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The Haunted Stage: An Overview

A popular saying among students of Ibsen is that "all of his plays could be called *Ghosts,*" and, indeed, the images of the dead continuing to work their power on the living, of the past reappearing unexpectedly and uncannily in the midst of the present, are concerns that clearly struck deeply into the poetic imagination of the most influential dramatist of the modern European theatre. The comment is perhaps even more appropriate if we recall that Ibsen's title for the play was *Gengangere,* meaning literally "those that come back again" (the French translation, *Revenants,* captures this concept much more successfully).

Relevant as this observation is to the works of Ibsen, one might expand this observation to remark that not only all of Ibsen's plays but all plays in general might be called *Ghosts,* since, as Herbert Blau has provocatively observed, one of the universals of performance, both East and West, is its ghostliness, its sense of return, the uncanny but inescapable impression imposed upon its spectators that "*we are seeing what we saw before.*"[1] Blau is perhaps the most philosophical, but he is certainly not the only, recent theorist who has remarked upon this strange quality of experiencing something as a repetition in the theatre. Richard Schechner's oft-quoted characterization of performance as "restored behavior" or "twice-

behaved behavior"[2] looks in the same direction, as does Joseph Roach's relation of performance to surrogation, the "doomed search for originals by continuously auditioning stand-ins."[3] The physical theatre, as a site of the continuing reinforcement of memory by surrogation, is not surprisingly among the most haunted of human cultural structures. Almost any long-established theatre has tales of its resident ghosts, a feature utilized by the French director Daniel Mesguich in a number of his metatheatrical productions and by Mac Wellman, who summoned up the ghosts of the abandoned Victory Theatre to reenact their stories in that space in his site-specific 1990 production, *Crowbar.*

All theatrical cultures have recognized, in some form or another, this ghostly quality, this sense of something coming back in the theatre, and so the relationships between theatre and cultural memory are deep and complex. Just as one might say that every play might be called *Ghosts,* so, with equal justification, one might argue that every play is a memory play. Theatre, as a simulacrum of the cultural and historical process itself, seeking to depict the full range of human actions within their physical context, has always provided society with the most tangible records of its attempts to understand its own operations. It is the repository of cultural memory, but, like the memory of each individual, it is also subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts. The present experience is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations while these ghosts are simultaneously shifted and modified by the processes of recycling and recollection. As Elin Diamond has noted, even the terminology associated with performance suggests its inescapable and continuing negotiations with memory:

> While a performance embeds traces of other performances, it also produces an experience whose interpretation only partially depends on previous experience. Hence the terminology of "re" in discussion of performance, as in *re*member, *re*inscribe, *re*configure, *re*iterate, *re*store. "Re" acknowledges the pre-existing discursive field, the repetition within the performative present, but "figure," "script," and "iterate" assert the possibility of something that *exceeds* our knowledge, that alters

the shape of sites and imagines new unsuspected subject positions.[4]

A parallel process can be seen in dreaming, which, as many dream theorists have observed, has distinct similarities in the private experience to the public experience of theatre. Bert States suggests that both human fictions and human dreams are centrally concerned with memory negotiation. "If something is to be remembered at all, it must be remembered not as *what* happened but as what has happened *again* in a different way and will surely happen again in the future in still another way."[5] The waking dream of theatre, like dreaming itself, is particularly well suited to this strange but apparently essential process. Both recycle past perceptions and experience in imaginary configurations that, although different, are powerfully haunted by a sense of repetition and involve the whole range of human activity and its context.

The close relationships between theatre and memory have been recognized in many cultures and in many different fashions. The founding myths and legends of cultures around the world have been registered in their cultures by theatrical repetition, and, as modern nationalism arose to challenge the older religious faiths, national myths, legends, and historical stories again utilized the medium of theatre to present—or, rather, to represent, reinscribe, and reinforce—this new cultural construction. Central to the Noh drama of Japan, one of the world's oldest and most venerated dramatic traditions, is the image of the play as a story of the past recounted by a ghost, but ghostly storytellers and recalled events are the common coin of theatre everywhere in the world at every period.

The retelling of stories already told, the reenactment of events already enacted, the reexperience of emotions already experienced, these are and have always been central concerns of the theatre in all times and places, but closely allied to these concerns are the particular production dynamics of theatre: the stories it chooses to tell, the bodies and other physical materials it utilizes to tell them, and the places in which they are told. Each of these production elements are also, to a striking degree, composed of material "that we have seen before," and the memory of that recycled

material as it moves through new and different productions contributes in no small measure to the richness and density of the operations of theatre in general as a site of memory, both personal and cultural. The focus of this study will be upon such material and how the memories that it evokes have conditioned the processes of theatrical composition and, even more important, of theatrical reception in theatrical cultures around the world and across the centuries.

Of course, as anyone involved in the theatre knows, performance, however highly controlled and codified, is never exactly repeatable, an insight that Derrida used to challenge the speech-act theories of Austin and Searle, arguing that, while performative speech depends upon the citing of previous speech, the citation is never exact because of its shifting context.[6] As Hamlet remarks in that most haunted of all Western dramas, "I'll have these players / Play something like the murder of my father." That evocative phrase *something like* not only admits the inevitable slippage in all repetition but at the same time acknowledges the congruence that still haunts the new performance, a congruence upon which Hamlet, rightly, relies to "catch the conscience of the king" through the embodied memory of the theatre.

One of the important insights of modern literary theory has been that every new work may also be seen as a new assemblage of material from old works. As Roland Barthes observes in a widely quoted passage from *Image, Music, Text:* "We now know that the text is not a line of words releasing a single theological meaning (the 'message' of an Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, *none of them original,* blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture."[7]

This complex recycling of old elements, far from being a disadvantage, is an absolutely essential part of the reception process. We are able to "read" new works—whether they be plays, paintings, musical compositions, or, for that matter, new signifying structures that make no claim to artistic expression at all—only because we recognize within them elements that have been recycled from other structures of experience that we have experienced earlier. This "intertextual" attitude, approaching the text not as a

unique and essentially self-contained structure but as an open-ended "tissue of quotations," has become now quite familiar. The dramatic script, as text, readily opens itself to analysis on these terms, though, as I will argue in the next chapter, it participates in the recycling of elements in a rather different and arguably more comprehensive manner than do texts created in the tradition of other "literary" genres.

Definitions and examples of the workings of intertextuality have usually discussed this phenomenon as Barthes does, as a dynamic working within the text or among a body of texts, usually with a corresponding de-emphasis of the individual author (or at least of the originality of that author). Such an emphasis somewhat obscures the importance of memory to this process, an importance that becomes much clearer when we shift attention from the text itself to its reception. All reception is deeply involved with memory, because it is memory that supplies the codes and strategies that shape reception, and, as cultural and social memories change, so do the parameters within which reception operates, those parameters that reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss has called the "horizon of expectations."[8] The expectations an audience brings to a new reception experience are the residue of memory of previous such experiences. The reception group that Stanley Fish has called the "interpretive community" might in fact be described as a community in which there is a significant overlap of such memory,[9] and the reception process itself might be characterized as the selective application of memory to experience.

This process occurs, of course, not only in the arts but in any human activity involving interpretation, which includes any human activity to which consciousness is brought, but the major feature generally separating a work of art from other activities of the consciousness lies in the particular way it is framed, as an activity or object created to stimulate interpretation, that is, to invite an audience to interact in this way with it. Their interaction will in turn be primarily based upon their previous experience with similar activities or objects, that is, upon memory. The primary tools for audiences confronted with new paintings, pieces of music, books, or pieces of theatre are previous examples of these various arts they have experienced. An audience member, bombarded

with a variety of stimuli, processes them by selectively applying reception strategies remembered from previous situations that seem congruent. The process is a kind of continuing trial and error, since many interpretive possibilities are always present, and, as the reception experience continues, strategies remembered from a great many previous experiences may be successively tried in the search for the one apparently most compatible with this new situation. If a work requires reception techniques outside those provided by an audience's memory, then it falls outside their horizon of expectations, but more commonly it will operate, or can be made to operate, within that horizon, thus adding a new experiential memory for future use.

A familiar example of this process can be seen in the operations of genre. Although the term is most closely associated with literature, most of the arts offer groupings of material that could be called genres, and such groupings provide one important and traditional part of the horizon of expectations. Whether a literary genre is a very broad and flexible one, such as a comedy or romance, or one much more specifically defined, such as a classic detective story, the audience for a new work in the genre can be normally expected to have read other works in the genre and to apply the memory of how those works are constructed to the understanding and appreciation of the new example. In his perceptive recent study of the relationship between the concepts of genre and of drama Michael Goldman begins his discussion with a consideration of the dynamic of recognition, noting that "the first function of genre is that it be recognized" and that recognition, the awareness of witnessing something once again, has been a process particularly associated with drama from "the very beginning of dramatic theory."[10]

This process of using the memory of previous encounters to understand and interpret encounters with new and somewhat different but apparently similar phenomena is fundamental to human cognition in general, and it plays a major role in the theatre, as it does in all the arts. Within the theatre, however, a related but somewhat different aspect of memory operates in a manner distinct from, or at least in a more central way than in, the other arts, so much so that I would argue that it is one of the character-

istic features of theatre. To this phenomenon I have given the name *ghosting*. Unlike the reception operations of genre (also, of course, of major importance in theatre), in which audience members encounter a new but distinctly different example of a type of artistic product they have encountered before, ghosting presents the identical thing they have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context. Thus, a recognition not of similarity, as in genre, but of identity becomes a part of the reception process, with results that can complicate this process considerably. Of course, on the most basic level all arts are built up of identical material used over and over again, individual words in poetry, tones in music, hues in painting, but these semiotic building blocks carry much of their reception burden in their combinations. Certainly, these combinations can and do evoke memories of similar, and at times identical, use in particular previous works in all of the arts, but it seems to me that the practice of theatre has been in all periods and cultures particularly obsessed with memory and ghosting, a phenomenon that I propose to explore in various constituent parts of that art.

Freddie Rokem, who sees, as I do, Marcellus' question in *Hamlet*, "What, has this thing appeared again tonight?" as profoundly evocative of the operations of theatre itself, focuses upon its significance for theatrical representations of historical events, the theme of Rokem's book *Performing History*. "On the metatheatrical level," Rokem observes, this question "implies that the repressed ghostly figures and events from that ('real') historical past can (re)appear on the stage in theatrical performances. The actors performing such historical figures are in fact the 'things' who are appearing again tonight in the performance. And when these ghosts are historical figures they are in a sense performing history."[11] Indeed, this is true, and this ghostly reappearance of historical, and legendary, figures on the stage has been throughout history an essential part of the theatre experience. My own interest here is somewhat different, however, focusing not only upon what is being performed (or, better, performed again) but also upon the means of performance, not only the actors but all the accouterments of theatre, the literal "things" that are "appearing again tonight at the performance." These are the ghosts that have

haunted all theatrical performance in all periods, whatever the particular subject matter of the presentation.

I propose to begin with the functioning of ghosting in the dramatic text, the widely accepted ground of theatre in many cultures, including our own. Although recent writings on intertextuality have called our attention to the fact that all literary texts are involved in the process of recycling and memory, weaving together elements of preexisting and previously read other texts, the dramatic text seems particularly self-conscious of this process, particularly haunted by its predecessors. Drama, more than any other literary form, seems to be associated in all cultures with the retelling again and again of stories that bear a particular religious, social, or political significance for their public. There clearly seems to be something in the nature of dramatic presentation that makes it a particularly attractive repository for the storage and mechanism for the continued recirculation of cultural memory. This common characteristic of the dramatic text will be the subject of my next chapter.

When we move from the dramatic text to its physical realization in the theatre, the operations of memory upon reception become even more striking. Because every physical element of the production can be and often is used over and over again in subsequent productions, the opportunities for an audience to bring memories of previous uses to new productions are enormous. Often these memories have been consciously utilized by the theatre culture, but, even when they are not, they may well continue to operate, affecting reception in powerful and unexpected ways. The most familiar example of this phenomenon is the appearance of an actor, remembered from previous roles, in a new characterization. The recycled body of an actor, already a complex bearer of semiotic messages, will almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles if they have made any impression whatever on the audience, a phenomenon that often colors and indeed may dominate the reception process. When the new character is of the same general type as the previous one, then the reappearance of an already known body operates rather like one of the variable recurring components that allow readers to recognize a genre. From this has arisen the familiar theatre and filmic practice of "typecasting,"

when an actor appears again and again as a rugged fighter or comic buffoon, in a character whose actions and gestures are so similar role to role that the audience recognizes them as they would the conventions of a familiar genre. But, even when an actor strives to vary his roles, he is, especially as his reputation grows, entrapped by the memories of his public, so that each new appearance requires a renegotiation with those memories.

A striking but not untypical recent example of this is provided by a review appearing in the *New York Times* in June 2000, written by that paper's leading drama critic, Ben Brantley, and concerning a current Broadway production of *Macbeth*. Not only is the review centrally concerned with the phenomenon of ghosting, but it even seeks to evoke in its own style something of the psychic disjuncture that the ghosting of an actor can evoke in the theatre. The opening paragraph, in full, reads:

> Across the bloody fields of Scotland, in the land where the stage smoke swirls and the synthesizers scream like banshees, strides a faceless figure in black, thudding along in thick, corpse-kicking boots. Who is this masked man, speaking so portentously about how "foul and fair" his day has been? At last he raises the gleaming vizard of his helmet and there, behold, is a most familiar wide-browed visage: hey, it's one of America's most popular television stars, and, boy, does he look as if he means business.

The popular television star in question is Kelsey Grammer, familiar as a very un-Macbeth-like character, an engaging, though ineffectual psychiatrist on the highly popular sitcom "Frasier." Brantley then goes on to consider why this well-known actor would choose to make a "semi-incognito first appearance" in the production and suggests, as one "quite legitimate" reason, that such an entrance

> forestalls that disruptive shock of recognition that might prompt some rowdy theatregoer to yell out "Where's Niles?" in reference to Frasier's television brother. It allows that actor's voice, most un-Frasier-like here as it solemnly intones Mac-

beth's opening line, to introduce his character without prejudice.[12]

The highly suggestive words *disruptive* and *without prejudice* suggest the powerful, troubling, ambiguous, and yet undeniable role that ghosting can play in the reception process in theatre, a role so powerful in this production (as in many) that Brantley chose to make it the centerpiece of his review. Ironically, in so doing, he has (unwittingly?) "blown Grammer's cover." If there were any members in the preview or opening night audiences whose first impressions of the "faceless figure" in black were not ghosted by "Frasier" (advance publicity and program notes already having prepared most of them for this effect), then that number was doubtless considerably reduced by the association being stressed in the most visible professional review of the production. An effect of this sort of ghosting upon reception is by no means confined to constant theatregoers such as Broadway reviewers. Almost any theatregoer can doubtless recall situations when the memory of an actor seen in a previous role or roles remained in the mind to haunt a subsequent performance. Despite its commonality, this familiar reception phenomenon has been accorded very little critical or theoretical attention. The haunted body of the performer and its operations will be the concern of my third chapter.

If the recycling of the bodies of actors has received little attention as an aspect of reception, still less attention has been given to the interesting fact that these bodies are only one part of a dynamic of recycling that affects almost every part of the theatrical experience and that, in its extent and variety, is more central to the reception operations of theatre than it is to any other art form. In my fourth chapter I will examine these operations as they have been manifested in the various production elements that surround and condition the body of the individual actor: costumes, lighting, sound, and the rest of the production apparatus. I will then move in my fifth chapter from these components of the performance space to the space itself, discussing some of the ways in which reception memory operates in relation to the places performance takes place. Each, I will argue, is centrally involved, in all theatre cultures, with the recycling of specific material, and the

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All theatre, I will argue, is as a cultural activity deeply involved with memory and haunted by repetition. Moreover, as an ongoing social institution it almost invariably reinforces this involvement and haunting by bringing together on repeated occasions and in the same spaces the same bodies (onstage and in the audience) and the same physical material. To indicate the importance and ubiquity of this involvement I will present examples from a wide range of theatrical cultures. Yet, while I do hope to demonstrate that the operations of repetition, memory, and ghosting are deeply involved in the nature of the theatrical experience itself, I am fully aware that, just as the theatrical impulse manifests itself in a very different manner in different periods and cultures, so does the particular way in which these operations are carried out. Highly traditional theatrical organizations, such as those of classic Japan and China, are so deeply committed to the process of recycling of material that ghosting might well be considered as their most prominent reception feature. There is scarcely an element of the theatrical experience in these traditions that audiences cannot immediately recognize as having witnessed before. The same actors appear year after year playing the same roles in the same plays, wearing the same makeup and the same costumes, using the same movements, gestures, and vocal intonations, all of which are inherited by the successors of these actors. In such performance cultures the attempt to repeat the original has resulted in a codification of actions and physical objects so detailed as to be almost obsessive.

On the other hand, some theatre cultures, particularly in more recent times, have so prized innovation and originality that they have attempted (never with complete success) to avoid entirely the sort of performance citationality that characterizes the classic theatres of the East and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the major national performance traditions of the West. The passion of romantic artists and theorists for original expression and the genius who would repeat nothing of his forebears (an ideal now almost totally discredited by postmodern theory and thought) and the vogue for

theatrical realism and the various avant-gardes that came in the wake of romanticism very much weakened the major traditions of citationality in Western theatre. Among them one might mention the traditional lines of business, the genealogies of performance, with certain gestures and patterns of movement handed down from actor to actor, and the common practice of using the same scenery, costumes, and properties in production after production, all of these normal practice in the pre-romantic European theatre and increasingly rejected in the wake of romanticism.

Neither romanticism's desire for the original nor its rejection of theatrical traditions in the name of the presumably more individual, even unique experiences of real life in fact removed the theatre from its close ties to cultural memory. Nor did they remove the performative memories that inevitably haunted its productions, the bodies of its performers, and the physical objects that surrounded them. In the major theatrical manifesto of romanticism, Victor Hugo's preface to his play *Cromwell,* the author condemns the traditional neutral chamber or peristyle used indiscriminately as the setting for countless French tragedies since Corneille and Racine and called, instead, for exact and specific settings, unique to each situation and free of the memories of a theatrical tradition."The place where this or that catastrophe occurred is an incorruptible and convincing witness to the catastrophe," Hugo argued, and the absence of this species of silent character would render incomplete upon the stage the grandest scenes of history.[13]

The romantic (and realistic) interest in the specific illustrated by this passage encouraged a trend in the Western theatre away from the tradition not only of the generic stock settings that Hugo would replace with settings unique to each event but the entire interrelated tradition of recycled material—in costuming, plotting, character types, and interpretive traditions. Nevertheless, the connections between memory and theatre went far deeper than these changes in performance practice, and, as first romanticism then realism strongly altered theatre practice, the operations of memory in this practice in some ways (but by no means all ways) shifted, yet they remained of central importance to the experience and reception of theatre.

Even the radical change in the attitude toward stage setting proposed by Hugo simply shifts the operations of memory and association in different directions. If in fact the "exact locality" that he proposes were to be achieved (as it never was in his own theatre but subsequently would be in certain "site-specific" theatre of the twentieth century), then the settings would be haunted not by the theatrical associations of their use in previous productions but by historical associations that, as Hugo notes, could be relied upon to produce "a faithful impression of the [historical] facts upon the mind of the spectator." Its operations, theatrically, still depend upon an audience's recognition of it as "restored" material.

The new approach represented by romanticism and realism in Western theatrical practice did not, moreover, ever really challenge certain of the most common and powerful traditions of recycled material, the most important of which was the body of the individual actor. For all his interest in unique and individual settings for each production, Hugo willingly, indeed eagerly, sought to use his favorite actors, such as Marie Dorval and Frédérick Lemaître, again and again, fully aware that they would inevitably bring associations from old productions to new ones. Indeed, in his afterword to the published text of *Ruy Blas* Hugo praises Lemaître precisely in terms of the associations he evokes. After noting that "enthusiastic acclamations" greet this actor "as soon as he comes on stage" (a practice still common even in the most realistic theatre and perhaps the most obvious sign of the audience's reception being haunted from the beginning by previous acquaintance with the individual actor in other works), Hugo proceeds to laud him for the acting associations he evokes. At his peak, says Hugo, "he *dominates all the memories of his art.* For old men, he is Lekain and Garrick in one; for us, his coevals, he is Kean's action combined with Talma's emotion."[14] For all of its passion for originality, the romantic theatre remained deeply involved with cultural memory for its subjects and theatrical memory for their enactment.

The particular manner in which memory, recycling, and ghosting has been utilized in the theatre has taken a distinctly different direction in the wide variety of theatrical and dramatic expression that may be generally characterized as postmodern. In a move that

created a relationship between theatre and memory quite distinct both from the classical search for the preservation of particular artistic models and traditions and from romanticism and realism's search for unique and individual insight and expression, postmodern drama and theatre has tended to favor the conscious reuse of material haunted by memory, but in an ironic and self-conscious manner quite different from classical usage. The postmodern stage, one could argue, is as deeply committed to the recycling of previously utilized material, both physical and textual, as have been the traditional theatres of Asia and of the pre-romantic West. As Peter Rabinowitz has noted, "We live in an age of artistic recycling."[15] The actual manifestations of this commitment, however, reflect a very different cultural consciousness.

Theatre artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth century based much of their work upon what Derrida speaks of as citation, but rarely did they present it directly *as* citation. The postmodern theatre, on the other hand, is almost obsessed with citation, with gestural, physical, and textual material consciously recycled, often almost like pieces of a collage, into new combinations with little attempt to hide the fragmentary and "quoted" nature of these pieces. This is certainly true, for example, of the work of Heiner Müller, widely considered one of the central examples of a "postmodern" dramatist. In his study of Müller, Jonathan Kalb describes him as "a new kind of master author whose identity is a pastiche of other identities"[16] and speaks of Müller's "postmodern valuing of fragments."[17] This can be clearly seen in what is probably Müller's best-known text, *Hamletmachine,* which, as Kalb notes, is "packed with quotations and paraphrases from Eliot, cummings, Hölderlin, Marx, Benjamin, Artaud, Sartre, Warhol, Shakespeare, the Bible, Müller himself, and others, often strung together without connecting text."[18]

The conscious and calculated recycling of material, from one's own previous life and work as well as those of others, is widely recognized as one of the hallmarks of postmodern expression, not only in literary texts but in theatrical performance. Robert Simonson, in a brief essay on the actor Spalding Gray in the popular theatre publication *Playbill,* called Gray "a walking piece of masterful post-modernism," justifying this appellation by Gray's continual

and highly self-conscious recycling of material, largely from his own life and work:

> Gray's drama never ends. One need hardly observe that his is hardly the unobserved life. The curtain rises when he gets up and falls with his head upon the pillow. Once onstage, relating the details of that existence, he is Gray the Performer in Gray the Drama. And, as an actor, in Gore Vidal's *The Best Man,* he is Gray the Performer playing Gray the Actor—a chapter in Gray the Drama, and a role he will no doubt dissect in his next monologue (as he did his experience in *Our Town* in the piece, *Monster in a Box.*)[19]

Gray was one of the founding members of what is probably the best-known experimental theatre company of the postmodern era, the Wooster Group, and that company also, like most companies around the world involved in experimental performance in the closing years of the twentieth century, has been centrally concerned with the process of recycling. In my final chapter I will focus upon the work of this group, not only because it is likely to be the most familiar postmodern experimental company for my readers but also because it provides so clear an illustration of the particular manner in which theatre's long-standing fascination with reappearance is being worked out in contemporary postmodern terms.

Although the Wooster Group may be, especially for Americans, the most familiar example of this process, an almost obsessive concern with memory, citation, and the reappearance of bodies and other material from the past is in fact widespread in the contemporary theatre internationally. It is indeed so widespread that one may be tempted to think of this concern as a particularly contemporary one. I hope to demonstrate, however, in the pages that follow that the theatre has been obsessed always with things that return, that appear again tonight, even though this obsession has been manifested in quite different ways in different cultural situations. Everything in the theatre, the bodies, the materials utilized, the language, the space itself, is now and has always been haunted, and that haunting has been an essential part of the theatre's meaning to and reception by its audiences in all times and all places.