



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

DRAMA AND DESIRE: THEORISING ENTANGLED PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

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Reading Drama with Desire

For philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour (1991, 2013), the splits and divisions of Modernity need to be overcome if we are to make the cultural shift that will be adequate to the challenges of the Anthropocene. To counteract Modernism's disconnect between politics, science, and the arts, Latour calls for a hybrid Gaia-like 'looping' sensitivity that connects thought, feeling, and action. This paper investigates an oblique, yet persistent, connexion between drama and desire, with the aim of formulating just such an ecology of entanglement; one capable of sending what Jacques Rancière terms the 'aesthetic coordinates of perception, thought, and action' into flux, to challenge identity and generate new political subjectivities (2004, 83). The paper suggests that in spite of Lehmann's (2006) post-dramatic move, performance practitioners may find much to value in a systematic understanding of dramatized spaces, charged as they seem to be, with the exchange of libidinal energy we term desire.

It may seem counter-intuitive to be thinking about something as irrational as desire in these difficult times, when our awareness of our geopolitical reality is changing so radically. It is tempting to revert to rationalism, Brecht's theatre for a scientific age for instance, to counter the global

challenges of climate crisis, of war, of pandemic, that face us. But this rational, high-Modern, approach is only half the story. We know the science. What we don't know is why it is so hard for us to act on it. We devalue the more introspective Arts and Humanities—the way we can gain insight into ourselves—at our peril. Latour argues for hybrid projects that allow nature and culture to inform each other. Our desires may be illogical and contradictory, but what is at stake if we disavow them in our performance practices? Does it matter for instance, if an avowedly compassionate researcher documents the impact of her bedside theatre practice for children, by filming them in very poor health in their hospital beds?

The paper will return to the question of bedside theatre to explore the dynamics of cinematic capture in intimate personal space a little later. We will begin by more broadly exploring the visceral and very personal notion of desire, by reading three different accounts of it. First, Aristophanes' satirical myth about sexual desire, as told at Plato's Symposium; then Freud's discussion of primal desire in connection with post-traumatic stress; and latterly the semantic instability that Lacan associates with the term. The paper will focus on the indirect reference each account of desire makes to drama, and then attempt to open up an association between them, to investigate the nature of the oblique connexion.

Sexual Desire: Plato's symposium

We can certainly sense the presence of Drama, the Greeks' dazzling new art form, as the ancients gathered to discuss desire at Plato's Symposium. Although the explicit function of the Symposium is a discussion of erotic attraction, Plato puts philosophers and thespians together, and the event is in celebration of tragedian Agathon's victory at the Festival of Dionysus. As Freddie Rokem (2010, 22) points out, Plato mixes things up by having comedian Aristophanes philosophise, while philosopher Socrates discusses comedy and tragedy.

Aristophanes' speech takes the form of a satirical myth, which explores how 'the innate desire of human beings for each other started'. He tells how Zeus, jealous of peoples' self-sufficiency, cut humans in half, 'as they cut sorb-apples in half to preserve them'. The result? 'Each of us is a matching half of a human being, because we've been cut in half like flatfish, making two out of one, and each of us is looking for his own matching half' (Plato [385 BCE] 1999, 28–29).

Although Socrates has plenty to say about desire, and his views are well-documented, Plato records his comments about drama less clearly. Socrates' discussion with dramatists Agathon and Aristophanes is postponed until later, when the dancing girls seem to have unleashed people's desires for each other, and everyone is drunk. It is as if Dionysus, breaker of boundaries, and God of theatre, wine, fertility, and madness, ensures the co-presence of the discursive and experiential—much in the spirit of Performance Philosophy. By the end of the symposium most of the revellers were unconscious, except Socrates, who by all accounts could hold his drink. Plato tells the discussion through third party Aristodemus who, half asleep himself, could not remember most of it: 'Socrates was pressing them to agree that the same man should be capable of writing comedy and tragedy, and that anyone who is expert in writing tragedy must also be an expert in writing comedy' (1999, 80).

So, while desire is cogently discussed and recorded at the Symposium by Plato, drama is not. Its quiet presence is contingent on Aristophanes' and Agathon's day-jobs as dramatists, and on Agathon's victory at the Festival of Dionysus. I'd like to draw our attention to the apparent disconnect between the reason for the event (a triumphant performance), and the focus of the event (desire—*specifically* erotic, or sexual desire). Why celebrate a great dramatic performance by discussing sexual attraction? Is there some reciprocity between the experiential and the discursive going on here? Is it because drama and sex are seen as 'performative'? Or have we in some way lost touch with drama's ancient sexiness? Plato's haziness concerning drama at the Symposium frustrates and intrigues. When drama *is* belatedly discussed, and by Socrates the great philosopher of all people, nobody is sober enough to remember much of what he says.

Primal Desire: Freud on Trauma

We encounter the oblique connexion between drama and desire again in Freud's meditation on shellshock, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* ([1919] 2006). Plato's *Symposium* is clearly on Freud's mind as he writes this essay, which explicitly credits Aristophanes with dealing 'with the origins not only of the sexual drive, but also of its most important variation in relation to the object' (Freud 2006, 186). But we are particularly interested here in Freud's concern with a more primal incarnation of desire—that of attachment between baby and mother.

In Section Two of the essay, he specifically deals with the psychic function of plays and playing as a way of circumventing desire's tendency to repeat traumatic experience. Freud observes his young nephew Ernst deal with his mother's upsetting comings-and-goings by playing a game of 'fort-da!' (gone-here!), which involves throwing a cotton reel attached to a piece of string into his curtained cot. Freud notes that Ernst repeats the painful 'fort' part of the game more often than the pleasurable 'da!'. He concludes that the game is not motivated by the happy reunion prized, as we have seen, by comedian Aristophanes, and played to raise laughter in games of 'peekaboo' (Davies 2018). According to Freud, what matters to the playing child is not the mimetic aspect of the game, but that the child exchanges 'his passive role in the actual experience for an active role within the game'. It is at the end of this section of the essay that drama makes a very brief appearance. Freud takes this discussion from playing to plays, extending his argument to encompass the pleasure we take in the 'form of play and imitation practiced by adults [...] for instance in the performance of tragedies'. Just as agency trumps mimesis for the playing child, so Freud seems to suggest, the performance of tragedies plunges adults into a primally imaginative engagement with the play's action; one which takes them beyond repetition into a state of radical creativity '*beyond* the pleasure principle' (Freud 2006, 143). For Freud this primal drive '*beyond*' pleasure was Thanatos. If Eros, the life drive, tends towards cohesion and unity (*da!*), the death drive concerns its opposite: splitting and tragic loss (*fort*). But although tragedy clearly concerns death, we can begin to locate the split between Ernst and his mother as the site of desire, from which the sexual drive, playing, and plays all emerge; a site where autonomy can outweigh mimetic repetition. This is arguably a definition of radical creativity itself, and hardly moribund. Freud's binary life and death drives would seem to be flip sides of the same coin, morphing into their opposites as Freud himself notes antonyms so frequently do in dreams (1997, 202). To set up a more nuanced understanding of entangled performance practice in relation to creativity we will return to the fort-da game a little

later. But we will do so with a Lacanian, rather than a Freudian lens. For Lacan, Freud's life-death binary acquires a tripartite, linguistic complexity; and although Lacan initially sees Thanatos as the child's nostalgia for a pre-Oedipal fusion with the breast, latterly he associates it with the way language stands in for, and replaces, bodies altogether (Hook 2020).

Language and Desire: Lacan's Graph

Lacan's 1958 article *The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Unconscious* (2006) focusses more obviously on the notion of desire that runs through Plato's and Freud's accounts, and less obviously on the ephemeral dramatic connection that specifically interests us here. There are, however, two suggestions that he sees Freud's Plato-inspired writing as dramatic. He introduces his Graph of Desire as having been 'worked out particularly in relation to the structure of jokes' (671), and claims it helps him to 'accurately formulate Freud's dramatism' (676). It is precisely this formulation of drama, the way its action thinks, that we attempt to grasp here. Typically, Lacan skips over the mechanisms that led him to the graph, with the following concise historical overview:

In this formulation, which is mine only in the sense that it conforms as closely as possible to Freud's texts as to the experience they opened up, the crucial term is the signifier, revived from ancient rhetoric by modern linguistics, in a doctrine whose various stages I cannot trace here, but of which the names Ferdinand De Saussure and Roman Jakobson stand for its dawn and its present-day culmination, not forgetting that the pilot science of structuralism in the West has its roots in Russia, where formalism first flourished. (676)

However, from these briefly dropped names, we can grasp that the Graph of Desire is an attempt, made post-war in 1957, to loosen the systemic conservatism of Saussure's binary algorithm of signifier and signified, fixed by a single 'bar'. We can read it as an attempt to account for a new, polysemic, post-structural, approach to communication; one that is open to flux, to positionality, intersubjectivity, and interpretation.

I encourage us here to read Lacan's Graph of Desire as a version of Aristophanes' cut-in-half human flatfish, throwing 'their arms round each other, weaving themselves together, wanting to form a single living thing' (Plato 1999, 28). But Lacan's version also accounts for Freud's nephew's need to displace (*fort*) as well as condense (*da!*); to dwell on autonomy and *autopoiesis*, as well as the pleasure of recognition, in the intersubjective relation. The graph opens up Saussure's fixed 'bar', and Jakobson's looser, cruciform version of the linguistic sign, tipping it on its side, to form an 'X' or chiasmus, showing the desire for social connexion in horizontal as well as vertical flux. Its horizontal axis figures the temporal gymnastics of the 'talking cure', when *a-posteriori* experience is retroactively assigned the *a-priori* signifiers which will allow it to be socially shared. Its vertical axis figures internality and externality in the intersubjective space; psychoanalysts call this transference and counter transference, but we can understand it in terms of the way we project and internalise gaze and voice in relation to the projections and internalisations of the other. The resulting graph shows how time and space affect our perception; gaze and voice, the metonymies of desire, jostle for position in our awareness with its metaphors, words and fantasies. Together

they form a series of boundary-crossing inversions that Lacan uses to understand the dynamics of desire in the consulting room.

Lacan's graph is notorious for its complexity—it is after all a working out of 'Freud's dramatism', his Oedipus Complex. To locate desire, however, we need only concern ourselves with its underlying post-structuralist principle: the destabilization of the 'bar' in Saussure's sign that opens discourse up to analysis. Saussure's algorithm provides one fixed and immutable site of connexion between a signifier and its object where meaning is generated. Saussure likens this to two sides of a sheet of paper; each side is irreducible to, but inseparable from, the other side. Lacan's graph figures a looser connexion, crucially without severing it; so that Aristophanes' desire for union and recognition (*da!*), is held in tension with the agency Ernst acquires when he differentiates himself from his mother (*fort*). Jacques Rancière usefully expands on this state of being 'together-apart' (2008); but for our purposes we can categorise Desire as the term that describes the attractions—and repulsions (see Kristeva 1984)—that take place in the space between the subject, human, and non-human other. Desire is the energetic, multifaceted, exchange of thought and feeling that takes place when we see and are seen, hear and are heard. These active and receptive aspects of gaze and voice are all we need to take from the Graph of Desire, to grasp and use its dynamics in relation to performance. Lacan used them to understand the dynamics of desire in the consulting room; Althusser (2001) used gaze and voice to theorise interpellation and analyse how the Ideological State Apparatus enforced state power; and Foucault used them to grasp how the panopticon gaze subjugated prisoners (1975). We apply these straightforward dynamics of desire—of seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard—to analyse the intersubjective (dramatized) space of theatre and performance. What is at stake? Nothing less than insight into the choreography of power in performance; insight that will help us grasp precisely why pointing a camera at a fragile child in their hospital bed and calling it 'compassion' might make us uneasy.

Democratising Desire: The Theatre of Dionysus

To transfer what we know about the dynamics of desire from the consulting room back to the theatre that arguably spawned them, I want us to consider two boundaries in particular: the visually permeable boundary between the performance space and auditorium (latterly termed the 'fourth wall') and the auditorily permeable Ancient Greek *skene*, which separated the visible stage from the invisible backstage space. Understanding these boundaries could help us understand, with more precision than ever before perhaps, the exchange of libidinal energy that takes place in the dramatized space.

In the street outside the theatre, citizens look and are looked-at, speak and are spoken-to. But once the performance inside the theatre begins, the active and receptive aspect of these interactions is restricted in interesting ways. The auditorium projects the gaze and receives the voice; while the stage projects the voice and receives the gaze. This reciprocal allocation of gaze and voice, the metonymies of desire, draw performer and audience into the dramatized situation in different, yet mutually desirous, ways. Together, like Aristophanes' androgynous humans, stage and auditorium form a 'single living thing'; two spaces conjoined by the shared modalities of a single body. When the post-dramatic stage returns the gaze, or the auditorium the voice, the fourth wall boundary is

ruptured, and the imaginative space of the drama is compromised. But dramatic relationality as we see in Lacan's graph, is an incredibly flexible association; power can shift radically between fictional and civic spaces of stage and auditorium without violating their union. For instance, when the staged voice pauses, is indistinct, or silent, the audience gaze—its super-power—is accentuated; and when the audience gaze is interrupted whenever the play's action moves behind the *skene*, the staged voice—its super-power— gains prominence. According to Jacques Rancière (2004), such disturbances to the 'aesthetic coordinates of perception, thought, and action' (83) generate what he terms a 'democratic' political subjectivity. Intimately held together, yet at the same time held apart, each side of the fourth wall boundary is simultaneously heteronomous (subjected to the other) and autonomous (independent of the other). Although the fictional events taking place onstage can affect all concerned in different ways, nobody loses sight of their imaginary nature.

Before we focus on the other boundary at the Theatre of Dionysus, its *skene*, it is worth paying attention to less egalitarian uses of gaze and voice, to highlight the importance of thinking desire with drama and performance. I am not advocating a slavish return to the dynamics of desire at the Theatre of Dionysus here, so much as a fresh way for contemporary practitioners to appreciate and use its democratic aesthetic. Some performance practices claim to be doing one thing when they are structurally doing the opposite. Compare the carefully balanced power at the Theatre of Dionysus to the practice of bedside theatre. Here actors with puppets seek permission, then 'engage with the child in an intimate one-to-one performance', while both child and actor are recorded on camera 'for the needs of the study' (Sextou 2016, 17). The first thing to note is the boundary violation where the metaphorical space of the performance invades the (already compromised) privacy of a child's hospital bed. In immersive theatre, the fourth wall boundary is frequently blurred or ignored in this way. An example of this is Tim Crouch's play *The Author* (2012), which has no defined stage; instead, two auditoria face each other. Throughout the performance, the play's characters are sitting amongst the audience, and for a long time we are unsure if the stranger next to us is part of the audience or a fictional character. More than the intrusion of personal space, it is this infliction of uncertainty that seems so problematic, especially for children who are already disempowered by illness. The presence of a fourth wall allows us to differentiate between reality and fiction. When performers breach it in this way, they knowingly take control of the boundary, putting their audience in the position of someone suffering from hallucination, unsure what is real and what is not. This manoeuvre, sometimes termed 'gaslighting', can cause us to question our sanity; it compromises the autonomous gaze, the super-power that gives audiences their independence: their capacity to see things for themselves. It is known to cause anxiety and has a disturbingly sadistic edge. It might provide a bit of a masochistic frisson for adult audiences of immersive theatre, but theatre-goers are free to leave anytime they wish. The bedbound child on the other hand, who may be very young, cannot walk away if this immersive 'one-to-one performance' overwhelms them. The balanced power relation, so carefully instituted at the Theatre of Dionysus, is subverted in Sextou's practice in favour of performer and researcher because the performer speaks *and* looks. The child is subjected to the desire—the gaze and voice—of the other, as well as the structurally voyeuristic outlying gaze of the camera-operator, and whoever else watches the recordings, for whatever reason.

The much vaunted ‘compassion’ of bedside theatre is brought into question when we consider whose desires it serves structurally, and what those desires might be. The question is surely worth asking of applied performance practices in general, but particularly where audiences are so uniquely vulnerable. By asking whose gaze and whose voice is active, and whose is suppressed, we may reveal democratic, or autocratic uses of desire in any intersubjective space (as Foucault and Althusser suggest). Answers to these simple questions can cut through and expose abusive choreographies of gaze and voice, even when this is vociferously disavowed, and might otherwise escape the vigilance of ethics committees.

To return to the other boundary at the Theatre of Dionysus, we come to the *skene*, a wooden wall that bisected the ancient stage dividing its visible and invisible aspects. The *skene*’s most obvious function was practical: according to John Gould, it created a storeroom offstage for props and a green room for actors (1999, 11). But when the action of the drama is played out offstage, as it was in ancient tragedy, the *skene* interrupts the audience gaze in very interesting ways. Freud deliberately de-centred his patients by positioning his couch so that, if they wanted to see him, they would have to sit up and turn around. When the play’s action moves into the offstage space as it did in the performance of ancient tragedies, like Freud’s patients, audiences are physically destabilised—what they see no longer validates what they hear. Only when we are put in this critically embodied position can the personal and creative work of forging connexions begin (see Katafiasz, 2018). As Lacanian commentator Mladen Dolar notes, vision and audition have conflicting functions:

the logic of vision seems opposed to the logic of audition; [the voice] hits us from the inside [...] if we want to localize it, to establish a safe distance from it, we need to use the visible as a reference. (2006, 78, 79)

If, as Dolar suggests here, we use our eyes to establish a space between self and other, not being able to see makes such differentiation difficult. This can compromise our sense of being separate from the other; like Aristophanes’ archaic human monads; like Freud’s nephew Ernst whose cotton-reel game honours his primal desire to remain connected to his mother. In such moments, it is as if the whole theatre is flying blind, and the other senses, as well as the imagination, are activated. If the fourth wall is doing its job protecting audiences from the staged gaze, when the *skene* collapses the dramatized space in this way, the predicament of the other can affect us personally without overwhelming us physically. It is a far cry from the positionality of the lone child experiencing bedside theatre who is subjected to the gaze of the performer, and beyond that, the camera. When our own gaze is interrupted and distance collapses, privacy from the gaze of the other really matters. The anonymity afforded to us in the auditorium of a theatre allows us the pleasure of suspending our identity, and like the playing child, becoming personally engaged—entangled—in a situation we know to be fictional.

Desire and the *Skene*

The *skene* at the Theatre of Dionysus seems to be designed to generate the same split in its audience that activates desire for Ernst and Aristophanes; the same division Freud deliberately

conjured in the geography of his consulting room; the heightened sensitivity to the other called for by Latour to politicise subjectivity in the Anthropocene, perhaps. If performance practitioners want to understand and use space that is charged with desire in this way, space that splits yet entangles, it may be helpful to look at the *skene* more closely.

One of the great conceptual leaps made by Lacan was his rapprochement between psychoanalysis and linguistics. As we have seen, his Graph of Desire loosens the bar in Saussure's linguistic sign to figure signifiers and objects in time and space: identity in flux. The bar in Saussure's sign operates much as the *skene* and fourth wall do: it unifies, and separates, things that are inseparable, yet irreducible. Such as the fictional world onstage and the social realities of the auditorium; the auditorial gaze and staged voice; eye and ear of each member of the audience. Inseparable yet irreducible, too, are Aristophanes' desirous sexual partners; Freud's anxious nephew and his disappearing mother. We can make more precise sense of this desirous relationality if we read it as Lacan did, by associating the psyche with the sign.

According to linguist Charles Peirce, there are three types of signifier. The 'bar' in Saussure's sign mediates the relationship between the signifier and its referent differently in each case; much as I suggest, the *skene* and fourth wall mediate each of the three spaces at the Theatre of Dionysus differently. Like the painted side of the *skene*, iconic signifiers resemble their objects mimetically. The words spoken by actors are symbolic signifiers, whose arbitrary rules we learn and internalise, in place of objects. Indexical signifiers operate differently because they indicate or point directly across time and space at their lost objects; for instance, an object may become personally valuable to us because it was once owned by a deceased relative. The obscene backstage space at the Theatre of Dionysus operates indexically because the *skene* indicates the presence of things we cannot see. We can begin to locate indices with the desirous, entangled, obscene space that interests us here.

Lacan linked Peirce's three signs to Freud's topology of *ego*, *super-ego*, and *id*, because (like icon, symbol, and index) they operate using reflection, laws or conventions, and bodies respectively. Lacan took Freud's topology and paired it with Peirce's linguistic insight to create the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, the psycho-linguistic 'registers' that form his version of the Oedipus Complex; the unique combination of early experiences that according to Freud, shape each human identity. As the child separates out psychologically from care-givers, they move from a world of contiguities in the Real, into one of picture-book semblances in the Imaginary, and eventually, speech in the Symbolic. It is interesting that the only trace of drama in the psychoanalytic lexicon is 'Oedipus'. But it is very tempting to suggest that Freud modelled his topology of the psyche directly upon the three carefully curated spaces at the Theatre of Dionysus.

Sophocles' cocksure King Oedipus was Freud's template for this complex, presumably because the character's *ego* and *super-ego* were so spectacularly dissociated from his *id*. In the Symbolic register of the *super-ego*, Oedipus is King of Thebes; in the Imaginary register (in his own *egoic* estimation) he is the hero who saved the city from the plague. His painful feet in the register of the Real cut through these cultural and personal misconceptions because they indicate the corporeal truth of

his situation. Oedipus' feet indicate the birth parents who nailed them to the rocks at Mount Kithairon when he was newly born, and left him to die; the parents Oedipus has unknowingly murdered and married. For Aristotle, the disconnect between thought, feeling, and action (between *ego*, *super-ego*, and *id*) gave rise to *hubris*, *hamartia* and *anagnorisis*; the arrogance, mistakes, and painful recognitions that dismantled the identity of the hero and formed the Aristotelian paradigm for tragedy. For Freud however, (as for Sophocles' chorus), Oedipus was a paradigm for the whole of humanity. As Oedipus shifts from fictional character to psychological complex, the drama of his situation frequently gets eclipsed; perhaps because psychoanalysis acknowledges its dramatic origins in name only. Here we attempt to hang onto and rehabilitate the performative implications of the Freudian move. If Oedipus is not just a dramatic character, but a paradigm for the tragedy of *all* character-formation, then the political function of the drama becomes clear: it dismantles the cultural and personal misconceptions of *super-ego* and *ego* to expose the physical reality of our situation: the underlying desire of the *id* we disavow. Freud's dramatism is surely badly needed in the Anthropocene. It takes us beyond Aristotle and suggests that drama can potentially send the subjectivities of its entire audiences into flux, not just its protagonists.

I propose we can understand how drama does this by reading the three spaces at the Theatre of Dionysus through Lacan's psycholinguistic registers to suggest an analogy between sign, psyche, and stage. The painted side of the *skene*, in front of which audiences gaze and actors speak, operates predominately in Lacan's Imaginary and Symbolic registers. Our particular interest here is in the temporal inflection of each register. Icons and symbols are composed of culturally determined patterns that exist 'always already', *a-priori* of us. They are the logocentric systems or ideological misconceptions that perform on us when society identifies and enculturates our bodies. Icons and symbols show us how thought performs.

But when the dramatic action moves beyond the *skene*, as it does when Oedipus goes inside the palace to confront his wife-mother, events are indistinct; as Dolar notes, sound 'hits us from the inside' (2006, 78). Without the gaze to distance us, the drama's fictional events get under our skin; triggering the primal anxiety (the fear Aristotle associates with tragedy, perhaps) that we experience when we hear an inchoate sound—a squeak or a rattle—and cannot rest until we have identified it. So, when we hear Agamemnon's death cries from behind the *skene*, or we see a character moving under a blanket, or hiding under floorboards in one of Edward Bond's plays for young people, we may become more intensely engaged in the action. Such drama deploys Lacan's corporeal register of the Real. In Greek tragedy a Messenger emerges from the palace to put the horrific events we have witnessed *a-posteriori* into words, the *a-priori* structures that can be socially shared. It is important not to confuse the Real with the literal as docudrama seems to do. The Real engages us physically because its temporal inflection is different from the other two registers; indices do not associate retroactively with their objects formally, or intellectually, as icons and symbols do; instead there is a direct, physical connection between signifier and signified that, like Oedipus' feet, is sensorially felt if not yet consciously understood. Drama can draw us into the corporeal logic of its fictional situation when meaning has to be personally put together or created by its audience, *a-posteriori*.

Indices point unequivocally at ‘this or that existing thing’, and they do so with urgency, directing ‘the attention to their objects by blind compulsion’ (Pierce cited in Chandler 2000, 41–2). Perhaps indices induce this psychic anxiety because they prevent eye and ear from grounding each other, to compromise the personalising physical unity (ego-identity) we acquire when we first recognise our reflection in the mirror (Lacan 2006, 78). The painted side of the *skene* reflects the human form as society recognises it; like Lacan’s mirror, it tucks us respectably inside our skin, and maintains our individuality. But the dark side of the *skene*, like Dionysus himself, challenges propriety and releases desire. The resulting sense of physical and psychic disintegration may put us in mind of the drunken philosophers and thespians at the end of Plato’s *Symposium*; of Aristophanes’ Queer humans; of Oedipus’ wife-mother; and of anxious little Ernst. It is in this emotionally-charged, primally entangled space, where things belong together but have been split apart¹, that drama and desire seem to originate.

Seen in this light, the *skene* deconstructs and reconfigures the Oedipus Complex for its audience. Its linguistic and pre-linguistic aspects set audiences on a cusp between knowing and being; between the *a-priori*, pre-existing structures provided by culture; and *a-posteriori* sensory evidence that connects us personally to external events we have to piece together ourselves. As we sharpen our definition of drama, this would be what makes it inescapably political. The peripety or reversal offered by the *skene* is temporal, but it does not relate to the duration of the performance, or the sequence in which the plot reveals the order of the play’s events. Performance practitioners can generate this imaginative engagement by being aware of the types of sign that are active at any particular moment. Audience desire is, as we have seen, activated by indices. When we interrupt the audience gaze, indices take audiences back to their most primal way of functioning. Relying on our other senses to guide us in an *a-posteriori* voyage of discovery may be a way into understanding how performance—how desire—thinks.

Theorising entangled performance practice

Lacan has proved helpful in theorising the oblique connection, made by Plato and Freud, between drama and desire. His psycho-linguistic hybrid expands our grasp of the way we can think through the three spaces instituted at the Theatre of Dionysus. It also opens up new ways to understand the function of theatrical boundaries in activating audience desire. I want to continue to think through the connexion between drama and Lacanian discourse to explore how these three spaces interact performatively and create the political feedback loops Latour espouses. The Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real registers guided Lacan’s life’s work as he explored first identity, then language, then corporeality; and latterly the different ways in which the three registers articulate in various sorts of psychic functioning. He used the three-dimensional structure of Borromean knots to understand how different configurations of the Oedipus Complex might give rise to different states of awareness.

For Lacan, Borromean knots show the different ways in which culture, individuals, and the unconscious (the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real respectively) can be knotted to constitute different types of subjectivity; different ways humans can experience reality without the loss of insight that

psychosis entails. Indeed, Lacan understood psychosis as the failure of the knot: if one link fails, the other two fall apart. When this happens the peculiarity of each register, which as Derrida (1978, 223) observed is distinct only in contrast to the others, is obscured. In hallucination (as in immersive and bedside theatre), the subject cannot distinguish between the literal and the figurative. Then, like Oedipus, (and like Latour's Modernists) we cannot make the crucial connexion between ourselves and our situation (between nature and culture) that gives us the autonomy we need to act effectively.

I propose we read the stage, backstage, and auditorium at the Theatre of Dionysus as a Borromean (that is to say, interconnected, interdependent, ecological) structure that echoes the Freudian psyche; or to be more accurate, the Freudian psyche echoes it. As we have seen Lacan's Graph of Desire expands Freud's binary life-death drives and Saussure's signifier-signified binary into a tripartite structure. Like Freud and Saussure's binaries, each aspect of Lacan's trilogy is irreducible to, yet inseparable from the others; no one entity is prioritised over the other two, and each has its being in that which lies outside of it. As a trilateral structure its interrelationships are more complex than the binary ones; but they give us an exciting new way to understand the connexion between drama and creativity because they figure a feedback loop like the one advocated by Latour. Here, the personal, social, and physical (feeling, thought, and action) can shift, each in relation to the other, offering changed perspectives.

If we rupture any one of these connexions, the unity of the personal-political relation, instituted at the Theatre of Dionysus, fails. In the context of the consulting room, the problem is private; a psychotic patient struggles to grasp that the things that seem so real to them cannot easily be socially shared. But in the context of the performance space the problem is civic; Latour's feedback loop between *a-posteriori* personal experience (action) and *a-priori* logocentric systems (thought and feeling) is broken. Then like Oedipus, the civic world does not know what it is doing to itself. As we have seen from the practice of bedside theatre, we should take our performance practices very seriously: the way we handle mind, body, and stage, can create civilisation or barbarity.

We can already see the importance of boundaries in the Borromean model. When they disintegrate, it becomes difficult to distinguish between words, images and bodies; between symbol, icon and index; between the social, the personal, and the corporeal. The *skene* and fourth wall boundaries instituted at the Theatre of Dionysus persisted in Early Modern theatre structures, such as the Globe and Rose theatres, and into Restoration and Proscenium models. It was in the Modernist period that theatre spaces began to disintegrate. Artaud dissolved the fourth wall, Brecht the *skene*, with Boal's Invisible Theatre leaving the building altogether (and in the process completely conning its audience). While these moves arguably put drama on the road to post-dramatic performance, they may have unintentionally helped relieve many performance practices of their personal and political relevance.

Psychoanalysis uses Borromean knots to figure the intersubjective space between patient and analyst; this paper proposes that we can use them to read the intersubjective space of performance. As we have seen, Borromean knots figure the different ways that mind, body, and

society can intersect. Most importantly from a political perspective, Borromean knots figure revolutionary reversals in power that do not sever the personal from the political.

When we look at the Lacanian version of the Borromean knot from one aspect, we see the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real plaited together, each overlapping the other in turn: the Symbolic suppresses the Imaginary, the Imaginary suppresses the Real, the Real suppresses the Symbolic.

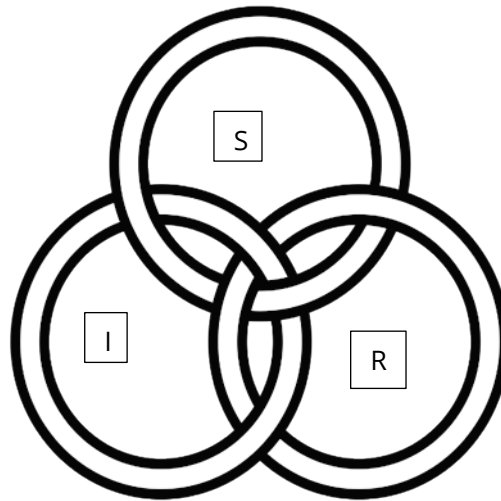


Fig 1. Prosopon: the skene's painted aspect. (How thought performs).

When we look at it from its other aspect, each intersection—each power relation—is reversed: the Imaginary suppresses the Symbolic; the Real suppresses the Imaginary; the Symbolic suppresses the Real.

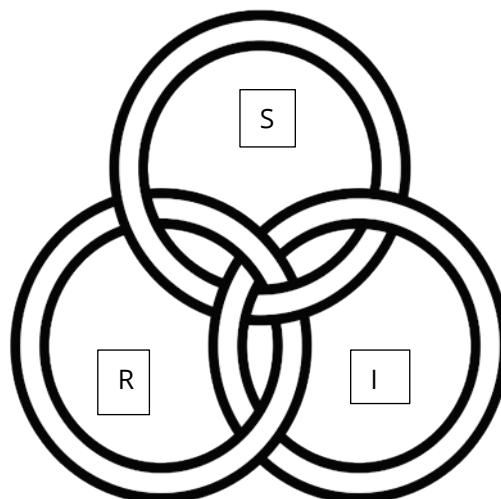


Fig 2. Obscene: the skene's embodied aspect. (How performance thinks).

The Borromean knot, like the *skene*, is three-dimensional, with three aspects—most importantly front and back. (Its view from above is not relevant here, although the Greeks did dramatize the roof of the *skene*. The statue of Dionysus was carried for the duration of his festival from his temple behind the *skene* onto the stage in front of it, as if he needed to see things from our side for a bit.) When the auditorium gazes at the painted front of the *skene* (or the surface of a screen), as in Fig. 1, images we recognise may command our attention more than the aspect we cannot see: the formal Imaginary suppresses the contiguities of the Real. But when the dramatic action moves behind the *skene* as in Fig. 2, the relation between the Imaginary and Real is reversed; audiences may try to piece together things they sense but cannot see.

When we link the Borromean structure of the Theatre of Dionysus with what Lacan has to say about the Borromean structure of the psyche, we can draw a comparison between some post-dramatic performance practices and psychosis. Post-dramatic performance frequently blurs the distinction between stage, auditorium, and the obscene space. When we abolish any one boundary two things happen to Borromean structure: it loses its inseparability and its irreducibility. If one link fails, the other two fall apart, are alienated from, and so cannot inform, the others. This means that the unity of the personal-political relation is lost and the Modernist division between culture and corporeality, observed by Latour, comes into focus. At the same time the irreducible peculiarity of each space, which (thanks to Derrida we realise) is distinct only in contrast to the others, disappears, so we cannot distinguish between them; the metaphorical space of the play is literalised as in hallucination. Alienation and immersion, which we may have considered antithetical performance practices, are both produced by boundary rupture. Both practices flatten the three dimensional complexity of the Borromean structure, so carefully constructed at the Theatre of Dionysus; in doing this they dismantle the contrast between *a-posteriori* (ontological) and *a-priori* (epistemological) perspectives to produce post-dramatic theatre. This contrast between nature, and culture's inevitably mistaken perception of it, this cusp between being and knowing which is the very stuff of drama, is lost when we focus only on the surface of the screen. When we reverse the Borromean knot on the other hand, its complexity is preserved, but every single power relation is radically altered. I am proposing this structure for radical and radicalising performance practices. If performance theory can get its head around the counterintuitive notion that differentiation unifies, while creating complexity in three dimensions, we can begin to grasp the ecology of dramatic entanglement at stake here.

For Lacanian analysts such as J-G Bursztein (2017), the Borromean knot figures 'the subjective body and its jouissances'. The Imaginary space represents the 'jouissance of the Imaginary body: perception of its image'; the Symbolic space, 'jouissance of the Symbolic body: speech'; and the Real, 'jouissance of the Real body: pleasure, pains' (27). We have already seen how the Theatre of Dionysus shares these pleasures of gaze, voice, and body, between its auditorium, stage, and backstage to generate its intersubjective space. And we have begun to understand the importance of the *skene* in returning audiences to states of prelinguistic creativity that put them in charge of signifiers, so that signifiers cannot perform on them. It is in the theatrical Real, its obscene space, that meaning is personalised; because here every pair of eyes splits from every pair of ears, opening the gaps—indices—in which the well-trodden connexions and expectations of culture may

be contested. This is where desire's libidinal energy is released, and so it may come as no surprise to find that it is also the space where drama's core foundational tropes of comedy and tragedy originate; laughter, pity-and-fear, seem to be Borromean reversals of each other. Seen in this light, Borromean reversals begin to look decidedly dramatic. Particularly if we drill down into the three sub-spaces where each register entangles with another, to contest its dominance, potentially reverse it, and open up a profoundly different perspective.

Genre: words and bodies

I am proposing that we can figure comedy and tragedy in the contested space where the Symbolic and Real overlap in Borromean structure. In the theatre, this is between the Symbolic speaking stage and the Real backstage space; most precisely, the space in the doorway—a gap in the *skene* that allows actors to enter and exit the stage. And since the theatre divides modalities up spatially (the auditorium looks but the stage speaks and so on) it functions like a singular body, the *skene* its communal skin, boundary between domestic internality, and social externality.

Comedy seems to configure in Fig. 1, where the Real enters the Symbolic space, and the community is faced with something intensely personal. To give two examples from Aristophanes, when we are faced with Kinesias' unruly phallus in *Lysistrata* ([411 BCE] 2003); or when Dionysus accidentally empties his bowels onstage in *Frogs* ([405 BCE] 2006). Although these things are personal, and may be unexpected, we recognise them—recognition is crucial in comedy. The baby in the 'peekaboo' game laughs at the precise moment it recognises the face of its caregiver: at that moment it joins the signifying network.

But if we see comedy as a purely visual trope, we are being too literal about it; because in its broader sense comic recognition involves an intellectual manoeuvre, wherein sensation transmutes into a pattern we can cognitively understand. When we laugh, our body speaks: Lacanians understand laughter as an element of *lalangue*, a hylomorphic union of matter and form (Latour's nature and culture), 'where matter becomes the signifying network, as language' (Bursztein 2017, 26).² When the Real enters the Symbolic we, and everyone else who 'gets' the joke, become consciously aware of it. In this sense, comedy is receptive—the mind receives it. The great thing about laughter is that this particular form of libidinal release marks the precise moment the penny drops for each individual, making this moment of personal insight public. The belated laugh intensifies the joke, as Joey from 'Friends' can tell you. We sometimes fake a laugh as we might fake an orgasm because we want the other to think we are with them; the stage and laughing auditorium is like two orgasmic bodies in this respect; a place of social and physical union. If you are the butt of the joke, as Socrates was said to have been during a performance of one of Aristophanes' plays, you can become (in his case, dangerously) socially ostracised. The union of the social and physical that laughter signifies relates to Aristophanes' integrated archaic humans. It relates to the specific, yet oblique connexion made by Plato in the *Symposium*, between drama and *sexual* desire. Now we can understand the connection more clearly; we can associate comedy with communal *and* carnal knowledge; with social and sexual association; as the Early Modern dramatists, whose comedies ended in marriage, seem to have done. Perhaps drama was better understood in the past than it is now.

When Socrates declared that the same person should be capable of writing tragedies as comedies (Plato 1999, 80), it may be because he had understood tragedy as a straightforward reversal of the comic 'knot'. If comedy is integration, tragedy is isolation; but it is isolation the theatre community goes through together. If comedy stages the individual joining the signifying network, tragedy stages the community facing the signifying network's inadequacy, as Oedipus does when he realises that being a king and a hero mean little in the face of his true identity. Tragedy seems to configure in Fig. 2, where the Symbolic enters the Real; where the community faces a situation it cannot yet define, one it has to piece together communally *a-posteriori*. An example of this is Franko B's (2002) *Aktion 395*, where the audience queue up to confront Franko, one to one, in a confined space. Franko is wearing one of those plastic funnel-collars given to dogs post-op to stop them licking their wound. This opaque plastic *skene* separates Franko's head from his painted, naked, wounded body; it also means he struggles to see you as you enter his space. An important component of the show was the little group of participants listening, and waiting for people coming out afterwards: 'what happened with you?' We could hear him react to each of us very differently and it became personally important to understand how our own physical presence had precipitated such wildly different responses from Franko. If comedy concerns knowledge, tragedy is an ontological, existential gap. Plato's symposium transformed philosophical expositions of desire into something more physical: no wonder the notion of drama kept coming up. Perhaps, at the end of that evening, Socrates was trying to suggest that the cusp between knowing and being is right where drama places us.

But if we view tragedy as simply not seeing, we are being as reductive as viewing comedy as a purely visual trope. Tragedy is about the failure of 'peekaboo'; about not being able to identify things; when things do not form a recognisable pattern the signifying network fails. Oedipus blinds himself because he says, identifying his parents in Hades would be too painful. In Greek Tragedy in moments of crisis, protagonists make noises: 'aiee', 'oymoy', 'feu-feu'. Lacanians might view these voiced sounds as a form of *lalangue* that acknowledges the inarticulate dignity of suffering; like an animal's howl; or the invisible death-cry Greek tragedians wrote into their plays. If laughter signifies Bursztein's pleasure of the Real body, these sounds indicate its pains.

When the Symbolic enters the Real it is not only words that lose their meaning. In Euripides' play *Herakles* (1997), we hardly ever see its protagonist. At first, he is offstage in Hades, then he goes through the *skene* into the palace to save his family from usurping King Lycos. While inside, he is driven mad by avenging goddess Hera, and unwittingly murders his wife and children. When Herakles recovers from his delirium and returns to the stage he hides under his cloak in shame. The cloak opens up a sort of pixelated gap in which he is visible but not identifiable. Perhaps the gap allows us to feel for him, rather than condemn him.

Contemporary dramatist Edward Bond uses a similar strategy in many of his plays. His 2006 play for young people, *Tune*, is particularly notable for this. Teenager Robert spends the first four scenes of this six-scene play shut up in his bedroom behind the *skene*. Because we cannot see him, we rely on the spoken accounts of him, given by his mother, Sally, and her new partner, Vernon. Vernon is busy trying to win Sally's trust so that he can defraud her out of her savings; he does this by falsely

incriminating Robert in various acts of vandalism. When Robert eventually appears onstage, he comes through his bedroom wall, a shape draped in cloth identical to the wall. As with *Herakles*, and the participants in *Aktion 395*, Robert is an indexical presence, acutely felt, like an apparition. The sheer ontological physicality of the Real contrasts with the less reliable epistemological signifying systems that surround it—particularly as we see Vernon manipulating words and images so skilfully. We may be able to understand this pixelated gap in terms of Aristotelian *anagnorisis*, the public re-cognition of a primal way of being which has been socially repressed.

Play: bodies and mirrors

Perhaps we can configure mimetic and autopoietic play in the contested space where the Real and Imaginary overlap in the Borromean structure. In the theatre this is where the audience gaze encounters its limit at the painted face of the *skene*; where iconic semblances on one side of the *skene* meet indications of things on its other side. Drama that operates on the surface of the screen or *skene* limits itself to mimesis, as so much film and TV drama do. This is Fig. 1, where the Imaginary dominates the Real.

We can see it at work in the following exercise for drama students, devised by my colleague Lindsey Muir, to demonstrate the limitations of realism. Half of a group of students are sent to another space to devise a realistic bank robbery, while the other half quietly compile a list of the tropes they expect to see. After watching the devised bank robbery, the second group reveal what they had predicted: guns: tick; panic button: tick; 'get on the floor!': tick, and so on. Where do these tired old ideas come from, we wonder afterwards? From films, from TV, from 'culture', we conclude. When we are bound by realism we are caught up in mimesis or simulation, repeating and reflecting what culture thinks.

In Fig. 2, the Real dominates the Imaginary. As Freud observes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 'there is no need to posit a specific imitative drive as the motive force behind children's play' ([1919] 2006, 143). For Freud, play is about agency not mimesis. Ernst's cotton-reel intersects the *fort-da* boundary of the *skene*—crucially without destroying or disavowing it. It crosses the 'X' of desire's chiasmus that Lacan plots on his Graph of Desire, and in a moëbius twist it privileges his desire to exceed the limitations of his predicament and get beyond his own skin; to be, as Lacan puts it 'the *fort* of a *da* and the *da* of a *fort*' (1998, 63). This is the Dionysian move made by actors, as well as playing children; but it is also as we have seen, the collapse of distance experienced by audiences when the action of the play goes behind the *skene*. It is the move made in the field of Drama in Education, when children go into role to explore their curriculum actively, instead of receiving it passively via words and images. As children go into role in the classroom, they behave as though they were onstage, in the sense that they behave according to the constraints of the imagined situation (Bolton 1992, 53–58). Unlike actors, they are not subject to the audience gaze; but like actors, audiences, and playing children, children in role are actively engaged in a situation they know is not real. It is not the reality of the situation, but their physical engagement in the fictional situation, that makes the Lacanian Real dominant here.

When teachers use role in the post-theatrical classroom context, they unleash an extraordinary creativity that contrasts vividly to the tired old clichés of the devised bank robbery above. Here's an example, designed by Professor David Davis, to demonstrate the experiential power of working in role. In pairs, A teaches B how to tie shoelaces. Then the exercise is repeated with the following additional constraints: A (parent, late for work again) encourages B (child, nearly ready to tie a bow for the first time by themselves) to get ready for school. A's desire to leave the house constrains B's desire to tie the bow without help, and vice versa. This second scenario generates a very pleasurable dramatic tension for the paired actors that was absent in the first; it is noticeable that the tension dissolves if the constraints are overcome or ignored. On reflection after the two examples of pair-work, workshop participants are able to compare simulation with drama, and can begin to grasp role and fiction as key ingredients of dramatic work. But something else also becomes apparent. When asked what they 'see' when in role, my drama students describe staircases, carpets, doorways, in colour and detail—the dramatic *mise-en-scène* that is so obviously absent in the classroom context. Are they hallucinating? No, because they know—they can see—they are in a classroom, just as actors and theatre audiences can see they are in a theatre. Immersive performance is hallucinatory precisely because its absence of boundaries removes the ability to distinguish between the literal and the figurative. Drama, I propose, because it employs boundaries, does not remove that ability. Yet at the same time it unleashes this extraordinary imaginative double-vision; images that 'land' unbidden, in the mind's eye, as vividly and unpredictably as dreams. The activity itself seems to 'think' them—perhaps because nobody is watching. In this post-theatrical classroom context, everything becomes a *skene*; an object which invites us to see beyond it.

Sense: eyes and ears

The last 'knot', where the Symbolic and Imaginary overlap, figures the play between audience gaze and speaking stage at the fourth wall boundary. For psychoanalysts, this is where meaning, or sense is negotiated. For dramatists, actors, and directors, this is where dramatic irony can be generated.

For instance, Sophocles gives Jocasta these lines:

Do not worry you will wed your mother.
It's true that in their dreams a lot of men
have slept with their own mothers, but someone
who ignores all this bears life more easily.

(Sophocles [420 BCE] 2004, L1165–1168)

But the actor playing Jocasta may undercut these words with a casual maternal gesture, bringing the accuracy of what she says into question. Strindberg, in the experimental 'pantomime' section in Scene 1 of *Miss Julie* ([1888] 1987), prioritises the iconic register and activates the audience gaze by cutting out the spoken word completely for several (in the nineteenth century very daring) minutes. Notice how he takes care not to give the gaze to the actress in lieu of her voice, thereby keeping the fourth wall intact:

This should be played as if the actress were actually alone. When the occasion calls for it she should turn her back on the audience completely. She does not look towards them, and must not hasten her movements as though afraid lest they should grow impatient. (111)

Martin Crimp, on the other hand, switches off the audience super-power as *Attempts on her Life* (1997) begins, by setting Scene One in a blackout. As the audience listen to the messages on an answering machine, they receive the spoken word with nowhere to project their gaze. In Harold Pinter's play *Mountain Language* (1988), Scene 3, 'Voice in the darkness', is set in a torture chamber. A young woman comes in through the wrong door on a prison visit. She sees her husband, hooded, held up by his torturers. 'The lights dim to half. The figures are still' (8). We hear the voices of the couple, remembering a love scene in a boat on a peaceful lake in springtime. The effect of looking at a torture chamber while listening to a love scene is very poignant. The point here is that without destroying the fourth wall, drama can activate or suppress the audience gaze; activate or suppress the staged voice; or it can jar our habitual connexion between gaze and voice, to generate dramatic irony. But it is worth noting that when the Symbolic register is prioritised over the Imaginary, not only does logocentricity prevail, but the stage projects actively, and the auditorium receives its meaning.

How thought performs; how performance thinks

This essay concludes its work using Borromean knots to theorise entangled performance practices, by drawing attention to desire's two very different processes. Both of these processes would seem to operate during dramatic performance, depending which aspect of the knot is in play.

In Fig. 1, the Symbolic suppresses the Imaginary, prioritising logocentricity; the Imaginary suppresses the Real, prioritising mimesis; and the Real suppresses the Symbolic, prioritising comedy. Each twist positions the auditorium to receive culture and conform to it, rather than create and change. This aspect of the knot would seem to figure the 'selfie' gaze, where the desire of the other inhabits, and represses, the body. It is tempting to relate Fig. 1 to the problems posed at the start of the article concerning our inability, in spite of understanding the science of climate dereliction, to change our disastrous culturally-embedded practices, and habits. In this state we are vulnerable to fake news; to the machinations of narcissistic politicians stirring up cultural enmities to consolidate their personal political power. It looks like a formula for the repetition compulsion Freud observes in his shell-shocked patients; like Lacan's take on Thanatos, whereby language stands in for and replaces embodied experience altogether.

In Fig. 2, on the other hand, the Imaginary suppresses the Symbolic, prioritising the audience gaze; the Real suppresses the Imaginary, prioritising *autopoiesis*; and the Symbolic suppresses the Real, prioritising tragedy. Each twist positions the civic community of the auditorium (or dramatized classroom³) to create as well as receive (see Katafiasz 2013, 2020). This would seem to figure how performance can impact society. Thucydides documents the extraordinarily creative culture

enjoyed by the Athenians, some thirty years after Winnington-Ingram tells us their practice of tragedy had become 'highly serious' (1999, 5):

The Athenians are addicted to innovation, and their designs are characterised by a swiftness alike in conception and execution; you (the Lacedaemonians) have a genius for keeping what you have got, accompanied by a total want of invention, and when forced to act, you never go far enough. (Thucydides, cited in Castoriadis 1987, 208)

In the face of the challenges coming our way in the era of climate crisis, of pandemic, of war, it might help us to be more Athenian than Lacedaemonian; to think and act in more aesthetically sensitive, desirous ways, as Latour suggests. It may help us to rethink some of our post-dramatic practices in the light of this; to capitalise on the highly creative exchange of libidinal energy that the practice of drama can give us.

Notes

¹ This insight originated in an actor's workshop given by dramatist Edward Bond to my students in 2018, in which he set a table and chair apart and asked the students to bring them together without touching them. He later said to them: all plays are written in that gap.

² I am grateful to Bill Roper for referring me to Bursztein on *lalangue* shortly before he died in 2021. His generous and insightful Lacanian scholarship in relation to Drama in Education will be hugely missed.

³ See Dorothy Heathcote's Conventions for Dramatic Action at <https://www.mantleoftheexpert.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/DH-Dramatic-Conventions-MoE.pdf>

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Biography

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