on hierarchy (a convention of Commedia), with the buffoonery of the attendants (or *zanni*) set against the more complex psychological make-up of the principal characters.

Fo essentially extends a tradition, amongst Italian playwrights, whereby the drama both mediates reality through the grotesque, and also exploits the duality of the mask to create a 'meta-text'. This meta-text, in Pirandello and de Filippo, relates to a philosophy of the art form that reflects on how theatre is a 'part of', as well as a 'function of', lived experience. In the dramaturgies of Pirandello and de Filippo,

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<sup>96</sup> Hirst's canon may be ancestrally extended (and anti-canonized) to include the medieval craft of the *guillairi* and, of course, the subsequent development of Commedia dell'Arte from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.

there is a developing philosophy of theatre as 'about itself', and this 'ambiguous distinction between theatre and life' sets a foundation for the development of an Italian epic theatre, via Fo. What links Fo to his self-selected father-figures of Italian twentieth-century theatre is his innate sense of the residual properties of the grotesque, and the potential deployment of these properties toward an alternative, emergent cultural element (or dramaturgy). What distinguishes him from them is his sense of social relations, which concerns the extra-performative elements of his dramaturgy. Fo's sense of social relations is, philosophically, informed by his readings of Marx and Gramsci, and reflective of his "guarded approval" (Farrell 2) of the practices of Brecht. Of the emergence of Social Expressionism in 1920s-1930s Germany, Raymond Williams states the following:

The social relations of such forms – internally, in their definitions of the sites on which reality was critically generated; externally, in their proposed relations with those who would assent to or learn from these – were thus radically different from those of bourgeois drama. (*Culture* 178)

Fo's practice radically extends the focus, in Brecht's epic theatre, on the two distinctions which it makes, according to Williams, between itself and the bourgeois theatre. By displacing his practice from the subsidized, theatrical mainstream, Fo enjoyed a largely unrestricted latitude in terms of site (location of performance space) and intended audience. The location of site in *Accidental Death*, a converted theatre in Via Colletta in Milan, self-consciously and geographically separate from the mainstream theatre circuit, invites access both in terms of geography and cultural permission for an audience for which 'theatre is not for me'. By placing the site of performance in direct opposition to the mainstream theatres of the Italian bourgeoisie, Fo radicalizes and realizes the Social Expressionist yearning for a redefinition of site. By re-defining the site appropriately, he subsequently achieved their other goal, the creation of a progressive, revolutionary exchange mechanism between performer and audience.

Fo's relationship to – and 'guarded approval' of – Brecht's practice is significant. He contextualizes Brecht's style of theatre in the context of his (Brecht's) contemporaries:



[Theirs was a] ... dreadful, emphatic style ... Everybody tended to chant or sing their parts. What reached the audience was no longer the argumentation of the drama, but the song/chant sound of that argumentation. So in order to achieve a levelling off, in order to restore a degree of naturalness, Brecht invented this technique. (*Theatre Workshop* 6-7)

While Brecht offered a 'coolness' of style in opposition to the grandiloquence of his contemporaries, Fo's oppositional style was considerably more emphatic, being, as it were, oppositional to developments in the Italian, naturalistic theatre. In the following, Fo distinguishes between the 'realism' of his epic theatre, and the Naturalism of his contemporaries:

[Realism] ... seeks to reinvent reality in a more acceptable form while Naturalism is the tendency to recreate in excessive detail the part of a situation to an infuriating degree. (qtd. in Ghelardi 227)

Clearly, both Brecht and Fo approached their quest for an appropriate style by considering two elements: firstly, the dominant, bourgeois form and how best to contrast with and, thereby, oppose it; secondly, what residual elements of indigenous folk and theatrical traditions may be appropriated to best serve this quest for style. As Ghelardi points out, "Realism is for Fo a purer and at the same time enhanced version of reality" (227). The same may be said for Brecht, as discussed in Chapter Four, and Brecht's contention that the term realism does not restrict the 'latitude' of the dramatist in terms of the means of representation. For the epic theatre, therefore, the term realism does not relate to genre (which the epic theatre opposes), but rather it relates to what the epic theatre presents as the essence of drama: its artisanal nature. Because 'realism' is not 'reality' (and vice-versa), both Brecht and Fo evoke the term 'realism' to distinguish between the terms, and how they relate to the duality of the epic theatre itself, where reality is represented (through the artifice of realism), and the artifice of realism catalyzes a new reality (the revolutionary gathering who participate in the event of performance).

To refer once more to this "guarded approval" of Brecht, it is worth considering why Fo is careful not to align himself too closely with his antecedent. This is because the epic theatre opposes genre and, just as Fo asserts his practice as 'one form of theatre'

and encourages young artists to discover their own style, so he is aware that Brecht's practice is historically specific, and that his style reflects the significant influences of the German's own personal sensibility and cultural roots. For, if the epic theatre opposes genre, then it must also oppose the notion of an epic drama that is prototypical, 'Brechtian', 'Fo-like' or 'Jarry-esque'. For Fo, as well as the epic theatre itself, the dialects of Italian popular theatre traditions provide appropriate elements to generate a suitable style for the counter-surveillance of the State that is *Accidental Death*. This suitability relates to the source material for the dramatic action: the farcical evidence put forth by the Italian State to explain the death of Pinelli and the Milan bombings. By "dramatising the analysis" (Hirst 41) of these tragic facts through the apparently incongruous form of a grotesque farce, Fo underlines the distinction, in epic theatre, between the term realism and the reality of the epic theatre event. And, by doing so, the meta-text of the drama deploys an 'ambiguous distinction between theatre and life' as a means of exposing the myths of the Italian bourgeois State hegemony.

What is necessary now are interim conclusions on what may be drawn from the analyses of Jarry, Fo and Brecht in the first section of this thesis, for application in the remaining chapters. Chapter Six will deploy the insights gleaned thus far from developments in twentieth-century, European epic theatre, as a means of reading contemporary trends in Irish story-theatre. Contrasting ways in which storytelling, as a residual cultural element, has been appropriated by contemporary Irish dramatists and dramatic artists will be discussed. Specifically, distinctions will be drawn between dramaturgies that deploy storytelling as a means towards an enabling, critical, socio-political engagement with Irish life, and dramaturgies of disengagement with same. These enabling dramaturgies will be argued as movements towards an epic strategy, while dramaturgies of disengagement will be argued as, at best, cult forms of avant-garde, bourgeois dramatic entertainment or, at worst, reactionary narratives. In Chapter Seven, the author's own professional theatre practice will be discussed, as attempts made to deploy storytelling as a weapon in the hands of Be Your Own Banana Theatre Company are analysed.

For all three of the practitioners discussed thus far, the relationship between the dominant and the residual cultural elements of their particular environments is crucial.

Epic strategies have, in all cases, drawn from the devices of folk tradition. All three strategies relate to the duality of the mask: for Brecht, most significant is the 'at-play' of the traditional storyteller; for Jarry and Fo, it is the transformative quality of the carnivalesque and medieval/ Renaissance clowning. Each successive epic strategy has considered the folk tradition(s) in question, the relationship of that folk tradition to performance, and ways in which the traditional may be redeployed towards a contemporary, oppositional, dramaturgical strategy. Each strategy has also considered how the meta-theatricality of their styles – reflective of the folk traditions that inform them - serves to re-configure performance in terms of site: Jarry in his riotous intervention in (and decolonization of) Lugné-Poe's Théâtre de l'Oeuvre; Brecht in his redefinition of musical theatre as socially scientific; and Fo, expanding the opposition, in his re-location of theatre to a site deliberately distanced from the theatrical mainstream.

Epic strategies also consistently invoke the dominant genres of the bourgeois stages. Jarry's scenography for *Ubu the King* parodied the conventions of the Symbolist theatre, while the dramatic world clearly lampooned French, nineteenth-century revivals of classical Renaissance drama. Brecht parodied the devices of Greek tragedy in *The Good Person of Szechuan*, and developed a semiotics of acting that replaced the heightened emotionalism of the German stage with a cooler, scientific mode of reporting information to his audiences. Fo, in turn, thoroughly re-defined farce as a tradition of political satire in opposition to the farces of the bourgeois stage. In each case, the epic theatre emerges not as a genre in itself, but rather a strategy that interrogates codified genre and, through parody, dismisses it as either cathartic or, simply, incompatible with critical spectatorship. Epic dramaturgy is incompatible with genre. For this reason, in the context of Raymond Williams' dominant-residual-emergent model of cultural elements, the epic theatre may only stand for the final two terms, as the first term relates only to genre(s). Residual and emergent cultural elements are, by definition, unpredictable, and these terms are therefore compatible with the strategies of the epic theatre. The epic theatre, regarding the craft of encoding narrative, therefore exploits the residual as a means of reclaiming the latent, revolutionary quality of folk narrative, and myth. In performance, it may be definable as emergent. However, when the epic performance (or run of performances) comes to

an end, its very nature denies that it become a dominant cultural element but, rather, that the dramas of the epic theatre become, themselves, residual.

For the contemporary Irish dramatist or theatre artist, the theatre of Jarry-Brecht-Fo may usefully serve as folk traditions or residual elements in themselves. For, as discussed previously, the epic dramas are not useful to each other as prototypes, and each event of the epic tradition is unique, in terms of cultural context and cultural capital, and what emerges in each given text as a style that is antagonistic to genre and the mythologies of bourgeois capitalism. And, just as Dario Fo researched the traditions of medieval and Renaissance clowning as a way of understanding his own emerging practice in the late 1960s, this thesis proposes now to discuss where Irish theatre, in the context of its own residual tradition of storytelling, now stands, and where it may be about to go to.

### A Night in the Theatre 3

***Thailand! What's Love Got To Do With It?*, by Máirtín de Cógáin and Brian Desmond, presented in Fast Eddies Night Club as part of the Cork Midsummer Festival, June 2007.**

An extremely popular venue amongst university students (Monday to Thursday) and young professionals (Friday and Saturday), Fast Eddies is locally known as the 'cattle-mart' of Cork's young and promiscuous. The authors of the popular play *De Bogman* have, for the first time in seven years, come up with a new show, and there is high demand for tickets. All week the performances are sold out (75 seats borrowed from a primary school), and each night at least twenty people take up the offer of standing-room at the back of the converted dance-floor. The venue reeks of stale alcohol, and the audience are permitted to bring drinks into the space during the performance.

De Cógáin enters before the backdrop of seedy, cabaret-red gauze, clean shaven, with short hair greased back, wearing a tropical print short-sleeved shirt, ill-fitting khaki shorts, grey trainers and unfashionable white ankle socks. The tale is related through the first person narrative of Declan, a twenty-something Irish male who participates as a sex tourist in Pattaya Beach, Thailand, while on a summer holiday with two friends. For thirty minutes, he outlines and celebrates (practically advertises) the economic value of the delights on offer to the affluent western tourist. Audience members (and not always male audience members) guffaw at the graphic descriptions of lewd sexual acts, and also at Declan's delusion that he is a benefactor of the Thai economy. An uncertain atmosphere develops at moments when the mask of innocence – "We'd only gone out there to have an auld laugh!" – slips to reveal a more sinister, expedient logic: "We're putting bread on the table for them! We're helping the Thai economy!"

This laughter usually abates during the description of Declan's episode in a 'bath-massage' parlour, where he claims to have been tricked into engaging in sexual acts with a child prostitute. Apparently, an Asian female prostitute needs to be a minor before being granted human sympathy. Following this, there is a closing sequence where Declan describes a safari trek on which he embarks with other tourists. The

trek becomes a sort of philosophical journey, which allows him to reflect on the meaning of his experiences in Thailand. During this narration, the mask of arrogance unveils a mass of contradictions, and his search for atonement appears disingenuous. The seanchaí of the twenty-first century, with exotic shirt and visa card, is running out of expedient opinions. Grasping for a mask of atonement, he parodies thought: "That was what Buddha was trying to say to me ... always wear a johnnie when you're in Thailand".<sup>97</sup>

After the performance, a range of responses are offered by the audience. Some males jokingly (often cloaking sincerity) state that they are 'off to buy their tickets' for Thailand. Other spectators found the play informative, while others are sickened by the episode with the little girl. Others are sympathetic to the innocence of the protagonist (apparent victim of his own relative wealth), while others express an instinctual desire to strangle him. Virtually everybody familiar with the actor express surprise that De Cógáin, a local celebrity of the bawdy folk song and related turns,<sup>98</sup> had just played such a dark role, and done so convincingly. As director/dramaturg, in consultation with the actor during the run, I recall De Cógáin observing that the more the parties of male spectators guffawed at the narrative reports of wilful, budget-priced, sexual abandon, the more tension that was evident among female spectators.<sup>99</sup> De Cógáin remarked that he could practically "hear the fingernails [of the female audience] growing" as an instinctual response to the narrative. De Cógáin's observation suggests that, observing the audience, the storyteller can occasionally witness a dialectic emerging around him/her.

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<sup>97</sup> 'Johnnie' is here used as slang for 'condom'.

<sup>98</sup> De Cógáin is a difficult figure to nail down in terms of his status as actor sign or local celebrity. A full summary of the significance of his established performance mask, prior to the Fast Eddie's appearances, will be given in Chapter Eight.

<sup>99</sup> It is extremely difficult to phrase diplomatically the contrast, in terms of gender, of responses to the narrative. It was certainly not the case that the female audience generically deplored the narrator, while the male audience unanimously fantasized with him, sympathetically. For example, several female audience members expressed sympathy for the simple-mindedness of the narrator's perspective. Also, several male audience members revealed that they were terrified to laugh at certain elements because they were afraid of what their partners, who had accompanied them to the performance, might think of them.

## Chapter Six

### Storytelling and Contemporary Irish Story Theatre

**[The storyteller uses wisdom] to pierce the myths perpetrated by the dominant governmental, religious and social institutions. Since these institutions legitimize themselves by fabricating mythical systems justifying and extolling their power, the genuine storyteller is by nature a subversive. (Wilson 56-7)**

The analysis in the first section of this thesis has argued for a reading of epic dramaturgy in the context of folk narrative traditions. It has been argued that the performative quality of the epic actor may be understood in relation to the mask traditions of folk narrative, in particular the mask of the storyteller and the mask of the clown. According to this analysis, the epic actor exploits the duality of the mask in order to achieve a dubious quality, and this dubiousness mirrors the exposition, in performance, of the contradictions inherent in the epic protagonist and in the epic dramatic world. Once exposed, these contradictions enable the spectator to critically interrogate bourgeois ideology (mythology) and its influence on twentieth century lived experience. The thesis now sets out to transpose this analytical framework to a contemporary Irish context, and to apply it towards a critique of trends in recent Irish story theatre. These trends will be discussed as strategies which appropriate the mask of the traditional Irish storyteller, or *seanchai*, towards dramaturgies that are alternative to the naturalistic mode which dominates twentieth century Irish drama. Ways in which these alternative dramaturgies represent either progressive or regressive narrative approaches to contemporary Irish life will be discussed. It is hoped that the insights gleaned from previous analyses will facilitate an understanding of what constitutes progressive, epic approaches to narrative in contemporary Irish story theatre.

During this analysis, the term story theatre is favoured over the term dramatic monologue, as the latter is, historically, associated with the naturalistic dramatic tradition. The eclectic range of anti-illusionist dramaturgies that characterize the *new storytelling* modes in Irish drama, it is argued, renders the term monologue restrictive and misleading, and it is proposed that the predominantly anti-naturalistic,

presentational style of these emergent dramas is better served by the term story theatre. Contrasting dramaturgical modes of presentation will be discussed in this chapter and a range of plays will be analyzed in relation to how they are 'about the world' and how they are 'about themselves'. In other words, distinctions will be made regarding ways in which certain dramaturgies signify either a critical engagement with the state of the contemporary Irish State or, alternatively, "approach[es] to storytelling that does not question its own validity [and which] ultimately supports the system it purports to challenge" (Wilson 28).

The analysis will be framed as follows. Firstly, there will be a brief outline of an originary form of story theatre, produced by the Irish National Theatre in the 1970s. This form will be set against the dominant modes of tragedy and Naturalism which dominated Irish drama in the middle half of the twentieth century, with particular reference to Michael James Molloy's *The Visiting House* and John B. Keane's *Sive*. The critical purpose of this comparison is to draw attention to a conversational mode of storytelling, used within the dominant naturalistic or realist dramaturgies of Irish drama during the twentieth century, and ways in which subsequent dramaturgies have contested or displaced this storytelling mode. Contemporary Irish story theatre, or *new storytelling*, emerges in 1990, with the production of Dermot Bolger's *The Tramway End*, a programme of two one-act plays – *In High Germany* and *The Holy Ground*. *The Holy Ground* will be discussed in relation to the Irish storytelling tradition and the strategies of epic theatre, and will be read as the originary moment of a presentational (second) mode of story theatre. This mode develops across a series of plays, including Patrick McCabe's *Frank Pig Says Hello*, Mark O'Rowe's *Howie the Rookie*, and Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs*, all of which will be critiqued, using a combination of textual and performative analyses. Gerard Mannix Flynn's *James X*, it is argued, inaugurates a significant mutation in the intention and effect of story theatre, and is the first example of what this argument proposes as a testimonial (third) mode of storytelling theatre.

In 1971, at the suggestion of Tomás MacAnna, the artistic director of the Irish National Theatre, Leila Doolan, developed an idea for a 'story theatre' in the Irish language to be developed for the Peacock Theatre, the smaller of the theatre's two performance spaces. This variety entertainment, described in Éamon Kelly's memoir



*The Storyteller*, consisted of “dramatised folktales ... music, mime, song and dance” (294), and toured the Irish-speaking regions of the country successfully over the following two years or so. Kelly describes the role of the storyteller in the dramatised sections of the performance:

The storyteller, sitting at the side, opened the tale and, as his characters materialised, the actors, as it were, leaped from his imagination and the story became alive. When it was not feasible, visually, to move the story ahead, the storyteller took over momentarily, in much the same way as the narrator in a radio play. (194-5)

Kelly, the celebrated seanchaí, was a resident actor at National Theatre at this time, and contributed to the project, both as a co-director and as a performer. Although the storyteller is a recurrent figure throughout the radical tradition of Irish drama, as is evident from the plays of Michael James Molloy, Seán O’Casey, Flann O’Brien, Brendan Behan and many others, the storytelling mode in Irish drama prior to the Abbey’s story theatre is reflective of the kind Wilson calls “conversational storytelling [which] can be unwitting, with the teller hardly aware that they are telling a story and the listener unaware that they are listening to one” (10). In other words, the act of storytelling is anecdotal, generally conversational, culturally ingrained and devoid of ostentatious formality.

In the conversational mode, the actors tell stories through role-play, or characters, rather than through story-telling masks. This ‘conversational storytelling’ is based on reportage, but is no less dubious than the reportage of Kelly’s formalized seanchaí as defined by his delivery of “The Tay-man”, as analyzed in Chapter Four. In Behan’s *The Quare Fellow*, for example, the tall-tales of the lag Dunlavin are dubious as, firstly, the character is a mischievous prankster and, secondly, because his anecdotes are designed to assert the experiential wisdom appropriate to his status as a veteran (or sage) of prison life. In Molloy’s *Wood of the Whispering*, the reportage of the old tramp Sanbatch Daly is coloured by romantic notions of the past and his lament for the destruction, through mass emigration, of the character and energy of Irish rural life. In O’Brien’s *Thirst*, the tall-tale of pub landlord Mr C’s service in the British army is told for a loaded purpose. After his pub has been raided for after-hours drinking, Mr C tells a story of the thirst-inducing heat in Mesopotamia in order to lure

the raiding police sergeant into taking a drink himself, thereby neutralising the raid and the threat of criminal charges. O'Casey's Captain Boyle (in *Juno and the Paycock*), like Dunlavin, is dubious because he asserts his own myth as a heroic veteran of Irish national struggle, and a 'great character' of the community.<sup>100</sup>

It is worth noting that the formal storyteller is not completely absent from Irish drama before the 1970s. For example, in *The King of Friday's Men*, Molloy presents us with the character Rory Commons, "last of the bards" (5), but his function is emblematic rather than functional, as would have been the purpose of a commentator or choric figure. William Butler Yeats, in *The Death of Cúchulainn*, frames his narrative with a narrator, who is titled "The Old Man" and described as "looking like something out of mythology" (263). This role of the 'Old Man' is, however, highly didactic and devoid of the dubiousness or complexity of the progressive storyteller, as described in Chapter Three of this thesis. By contrast, the 'story theatre' project of the Irish National Theatre represents a re-appropriation and re-formalization of the storyteller's role in Irish dramatic narrative. Its mode is pastiche, a hybrid dramatic form that fuses the Irish folk tradition of the seanchaí with the formalities of western European dramatic representation. The 'story theatre' projects of the Irish National Theatre were, in terms of narrative content, light-hearted, variety shows for families in Irish speaking communities throughout Ireland, and the role of the narrator was quite conservative (unfortunately the company could only conceive of a storyteller as 'sitting', thus limiting his narrative potential). At odds with the 'conversational storytelling' which characterizes Irish drama prior to the 1970s, the Irish National Theatre's project moves toward foregrounding the mask of the storyteller as at once a narrative mode of storytelling and also a narrative strategy that is about the mode of storytelling or, in Badiou's terms, a theatre that is potentially at once "about the world" and "about itself" ("Rhapsody" 197). Despite its limitations, this mode of performance anticipates 'story theatre' strands that later emerged in Irish dramatic writing, in terms of the complex layering of its narrative mode. These strands include isolated efforts such as Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* (1979), the one-actor/storyteller plays of Dermot Bolger, such as *In High Germany* and *The Holy Ground* (both 1990),

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<sup>100</sup> The 'great character' or 'great man' is, much like the description of Behan's father, Stephen, in the folk song "Come Out Ye Black and Tans", of a great man for a drink, a great man for a fight, a song, a story (generally self-aggrandizing), etc...

the subsequent ensemble storytelling modes of Patrick McCabe, in particular *Frank Pig Says Hello* (first produced in 1992), and innovative dramaturgical approaches to the mode of the solo actor show from the 1990s, including dramas by Conor McPherson, Donal O'Kelly, Enda Walsh and Pat Kinevane. Of major interest to this thesis is the gradual emergence of a dramaturgy of complex layering, and its potential to activate a dialectic that interrogates aspects of the Irish State through dramatic narrative.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the storyteller of the epic theatre, like the traditional seanchaí, guides the audience through a demonstration of the narrative. In the same manner that the formalized seanchaí of the Irish National Theatre's story theatre is supported by a physicalization of elements of the narrative, so the storyteller of Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechuan* is employed as a framing device for action embodied onstage. These narrative approaches, however, are distinguished by the fact that Kelly's story theatre seanchaí is a 'conjurer', suggestive of a mystical quality, while the storyteller of *The Good Person of Szechuan* parodies the mysticism which is often atavistically ascribed to storytelling traditions. It is this dramaturgy of complex layering, common to Brecht's practice and the 'story theatre' of the Irish National Theatre, which defines the latitude available to the contemporary Irish dramaturg who deploys a storytelling mode. This latitude was never seriously pursued by the Irish National Theatre. However, its experiment was suggestive of a potential, dramaturgical deployment of the mask of the seanchaí towards an epic dramaturgy of complex layering, with epic qualities. It will be argued that, since 1990, a number of Irish dramaturgs have begun to exploit the potential of this latitude towards a critical engagement with contemporary Irish politics and life. In other words, examples from contemporary Irish story theatre reveal deliberate dramaturgical trends toward epic narrative strategies.

The fact that these largely minimalist story theatre modes emerged during and since the 1990s is significant, as this time period marks Ireland's development into an affluent, complex, hyper-globalized society, during the so-called Celtic Tiger era. More recently, since 2008, the Irish population has experienced a rapid economic fallout, with a return to mass unemployment, diminishing growth rates and emigration last experienced (albeit with more gradual regress) in the memorably bleak 1980s. If,

as Victor Merriman suggests, the history of the Irish Free State reflects a neo-colonial amnesia, or “decolonisation postponed” (“Decolonisation Postponed: The Theatre of Tiger Trash” 305), then perhaps it is through the complex dramaturgy of story theatre that Irish theatre can re-schedule appointments with what Luke Gibbons calls the “incomplete narratives of the nation itself” (*Transformations in Irish Culture* 268).<sup>101</sup>

Elsewhere, Merriman argues for “conceptualizing the postcolonial as a form of critical consciousness” (“Willing To Do Public Work” 59),<sup>102</sup> while Gerry Smyth states that “Irish culture cannot express, reflect, embody ... the decolonising nation until it is constituted by an enabling metadiscourse: criticism” (52). Both critical perspectives are in tune with an epic theatre strategy, as outlined previously, that interrogates the (neo-colonial) state of the (Irish) State, while also re-configuring the social function of contemporary Irish drama. What Smyth refers to as ‘metadiscourse’ is related to what for the epic theatre is the ‘metatext’, which connects the dramatic world with the social world. Eamonn Jordan states that, in the middle part of the twentieth century, the Irish play was:

... at once about the comfort of stasis, the reluctance to change, and the need to talk and debate without hesitation. Affirmative action lagged well behind the ambitions of language. The distinction between saying something and meaning it, between dreaming and realizing it, were the comfortable tensions upon which the plays relied. It is the internalization of dominant and repressive values that prohibits action, by diminishing possibility, by giving false and soft targets for challenge, while the deeper structural issues are filtered or framed in such a way that they are misunderstood. (13)

Jordan’s general survey usefully brings up the recurrent representation of internalized subjectivity, and the success of Irish playwrights of this era in dramatizing this dimension of the Irish consciousness through a dramaturgy of tragic inevitability. In Molloy’s *The Visiting House*,<sup>103</sup> for example, the character Broc Heavey’s rambling house is in mortal decline, an inevitability explained by the forced, economic

<sup>101</sup> In this instance, Gibbons is referring to Neil Jordan’s biopic, *Michael Collins*.

<sup>102</sup> At this point in the article, Merriman is discussing Conor McCarthy’s “manifesto for a politically-focused critical practice” (“Willing To Do Public Work” 58).

<sup>103</sup> *The Visiting House* was first produced by the Abbey Theatre in 1946. It is out of print and is rarely produced, even on the vibrant Irish amateur circuit.

migration of the young men of the parish to Irish cities and to foreign shores. Fintan O'Toole notes that during this era in Irish drama there was "a form which is extraordinarily unusual in theatrical history,<sup>104</sup> and that form is tragedy" ("John B Keane" 34). O'Toole elaborates that, for the form of tragedy to emerge, there "must be something going on which is a relationship to that particular society ... that is part of a broader movement that's happening around him culturally and socially" (34). In other words, O'Toole argues that tragedy reflects a process of change in the make-up of society, over which the citizen has apparently no influence. O'Toole exemplifies this perspective in relation to John B. Keane's rural tragedy, *Sive*. In *Sive*,<sup>105</sup> the eponymous teenage heroine is consigned by the matriarch of the house, her sister-in-law Mena, to an arranged marriage with a man fifty years her senior. There are two world views on display: the "traditional [Irish] extended family household" which we encounter at the start of the play, and Mena's desire "to be able to build a modern Irish nuclear family" (38). *Sive*, as an in-law, signifies a postponement of the transition from the traditional to the modern nuclear family, and therefore must be removed from Mena's house. The tragic heroine assumes agency and elopes, but is drowned as she attempts to escape via a route through bog-land. The fate of *Sive* represents a "death that is not assimilated back into life" (Calasso 42).<sup>106</sup> She is, apparently, an unavoidable casualty of the State's project of inevitable progression towards modernity.

*Sive*'s situation represents a clash of perspectives on modernity, where her personal quest for selfhood is set in opposition to Mena's commitment to the apparently inevitable social progression from extended to nuclear family. In the dramatic world, there is no compromise or conversation offered. Mena as matriarch affirms her authority, while *Sive*'s deterministic fate fuels the tragedy. In this deterministic world, there is at stake an aesthetic dramaturgical decision on the part of the playwright: that is, a decision on which character facilitates tragic catharsis (*Sive*) and

<sup>104</sup> In this instance, O'Toole is referring to theatre generally, or internationally, although in the article he applies the theory to the context of Irish drama.

<sup>105</sup> *Sive* was first produced by the Listowel Drama Group, Co. Kerry, in 1959. The production enjoyed a successful run at the National Theatre, and has been one of the most popular plays on the Irish amateur drama circuit ever since. In 2002, it was produced by Druid Theatre Company, and this production has toured nationally and internationally to great acclaim.

<sup>106</sup> Calasso uses this phrase to describe the death of Erigone, daughter of Icarus, in Greek mythology. The myth of Icarus, Dionysus, Erigone and Maera (the family dog, later to be deified as the constellation Sirius), according to Calasso, explains the origin of tragedy.

which character lives on to pick up the pieces (Mena). There is no dialogue about alternative ways of thinking about the ingrained social contracts that characterize the dramatic world. Also, there is no significant altruistic intervention in the egoism of the social world. Rather, the catharsis encoded in the dramatization of Sive's life presumes a community's impotence in relation to the social structures which dictate her fate. This is the psyche of the neo-colony: a psyche postponing decolonization and suspicious of the embers of revolution: the agency, or quest for selfhood, of the individual.

In each of these three tragedies of rural Irish life, significantly, the State exists only in an abstract sense. It could be argued that the dramas of Keane and Molloy contain an implicit criticism of the State's role, through economic policy, in the decline in the rural population. However, in the nuclear dramatic worlds of both playwrights, there is an exhausted resignation redolent of the deterministic outlook of the naturalistic theatre (and Greek tragedy). Jordan's 'deeper structural issues', which relate to the economic and social policies of the State, are unattainably remote from the dramatic worlds of these plays. While all three plays effectively dramatize the 'internalization of dominant and repressive values that prohibits action', their nuclear dramatic forms are equally inward-looking and prescriptive. The dominant form of Naturalism (social realism) has, for the majority of Irish Free State theatre, been bound up with an aesthetic of reflection, and the postponement of dramaturgies of critical engagement. As Gibbons notes, the "most readily available genres or narrative structures ... may end up doing violence to experience, sanitising or cauterising it rather than registering the full force of its impact" ("Global Cure" 95). The dramas of Molloy and Keane, the "local laureates" (Merriman, "Willing To Do Public Work" 68) of their respective rural home-towns, reflect how naturalistic form, inevitably, is drawn to the cathartic aesthetics of tragedy. The conversational mode of story theatre, therefore, is inhospitable to the full latitudes, in revolutionary terms, of the epic theatre. The conversational mode, contained within a nuclear dramatic world, resists a dramaturgy of metatext.

In the late twentieth century, confronted with circumstances demanding socio-political engagement as well as reflection, Irish dramaturgy began to take an epic turn,

appropriating devices of rich indigenous folk traditions, in particular, the art of storytelling:

Traumatic memory, as Theodor Adorno emphasised, is not about recovering or indeed banishing previous experiences but rather 'working through' them, and it is this protracted, often painful, process which links the lost voices of the past ineluctably with the present. (Gibbons, "Global Cure" 97)

In Dermot Bolger's *The Holy Ground*, first produced as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1990, the audience is brought into the living room of the newly widowed character Monica, a 'lost voice' of mid-to-late-twentieth-century Ireland. Over forty minutes or so, Monica 'works through' the traumas of her very painful past. As a young woman, she becomes attached to Swifty, a soccer-infatuated, unworldly young Catholic man, whom she marries. Amongst the paraphernalia which he brings to their new home is the cot in which he himself slept as a baby, an object which haunts the duration of their childless marriage. Their relationship is not without love: Monica recounts their courtship and early married life with affection. This all changes, however, when Swifty is diagnosed impotent, which makes him ashamed of himself. As a result, he diverts himself by becoming an activist for several right-wing Catholic organizations, campaigning against divorce, contraception, abortion, films with sexual content, films with sexual innuendo and so on. He demands that Monica no longer refer to him as Swifty, but by his correct appellation, Myles, and he alters his surname from Hurley to the Gaelic Ó'Muirthile to emphasise his commitment to the conservative, Irish Catholic ideologies of the Legion of Mary organization. Myles, apparently, resents Monica for their inability to have children: this resentment is never fully explained, but it is probable that, at a deep level, he resents the fact that only she *knows* that he is impotent. Myles devotes himself more and more to the daily chores of the Catholic Right, and barely converses with his wife at this stage of their marriage, except to censure her style in dresses or to ensure that she is not wearing make-up. Eventually, he volunteers to host the committee meetings of the Legion at their home, rendering Monica's living room further colonized by the Catholic Right of the Free State. The generally maudlin tale then takes a turn:

It was an accident the first time, rats in the shed. Myles had the poison on a shelf in the kitchen. My elbow slipped. It covered his cabbage like a fine dust. I was about to throw it out when I stopped. I looked inside and saw him

crouched at the table like an alarm clock about to go off. I wiped most of the poison off, poured his favourite gravy and served it to him. (120-1)

On the night of this incident, Monica is traumatized at the thought she may have served her husband a lethal meal, and fantasizes about his death and her subsequent conviction as a murderer. However, she questions whether jail “would be any worse than the way I live now” (121) and sets about gradually poisoning her husband to death with rat poison concealed in a variety of his favourite meals. When he eventually dies, she confesses what she has done to a doctor in the hospital. Monica reports the doctor’s reply:

Your husband died from a clot to the brain. The man had a history of thrombosis, he’d take treatment from nobody. Rat poison contains Warfarin that prevents clotting and thins out the blood. If you did give it to him you probably lengthened his life. Go home now Mrs Ó Muirthuile and keep your mouth shut. (124)

Dramaturgically, the doctor’s diagnosis is neither a denouement nor a *deus-ex-machina*. It is the unexpected twist of the seanchaí tale,<sup>107</sup> a displacement (or ‘at-play’) both of judgement and of guilt. In terms of judgement, the signification is replete with contradictions: we empathise, as Monica’s audience, with her desire to free herself of Myles; simultaneously, we are horrified by her homicidal intentions; meanwhile, the comic sensibility is gleefully aroused at the irony of an Irish, right-wing Catholic being poisoned via the traditional staples of the Irish diet, cabbage and stew; there is also an ironic tension between Monica’s intention (to kill Myles) and the net effect of her efforts (accidentally prolonging his life); finally, the dramaturgical deployment of the storytelling ruse confronts the audience with the necessity to review and reconsider judgements made on Monica’s actions. The final point is significant, and relates to Bolger’s flirtation with, and rejection of, dramatic closure. If, as the audience initially assumed, Monica had managed to murder Myles, the drama is simplistic: the woman is the victim of a repressive marriage, murders her husband out of frustration, and is likely to be racked with guilt for the rest of her life (the stuff of tragedy). However, because Monica fails to murder Myles, her sense of

<sup>107</sup> In Chapter Three, a full analysis of Éamon Kelly’s “The Tay-man” includes a description of such a twist.



agency is complicated by the impotence of her acts, and she reassumes a pathetic quality. Monica remains a victim, but courtesy of her agency as would-be poisoner, she is no longer an innocent victim. Her sense of guilt, which overwhelms her when she discovers Myles' corpse, is displaced, and she is robbed of the closure that guilt may afford her.

Dramaturgically, the audience is robbed of catharsis, of closure, of cosy explanations of behaviour, cause, effect and atonement. The contradictions, or 'at-play', at work in this section of *The Holy Ground* are redolent of those played out in John Millington Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*.<sup>108</sup> In Synge's play, the audience must contend with the contradiction of how the people of the Mayo village deem Christy Mahon a hero for killing his father in a faraway town, yet consider the same act a hanging offence when it happens on their own doorstep. Similarly, the audience at Bolger's play are forced to negotiate their judgements of Monica as murderous/avenging agent and Monica as failed murderer/avenger, with both perspectives set against her construction, for the majority of the narrative, as sympathetic victim of a patriarchal, despotic husband.

In an *Irish Times* review of the first production of *The Holy Ground*, Fintan O'Toole remarks that the play is "so short, so slight", yet touches on "so many things that we haven't heard about in the Irish theatre for the last few years", and how it is "a shocking reminder of how shy our theatre has been about trying to make something of our recent and desultory history" (107).<sup>109</sup> While praising the content, however, O'Toole sees limitations in the monologue (his term) form, which relates to the fact that the action is "narrated rather than enacted" (107). He claims that the narrative "touches on more things that we want to know about, that seem to be passed over too quickly because they cannot be dealt with within the narrow form" (108). In apparent contradiction to this, he posits the paradox that although both plays are "not huge epic works [they] yet manage to sketch in a whole history of the Republic of Ireland in the last 40 years" (107). O'Toole's reading is insightful, but reveals a misunderstanding

<sup>108</sup> It is worth noting that, when he died in 1956, Brecht was working on a production of Synge's play at the Berliner Ensemble.

<sup>109</sup> O'Toole's review deals also with Bolger's *In High Germany*, which was presented as part of the same programme. Some of the comments referenced relate to both plays, but all are relevant to *The Holy Ground*.

of the function of storytelling, which is not to 'deal with' the narrative but rather to report it. He correctly states that the plays are not 'huge epic works', but it is actually through the very 'narrow form' of the presentation that Bolger encodes the epic (perhaps 'miniature epic') quality of *The Holy Ground*. In other words, through a compression of narrative, Bolger's play produces disproportionate effects.

Monica relays her story in "a living room in the suburb of Drumcondra" (102), a space that, for her, is haunted by the absence of Myles, whose presence is evoked by each object of the *mise-en-scène*. The living room is the place where she waited in solitude every evening for her husband to return from his meetings, with the sound on the television down low in case she cannot hear him arrive home, and catch her watching something scandalous like *Brief Encounter*.<sup>110</sup> It is also the room which Myles allows the Legion of Mary to occupy for their meetings, a colonizing act which Monica presents as if giving the audience a retrospective tour of the site (118-9). She indicates the kitchen, where she committed acts of murderous intent. She also indicates the upstairs, the bedroom – episode of "the only time he ever struck me" (117) – and the spare room, haunted by an unfilled cot. Monica's living room is superficially a naturalistic space. However, through storytelling, the site is made liminal: a haunted space where the 'lost voice' can report the details of her oppressive past and, through the episodes with the rat poison, her resistance. Monica, significantly, reports the dialogue of several characters – Myles, Clarke from the Legion of Mary, the doctor – in direct speech, and in this way Bolger encodes the body politic positively, both in post-colonial and feminist terms. As Kevin O'Nolan puts it, the "storyteller's chief gift is a sort of visionary power which enables him [her] to see the persons and events he [she] describes" (qtd. in Zimmermann 442). O'Nolan's comment explains the manner through which the epic narrative, embodied in the role of Monica, "seems to stand still" while the remembered world, via the evocative power of storytelling, "move[s] around" her (Schiller, qtd. in *Brecht on Theatre* 210).

The analysis thus far would suggest that Bolger's drama may be read as reflective of the first two terms of Merriman's post-colonial model of colonization-anticolonial

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<sup>110</sup> *Brief Encounter* is a classic, black and white British film that deals with the theme of extra-marital love.

resistance-decolonization. In terms of this model, Monica's closing speech is something of an act of decolonization postponed:

... I closed my eyes and thought of God. I saw him there kindly ... like my own father beckoning, but suddenly you were there beside him. Myles, righteous and stern... I tried to pray but nothing would come. You've stolen my youth and left me barren, you've stolen my gaiety and left me shame, and when I die I will die unmourned. But I could forgive you Swifty, everything except that ... seated there at the right hand of God, you had stolen my Christ away from me. (125)

Monica expresses a desire, as it were, to decolonize her mind. However, in Bolger's drama, it appears that she does not possess the tools with which to do so. This epilogue, it is argued, is problematic in the sense that it undermines the epic atmosphere that characterizes the performance, both in terms of subjectivity and in terms of narrative closure. Throughout the narrative, the storyteller's subjectivity is a projected one: Monica evokes and speaks for a range of characters, reporting the details of the episodes and presiding over her own, domestic court-room in order to expose and investigate the consequences of right-wing, Irish Catholic ideology, and its real effect on the lived experiences of Irish women. The closing speech, however, sees the storyteller retreat into an internalized subjectivity, inviting audience identification, and aestheticizing her story as tragic. The ending, as it were, invites a cathartic reading, and in less than a minute of stage time an epic dramaturgical achievement is apparently undone.

The cathartic blow is offset somewhat, however, by the rich, meta-textual quality of Bolger's play, and the range of referents from Irish social and political life that it invokes. The first production, in 1990, recalls the historic 1986 divorce referendum, where the Irish electorate emphatically rejected the opportunity to vote for the constitutional right to marriage annulment. The production precedes another referendum on the subject in 1995, when the right to divorce was passed by a slim majority. It is flanked, historically, by referenda on the abortion issue in 1983 and 1992.<sup>111</sup> The referenda on abortion and divorce were characterized by vociferous

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<sup>111</sup> The 1983 referendum, on a mother's right to terminate pregnancy, was overwhelmingly rejected by the electorate. The 1992 referenda had three components: the right to travel (mainly to England) for a

campaigning on both sides of the debate, during which the politics of the body was established as a key issue in Irish public discourse. Also, in the 1980s, scandals relating to child sexual, physical and psychological abuse, perpetrated in Catholic Church institutions in the name of the State, had begun to surface.<sup>112</sup> By associating the neo-colonial figure of Myles with the ideologies of the Irish Catholic Right, Bolger invokes each of the referents listed above, and performs the epic act of encoding within his narrative a meta-text.

Bolger's play initiates a mode of story theatre that will be referred to as the presentational mode. *The Holy Ground* is presentational in its use of direct address to the spectator, and in its liminal sense of time and space. It represents a dramaturgical displacement of the "significant use of monologue within a naturalistic setting" (Loneragan 177),<sup>113</sup> which this thesis has identified as the dominant conversational mode of storytelling in Irish drama. One of the significant achievements of Bolger's dramaturgy is that, within an apparently naturalistic setting, there exists a liminality through which he can exploit the transformative potential of traditional Irish storytelling.<sup>114</sup> For Bolger, the naturalistic mise-en-scène is not a narrowing of possibilities, and this relates to the haunted atmosphere of his plays. For Bolger, ghosts are representative of unfinished business, a motif which recurs in more expansive, ensemble works like *The Lament For Arthur Cleary* (1989) and *From These Green Heights* (2004).<sup>115</sup> In *The Holy Ground*, the memory of Myles haunts

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termination; the right to information; and the right to terminate pregnancy in the Republic of Ireland. The first two parts were passed by the electorate, while the third part was rejected.

<sup>112</sup> The scale of the child abuse scandals that have emerged since this period is extraordinary. As Merriman notes, the "enormity is such as to warrant the re-writing of Irish history since independence" ("Not Always, But Often" 48).

<sup>113</sup> In this instance, Loneragan is referring to Conor McPherson's *The Weir*, as a category of monologue in contemporary Irish drama. This thesis suggests that his description can be applied retrospectively to a range of realist, twentieth-century Irish drama and the dominant, conversational mode of storytelling described in this chapter.

<sup>114</sup> The same may be said for *In High Germany*, the companion piece to *The Holy Ground*, which is set "on platform 4 of Altona railway station, Hamburg, Germany" (70).

<sup>115</sup> In *Lament For Arthur Cleary*, the action is narrated by the eponymous character, an Irish emigrant who has returned to his native Dublin. The play dramatizes Dublin during the 1980s recession, which is characterized by dehumanizing poverty and illegal money-lending. At the end of the play, it is revealed that Arthur is a ghost, and has just narrated the events leading up to his murder by a money-lending organization that he refuses to be part of. In *From These Green Heights*, the action covers nearly forty years in the history of Ballymun, the Dublin suburb that was a 1960s urban planning experiment that went horribly wrong. Since the 1960s, Ballymun was largely neglected, became a notorious location for drug-related criminality and had high unemployment rates. In Bolger's drama, there "is no distinction between the living and the dead" (1) characters, in the sense that some of the

the living room of his widow, Monica. However, what his ghost represents is a very corporeal reality of contemporary Ireland, as exemplified by the discourse of the Catholic Right that surfaced during the abortion and divorce referenda, and also by the findings of the Ryan report.<sup>116</sup>

Since 1990, the most significant departure and development from Bolger's dramaturgy in *The Holy Ground* is the rejection by dramatists of the presentational mode of a naturalistic *mise-en-scène*. The presentational mode, since 1990, has consistently defined the performance site as physically liminal. The stage space, according to this mode, is a contingent space, and it is Patrick McCabe's play, *Frank Pig Says Hello* (1992),<sup>117</sup> set in the town of Monaghan in the 1960s, which establishes this convention. The play is performed by two actors: one plays Frank, the narrator, who reflects on his childhood, while embodying over twenty roles; the other plays the role of Piglet, Frank's younger self. Recalling the National Theatre's story theatre in the 1970s, in *Frank Pig* the storyteller is detached from the dramatized episodes, and Frank's narrator role includes setting the context for various episodes, as voiceover to the embodied action, as dubious commentator on the action (Frank is a committed lunatic),<sup>118</sup> and also as role-player, when a second actor is needed in certain episodes. There are thirty-two episodes, which take place in a variety of locations: Piglet's home; the streets of Monaghan town; the home of his nemeses Philip Nugent and Mrs Nugent; the abattoir where Piglet works as an adult; and the State institutions where Piglet is disciplined (reformatory and mental hospital).

McCabe's play is, like *The Holy Ground*, a narrative of a lost voice of twentieth-century Ireland. Piglet's domestic childhood is characterized by poverty: his father is an alcoholic and his mother a chronic depressive (she commits suicide during scene ten). In scene four, Mrs Nugent calls to his house to complain that Piglet has stolen

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fictional characters will have passed away by the end of the drama (2004), while others will, associatively, signify the present, living population of Ballymun.

<sup>116</sup> The Ryan Commission investigated the abuse of children in Ireland from 1936 onwards. It published its findings in the Ryan Report on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>117</sup> *Frank Pig* was first produced as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival, 2002.

<sup>118</sup> Because *Frank Pig* is a lesser-known version of McCabe's hugely successful novel, *The Butcher Boy*, the story of Piglet (Francie Brady in the novel) is well known to Irish audiences. Much like the *mythos* of Greek tragedy, the staging of this play has a re-creative atmosphere, which adds to its distancing quality.

her son Philip's comics, and publicly humiliates Mrs Brady in front of the whole street:

**Mrs Nugent** Mrs Brady, what I want to know is – where are the comics? Do you know how much they cost? Do you? Do you? How do I know it was Frank! Oh for God's sake! Maybe it wasn't him. Maybe it wasn't Frank! Of course it was Frank. (*Surveying the house and sniffing contemptuously.*) Pigs! Live like pigs. Pigs.

**Piglet snorts.** (243)

The refined, functional domestic life of the Nugents is set against the dysfunction of Piglet's upbringing. However, rather than craving a 'normal' family life like the Nugents, Piglet's idealized world view is characterized by the 'buddy' codes of the Hollywood western, and the glorification of his relationship with his friend and 'partner', Joe Purcell. As Piglet's mind becomes gradually more unhinged, characterized by his failure to 'mature' in a 'normal' way, Joe distances himself from his childhood friend and befriends Philip Nugent. Piglet commits several anti-social acts against the Nugents during the story. In scene eleven, he beats up Philip with a chain. Following this, he breaks into the Nugent home (also in scene eleven) and defecates on the living room floor. The latter act leads to his arrest and confinement in a Christian Brothers' reformatory, his first hospitality in an institution of the State, where he is beaten into accepting a culture of conformity. On his release, Piglet searches for Joe, but the Purcells are determined to keep their son at a safe distance. Piglet's sense of isolation is deepened by the death of his father, which the boy psychologically blocks out. When a police sergeant discovers the corpse in scene twenty-three, it has apparently been rotting in the living room for weeks (Piglet is discovered in conversation with his dead father). The teenager is committed to a mental hospital: however, on his release his ambitions are unchanged. His final attempt to recover his friendship with Joe involves a lengthy bicycle ride to a boarding school, where he finds his childhood friend in friendship with his nemesis, Philip Nugent. When Joe claims not to know him, Piglet returns to his home town, murders Mrs Nugent, and is committed to a mental asylum. This represents the character's final retreat from reality, and the final scene is set in "lost Eden" (305), a limbo of sorts, with Frank and Piglet in nostalgic, albeit resigned, mode.

Of the story theatre plays of this period, *Frank Pig* is the one which most resembles the storytelling mode deployed by Brecht in *The Good Person of Szechuan*, as discussed in Chapter Four. Double-emphasis is used throughout, and the tonal complicity between role (Piglet) and storyteller (Frank) is best exemplified in scene thirty-one, during the murder of Mrs Nugent (302):

**Frank** I'm coming in, Mrs Nugent

**Piglet** Mrs Nugent, I'm coming ...

**Mrs Nugent** You can't come in!

**Piglet** I'm coming in.

**Mrs Nugent** You can't come in here!

**Frank/Piglet** I'm coming in!

**Mrs Nugent** Help!

**Frank/Piglet** Mrs Nugent – I'm coming in.

**Mrs Nugent** Please help me.

**Frank** You try to cry out and you don't know how.

**Piglet** You try to cry out and you don't know how.

**Frank** Isn't that right, Mrs Nugent?

**Piglet** Now you know.

**Frank** Cry out.

**Piglet** You can't.

**Frank** Cry out.

**Piglet** You can't.

**Frank/Piglet** You can't (*A scream.*) You can't (*Silence.*) That's what it's like for dumb people. (*Silence.*)

What is interesting about this episode is that the brutal determination of the teenage Piglet is matched by the manner in which his older self, Frank, relishes the replay of his most notorious act. On reflection, the storyteller shows no remorse, and reports his tale without apology or apologia. The nature of this narrative voice is akin to the Irish folk song tradition, and the dubious speaker in well-known ballads like "Dick Darby The Cobbler", of which these are the final two verses:

Oh my wife she is humpy, she's lumpy

My wife, she's the devil, she's cracked

And no matter what I may do with her  
Her tongue it goes clickety clack

It was early one fine summer's morning  
A little before it was day  
I dipped her three times in the river  
And carelessly bad[e] her 'Good day'. (anon. 25-8, 33-6)

McCabe invokes the morally ambiguous voice of the Irish song ballad to create, onstage, a balladesque atmosphere.<sup>119</sup> As in "Dick Darby", there are reasons put forth for the act of criminality: Dick Darby grows tired of his wife, while Piglet blames Mrs Nugent for his solitude. However, it is not the purpose of the ballad to offer an excuse for the act of criminality, but rather to report the relevant circumstances.

The balladesque atmosphere of McCabe's play also relates to, as discussed in relation to Brecht in Chapter Four, an ironic montage between the storyteller and the episode being presented onstage. In scene twenty-three, as Piglet is undergoing a range of electro-shock treatments in the mental hospital, a contradiction in tone is evident:

**Frank** Then they took me down to the Time Travel Room. It was just like Adam Eterno in Philip's comics. They strapped me to a chair and they scribbled away. I didn't care what they scribbled. I was off.

**Piglet** Nnnnnnngyeow! Hello there, Egyptians. Youse are doing fierce hard work at them pyramids. Have a break. Have a Kit Kat – that's what I say! Well, got to be off, can't stay, I'm a busy man. Nnnnnnngyeow! Excuse me, Romans, would you mind leaving that Christian alone please. Yes – now! Excuse me lion, buck off! Nnnnnnngyeow! Through the wastes of space and time. Nnnnnnngyeow!

**Frank** It was kind of hard to beat that chair. Only me got it.

**Frank** *operates a drill.*

**Piglet** No, please. (287)

<sup>119</sup> Patrick McCabe is well known as an amateur dabbler in the art of folk singing, and songs are a regular motif in his dramatic and literary output. The title of *The Butcher Boy*, the novel version of *Frank Pig*, relates to a well-known Broadsheet ballad, which is the dirge of a female suicide, who becomes pregnant out of marriage and hangs herself out of grief for the lover who abandoned her.



The contradictory tone of the scene relates to the tension between Frank's narrative voice, suggestive of a fond memory, and the grotesque depiction of a teenage boy hallucinating under electro-shock treatments in a 1960s Irish mental hospital. This contradictory tone is also present in the Irish folk song tradition, where dark content often co-exists with bawdy, comic tone or style, as in the well-known ballad, "Seven Drunken Nights". In this song, a cuckolded husband makes comedy of his wife's nightly infidelities. Each night, the speaker returns home drunk from the public house, but is too intoxicated to expose his wife and cuckold:

And as I went home on Friday night as drunk as drunk could be  
 I saw a head upon the bed where my old head should be  
 Well, I called me wife and I said to her: Will you kindly tell to me  
 Who owns that head upon the bed where my old head should be?

Ah, you're drunk, you're drunk you silly old fool; still you cannot see:  
 That's a baby boy that me mother sent to me  
 Well, it's many a day I've travelled a hundred miles or more  
 But a baby boy with his whiskers on sure I never saw before. (41-50)

Deployed by McCabe, this tonal contradiction enhances the balladesque quality of *Frank Pig*, and is a key distancing device in this example of story theatre. Piglet displays an Arlecchino-like, unflinching optimism, despite the various traumas and obstacles he experiences throughout the story, and the contradictory quality of the narrative delivery invites the spectator to consider the characters' actions, rather than sympathise or empathise with them. Reviewing *Frank Pig*, O'Toole contrasts McCabe's original narrative mode in his novel with the dramatic version:

... the great technical achievement of the novel – the insidious intimacy of the narrative voice – is missing. The story becomes more external, a set of things that happen rather than a succession of words in a man's head. (*Irish Times Review* 239)

As in *The Holy Ground*, McCabe's play presents an externalized subjectivity. The narrative is controlled by the storyteller, Frank, and the manner in which he leaps, as it were, in and out of roles, renders the stage space unpredictable and open to transformation. Piglet, paradoxically, 'seems to stand still' while the narrator, who

catalyzes the spectator's gaze, 'move[s] around' him. As a result, the spectator is invited to consider the dramatic world as a means of understanding the anti-social, and finally murderous, actions of Piglet. There is nothing mysterious or unpredictable about the scene where Piglet murders Mrs Nugent. The episodic quality of the narrative places this action as a component of Piglet's story, rather than its tragic climax. Because Frank is seen to relish the memory of the incident, the murder is defined as the protagonist's choice, rather than a tragic inevitability. The other components of the story – Piglet's social class, the diffident manner in which Joe's family and the Nugents ostracize him, the failure of the State's institutions to support him or take any responsibility for him when he returns to society – are not put forward as a means of explaining his actions, but rather are used as potential means of understanding them. In its meta-textual qualities, *Frank Pig* resumes a critical interrogation of the ideologies of the State which Bolger initiates in *The Holy Ground*, mainly through the depiction of its institutions (reformatory and mental hospital) as ineffectual and lacking in compassion. First produced in 1992, *Frank Pig* therefore takes up the task of "trying to make something of our recent and desultory history" (O'Toole, *Irish Times Review of The Holy Ground* 107).

In contrast to the social engagement of Bolger's and McCabe's plays, the presentational mode of story theatre includes works which ostentatiously embrace the "postmodern cult of parody and pastiche" (Kearney 11), notably Mark O'Rowe's *Howie The Rookie* (1999) and Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs* (1996). Both plays have received much critical attention, and it is significant that Aleks Sierz considers both texts in his survey of developments in British 'in-yer-face' theatre in the 1990s (155, 180, 208). Marco Ghelardi describes this era in British theatre as "focused on stories with strong sexual overtones about private existences" (222), and it is interesting that, in the plays of Walsh and O'Rowe, this concern with internalized subjectivity is combined with the externalizing mode of storytelling. This tension between the introverted self and externalized dramatic form demonstrates how, in these plays, story theatre "disrupts the notion that stage representation should be regarded as discrete, reliable, and self-contained" (Lonergan 185). Lonergan notes that, in *Howie the Rookie*, the narrative of The Howie, a 'hard man' of suburban, working-class Dublin, reflects "his awareness of the difference between his public persona [of intimidating, street thug] and his private thoughts" (184), which relate to loneliness

and a desire for *The Rookie's* companionship. In *Disco Pigs*, working-class Cork teenagers Pig and Runt live for their nights out on the town together: anti-social orgies of underage drinking and unprovoked violence. Their desire to be publicly terrifying to others is set against their private desires: Pig desires sexual relations with Runt, while Runt desires the life of a middle-class socialite. In both plays, the spectator must juggle between modes of identification (via inner monologue) and disidentification with the characters. These disorienting modes of identification and disidentification, this thesis argues, relate to the dominant genres of cinema, and may be best understood with reference to recent Irish film.

Debbie Ging notes how, since the 1990s, Irish cinema has been “moving steadily toward easy, globally-digested narratives” (185). She observes that, although “a significant number of contemporary Irish films ... deal with outsiders and marginalised groups ... in the context of global, post-modern culture, the concept of being an outsider has taken on new meanings” (187).<sup>120</sup> Ging points out that “video directors, advertisers and film-makers have been quick to exploit the bad boy anti-hero of disaffected youth as the new symbol of resistance to ‘the system’” (188). She asserts that this trend represents “an illusion of counter-hegemony” that is generally “totally lacking in social context”, and that often the “reasons for social marginalisation are not addressed, nor do the protagonists appear to know – or care – what they are rebelling against” (188). A majority of contemporary Irish film-makers, according to Ging’s argument, appropriate a dominant, Hollywood “subcultural style” which, problematically, signifies “a sort of universal youth culture that is as apolitical as it is location-unspecific” (188). In other words, this ‘subcultural style’ represents a disengagement from what is locally (or nationally) specific. As a form of (Hollywood) genre mimicry, the ambition is global marketability rather than social or political engagement. This thesis argues that this trend in Irish cinema, as outlined by Ging, enables a critical reading of the presentational mode of *Disco Pigs* and *Howie the Rookie*. Both plays, it is argued, appropriate and mimic this global, ‘subcultural style’. Both represent post-modern modes of pastiche which, as Jameson states, are “neutral practice[s] of such mimicry” and, devoid of “parody’s satirical impulse” (911), evident in their disengagement from the suburban, working-class worlds which

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<sup>120</sup> Ging cites *Crushproof* (1997), *Flick* (2000) and *Accelerator* (2001) as examples of contemporary Irish films that deal with ‘outsiders’.

they claim to represent. Both plays lack meta-text. In its place, the spectator is offered what Umberto Eco calls “intertextual frames . . . stereotyped situations derived from preceding textual tradition” (200).

Lonergan notes that a significant feature of these plays is that “the audience will rarely share the background of the characters on stage”, that there is “a class divide between the middle-class audiences before whom most of the plays were premiered and the mostly working-class characters that populate the stage” (183-4). Jordan observes, of *Howie the Rookie*, that the play’s “geography is deliberately suspect” and that “Dublin serves both as text and symbolic landscape” (171). This observation could apply equally to Cork’s relationship to Walsh’s drama.<sup>121</sup> Because the protagonists of both plays are anti-social, working-class ‘others’, the spectator is invited to identify with the protagonists on very casual terms. Because the dramatic world is that of the social ‘other’, there is apparently very little ‘at stake’ for the spectator in terms of the dramatic action, and the spectator identifies with the protagonist, mainly, because s/he is the mouthpiece for the narrative. The Irish spectator is distanced from the dramatic and social worlds portrayed much as s/he would be distanced as spectator from the dramatic world of an American ‘gangsta’ movie, such as *Juice* (1992) or *Boyz n the Hood* (1991). This comfortable distancing of the spectator relates to the ‘anywhere’ quality of these plays. Unlike Brecht, however, the ‘anywhere’ dramatic world does not present us with an ‘anyman’ protagonist. In *Disco Pigs* and *Howie the Rookie*, the protagonist is ‘genre man’, inter-textually drawn from the formulas of the Hollywood studio system. For Walsh and O’Rowe, the working-class idioms of Cork and Dublin are pretexts, not subjects, and facilitate a transposition of a global, cinematic narrative form into an apparently Irish, theatrical context.

*Howie the Rookie* consists of two first-person narratives. The first is delivered by The Howie Lee, an inner-city Dublin, working-class thug. The Howie is misogynistic, racist, and enjoys beating people up. He reports the story of himself and two friends, Peaches and Ollie, searching for The Rookie Lee, a rough diamond who, apparently, is responsible for Peaches’ contracting scabies, as both he and The Rookie had slept

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<sup>121</sup> In *Disco Pigs*, the characters are portrayed descending on the city from Cork’s predominantly working-class northside. Their accents are a stylized version of the Cork, working-class vernacular.

on Ollie's spare mattress on consecutive nights. The three friends locate The Rookie, beat him up and part ways. The Howie returns home drunk to find that The Mousey, his five-year-old brother, has been run down by a truck. His mother blames The Howie for the incident, as he had refused to babysit his younger brother, and the babysitter he had persuaded to cover for him had fallen asleep just before Mousey had wandered to his death. The second half of the play is narrated by The Rookie, who is racist, misogynistic, a great charmer of the opposite sex and, unlike The Howie, cowardly. The Rookie reveals that he has accidentally killed some exotic fish that belonged to Ladyboy, a sadistic and wealthy local criminal. Ladyboy has demanded that The Rookie pay him seven hundred pounds in compensation, failing which a violent revenge awaits him. The Howie offers his help, and accompanies The Rookie to a party where he fights Ladyboy. The Howie beats Ladyboy to death, after which he is impaled on a gate, after Peaches and Ollie throw him out a window (Peaches has discovered that The Howie was having sexual relations with his sister). The Rookie walks away, calls to the home of The Howie to tell his parents what has happened and the action comes to a close.

Eamonn Jordan states that the "performance potential of this play is to escort an audience into the terrorism of a world where actions have no significance and are without resonance or connection". For the characters, "[v]iolence is a way of gaining respect and a way of marking out territory". He observes that, in O'Rowe's dramatic world, "[s]ex and violence are fundamentally interconnected and nothing else seems to generate a value system" and that to "be macho is not so much about expression, more about cultural compensation" (174-5). The final point is significant: in *Howie the Rookie* the "social system is just a given" (175), and the characters accept this ecology of violence and misogyny without question. Their actions have an immediate quality, and are fuelled by egoistic desires for survival and instant sexual gratification. The 'terroristic' atmosphere of the play to which Jordan refers, and these desires for instant gratification, is reflected in the cinematic quality of the narrative voices. In the following, The Howie is eager to find out who his friends are planning on beating up that evening:

Call up to Ollie's.

Ollie comes out, call up to Peaches'.

Not in the best of moods, Peaches, have to say. Big dirty puss on him.

I wanna know why we're here, his oul' one's kitchen, but it's his skit an' he wants to go out first.

Bein' teased righteous, I am, 'cos they know I'm a curious fucker.

Delayin' me, they are.

Delayin' me earlier, delayin' me now.

Tell me somethin' first.

We go out first.

A *morsel*, man. Tell me who the fuck we're after.

After someone, you're lookin' for them. Gonna give them a hidin', hurt them, you're chasin' them.

Someone's after you, you're hunted.

Tells me we're after The Rookie Lee. (11)

The narrative voice blends stream-of-consciousness with cinema-style editing. The images which the narrator evokes are snappy, vivid and in the present tense, almost like a montage of film clips thudding through the mind's eye of the spectator. This effect, as Lonergan notes, is of "action taking place quickly enough to be perceived, but too quickly to be analysed", an "attempt within new drama to provoke spontaneous emotional reactions rather than considered intellectual ones" (182). It is the stuff of action movies, where location is incidental, the present tense is the dominant tense and the spectator is invited to engage with the action on visceral rather than critical terms. As Jordan notes, in *Howie the Rookie* there is "no protest and no political agitation" and there is a "true absence of connection and real impoverishment in terms of the imagination" (175) of the characters. The impoverished imagination of the characters and, by corollary, the drama itself, has consequences for history, meaning and form.

According to Barthes, meaning “has a sensory reality ... a richness in it”, and this richness relates to the fact that meaning “belongs to a history” (117). The meaning contains “a whole system of values: a history, a geography, a morality, a zoology, a literature” (118). In *Howie the Rookie*, the characters have no real history, and nor does their dramatic world: the characters are stereotypes of a global, ‘gangsta’ Hollywood genre,<sup>122</sup> and the social world reflects the playwright’s choice not to refer to the complex history of lived experience in working-class, suburban Dublin. Bourgeois myth, according to Barthes, takes hold of a history, “turning it suddenly into an empty, parasitical form” (117). When it becomes form (in the case of O’Rowe, dramatic form), this rich “history evaporates” (117). The form of *Howie the Rookie* puts “all this richness at a distance” (118), and is highly problematic in the performance context of the play.

The dramatic world of *Howie the Rookie* represents a parasitic appropriation of working-class idiom, an orientalism of the Irish working class, and a regressive, gothic representation of the Irish ‘other’ as aestheticized ‘minstrel’ of the Irish middle-classes. O’Rowe, as a post-modern dramaturg of contemporary Irish story theatre, appropriates the latitudes of storytelling towards a bourgeois mythologizing of the Irish working-class as ‘natural’ in terms of their social milieu. The play demands that the spectator must juggle between modes of identification (via inner monologue) and disidentification with the characters, and this disorienting quality of the narrative relates to the spectator’s familiarity with dominant, Hollywood, cinema genres. However, while this may be disorienting it also represents a comfort zone for the spectator: because the play is not about Ireland (unless one chooses to decipher so-called ‘universal’ themes that relate to Ireland as well as everywhere else), but rather about genre, the spectator is invited to enjoy the inter-textual qualities of the narrative, and to regard as other the social world (working-class Dublin) which it claims as its site. Perhaps most problematic of all is the fact that the characters, unquestioning of the nihilism, racism and sexism of the dramatic world, behave as if ‘by nature’. This sense of ‘what is natural’ exemplifies how the narrative inevitability of codified genre puts forward a deterministic world outlook, and endorses the dominant

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<sup>122</sup> It is worth noting that, in films such as *Boyz in the Hood*, the relationship between gang culture, social class, social exclusion and education, informs the complexity of the narrative. The same cannot be said of O’Rowe’s pastiche.

ideologies of the bourgeoisie, as discussed in Chapter One and Chapter Two. By presenting the working-class male protagonist as, by nature, criminal, violent, egoistic and misogynist, O'Rowe's play takes up a reactionary position. It necessitates an epic, narrative response: a dialectically divisive dramaturgy that opposes this regressive textualization of the working-class protagonist. In Chapter Seven, examples of such epic dramaturgies in Irish story theatre will be discussed.

The problems that O'Rowe's play raises regarding representations of class are also evident in Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs*. Walsh's play, first produced in 1996,<sup>123</sup> is also characterized by a cinematic quality, although it creatively edits the action mainly through the physicality of the actors rather than through spoken imagery, as in *Howie the Rookie*. Two actors alternate between direct address to audience, internal monologue, role-playing protagonists Pig and Runt, and role-playing other characters. The action takes place over two nights. The first night is the protagonists' joint seventeenth birthday, and their symbiotic, anti-social behaviour is explicitly connected to their being neighbours born on the same day. Their anti-social formula is straightforward: they get drunk, dance to rave music, Runt dances with a young, middle-class student and encourages him to kiss her, at which point Pig plays the part of protective boyfriend, and beats their target to a pulp. After their birthday celebration, they get a taxi to the seaside, where they stand, in the early hours of the morning, like "2 specs a dust on da telly" (175). Their reactions to the serenity of the seaside are significant:

**Runt** I wanna walk inta da sea an neva come back. I wan ta tide to take me outa me an give me someone different ... maybe jus fur a halfhour or so! Dat be good, wouldn't it, Pig?

**Pig** Jesus, Runt! Dat be impossible! A half hour, fuck! (*Beat.*) I wanna a huge space rocket ship la, take it up to da cosmos shiny stars all twinkle twinkle an I shit in my saucer an have a good look down on da big blue blue. Dere be a button named Lazer dat blast all da shitty bits dat ya'd see, yeah. I press dat button an Lazer would fireball all below an den back down I fly to Crossheaven

<sup>123</sup> The play was produced by Corcadorca Theatre Company. It won awards at several international festivals, including an Edinburgh Fringe First. It toured extensively throughout the world, and has been a popular play in translation, particularly in Germany.



happy dat all das left a Pork Sity is my roam your roam an da Palace Disco  
cause das all dat matters, Runt ... ress is jus weekday stuff. (176)

Pig, similarly to the characters of *Howie the Rookie*, is devoid of imagination, or any real ability to make critical judgements in relation to the world. His sociopathic tendencies are not negotiable, and as a character he is simplistically drawn. Runt, however, craves a different life, although she is unable to articulate what that is. The main distinction between *Disco Pigs* and *Howie the Rookie* is that, in *Disco Pigs*, Runt imagines that an alternative life to their anti-social, teenage abandon is possible, although at no point is she able to express what that alternative is. The second half of the play dramatises the severing of Pig and Runt's relationship. When Runt is beaten up (while Pig is singing her a karaoke song), her desire for 'something else' is accentuated. Following this, they find themselves at the Palace Disco, an upmarket nightclub, where Pig remarks that the clientele regard him with condescension. Runt is far more comfortable in this milieu, and when she is chatted up by a random male, Pig misinterprets the cue and beats the young man to death. Runt flees the scene and, alone, states that her friendship with Pig has come to an end, again asserting her desire for a new life:

... [Pig is] my one an only, he de bes an da worse pal in dis bad ol whirl. An I wan Pig an I wan for all da buzz an all da disco we do dance but hey ho an wadda ya know I wan fur sumthin else! Sumthin different! Sumthin different! Fuckin freedom! Jus me! Jus da Runt! ... (187)

Walsh's drama, unlike O'Rowe's, at least offers a working-class character who can think outside of immediate desires for personal gratification or survival. However, the dramatic world of *Disco Pigs* is, like that of *Howie the Rookie*, restricted by its appropriated, cinematic form. Runt, directly addressing the audience, states:

... we make a whirl dat no one can live in sept us 2. Bonny an Clyde, ya seen da movie! Fantastic, yeah! (173)

*Disco Pigs* merges the 'subcultural style' that Debbie Ging refers to with the conventions of the Hollywood road movie. Hollywood road movies like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) generally involve a boy/girl relationship, a car and an open highway where the criminal couple can wreak havoc and evade the clutches of the law until,

naturally, the genre demands redemption. Walsh's play forgoes the car and the highway, but appropriates other conventions of this genre, and the play's closure resembles that of Terence Mallick's *Badlands* (1973). In Mallick's film, the male protagonist wilfully embraces a random, murderous course through the narrative, and is eventually arrested, unapologetically proud of the infamy that his acts have attached to him. His younger, less worldly, female companion grows disillusioned with and bored of the road trip, and returns to civilization after his arrest, apparently atoned. The motive of Mallick's characters, like those of Walsh's, is boredom. In Walsh's play, having committed an act of murder, Pig is restrained and apparently arrested.<sup>124</sup> Runt, the penitent lesser of two sociopaths, preserves the emotional connection between the spectator and the terroristic dramatic world through her closing speech. The vagueness of the 'Sumthin different' that Runt craves in this speech reflects the fact that Walsh's play, in terms of referents, favours inter-text over meta-text. Devoid of meta-text, the drama has no pretext for an alternative way of living. Having 'grown out' of the road movie narrative, Runt must construct her world all over again. A sense of dramatic closure is achieved by the retreat of this character, during the closing speech, towards internalized subjectivity. For the spectator, Runt (but certainly not Pig) is finally encoded as sympathetic. This sympathy relates to the fact that Runt, unlike Pig, craves and is adaptable to the middle-class world of socializing, represented by the Palace Disco, where the spectator is most likely to go for a drink after the show.

In summary, both Walsh and O'Rowe develop their presentational, storytelling modes as inter-textual homages to the conventions of cinema. Both encode their narratives according to the 'subcultural' genre of Hollywood cinema. The manner in which both plays report action reflects an understanding of how stories are told through cinematic imagery: for Walsh (and director of the original production, Pat Kiernan), the rapid editing is achieved through a charged physicality, while the cinematic imagery of O'Rowe's drama relates to the relentless present tense and imagistic quality of the narrations. The cinematic, presentational mode favours inter-text over meta-text. The

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<sup>124</sup> The published script to the play does not state this. However, at a revival of the original production of the play in Cork's Half Moon Theatre in 1997, the arrest of Pig was physically suggested. In this performance the actor playing Pig, when he finished murdering the young man at the Palace Disco, threw himself backwards off the stage and held his wrists together as if bound. The actor playing Runt was thus fore-grounded and given the stage to deliver her closing speech.

intentions of its authors are apparently apolitical: however, both plays are problematic in terms of how they represent the Irish working-class other, recalling Nicholas Grene's assertion that often "Ireland in an Irish play is a world elsewhere" (262). Elaborating on Grene's observation, Lionel Pilkington notes that

... Grene argues that the setting of an Irish play tends to be rural (or working-class urban) and that the effect of this is to leave the spectator feeling more alert to the reasons she or he now lives at a distance from this rural [or working-class], other world on stage. (7-8)

The success of both *Howie the Rookie* and *Disco Pigs* may be accounted for by two factors. Firstly, they are encoded as recognizable, safe genres that their target audience may easily consume and, because of the , 'cool', cult quality of their styles, offer themselves as theatre events that are 'as good as going to the cinema'. Secondly, they pander to the cinematic literacy of their target audiences, while setting the dramatized, other world of the urban underclass against the affluent, diverse cultural lifestyles of the beneficiaries of the Celtic Tiger era. In other words, the depravity of the dramatic worlds encoded by Walsh and O'Rowe contrasts with and affirms the cultural modernity (and post-modernity) of their target audience.

This chapter has so far considered the first two of three modes of Irish story theatre in relation to the socially progressive strategies of epic theatre discussed in section one of this thesis. The first mode discussed is the conversational, whose epic potential is limited, due to the nuclear, naturalistic dramatic worlds which it stages. The presentational mode splits between emergent, epic narrative strategies in fictional dramatic worlds, as in the plays of Bolger and McCabe, and genre pastiche, as in the plays of Walsh and O'Rowe. This chapter will now consider a testimonial mode, arguing that it represents a restoration of the counter-hegemonic mask of folk performance tradition, and thus enables a contemporary Irish, epic theatre. In other words, the emergence of the testimonial mode of Irish story theatre is where Irish drama enters the genealogy of the epic theatre, which begins in 1896 with Alfred Jarry, and re-emerges in the theatres of Brecht, Fo, Littlewood, Fugard and others.

Because storytelling, by its very nature, has a testimonial quality, a clear distinction of what this thesis understands as the difference between the testimonial and

presentational modes needs to be set out. According to this thesis, the presentational mode is fictional. Dramas that belong to this mode may have an epic, meta-textual quality (Bolger, McCabe) or, alternatively, may be characterized by a post-modern, inter-textuality (O'Rowe, Walsh). The story dramas of the presentational mode tend to have varying degrees of engagement with lived experience or with the pressing social issues of their time. However, in each case the story content, however far from or close to lived experience, is recognizably fictional. The testimonial mode reflects the presentational mode in the sense that its storytellers address the audience directly, in a presentational manner. Both modes also share a liminal sense of time and space, a contingent or transformative approach to staging, and an unpredictability of narrative voices. The testimonial mode differs from the presentational in its disclosure of a documentary or biographical quality. The testimonial mode advertises its meta-text.

According to this thesis, the testimonial mode is initiated in 2002, with the first production of Gerard Mannix Flynn's *James X*.<sup>125</sup> The complex dramaturgy of the play is reasonably well explained in the following summary:<sup>126</sup>

James X explores the difficulties of a person confronting the complexities of life. As he tries to salvage the truth of his childhood, James X finds himself pitched against an indifferent State and Church still in denial.<sup>127</sup> Conjuring up people and places, he does battle with memories of industrial school, reform school and prison. (irishplayography.com)

*James X* is testimonial because, according to the biography of the author and its promotional material, it asserts itself as a reflection of Flynn's life as an anti-social citizen under the surveillance of the State. The narrative is dominated by accounts of the State's surveillance and incarceration of the eponymous character, who is at once the author and not the author. Flynn deliberately truncates the narrative so that it is at first a fictionalization of his life as an inmate of the Irish State's institutions of reform, and secondly (in an epilogue) an autobiographical account of the known facts of these

<sup>125</sup> *James X* was first produced, in its definitive version, at the Project Arts Centre, Dublin, in 2003. The production was directed by Pam Brighton and performed by the author.

<sup>126</sup> This website, which archives Irish professional dramatic productions, generally allows the author/company to write their own summary. In this case, the description is most likely that of the author himself.

<sup>127</sup> In the context of the analysis of *James X*, the term State denotes the Church/State nexus.

experiences. The dramaturgy reflects the dubious quality of traumatized memory. The main part of the story, the narrative of the semi-fictional James, is Flynn's "grandiose story ... [the] euphoric recalling of the events of my [Flynn's] life ... [without which] I wouldn't have survived" (52). The final statements are the "story I came to tell" (52), a factual listing of what he remembers as the abuses visited upon him by the State. Flynn presents two realities: the reality of creative memory as anaesthetic to the abuses inflicted upon him by the State and, latterly, the reality of concrete facts, with the spectator invited to assume that these memories are not creative, but rather testimonially accurate. The text is at once memory and testimony. Creative memory serves a transformative act of storytelling, while the testimony asserts the didactic purpose of the performance: the demand for social transformation. By rendering its narrative transparent as a polemical act of creation and intervention, *James X* represents an act of de-mythologizing. The play asserts its own mythology as an alternative to the narratives of the State through the specific rejection of the State's files as the dominant narrative of Flynn's life. The play also proposes a re-mythologized narrative of the State, as told by the victims of its institutions of reform. *James X* asserts the testimonial mode as interrogative of the narratives of the Irish State, and dramaturgically inverts the gaze that characterizes the terroristic surveillance that the State visited upon Flynn's own childhood, and the childhoods of others.

As a dramaturgical location, the courtroom, as discussed in relation to Brecht, is intrinsic to the 'thinking space' of the epic theatre. It is no coincidence that this location re-emerges in the dramaturgy of Flynn. *James X* begins with the author thinly disguised as narrator of a version of the story of his abuse by the institutions of the Irish State. He is about to enter a courtroom to give testimony regarding his experiences as a victim of these abuses:

I have to go into that courtroom soon, into my past. Tell them what happened back then when I was eleven, but I just want to run and run and run. Abandon the whole thing. Fright, me therapist called it. We get it the first day we are born. Fright. I got a great fright when they handed me my file this morning but it was nothing to the fright I got when I read it. I feel contaminated, sick, soul-sick. According to this State file I was a dangerous person at three years old.

(13)

The narrator is confronted by a dominant narrative, the State file which he holds in his hand. According to this report, he has been psychologically dangerous, violently anti-social and prone to criminal acts since his early childhood. Through an oppositional narrative, James recalls the significant memories of his childhood and adolescence: his birth; his early childhood as part of a large working-class family in Dublin; the constant arguing of his parents, often interrupted by the police; the over-crowded flat (sometimes six to a bed); being expelled from school (aged six); his sentences in various State industrial schools (aged 11) and reform schools (aged 13) due to various thefts (including stealing Dinky cars); being declared insane and committed to the Central Mental Hospital (aged 15); a term in prison (aged 16); and an adult life of addiction to alcohol and drugs (aged 18 to 40). The narrative voice has a stream-of-consciousness quality: as Liam Heylin notes, in an *Irish Examiner* review, Flynn as performer “frequently turns phrases into a kind of rapping rhythm ... [with] the strange double effect of a child trying to remember and a crazy person trying to blot things out” (qtd. on back cover of *James X*). James describes the early-morning mayhem of his childhood in his family’s overcrowded flat:

... ‘Aaagh, who robbed me shoelaces?’ ‘That’s my shirt.’ ‘She’s got my underpants on.’ ‘They’re mine.’ ‘That’s his.’ ‘They’re hers.’ ‘You’re standing on my toe.’ Push, shove, kick, punch. Kill to dress, not dressed to kill, kill to dress, not dressed to kill, all ‘cause the pope wouldn’t give out the pill. (23)

Redolent of *Frank Pig Says Hello*, this extract presents a dramatic world of poverty with humour and invention. The storyteller, apparently lost in an internalized memory of his youth, carefully recalls the narrative meta-text through the reference to the pope. On one hand, Flynn reports an aspect of the history of a particular type of family of the Dublin underclass, one which is characterized by poverty, large numbers of children, and poor, over-crowded living conditions. On another hand, he is putting this poverty in a complex historical context: that is, the drama explains this poverty and over-crowding as a function of State legislation, or Church-State legislation (the banning of contraception). A running joke in the narrative is that, whenever James returns home after one of his spells in a State institution, there is a new baby in the house. The Church and State have laws, apparently, but they have no remedy for the dehumanizing consequences of these laws on the lives of ordinary people. Through

the creative dramatization of memory, *James X* brilliantly exposes the dehumanized living conditions of the Irish Catholic underclass in the 1960s, as consequences of the repressive legislative systems of Church and State. Through the personal narrative of James, the play also explains the system which the State put in place to deal with the anti-social 'others' which these conditions inevitably produced. When James is sentenced to two years in a State industrial school in Connemara, he experiences brutal, violent discipline "under the watchful eyes of the Christian Brothers ... armed to the teeth with canes, boots, fists and the hand-stretched leather straps" (29). James reflects on the landscape of the school:

The wind stings. It has no knowledge of mercy, and lost boys cannot understand why in the graveyard up at the back, beyond the church and the Brother's monastery, hidden amongst dead wind-twisted rhododendrons, stands a cement cross that carries the names of boys, aged seven, from 1907. Carries the dates of their deaths from past to present. They died of a cold, so we were told, so we were told ... (29)

In this extract, Flynn deploys one of the great latitudes of the storyteller's art: that is, that in the reporting of his/her own narrative, the storyteller may also invoke the stories of others, untold, that carry a similar history. Flynn, however, does not invoke the untold stories of the thousands of other boys who suffered abuse at the hands of the Irish Church and State as a means of universalizing or aestheticizing their tragedy. He does so as a means of disidentifying the audience with the specificity of *James X* and drawing attention to the wide-scale enormity of the crimes committed by the State against the Irish working-class. The narrative begins as, apparently, an internalized, stream-of-consciousness act of recollection, but is constantly projected in relation to, and about the world that surrounds the author. By setting out to confront 'the complexities of life' in order to 'salvage the truth of his [Flynn's] childhood', *James X* breaks through the limit of possibilities accepted by Monica in *The Holy Ground*. In so doing, he embodies the liberatory potential of a dramaturgy which acts on Jerome Bruner's insight that, through narrative, "Self[hood] is a product of our telling, and not some essence to be delved for in the recesses of subjectivity" (85/6). Bruner argues that selfhood is "profoundly relational ... [and that] self is other ... [that the] construction of selfhood cannot proceed without a capacity to narrate" (86). Flynn's narrative drive for selfhood "involves a commitment to others as well as being 'true to

oneself” (Bruner 69). Through the imaginative recollection of his experiences of the surveillance of the State, he puts forward a way of thinking about the State, or the state of the State. Damningly, he suggests that the State itself is not characterized by ways of thinking, but rather by ways of operating. In the following, James paraphrases the conclusions of a doctor who examined the boy, aged thirteen, at the Dublin Children’s Hospital, on behalf of the courts:

What am I going to do with you? It’s me needs the help. I know, I’ll remand you on bail for more psychiatric assessments, physical, mental, emotional and psychological reports, school reports, garda reports. There is something wrong with you, you are the problem. We have nowhere to put you but when we do find a place we are going to lock you up and throw away the key. Can somebody see if there is a vacancy at the reform school? Remand on bail for more reports. See you next week child, if not before. In the meantime be good, be good. (35)

In this extract, Flynn embodies and satirizes the farce of a State hegemony that operates but does not think. *James X* surveys the self as a function of a State penal system that is a continuum of debilitating institutions perpetuating a path from juvenile to adult delinquency for the anti-social other.<sup>128</sup> The State is impenetrable, because it cannot think outside of its corrective system or contemplate a critique of its expedients of silence and denial, regarding its crimes against children. In a moment of despair, while confined in prison, James dreams an alternative narrative to the one which he is acting out:

Love, I thought in my dream, love and compassion. Love is the only thing, not madness and destruction. (44)

The desire for love is neither pitiable nor sentimental. It relates to the meta-text of the narrative. In James’s encounter with the narrative survey of the State, the things that are absent in its *modus operandi* are love and compassion. In his oppositional survey of the State, he locates the dialectic, both ontological and political, in what is absent. At this point in the narrative, the possibility of transformation – both personal and

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<sup>128</sup> At each successive court-room appearance or first day in industrial school/reform school/prison, James notes that the same faces, several years older, are there to greet him, including police officers and prisoners.



social – is foregrounded. As Bruner states, narrative is “a form that keeps perpetually in play the uneasy alliance between the historically established and the imaginatively possible” (62). In this sense, James’ quest for selfhood relates to a process of deconstruction/reconstruction: in order to reconstruct (achieve selfhood), the storyteller must first deconstruct (the narrative of the State). For Flynn, the problems of the State relate both to what is present (operations) and what is missing (love, compassion). In *James X*, the working through of the traumatized memory of the self is bound to an interrogation of the narrative which the State has written for (and inflicted upon) him. Flynn deploys the unpredictable voice of the storyteller in opposition to the cold, expedient facts of the police file on his life. Through a transformative storytelling voice that is in turn poetic (the graves in Connemara), ironic (the doctor’s summary) and hesitant (in the waiting room of the court), Flynn asserts the history of the Irish working-class as integral to an understanding of the history of the neo-colonial State. In Barthes’ terms, history is considered integral to meaning.

The testimony (or epilogue) which closes the action is delivered as factual, sober reportage. It is devoid of the anaesthetics of comedy and selective memory, and includes reference to extreme sexual abuses which the author suffered in a number of institutions. It is set against the physically charged theatricality of the memory narrative which forms the main body of the drama, which it resembles in terms of content but not in terms of narrative voice or style. By presenting the same story twice, Flynn asserts both the power of poetry and the power of testimony and, by doing so within one dramaturgical conceit, reconciles both. In the terms of this thesis, *James X*, makes visible both text and meta-text, and is an example of progressive, epic, storytelling theatre. It asserts storytelling and story theatre as a potentially subversive tool through which can be expressed “narratives occluded in the process of State formation”,<sup>129</sup> and which can be deployed against the State’s “narrative resources [which] conventionalise the inequities it generates and thereby contain its imbalances and incompatibilities” (Bruner 93).

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<sup>129</sup> David Lloyd used this phrase in concluding remarks to “Radical Theatre and Ireland: A Colloquium” held at Liverpool Hope University, February 6-7, 2009.

Flynn's narrative calls for a re-thinking of the State and its relationship to its citizens. The burden of State guilt is such, according to Flynn's accounts of his experiences of its institutions - both factual and fictional - that the narrative of blame acts as both pretext and licence for transformative thinking. As its closing lines demonstrate, the play rejects financial compensation or apology on the part of the Irish State as a cathartic closure to its crimes against the humanity of a vulnerable class of Irish person. Instead, the epilogue invites active citizenship, with James X/Mannix Flynn refusing to engage with the legal procedures of the Irish State:

If I walk into that courtroom now I'll never be able to walk again into my own life. They'll give me the few bob, their financial redress, and push me back out on the street. Plead Guilty and Sons want me to take a no-fault statement - that's like pleading guilty to something I didn't do - right up their street! But not today, all I am here for now is to hand them back this file and give them my statement. This is what was done to me when I was helpless, when I had no voice, no one to turn to. When I was a child. This is not my shame anymore, it never was. I've carried it long enough. It is yours and today I am giving it back. So here's your file, File No. 195702 your words, property of the State, the Church, their servants and agents and you the citizens. And this statement [the State file], this is your shame. There is no care in this file, no love. (54)

The Irish State, apparently, doesn't care for its miscreants, or 'other' citizens. It does not show them any love. The narrator therefore decides to enact at once an act of self-compassion and a call-to-arms of Irish active citizenship. The physical presentation (holding aloft) and rejection (handing back) of the State file is a metaphor for a call for a new State, or a new state of the State. It demands a new narrative of the State, as invited by the dramaturgical, counter-narrative of the drama.

In summary, *James X* asserts the potential of (auto)biographical and documentary-based, testimonial story theatre as an inverted gaze, or counter-narrative to the narrative of the State. The re-creative repetition of Flynn's story, as a dramaturgical structure, reflects the epic quality of Flynn's autobiographical narrative. The creative account of Flynn's life, which takes up most of the performance, signifies the transformative power of narrative (and storytelling) as a way of imagining the world as a more just place to live in. The brief factual account of Flynn's life asserts his

stage as an epic courtroom in which Irish State malpractice is publicly arraigned. Narrative transformation, through the act of storytelling, is thereby bound to social transformation, which relates to the analysis of the documentary facts. Through a narrative of the self as other, Flynn the protagonist is the dramatized victim of the State, or the 'anyman' (after Brecht) of the drama. As performer, he is a self-proclaimed and self-staged interventionist (after Fo and Jarry). As dramaturg, he opposes both illusionist (naturalistic) and delusionist (inter-textual, presentational story mode) dramaturgies. For Flynn as epic theatre strategist, the culture of silence and denial which supports the State institutions exposed in *James X*, is bound to the problem of contemporary Ireland as an illusion, or semblance, of modernity. To initiate an epic trend in Irish story theatre, Flynn makes a dramaturgical statement against illusion, or semblance: hence, the chosen style of *James X* is the real of autobiographical testimony. Flynn innately understands the dialectical quality of an oppositional, epic dramaturgy: in a corrupt State system which attempts to conceal the facts surrounding its malpractices, Flynn opposes silence with documentary facts. According to this example of epic theatre, what contemporary Ireland and contemporary Irish theatre requires is a dramaturgy of testimony, and storytelling reconsidered as a form of cultural intervention.

In Chapter Seven, further examples of the testimonial, story theatre mode will be discussed, in relation to my own practice with Be Your Own Banana Theatre Company. Two productions will be analyzed: *The Self-obsessed Tragedy of Ed Malone* by Edward Malone (autobiographical), and *Thailand: What's Love Got To Do With It?* by Máirtín de Cógáin and Brian Desmond (documentary). Both plays deliberately set out to use testimony as a pretext to an epic narrative strategy that critically opposes both the state of the Irish State, and the state of contemporary Irish theatre.

## Chapter Seven

### Global theme, local form: Testimony, Storytelling and *Thailand*: *What's Love Got To Do With It?*

Storytelling, great storytelling is simple. Direct. Honest. No hiding. No judgement. Just straight forward storytelling. Like a child relaying information to his mother or father from a day at school. With neutrality. There is no attachment to outcomes, there is no 'sighing' or 'shrugging of shoulders'. No 'naturalistic behaviour' that gets in the way of the direct communication that the audience has paid their money to see. And this was and still is a major grievance of mine. Naturalism. The preoccupation with 'Behaviour'. 'Who cares?', I ask. One doesn't go to the theatre to see actors behaving like there is a camera in their face. (Edward Malone, interview)

This chapter sets out to analyze the play, *Thailand: What's Love Got To Do With It?* (2007) by Máirtín de Cógáin and Brian Desmond,<sup>130</sup> as an example of the testimonial mode of Irish story theatre initiated by Gerard Mannix Flynn's *James X*, discussed in Chapter Six. The analysis will be framed as follows. Firstly, there will be a brief description of examples of story theatre produced by Be Your Own Banana Theatre Company (BYOB) prior to the first production of *Thailand*, in particular Edward Malone's *Self-obsessed Tragedy of Ed Malone*, which was the first BYOB production that deployed the testimonial mode. Following this, the dramaturgical process through which the play was conceived, developed, encoded and performed will be outlined. The play will then be analyzed in terms of the role of the performer, de Cógáin, an established, contemporary seanchaí who re-configures his own practice as a storyteller for this production. *Thailand* will be analyzed in relation to its interrogation of contemporary Ireland and the responsibilities of citizenship, both national and global. Its meta-textual qualities, it is argued, are a function both of the political context in which it was produced (the Irish general election of May 2007) and the devices through which the storyteller (and narrative) invites a critical

<sup>130</sup> *Thailand* was first produced in June 2007 at Fast Eddie's Nightclub, Cork, as part of the Cork Midsummer Festival 2007, by Be Your Own Banana Theatre Company. The show was performed by de Cógáin and directed by Desmond. The original production was produced in 2008 and 2009 by Meridian Theatre Company, with the same performer and director.

spectatorship of the contradictions and expediencies of the State's relationship to the sex industry in the Far East. A brief interview with de Cógáin will expose how the storyteller understood the exchange mechanism between performer and spectator during performances of *Thailand*. As director of the production, this author will reflect on the production as a deliberate epic strategy and how this relates to the dramaturgical latitudes available to the testimonial mode of story theatre. It is important to note at this point that the analysis of *Thailand* is not based on a practice-based research methodology, but rather is a critical reflection on professional practice. This reflection on practice follows the example of Dario Fo who, as a researcher of popular performance traditions "did not create a theoretical method... [but] analyzed his own practice, developing it, finding parallels with it, and so on" (Ghelardi 225). As a result of this structured reflection, *Thailand* will be argued as the moment in which BYOB's attempt to achieve epic narrative becomes manifest. It is hoped that the analysis of the storytelling qualities of *Thailand* will expose the nature and critical potential of epic storytelling, as embodied in the testimonial mode of story theatre.

BYOB was founded in 2000 by Brian Desmond and Marcos Bale, an Argentinian performer trained in forms relating to the mask and clowning. The aim of the company was, through critical practice, to research international performance traditions relating to the mask and clowning, and to develop and produce original, comedic theatre for the Irish stage. During the first six months of activity, practical workshops were undertaken to explore European performance traditions, including the masks of Commedia dell'Arte and Grotowskian exercises,<sup>131</sup> with the purpose of developing a studio practice through which the company could encode original, grotesque, physical characterizations through exploration or rehearsal. In other words, BYOB set out to develop a methodology through which we could encode 'new masks' or, to employ Jarry's term (of which we were ignorant at the time), effigies of contemporary types or characters. An interest in storytelling emerged during the process, mainly due to the involvement of seanchaí (and latent clown) Máirtín de Cógáin. BYOB began to develop improvisational exercises, influenced by Keith Johnstone's story games in *Impro for Storytellers*, involving a storyteller figure and

<sup>131</sup> The Grotowskian exercises were based on a three-day course Desmond attended with Polish company teatro Osmego Dnia in Dublin in January 1999. The exploration of Commedia was informed by John Rudlin's outline of the physicalities of Commedia masks in *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook*.

role-playing actors, with the latter attempting to embody the action related by the narrator. Insights gleaned from these improvisational exercises in storytelling and role-play, developed in ignorance of the story theatre traditions of Brecht and the Irish National Theatre referred to previously in this thesis, characterized the particular style or performance language of BYOB's practice over the next decade or so.

What interested the company about this form of improvisation was the intrinsic 'at-play' that it demanded. This 'at-play', in a studio environment, related mainly to the ensemble. The storyteller would develop a narrative line which the role-players would pantomime. As the complicité between performers developed, it was found that role-players would inevitably anticipate their next action according to narrative logic. As the company's main concern at this stage was with comic effect, the storyteller was encouraged to thwart the through line of the role-player. For instance, a role-player, under instruction from the storyteller, might lift a bag from the floor and move towards a train station. The storyteller might then insert a line such as 'the bag felt very heavy on his shoulder', requiring the role-player to shift his/her physicality, which would cause great hilarity amongst the actors not participating in the exercise. Noticing that this dynamic conferred a great deal of status upon the storyteller, an alteration was made to democratize the 'at-play' of the exercise. BYOB established the convention that the storyteller would allow the role-player to speak at random points in the story: for example, if a hero character encountered a terrifying ogre, the storyteller might say, 'the hero said', to which the actor role-playing the hero might ask, 'do you know the way to Dingle?', or something similarly incongruous, or surprising. Interestingly, much of the comedy developed in these improvisations related to the predictability of genre or story conventions, and the actors' disregarding of them. In these improvisations, the actor/storytellers revelled in the undermining of the spectators' (those watching the improvisation) expectations, and the latitude afforded them by the unpredictability of this narrative mode.

BYOB's first production, *My Best Friend's Mother* (2000),<sup>132</sup> belongs to the presentational mode of Irish story theatre. It was first produced at a time when the small theatre of Cork, the Granary Theatre, was producing an increasing amount of

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<sup>132</sup> First produced at the Granary Theatre, Cork, in September 2000, directed by Brian Desmond.

British 'in-yer-face' theatre, including the plays of Mark Ravenhill and Jonathan Harvey.<sup>133</sup> *My Best Friend's Mother* set itself in tacit opposition to this development in local production, exemplified in the play's anti-psychological, anti-naturalistic, presentational dramaturgy. This opposition was underlined by the self-conscious 'Irishness' of the play's style, which blended seanchaí storytelling with the grotesque role-play of characters. The play is a comic tale of an Irishman's exile, due to an affair with an older, married woman, and his subsequent sexual odyssey throughout Europe, punctuated with affairs with women twice his age. The protagonist's story is reported by five first-person narrators, who also perform over thirty other roles, with one female actor role-playing his various lovers. The roles of storyteller and protagonist are interchangeable, with each male actor taking turns in both. The protagonist is presented, in turn, as both innocent and sinister: as an exile he is an archetypal, Irish romantic figure; as a promiscuous opportunist, he resembles the nihilistic anti-hero of Thackeray's *Barry Lyndon*.

The aim of the production was, primarily, to entertain and to create an 'at-play' with the spectators' expectations of narrative, via the 'at-play' between storyteller and role-play described previously. By interchanging the actor-in-role as protagonist, however, the production also emphasised the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in the narrative. In a manner reminiscent of Brecht, each substitution of a new actor in the role of protagonist emphasizes the sense of an episodic presentation. Eschewing psychological interpretation, the dramaturgy invites the audience to decipher, or judge, the individual actions of the protagonist in isolation. As a comedic experiment in the latitudes of storytelling and narrative, *My Best Friend's Mother* contained several epic qualities. Firstly, the play defines narrative as unpredictable and 'at-play' with the narrative expectations of the spectator. Secondly, it interchanges its actors towards a mode of audience disidentification with the protagonist. Thirdly, it restores the Irish folk tradition of the seanchaí as a deliberate intervention against the increasingly influential, introspective dramaturgies of contemporary British, 'in-yer-face' theatre, and their Irish counterparts such as Enda

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<sup>133</sup> In 1999, the Granary had also hosted the première of Enda Walsh's *Misterman*, and has regularly produced Walsh's plays over the last decade. Interestingly, in this presentational, one-actor play, Walsh's writing shows clear epic potential.

Walsh, as discussed in Chapter Six.<sup>134</sup> Finally, its dramaturgical mode of complex layering is transparent: its storytellers report the narrative, physically framing the episodes (or role-plays). The role-plays, playfully performed as if improvised, reveal the means of production, or physical construction of narrative.

BYOB's next project culminated with the production of *De Bogman* (2000),<sup>135</sup> by Brian Desmond and Máirtín de Cógáin, which also belongs to the presentational mode of Irish story theatre. The play is a parody of the Hollywood boxing (or sports) movie, satirizing the modes of identification traditionally deployed by this genre. *De Bogman* is mainly a solo performance,<sup>136</sup> with seanchaí de Cógáin reporting the third-person narrative and also role-playing over twenty characters. The narrative reports the story of Declan (the Bogman), an Irish village idiot and pariah who, exiled after accidentally murdering a man in a brawl, goes to the United States to become world heavyweight boxing champion. The narrative observes the core conventions of the established genre: Declan is an outsider from a poor family; Declan is a man of honour and integrity (the man he kills in Ireland has just insulted the Bogman's mother); he overcomes an exploitative master, namely his first manager on the US prize-fighting circuit; he eventually becomes world champion; and, of course, he falls in love. The treatment of the final convention crystallises the relationship in the narrative between parody and satire, as the love Declan discovers is a homosexual one, with his trainer Donal Ó Rí.<sup>137</sup> The parody relates to the transformation of the protagonist from the archetypal, laconic (Declan is generally mono-syllabic), alpha-male hero of the Hollywood sports movie to that of unlikely gay icon-cum-boxing hero. There is an explicit satire of the Hollywood sports movie, which traditionally flits between tongue-in-cheek homoeroticism (*Gentleman Jim*, *The Longest Yard*) and downright homophobia (*The Basketball Diaries*, *The Longest Yard*). *De Bogman* booby-traps the audience through initially inviting their support for the outsider,

<sup>134</sup> Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs* was developed and rehearsed for its first production in the Granary Theatre Studio (1996).

<sup>135</sup> *De Bogman* was first produced at the Granary Theatre, Cork, in September 2000, performed by de Cógáin and directed by Brian Desmond. The play was initially funded, and therefore produced, by the dramatic society of University College Cork. The production team, however, was that of the company, and subsequent productions were all mounted under the BYOB banner.

<sup>136</sup> In the final section, there are two cameos: one is that of a boxer for a ten-minute, slapstick, world title fight; the other is that of a commentator, who also plays the role of the Bogman's assassin.

<sup>137</sup> Donal Ó Rí translates from the Gaelic to Don King, and is a parodic reference to the real-life US boxing promoter.



evoking how this genre conditions spectators to sympathise with the protagonist, and then, by re-writing the protagonist as homosexual immediately before the scene of his ultimate triumph, the world heavyweight title fight. Following his triumph, Declan is assassinated, ascending into heaven to be re-united with his beloved mother, which farcically ends both the narrative and any pretence that the spectator is expected to identify with the protagonist.

*De Bogman* is essentially an assault on genre, and the simplistic modes of identification it invites in the spectator. De Cógáin's breathless, versatile performance, described as "rich, varied, broad, and supremely physical" (www.nytheatre.com), above all else, asserted the potential of the individual storyteller as an agent of radical stage transformation, both in terms of his constant shifting between characters and storyteller (and multiple locations), and also in the manner through which his narration re-writes both itself and its referent (the boxing/sports movie) in the exposition of Declan as homosexual. De Cógáin's performance in *De Bogman*, much like that of Dario Fo in *Accidental Death*, asserts the clown as pretext, as 'potentially anything' at the service of the narrative. By asserting this potential, De Cógáin as clown asserts himself as a potentially terrifying, transformative, dramaturgical weapon. This potential derives from the fact that *De Bogman* is a solo performance. In ensemble story theatre performances such as *My Best Friend's Mother* and *The Ballad of Badger Bickle's Youngfella*,<sup>138</sup> there are two 'at-plays': the 'at-play' between the actors, and the 'at-play' between the ensemble and the spectator. In plays such as *De Bogman*, however, there is only an 'at-play' between the performer and spectator. The distillation from ensemble to solo story theatre therefore creates a sustained 'at-play' between performer and spectator. As epic strategist, the solo storyteller has the potential to confront an audience with a counter-narrative in the most direct terms, as exemplified in the dramaturgies of Dario Fo (*Mistero Buffo*) and Gerard Mannix Flynn (*James X*).

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<sup>138</sup> *The Ballad of Badger Bickle's Youngfella*, by Brian Desmond and Alan Collins, was first produced by BYOB at the Dublin Fringe Festival in September 2003. In *The Ballad*, four actors perform over one hundred roles.

In 2005, BYOB produced *The Self-obsessed Tragedy of Ed Malone*,<sup>139</sup> written and performed by Edward Malone and directed by Brian Desmond. *The Tragedy* was the first BYOB production to deliberately deploy the testimonial mode of Irish story theatre. The shift in production style from the presentational mode to the testimonial mode of story theatre reflected a definite shift in the company's cultural politics. Having successfully produced a number of comedies from 2000 to 2005, BYOB aspired to produce a more direct theatre, politically engaged and committed to "provocation" in its moment of "presentation" (Badiou, "Rhapsody" 194). The play is an autobiographical account of reflections on and presentations of significant episodes in the life of the twenty-four-year-old author: his many unrequited loves; his 'gay phase'; his being bullied by an abusive, Irish speaking, secondary school teacher; and, most importantly, his relationship with his recently deceased father. Malone describes his dramaturgical intentions:

In the text I wanted to explore and break down class clichés. What does it mean to examine a self-educated working class father in modern Ireland who speaks with an English accent? Does this exist? It did in my world and it was something that I had never seen in contemporary Irish theatre, where the working class father is Perennially being portrayed in one-dimensional, idiotic terms. I was bored of that, and I was bored of seeing teenagers having their first drugs experiences on stage in play after play. I listened to 'The Carpenters' as an adolescent. That's not to say 'Oh, look at me, I'm so unique and different' but more 'Can we please have a bit of honesty here?' (Interview)

Malone's play sets itself in direct opposition to the subcultural style of the post-modern presentational mode of Irish story theatre, as discussed in Chapter Seven. Cognisant of the problematic representations of the working-class subject in plays such as *Disco Pigs* and *Howie the Rookie*, *The Tragedy's* biographical narrative presents a working-class experience that is as complex as its angst-ridden author's quest for selfhood. Malone's father is a working-class Englishman, employed as a security guard in a General Motors factory in Cork in the 1990s. The following is an extract from the episode where Malone's father reveals that he has just been fired from his job:

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<sup>139</sup> *The Tragedy* was first performed at the Granary Theatre in January 2005. It was revived several times over the following two years.

FATHER

That's right son. They fired me. They fired me son, because I didn't speak with a Cork accent.

ED MALONE

What? That's silly dad! What are you on about?

FATHER

They don't like the way I speak. I'm well spoken. I pronounce my th's. I like doing my crosswords. I like to read books. You know, some nights when I was doing those crosswords I would ring you and with my beautiful David Niven like voice I would ask questions like, who was it who played Marlon Brando's brother in *On the Waterfront*? And you would say . . .

ED MALONE

Eh, that's Rod Steiger dad!

FATHER

And they would snigger and laugh behind me, and roar Malone you fucking queer! With your fucking crosswords and shit. What the fuck are you doing? I suppose your son's the fucking same is he? A family of fucking queers.

NARRATOR

Then he would tell me how they would poke and dig him in the stomach and chest and scream . . .

FORD WORKER

C'mon Malone, you fat bastard! Hurry up! It's not rocket science!

NARRATOR

He was slowing up you see. Wasn't stacking those shelves or lifting those boxes or carrying out all the other acts of a security guard with the same vibrancy.

FORD WORKER

What's wrong with ya Malone, c'mon faster, what's wrong with ya, c'mon for fuck's sake! (Unpublished)

Malone's father is presented as an outsider within his own social class, ostracized by advocates of a nationalist identity that defines itself as "above all that which [is] not English" (Merriman, "Not Always, But Often" 49). Just as Malone presents himself as a bullied outsider amongst his secondary school teachers and peers, so his father is

victimized in his workplace according to the expedient logic of residual anti-colonial atavism. In terms of cultural capital, father and son also share a passion for classic movies and 'old' movie stars, such as Richard Burton, Richard Harris and David Niven. For Malone, working-class Irish experience is not an egoistic drive for instant gratification, á la Walsh and O'Rowe, but a complex attachment to cultural stimuli such as classic film, amateur dramatics (he makes his stage debut in *King Lear*) and pop music from the 1960s and 1970s (The Carpenters and The Beach Boys are mentioned). More generally common teenage distractions are also referred to: Malone plays football for his local club (inevitably he is a substitute), experiments with alcohol, and falls for a series of women, although each romantic aspiration is unrequited. Malone's dramatization of a personal quest for selfhood interrogates the self as subject through a critical, somewhat bewildered analysis of the social world of his experiences. Through a projected subjectivity, which incorporates social analysis (in particular his father's ostracism) and also the act of storytelling itself (in several episodes Malone refers to himself in the third person), the play becomes a "meta-event that gives coherence and continuity to the scramble of experience" (Bruner 73). This coherence grounds the play's assertion that the working-class subject can not only behave in relation to things other than the immediate desires of the flesh, but s/he can also write and perform complex, socially conscious plays.

For BYOB, *The Tragedy* represented a departure in storytelling mode from the company's earlier practice. The urban storytelling voice of Malone's play contrasted with the more rural tone of earlier plays like *De Bogman* and *My Best Friend's Mother*, which recall the seanchaí tradition, and this urbanization reflects a movement towards testimony, in this case autobiographical testimony, and the immediate, social concerns of *The Tragedy's* narrative. The epic qualities of the play reflected a developed complexity of layers, with Malone himself as author, storyteller and role-player of the narrative. In rehearsal, one of the key concerns was the autobiographical and potentially sympathetic nature of the play's material. In order to minimize audience sympathy for Malone the character, it was decided that Malone the storyteller would be deployed as the ambiguous, dramaturgical agent of disidentification. An opening tirade was written into the script, which Malone delivered directly to the audience, with aggression and volume:

Look at the state of ye! Look at the state of ye! Behan would turn in his grave if he saw ye! Middle class cunts! Quare fellas is right hah! Hah! Hah! D'ye hear me! D'ye hear me! D'ye hear me!

*Blackout. Spotlight on actor.*

Singer songwriter nancy boys! Moanin' about their ol' dolls! If Luke Kelly could see ye now! I can't believe ye come from the same country as that man! Ye're no parcel of rogues! Ye're no parcel of rogues! Kelly sang from the heart! From the heart, d'ye hear me? Put that in your café latte! Put that in your café mocha! Hah! Hah! Hah!

*Blackout. Spotlight on actor.*

Roy Keane. Michael Collins. Béal na mBláth. Saipan. What's the difference. Two great Corkmen shot in the back. All he wanted was a bowl of pasta! A bowl of pasta! And ye wouldn't give it to him! Was that too much to ask for? Was it? Was it? Hah? Hah? Hah?

*Blackout. Spotlight on actor.*

Romantic Ireland's dead and gone. Fuckin' sure it is! (Unpublished)

By labelling the audience a bunch of café latte-sipping, 'middle-class cunts', Malone positions his storytelling according to his social class perspective, which grounds the perspective of the narrative. Malone, standing at six feet four inches, with unkempt curly hair, an odd costume of grey trousers, cardigan, tie and blazer (also his everyday garb at this time), with saliva drooling from the corner of his mouth and often splattered on people seated in the front row, cut a wild, albeit comical storytelling figure. Throughout the play, he delivers his thoughts and memories in a range of manners: at times he is self-obsessed in an adolescent sense; at others he is opinionated in a pedantic sense; always, however, there is a desperate attempt to make sense, not only of the contradictions of his self, but also of the world in which he lives. In the dramatic episodes, Malone courts the sympathy of the other characters, in particular the various women with whom he is infatuated. Malone the storyteller, however, remains ambiguous, and throughout the drama critiques his obsession with self. In the following, Malone the storyteller comments on his latest infatuation, a bartender called Aoife:

The following day Aoife tells me she's in love with Dave. The following week I see her kissing one of my best buddies Steve. The innocence of it all, eh

Maura [Malone's mother]? The innocence of it all. Maybe I should have eaten those mashed potatoes when I was younger. Helped me get over the rejection. Ah fuck her anyway. It turns out she didn't have much upstairs. No offence, but I like intelligent women. (Unpublished)

This extract perhaps best exemplifies the dubious quality of the storyteller in Malone's play. Courtesy of a tragic tale of unrequited love, Malone leads the spectator down a garden path towards a land of pathos. Before reaching this destination, however, the storyteller delivers a custard pie in the face of the spectator: the arrogant dismissal of Aoife as unintelligent and, on reflection, unworthy of his attention. Malone as storyteller exploits one of the most powerful weapons of the testimonial mode of Irish story theatre: the capacity of the dramaturgy to deconstruct itself. This device of self-deconstruction is, according to this thesis, intrinsic to the epic potential of this mode of story theatre. The complex layering that characterizes *The Tragedy* relates to a dramaturgical understanding that if, in biographical theatre, the "self is [presented as] other" (Bruner 86), then the drama defines itself as a performative act of critical self-interrogation. The author, in this case Malone and previously, Gerard Mannix Flynn, presents a perspective to the audience based on his own lived experiences. The epic quality, or meta-text, relates to the author/performer's admission of subjectivity, which s/he critiques, contradicts and exposes through the act of performance.

*Thailand: What's Love Got To Do With It?* was conceived as a project in November 2006, developed through the following six months and first presented by BYOB as part of the Cork Midsummer Festival in June 2007. Towards the end of 2006, the authors had been privy to a number of conversations where Irish males, both young and middle-aged, had spoken freely about their experiences as sex tourists in the Far East and elsewhere. Apparently, it was becoming more socially acceptable for Irish men to partake of these global recreational opportunities. What fascinated the creative company most about these testimonies was their expedient logic of self-justification. Several reasons or excuses were generally put forth as means of justifying the opportunistic sex tourist: firstly, the host country (and prostitute) was poor, and in need of the business for subsistence purposes; secondly, modern Irish women were apparently such 'hard work' and so diffident to their male counterparts,

that it was logical to seek 'companionship' elsewhere; thirdly, sex tourism is so cheap for the western tourist that it is difficult to avoid its temptations when in the Far East; and, finally, there is the peer pressure associated with the fact that 'all the rest of the lads' are doing it. The first reason put forth was pivotal to the *Thailand* project: the notion that the Irish sex tourist considered himself an economic benefactor of the Third World, rather than an exploitative opportunist. The grotesque, expedient logic of this conviction represented, for the play's authors, a farce of power (economic, rather than governmental) redolent of that encountered by Dario Fo in relation to the events surrounding the Milan bombings, which dictated the dramaturgical form of *Accidental Death*. While conceptualizing *Thailand*, the authors discussed the reasons for Fo's choice to encode *Accidental Death* as a farce. The logic of the self-avowed economic benefactor was, according to the authors of *Thailand*, a joke: the dramatic representation, therefore, would blend the modes of storytelling and stand-up comedy, in order to reflect the contradictions inherent in the documentary evidence.

The play was workshopped through a series of open rehearsals, mainly in cafés and artists' living-rooms before an invited audience of theatre artists and non-theatre professionals. De Cógáin, an accomplished mimic and caricaturist, would improvise the testimony of Declan, a twenty-something Irish man, recounting his experiences as a sex tourist in Thailand. The director would prompt the actor with questions relating to the testimonies received via interviews undertaken with sex tourists.<sup>140</sup> De Cógáin's improvisations were framed around some of the more haunting lines heard during these interviews, all of which remained in the final, performed script:

... we're helping the Thai economy... we're putting bread on the table for them... they know how to treat a man out there... I only did it because the lads were doing it... I wasn't really in the mood, but I'd paid for it... you see, it's not really prostitution at all... (Unpublished)

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<sup>140</sup> The interviews were not recorded, as it was deemed preferable to allow the speaker to deliver their testimony in the least formal terms possible, generally in pubs or coffee shops. Very few of the interviewees were aware that the company was actually developing a play on the subject. However, when it became common knowledge that BYOB was developing *Thailand* for production, several individuals volunteered their testimonies. Some of these individuals genuinely thought that BYOB were writing a play that would advocate sex tourism. Others actually requested that they be credited as contributors to the script.

A common element of the testimonies received was their coercive quality. Many interviewees had spoken of their experiences as if they were letting the interviewers in on a secret, as if this was an opportunity not to be missed. The company came to the conclusion that this coercive quality was intrinsically linked to a project of self-justification: that is, that the more people that could be convinced to partake of the sex tourist industry, the more justifiable it would appear to be (justification in numbers, as it were). During these open rehearsals/improvisations, the intention was to generate a good deal of laughter amongst the spectators. In order to reflect the boastful quality of the interviewees, it was decided that Declan would recount his experiences as if advertising the possibilities available in the Far East to the uninitiated young Irish male. The spectators were generally appalled, in a light-hearted sense, at the grotesque descriptions of lewd sexual acts recounted by Declan. What they found generally most amusing was that the character - encoded as at once gormless, innocent, insatiable and cynical - had come to accept these transactions as a perfectly natural consequence of the size of his wallet and the economic relationship between East and West. Declan, living out his wildest fantasies for a meagre financial outlay, misogynistically revels in the conviction that this was his 'last laugh', as it were, in his largely unsuccessful, romantic history with Irish women. For Declan, selfhood relates to this misogynistic triumph (or delusion).

The comic quality of *Thailand* relates to the farcical logic of the self-justifying statements made by those interviewed about their experiences. The storyteller fulfils two narrative objectives: firstly, he reports the economic relationship between East and West, via Declan's testimony; secondly, he reports the logic of self-justification, according to the documentary material, which is supplied by the testimony of interviewees. The story is exclusively reported through the first-person narrative of Declan. Declan is the filter through which the Irish audience comes to know the remote social world of the play, a convention which exists in western, cinematic treatments of events in the recent history of Asia. Conventionally, western film encodes a westerner (usually white, middle-class) as an outsider in the social world, through whose revelations the audience acquires knowledge of the other world of the narrative. Generally, this character/filter (a cinematic version of narrator) is a sympathetic everywoman/everyman, a reporter (*The Year of Living Dangerously*, 1983) or tourist (*Beyond Rangoon*, 1995) who observes the social world, but plays no



significant part as an agent within it. With *Thailand*, this cinematic mode of narrator/filter was insufficient, because the play set out to interrogate the Irish sex tourist as a conscious agent in the global economic market. We considered how films like *Beyond Rangoon* and *The Year of Living Dangerously* offer the spectator a 'way out' of the dramatic/social world, as represented by the filter/narrator's final act in both narratives, the boarding of an aeroplane in order to ensure their own safety and escape. Because we wanted to provide the audience with a 'way in' to the dramatic/social world of Thailand's sex industry, Declan needed to be encoded as a perpetrator, with every intention of returning to the scene of his adventures, and intent on encouraging others to follow his example.<sup>141</sup> Dramatically, therefore, we decided "to tell the story of evil that takes pride in evil" (Wa Thiong'o 81). This choice was informed by genre convention, as encoded by films like *Beyond Rangoon* and *The Year of Living Dangerously*. *Thailand*, however, opposes and re-writes the convention, just as Fo re-configured the mechanics of farce in *Accidental Death*, as Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechuan* is a pastiche of Greek tragedy, and Jarry deconstructed the Shakespearean heroic drama with *Ubu the King*.

*Thailand* is written as a chronological account, in selected episodes, of Declan's experiences in the course of a three-week holiday in Thailand.<sup>142</sup> The narrative has two sections: firstly, there is the tale of Declan's exploits as a sex tourist in the Pattaya beach resort and, secondly, there is his account of a week-long, safari trek in which he takes part. The Pattaya section reports the range of services available to the sex tourist: brothels where prostitutes are available for as little as five euros; bars where escorts/prostitutes are readily available; bath massage parlours where sexual favours are negotiable; and, finally, the child prostitution strand of the industry. Declan's gleeful, graphic descriptions of the professional services of which he avails are set against his determination to justify the morality of his actions. In the following, he makes an expedient distinction between the Pattaya brothels and the escort/prostitution services available in bars:

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<sup>141</sup> Declan's final statement in *Thailand* is that he plans to holiday in Malaysia the following summer, and to participate in the sex industry there.

<sup>142</sup> The only exception to the chronology is a brief flashback to a disco incident in Ireland, where Declan dances with a French lady.

... [In the Souka-Souka, escort bar] you had to pay the bar to take your wan away, and she was your wan for the night then. It's like, the wans there work for the bar. They're like barmaids that don't serve drink.

So, if a wan takes a fancy to you, you throw the bar a few bob - a tenner or what have ya - and away ye go. That way you've paid off her wages for the night. It's a really good system, d'y'know, in the way that sure what's a tenner to me, and neither the bar nor the wan lose out either, d'y'know. Everyone's happy ... I mean, people say it's prostitution, but it's not. I mean, the Thai wans are really up for it like. Fair enough the first bar we were in was, like, pay for your round, and whatever. But the Souka-Souka bar was different class altogether. I mean, the Souka-Souka wasn't like a brasser place. The wans there don't have to go away with ya if they don't want to. Sure there was one night, this wan wouldn't go away with Louis. We all had a great laugh at him over that, d'y'know what I mean.

But once you've paid the bar the 'bar fine' - that's what they call it, the 'bar fine' - that only means you're doing her a favour, like. You see, there's no guarantee of anything happening after with her like. And if you do get a bit of action, happy days, but there's no obligation to pay her anything extra. So you see, it's not *really* prostitution at all. But I always gave them a few bob before they left in the morning. Even though I didn't have to. I always made a point of that. 'cause I mean, they're broke like. (Unpublished)

The complexity of the storytelling mask is best exemplified here in relation to the italicized 'really', which the storyteller emphasizes to double effect in performance. On one level, the mask of Declan is drawing attention to a potential moral loophole in the distinction between a brothel transaction and the 'bar fine' service of solicitation. Essentially, he is advertising this form of prostitution as ambiguous, and rhetorically justifiable because the sexual act does not happen in the site where the prostitute is solicited. The mask of de Cógáin as storyteller, however, complicates the meaning of the emphasis. De Cógáin, 'at-play' with the mask of Declan, emphasizes the contradiction, or expediency, of the sex tourist. Declan presents a loophole: however, in Fo-like fashion, the mask of de Cógáin as storyteller peeps through to emphasize, and question, the rhetorical quality of Declan's argument.

*Thailand* is carefully encoded in terms of distancing effects, precisely because the testimony is spoken through the first-person narrative of Declan. Throughout, attention is drawn to the presence of the core storyteller, de Cógáin. The opening speech is spoken as if in slow motion:

So we got into Pattaya, right, straight down to Schneider's place to drop off the bags. Schneider was a kind of a half-German fella, whose mother was Irish. McGrath had been talking to him on the internet. So we got a room each for half nothing, all on the top floor, next to each other, handy out, d'y'know. Twas getting nearly dark by this stage, so we went straight downtown, to check out the action, d'y'know what I mean. (Unpublished)

The introduction is painstakingly slow for two reasons. Firstly, because the enthusiasm of Declan's narrative dictates a fast tempo to the delivery, the opening attempts to encourage the audience to listen closely to the testimony, and the contradictions encoded therein. Secondly, it gives the sense of narratives being painstakingly constructed, both by the storyteller and by the cynical mask of Declan that he assumes. A third mask also appears during the performance, although he does not speak. We called this mask the 'Crooked Man',<sup>143</sup> and he appears twice in the play. The first appearance of this mask follows the scene where Declan argues his absurd theory that sex trafficking is an exclusively European phenomenon and that "none of that sort of thing goes on in Thailand". The storyteller, responding to an abrupt sound effect of the instrumental track "The Wild Cats of Kilkenny",<sup>144</sup> instantly transforms into this grotesque mask, which appears to beckon the audience to buy into Declan's logic. This track, filled with background screams and howling, is introduced at a high volume, and as it plays the Crooked Man revels in his hunched, grotesque body. At this point in the drama, the Crooked Man celebrates his power as a western consumer, and practically laughs into the faces of the audience, quite the opposite of apologetic. His dramaturgical function, as a sub-mask of Declan, is to suggest that, despite the rhetoric of his apologia, Declan knows exactly what he is doing. The Crooked Man exposes Declan as an unapologetic mask of arrogance, beckoning the spectator to

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<sup>143</sup> This mask is named after a character in John Connolly's novel *The Book of Lost Things*. In Connolly's novel, the Crooked Man is a child-killer, with a grotesque posture and an unapologetic attitude to his crimes.

<sup>144</sup> The version used in production was by The Pogues, from their 1985 album *Rum, Sodomy & the Lash*.

consider availing of the delights of the sex tourist industry and celebrating the economic power of the western tourist.

The second appearance of the Crooked Man is during a pantomime sequence where the storyteller depicts a child prostitute bound to a bedpost. During this sequence, de Cógáin moves through three masks: the enslaved mask of the child prostitute, bound to the bed; the mask of Declan, who puts his hands over his eyes in shame; and finally the Crooked Man, who superimposes his eerie mask over the image of the child. The child's arms are raised as if bound, and this image is transformed into one of the Crooked Man with his arms raised in triumph, as if celebrating the enslavement of the little girl. After this second appearance of the Crooked Man, de Cógáin completely dissolves all masks for a minute or so, as if neutralizing or cleansing the space, or storyteller, for a resumption of the narrative. As a mask, the Crooked Man haunts the narrative, and its narrators. Significantly, the second appearance of the Crooked Man coincides with the only act which Declan does not attempt to justify: the one where he engages in sexual acts with a child prostitute. Instead, the narrative moves on to the safari trek, where Declan philosophizes on his experiences in Pattaya Beach. In the following, the natural world inspires a moment of apparent spirituality:

But when I saw the waterfall, it changed my whole perception of things. I understood that there's beauty beyond the trees, the cars, and the houses. That there's beauty in the things that nobody sees. And that's where you find your inner solace. That's where you find your inner being. That if you can find beauty in something that people think is worthless, then you're at one with the world.

Because everything is worth something. There is no such thing as waste. Like, if you throw rice in the bin, the rats will eat it. D'y'know what I mean.

(Unpublished)

Declan's reflections are encoded as bland, rhetorically random and bereft of knowledge. Declan's closing narrative lacks insight because, as an insatiable, serial consumer, thought eludes him. He sums up his pseudo-spiritual experience of nature with the following:

We were walking down, through some clearance, when I saw this girl. She must have been only, five or eight, or whatever. In these white clothes. They wear

these white clothes over there until they reach puberty, and then their kind of innocence is lost. I heard.

They grow up fierce fast there because, d'y'know, because life isn't worth the same there as it is here.

And I think she was a vision to me. That like, she was going to be my child, and lose her innocence early. And I felt a deepness inside of me saying, 'Always wear a johnny when you're in Thailand!' That's what this vision was trying to say to me. 'Don't leave a poor child grow up in such a bad area!' That was what the vision was trying to put forth to me. Always wear a johnny in Thailand. D'y'know what I mean. (Unpublished)

Declan clearly craves selfhood. However, he cannot reflect on his self as other. The others in his narrative serve a common purpose: to satisfy Declan's desires of the flesh. The perspective of Declan's narrative is dominated by his sense of how the world may serve him. There is no critical consciousness of how Declan as an agent influences the world. In contrast to *The Tragedy*, the storytelling in *Thailand* deconstructs itself through an unwitting narrative voice: Declan. This contrast relates to distinctions of efficacy within the testimonial mode. The testimonial mode, when its narrative strategy is epic, eschews the conventions of genre. Its narrative voices must be unpredictable, and its dramaturgies must not be considered prototypical. In *Thailand*, the absurd logic put forth by the protagonist during the safari trek signifies a narrative voice that is unreliable and devoid of insight, because this voice reflects the testimonies which formed the pretext for the play. Declan must be deciphered by the spectator, therefore, through a consideration of his actions, which relate to his inability to make critical choices. He does, however, make choices. The fact that he spends fifty minutes or so attempting to justify these choices, through an expediently constructed apologia, relates to the meta-text which informs *Thailand*: the facts surrounding the Irish general election of May 2007.

Badiou, reflecting on the twentieth century, identifies one of "the guises taken by today's intellectual hegemony, [as] encapsulated in the slogan 'there is no alternative', what the French call *la pensée unique*" (Century 4). This, he states, "is really nothing but the promotion of a *politics without an alternative, a politique unique*" (Century 4). Badiou's *pensée unique* eerily echoes one of the great myths of

the Irish Free State, although the aphorism would, in the Irish idiom, be ‘There is no opposition!’<sup>145</sup> The history of the Irish Free State has, largely, been the history of a one-party state, testimony to Ireland as an apolitical exemplar of the neo-colonial condition. The events leading up to the 2007 general election – a false economy built upon an inflationary housing market, an unprecedented amount of new home owners who could scarcely afford their 100% mortgages, scare-mongering that the opposition couldn’t handle an economic boom when in power and would slash concessions on stamp duty - consolidated the national phobia of democratic and accountable politics. Issues like education and health were shelved in the prioritisation (one could say monomaniacal prioritisation) of this false economy which works, as recent history has shown us, like a pyramid scheme: certainly not to the advantage of those on the lower socio-economic scale.

In May 2007, Fianna Fáil were re-elected, albeit in coalition with the Green Party and the Progressive Democrats, and the neo-colony re-instated for another term. Election-day media comment speculated on an overall majority, despite statistical evidence suggesting that this was never a possibility. Despite losing nine seats in the election, the ruling party, in collaboration with state television and radio, achieved a mythic sense of triumph, while in reality cobbling together a coalition majority with more or less anyone who would barter their parliamentary vote. This false projection of myth over reality is symptomatic of the neo-colony, where the “semblance”, in this case of dependable continuity, is more easily digestible than the alternative of a confrontation with “the real” (*Century* 49), a false economy on the brink of collapse and an electorate encouraged by their government to live dangerously beyond its means.<sup>146</sup>

According to the authors of *Thailand*, the Irish people who re-elected Fianna Fáil in 2007 voted according to the temptations of consumer nihilism rather than according to

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<sup>145</sup> I refer to this common propaganda (or myth), espoused by Fianna Fáil party supporters, with particular frequency in times of an impending election. This form of canvassing, common to casual conversation and popular public discourse, is a shorthand that could be re-phrased as “We don’t need to discuss policies or hard facts. All that matters is that it would be worse if anyone else was in government, and because this goes without saying, the matter is closed to discussion.”

<sup>146</sup> A full account of the economic difficulties that have ensued in Ireland since the 2007 election is superfluous here, except to confirm that the housing market did indeed collapse, house prices dropped dramatically, and unemployment figures rose on a weekly basis. Revelations of negligence and mismanagement of financial institutions and pension schemes emerged, and a tax levy has been imposed on public servants to help pay for these and other mismanagements.

a consciousness of critical citizenship. Fianna Fáil's electoral promise to ring-fence stamp duty concessions for those purchasing their first home was a pivotal issue in public debate preceding the election, and arguably swung the electorate in their favour. The fact that the Irish electorate was so easily coerced by the short-term, myopic, economic voodoo of the government was highly influential on the authors of *Thailand*. Declan, as self-serving global citizen, was encoded as reflective of the Irish electorate of self-serving national citizens. The intention of encoding Declan as reflective of the contemporary Irish consumer, this thesis argues, closely parallels the intention of Jarry with the mask of Père Ubu, as emblematic of the Nietzschean, petit-bourgeois man. The following contains extracts from an interview with Máirtín de Cógáin:

BD. What for you was the intention of the Thailand play?

MdeC. To make money! Ah, no, in 2006, was it? A bunch of lads in Cork came back from the Far East boasting of their sexual exploits with Thai wans. I had come across a lot of this while I was travelling in New Zealand and Australia. Brian (that's you like) and myself said, 'There is a play in that'. We wanted to make a statement that it wasn't ok to accept that a lot of young Cork men were taking on a second job just so they could balm out and live cheap, free and easy, while having as many women as they want in Thailand: not because of envy, but disgust. Society as a whole had become far too open to the idea that it was okay to have a great time at anyone's expense, 'if it was your own money, like,' while abroad. Sex had become a need and part of any travel abroad, as one teenager said to me in Spain in 2005, "I've had no luck with the ladies, so I had to purchase!"

BD. What, as a storyteller, did it demand of you?

MdeC. More focus than anything else as the mask used in this has many layers. I found the darker I focused my thoughts behind the stage in the few minutes of build up the funnier and sadder the story became. The more serious and vicious I treated the story the more extreme the reaction.

BD. What is the difference in relationship between storyteller and audience in *Thailand* and in seanchaí performance?

MdeC. The modern seanchaí is viewed mainly in a light hearted position with a

punch-line expected more often than not. In that way you are always looking to make the audience come over to your side and be with you on a happy note with uproarious laughter at the finish. A lot of the gruesome, real life, harsh, sensationalism is lost on the modern listener in the world of Irish storytelling, anyhow, in my own view.

With *Thailand*, I wonder am I going back to the origins of the seanchaí, the total inhabitation of a character without using the notorious New York 'Method' but all the time wearing a mask to keep an eye on the audience reaction but still staying true to the rhythm of the play? I find in this I need to be so real to life that I seem unrealistic, for it is easier to look at a cartoon than a mirror, but once the smoke settles the people can no longer avoid themselves.

BD. Any other thoughts?

MdeC. ... the main guy we interviewed in Cork about his time in Thailand, one which we based a lot of the show on, came up to us after the show and said, 'You hit the nail on the head, I met so many fellas like you out there!' Ironic?

De Cógáin's description of the mask of Declan as a 'cartoon' rather than a 'mirror', interestingly, would perhaps be a better description of the mask of Père Ubu than Jarry's own (Jarry described Ubu as a mirror of petit-bourgeois man). Declan is encoded as an effigy of an Irish consciousness that emerged during the Celtic Tiger era. This consciousness of consumerism, according to the authors of *Thailand*, could neither think critically of itself, its government, nor the political economy it generated in Ireland and other places. The epic quality of *Thailand* relates to an exploitation of the potential of storytelling to deconstruct the contradictions of this uncritical consciousness. *Thailand* is at once a documentary play about the global sex tourist industry, and a metaphorical satire on the smug, western consciousness which participates in it. The consumerist consciousness which emerged in Ireland during and after the 1990s, apparently, has moral consequences in both national and global terms. These consequences relate to citizenship, and the critical purpose of both *Thailand* and the epic theatre generally: the call for critical citizenship, both nationally and globally.



*The Tragedy* and *Thailand* represent different strategies through which the testimonial mode of Irish story theatre, and its narrators, is hospitable to an epic approach to narrative. The former, following the example of *James X*, relates to the author/actor's presentation and consideration of self as other, and a simultaneous interrogation of both the dramatic/social world and the how the author positions himself in relation to his experiences. *Thailand*, on the other hand, does not present its narrator as a self-critical voice, but rather as an agent whose desire for consumption is insatiable. For Declan, consumption perpetuates a desire for more consumption: therefore, selfhood is unattainable. *Thailand*, dramaturgically, allows the cartoon of Declan to deconstruct itself by emphasising the contradictions between the actions of the perpetrator, and the expedient apologia through which he attempts to justify these actions.

In summary, the testimonial mode of Irish story theatre represents an emergent, more politicized aesthetic strategy than the conversational or presentational modes, as discussed in Chapter Six. The testimonial mode is antagonistic to the fashionable, in-ner-face dramas of the British and Irish stages, and contests the internalized, subjective quality of this movement with the efficacy of its source material, which is both documentary and biographical. The testimonial mode recalls Jarry's statement regarding alternative theatre practice that its practitioners should "remember that their whole point is not in being but in becoming" ("Twelve Theatrical Topics" xl). A development from the presentational mode of Bolger and McCabe, it is a re-creative aesthetic strategy: for each new project, the dramaturg must re-think his mode of storytelling. As an epic dramaturgy, it considers the folk traditions of Ireland, it opposes the dominant reactionary dramaturgies of its peers, and presents its audience with a testimonial mask, complex in terms both of its layering and its meta-text. Just as, historically, each re-appearance of the epic theatre (Jarry, Brecht, Fo, Fugard) assumes new dramaturgical garb, so the testimonial mode of story theatre is, according to this thesis, the appropriate strategy for a critical, performative interrogation of the State (and state) of contemporary Ireland.

## Conclusion

**A writer's handling of reality is affected by his basic philosophical outlook on nature and society: whether for instance he perceives and therefore looks at a phenomenon in its interconnection or in its dislocation; in its rest or in its motion; in its mutability or immutability; in its being or in its becoming; and whether he sees any qualitative change in its motion from one state of being into another. (Ngugi Wa Thiong'o 78)**

This thesis has argued that epic narrative is an antagonistic dramaturgical strategy, a dialectically divisive, counter-narrative to the mythological sign-systems which support the ideologies of the bourgeoisie. A dialectic emerges because epic dramaturgy has a "philosophical outlook on nature and society" (Wa Thiong'o 78) that contests meta-linguistic narrative forms, which are deterministic, or cathartic. Bourgeois narrative forms, through the codifications of genre, stifle revolutionary thinking through an aesthetics of inevitability, and an insistence that man is either fated as ending unhappily through vicissitudes beyond his control (tragedy) or, alternatively, is fated to end happily through the benefaction of the certainty of chance (comedy). Metalanguage is the perpetual repetition of the bourgeois myth that the world is not changeable, which is bound to the anti-dialectical aspirations of the bourgeoisie, "*la pensée unique* ... the promotion of a *politics without an alternative, a politique unique*" (Badiou, *Century* 4). The epic narrative contests the fatalistic myth of the world's "immutability" with dramatic worlds replete with voluntaristic "mutability". In opposition to genre which, when codified and copied, constitutes narrative form as "being", or prototypical, epic dramaturgs offer unpredictable narratives, which have a sense of emergence, or "becoming" (Wa Thiong'o 78). Wa Thiong'o's assertion echoes Jarry's statement that alternative theatre becomes "regular in the worst sense of the word unless they remember that their whole point is not in being but in becoming" ("Twelve Theatrical Topics xl). Jarry's observation, meanwhile, anticipates Jean-Louis Barrault's warning that one should "beware of schools" (qtd. in Lecoq 57), which reflects the fact that genre is the anti-dialectical opponent of epic narrative.

The epic theatre is neither school nor genre, but a counter-cultural praxis. It deploys the latent, revolutionary potential of evental performance in order to antagonize the State, and provoke thought in its citizens. Each incarnation of the epic theatre is unique. However, all of these incarnations are connected by their relationship to folk narrative, and its various masks. Barthes states that what metalanguage “distorts [is] ... the history of the subject” (122), and in theatre this deprivation is linked to a semblance of determinism, which is opposed by the voluntaristic “thrill of opposition” (Fo, *Tricks* 118), which is the real of the epic theatre. Through metalanguage, the real subjects of the theatre, its spectators, are “deprived of their history” (Barthes 122) of counter-cultural praxis, performance and intervention. Epic narrative sets out to atone for this deprivation: firstly, through the act of staging, which renders counter-cultural performance historically present and, secondly, through the “provocation of the presentation” (Badiou, “Rhapsody” 194), which invites the spectator to consider her/himself in terms of (active) citizenship. Omnipresent in these epic acts of performance is, as outlined during this thesis, the mask.

Wa Thiong'o states that satire is “one of the most effective weapons in oral traditions” (81), and folk traditions such as storytelling and clowning are intrinsically linked to the duality of the mask. The epic theatre, it is argued, contests metalanguage through its restoration of the mask to the stage precisely because it is the history of folk narrative which is suppressed by the stages of the bourgeoisie. Through restoring the masks of folk performance, epic dramaturgy restores to the spectator his/her suppressed history of oppositional performance. Each epic dramaturg deploys the performance mask s/he deems most suitable to her/his particular context. Fo's assertion that the spirit of revolutionary strands of Commedia has “never died” (*Tricks* 88) is suggestive of the latent, residual quality of folk masks. While Goldoni appropriated, and gentrified, the masks of Commedia for the bourgeois stages of Venice, Fo counter-appropriates and deploys them according to what he sees as their original, performative context, as people's court jesters. Decades earlier, Jarry recognized in Firmin Gémier, comedian of the Parisian bourgeois stage, an oppositional clown waiting for a licence to agitate the representational codes of the bourgeois avant-garde. Brecht, to his historical purpose, deployed the mask of the storyteller dramaturgically, offering a politically turbulent Germany a folk mask rich in sagacity, and narratives of transformation.

This thesis argues that for Irish theatre, the deployment of the craft of the storyteller in contemporary modes of story theatre is a recognition by Irish dramaturgs of the potential of epic narrative as an antidote to the restrictive naturalistic form which dominated the Irish stage during the twentieth century. As discussed in Chapter Six, this restoration of the storyteller to the Irish stage has a double-edged quality, recalling Kearney's warning that "myths are neither good nor bad", and that we must be critical of the "uses and practices to which we put them and the interests and aims we have them serve" (89). During the 1990s, on one hand, storytelling became a licence for Irish dramaturgs such as Enda Walsh and Mark O'Rowe to appropriate the atmosphere of the fashionable, British *in-yer-face* theatre towards a formal mimicry of the "easy, globally-digested narratives" (Ging 185) of Hollywood cinema. On the other hand, however, there are examples of dramaturgies with significant epic qualities: firstly, within the presentational story theatre of Dermot Bolger and Pat McCabe and, secondly, within the testimonial story theatre of Gerard Mannix Flynn and Be Your Own Banana Theatre Company. Máirtín de Cógáin, referring to his performance in *Thailand: What's Love Got To Do With It?*, suggests that, through a storytelling grounded in contemporary lived experience, his performance may be "going back to the origins of the seanchaí" (Interview). De Cógáin states that, as the storyteller of *Thailand*, he is "wearing a mask to keep an eye on the audience reaction" (Interview). The dramaturgical function of this observational mask, however, is not to get into the audience's face, but rather to get in their heads, as it were: to provoke thought and to satirize the expedient logic of the petit-bourgeois.

Richard Kearney "wager[s] that postmodernism does not spell the end of the story but the opening up of alternative possibilities of narration" (12). The emergence of new modes of Irish story theatre since the 1990s contests the dominant, naturalistic mode and, significantly, sees the emergence of a range of often unpredictable, innovative dramaturgies. Irish story theatre blends the fireside tradition of the seanchaí with the dramatic monologue form, and as a pastiche of these elements has given rise to both reactionary (Walsh and O'Rowe) and enabling dramaturgies (Bolger, McCabe, Flynn, BYOB). Interestingly, during an era when Ireland's economy developed at an unprecedented rate, and its citizens embraced the thrills of globalization with abandon, its dramaturgs restored the folk mask of the storyteller to the stage. It has

been argued that during this period there emerged a testimonial mode where examples of epic dramaturgy may be identified, namely in the plays of Gerard Mannix Flynn, Edward Malone, Brian Desmond and Máirtín de Cógáin. Other examples of this mode not discussed in depth in this thesis but worth mentioning include: *Walking Away* (2005) by Helena Enright, a verbatim, documentary theatre play which deals with domestic violence in contemporary Limerick; *Forgotten* (2006) by Pat Kinevane, which blends dance and storytelling and is based on the testimonies of contemporary Ireland's neglected elderly; and *Closed Circuit* (2006) by Raymond Scannell, a theatre-in-education play which adapts the facts surrounding the death of Brian Murphy as a means of exploring infrastructures of class prejudice in Irish life.<sup>147</sup> Outside Ireland, other neglected dramaturgs who, this thesis argues, are worthy of consideration as epic strategists include Federico Garcia Lorca, Athol Fugard, in collaboration with John Kani and Winston Ntshona, Brendan Behan, and Joan Littlewood.

In 1890s Paris, the apparent centre of modernity, the folk mask of Père Ubu performed a “mirror” of their “gluttony” (Jarry, “Theatre Questions” xxxiv) to the emerging petit-bourgeoisie. In 2007 Cork, the mask of Declan is held up as a “cartoon” (De Cógáin, Interview) to the consumerist nihilism of the Irish *nouveau riche*. This axis frames the argument of this thesis, which traces an ancestry of epic dramaturgy that is mapped from Paris 1896, through Germany, Italy, Dublin and finally, Cork 2007. George Bernard Shaw said that if one were to give “a hypocrite a mask to wear ... he will be rendered incapable of further lying” (qtd. in Fo, *Tricks* 37). In response, Dario Fo states that the “mask obliges people to tell the truth” (*Tricks* 37). Père Ubu and Declan are examples of the mask of the hypocrite, and in its “effig[ies]” (Jarry, “Futility” xvi) of the hypocrite, the mask of the epic theatre revels in its duality. Because the hypocrite refuses to wear a mask (and thereby disclose her/himself), the epic actor wears the mask of the hypocrite in order to expose her/his hypocrisy. The mask of the hypocrite, in the epic theatre, continues to tell lies. However, the epic actor, wearing the mask (of the hypocrite), is compelled to tell the

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<sup>147</sup> Brian Murphy, a secondary school student at Clongowes Wood College in Kildare, was murdered outside Club Annabel nightclub in Dublin in August 2000. His assailants were students at Blackrock College, another elite secondary school.

truth, and does so by revealing the real of the mask: the expedient logic that characterizes hypocrisy, semblance and the ideology of the bourgeoisie.

Badiou states that Brecht was a “thinker of the theatre conceived as a capacity to unmask the real, precisely because theatre is above all the art of the mask, the art of semblance” (*Century* 47). This thesis argues that Badiou’s comment, which relates to his idea of Theatre, is specifically appropriate to the masks and dramaturgies of the epic theatre. Finally, this thesis would like to suggest a mask for the epic dramaturgs of the future, or indeed the present. Dario Fo points out that the Commedia mask of The Magnifico, one of the bosses of the zanni, “with whom the grotesque mask of the impoverished nobleman has its origin, was a banker” (42). Given the unprecedented assaults on the social contract throughout Western Europe – and in Ireland, catastrophically so - perhaps the mask of The Magnifico is what the epic dramaturg must now deploy.

## Appendix 1: Interview by e-mail with Máirtín de Cógáin, September 28th 2010

BD. What for you was the intention of the *Thailand* play?

MdeC. To make money! Ah, no, in 2006, was it? A bunch of lads in Cork came back from the Far East boasting of their sexual exploits with Thai wans. I had come across a lot of this while I was travelling in New Zealand and Australia. Brian (that's you like) and myself said, "There is a play in that". We wanted to make a statement that it wasn't okay to accept that a lot of young Cork men were taking on a second job just so they could balm out and live cheap free and easy, while having as many women as they want in Thailand: not because of envy, but disgust. Society as a whole had become far too open to the idea that it was okay to have a great time at anyone's expense, 'if it was your own money, like,' while abroad. Sex had become a need and part of any travel abroad, as one teenager said to me in Spain in 2005, "I've had no luck with the ladies, so I had to purchase!"

BD. What, as a storyteller, did it demand of you?

MdeC. More focus than anything else, as the mask used in this has many layers. I found the darker I focused my thoughts behind the stage in the few minutes of build up, the funnier and sadder the story became. The more serious and vicious I treated the story the more extreme the reaction.

BD. What is the difference in relationship between storyteller and audience in *Thailand* and in seanchaí performance?

MdeC. The modern seanchaí is viewed mainly in a light-hearted position, with a punchline expected more often than not. In that way you are always looking to make the audience come over to your side and be with you on a happy note, with uproarious laughter at the finish. A lot of the gruesome, real life, harsh, sensationalism is lost on the modern listener in the world of the Irish storytelling, anyhow, in my own view. With *Thailand*, I wonder am I going back to the origins of the seanchaí, the total inhabitation of a character without using the notorious New York 'Method' but all the time wearing a mask to keep an eye on the audience reaction, but still staying true to the rhythm of the play. I find in this I need to be so real to life that I seem unrealistic,

for it is easier to look at a cartoon than a mirror, but once the smoke settles the people can no longer avoid themselves.

BD. How did going on the road and touring with Meridian change it?

MdeC. The nerves I had with this play originally (as we never had a great deal of rehearsal time to hone it) left as the Meridian tour went on the road. With the replaying of it each night a familiarity came with it. That said, a callous view from my point of view may have crept in.

It is a hard play to listen too. But when you are telling it, you don't have to listen to yourself, but the reaction. I am not sure if the pairing with *Love, Peace and Robbery* was the best match for it.<sup>148</sup> The double bill was sold as a set of dark comedies and many of the audiences weren't given a fair warning as to the graphic nature of the Thailand story.

BD. Any other thoughts?

MdeC. On the Meridian tour, two very peculiar things happened.

The first was in Limerick, where the crowds were very small. A man in the front row and within my view, seemed to be crying during the second massage scene [the incident with the child prostitute]. This was very powerful for myself to know a story I was telling could create such emotions.

The second was in Dublin's Dríocht Theatre, where the crowds were massive. When I walked off the stage, no one clapped. When I went on to collect my glass and acknowledge them, they stayed quiet. After going behind the curtain again, I slammed the stage door to make it clear the show was over. Yet, no one spoke or clapped and they all walked out in silence. I never came across the likes of it. The following night, they roared at the finish and clapped incessantly. Three big Dubs came up to me after and said, "That was unreal", "I can't wait to go back", "I thought your opening like was in Thai, saying hello!".

Another thing, the main guy we interviewed in Cork about his time in Thailand, one which we based most of the show on, came up to us after the show and said, "You hit the nail on the head! I met so many fellas like you [Declan] out there!" Ironic?

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<sup>148</sup> *Love, Peace and Robbery*, by Liam Heylin, was the companion play of *Thailand* on a four-week Irish national tour, funded by Meridian Theatre Company. Heylin, a crime journalist, based part of his play on interviews with repeat offenders for a radio documentary, and this was also the subject matter of the play.



## Appendix 2: Interview by e-mail with Edward Malone, September 28th 2010

BD. Ed? Could you send me a mission statement of what *The Tragedy* meant for you as an artist? What was the strategy of the play? Whose head were you trying to wreck? What do you feel was the real impact of the play? Most importantly, what is the nature of the storyteller and the storytelling in the *Tragedy*?<sup>149</sup>

EM. Having witnessed a lot of what I considered elitist theatre in Cork City and witnessed a lot of snobbery in the theatre scene (subconscious snobbery it may have been, but snobbery all the same), I set about writing my first play. The goal of *The Self-obsessed Tragedy of Ed Malone* for me was to give off an 'if I can do this, anyone can do it' energy. In the text I wanted to explore and break down class clichés. What does it mean to examine a self-educated working class father in modern Ireland who speaks with an English accent? Does this exist? It did in my world and it was something that I had never seen in contemporary Irish theatre. The working class father is Perennially being portrayed in one-dimensional, idiotic terms. I was bored of that, and I was bored of seeing teenagers having their first drugs experiences on stage in play after play. I listened to 'The Carpenters' as an adolescent. That's not to say 'Oh, look at me, I'm so unique and different', but more 'can we please have a bit of honesty here?' That may sound kitsch and sentimental, but that's what was going through my mind. Honesty was all I was after.

Then there's audience. And how we writers/performers choose to communicate to our audience. I began improvising autobiographical stories in bars. The best training in the world. No pat on the back, or 'I liked what you did with that bit, we can develop that'. I was more likely to get a straight forward raw response, e.g. 'Ed, what was that all about? Didn't get it!' or 'Ed that was amazing boy!' Obviously, one knows where one stands immediately here. The visceral was what I was going after. *The Self-obsessed Tragedy of Ed Malone* was not written to be studied on the Leaving Certificate. It was written to be seen. It was written through the performer improvising into tape recorders. It had to be alive. Fortunately, in Brian Desmond I

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<sup>149</sup> Typical of the way Malone thinks, he answers each question at once and, therefore, the questions and answers are not individualized, but rather his entire response is left as one unit.

had found a director who seemed to understand what I was going for. Having seen other plays he directed like *De Bogman* and *The Ballad of Badger Bickle's Youngfella*, I knew he was the man to hone my script into something interesting.

The beautiful poetics of contemporary Irish playwriting was making me vomit, and in my opinion was as clear a reason as any as to why the common man has no interest in going to the theatre. Watching an actor just stand there and talk and be charming was of no interest to me or Brian. We wanted energy. We wanted physicality. In Brian's previous plays, I had noticed how alive the performers were alive, without any chairs or tables to assist them. They were telling the story with their bodies. It was fast, it was visceral and, most importantly for me, it was attracting a non-theatre going audience. The hardest thing in the world to do. To attract a non-theatre going audience was what I wanted that more than anything. Someone to give me an honest response just like I got in the bars.

Simplicity. The text of *The Self-obsessed Tragedy* of Ed Malone is simple. Storytelling, great storytelling is simple. Direct. Honest. No hiding. No judgement. Just straight forward storytelling. Like a child relaying information to his mother or father from a day at school. With neutrality. There is no attachment to outcomes, there is no 'sighing' or 'shrugging of shoulders'. No 'naturalistic behaviour' that gets in the way of the direct communication that the audience has paid their money to see. And this was and still is a major grievance of mine. Naturalism. The preoccupation with 'Behaviour'. 'Who cares?', I ask. One doesn't go to the theatre to see actors behaving like there is a camera in their face.

And that was one of the major successes of *The Tragedy*. It gave the audience a truly theatrical experience by beautifully balancing the art of the seanacháí and the grotesque physicality of a Grotowskian trained performer. As a result of our honesty and directness, the play became a big hit in the city, inspiring younger theatre practitioners to think outside the box a little, and indeed attracting that non-theatre audience. A large section of our audience came from the music scene in Cork city. Word had got out that there was someone actually sweating and performing with energy in the theatre. This was very rare in Cork. People came back a second or third time to see the piece. Why? Well, in my opinion the key reason was the lack of

sentimentality in the storytelling. It's a tragedy. The father dies. The son's confused about his sexuality. An unrequited love drove him to alcoholism. These three issues one would assume would be portrayed in a manner that is to elicit feeling from the audience. Through rehearsal, myself and Brian discovered we had no interest in doing this. By making the audience laugh through 'direct, honest, simple' storytelling we made the audience think. 'Why was I laughing?' was a comment that I heard from so many people who saw the play. This is a major accomplishment.

For me the storyteller must always be free of judgement when he is performing tragedy or comedy. Then you just may give your audience an experience that isn't just another Irish play about the father-son relationship. The storyteller in *The Self-obsessed Tragedy of Ed Malone* was neutral. It seemed almost like he didn't care what the outcome of each scene would be and as a result the audience cared. The storyteller makes it all about his audience. Whether you're in the bar, or out on the street, or in the theatre, it's not about you. It's about you communicating your story to the audience, and then maybe, just maybe, they will keep coming back. However, if you choose the introspective monologue type performance of so many contemporary Irish playwrights, you may not be so lucky.

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