ADAM SEELIG / *EMERGE*N*SEE*: GET HEAD OUT OF ASS: "*Charactor*" and Poetic Theatre

It's time to break character. Character, as we know it, has become just another mask, concealing the person who performs. The play *of* our selves, *by* and *through* our selves (but not necessarily *about*), is the drama we need. Theatre may be a great art form, but it couldn't be more abused, with acting reduced to an habitual bag of tricks yielding vacuous entertainment in lieu of serious pleasure, love…

It's time to break character so the actor can break through. Or if we bury character at least a little, the performer can surface, freeing her from the tacit obligation to imitate society and enabling her to radiate more of her actual self. Those who perform are never what they perform about. In fact, they are often more interesting and dynamic than the subjects they portray. Actors are highly sensitive, acute people, and, in being right before us, in the flesh, are always more present than what they represent. So why hide them? Their inalienable nature, as opposed to assigned character, should be the origin of their performance. As Noh suggests, "Each pupil has his own voice; it cannot be made to imitate" (Fenollosa and Pound 30). Yet most of our actors (as directed by most of our directors, written by most of our writers, and created by most of our collectives) have been playing like Bottom with head all too much in ass — the mask that is their character consumes them entirely. This is our emergency: the actor must reemerge. So let's stop braying antics, awaken from the spell, and pick up where Shakespeare left *The Tempest*, forswearing illusion, book of tricks buried:

> Now my charms are all o'erthrown
> And what strength I have's mine own (Epilogue 1-2)

This is where a new kind of character, the *charactor*, can begin.

If Bottom transformed so entirely into a donkey that we couldn't recognize him at all, the comedy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would be lost. What amuses the audience is the tension between who Bottom is and what he's become; in short, his AssBottom *charactor*. We see an actor (Bottom is part of a ragtag troupe) in his new if unexpected role, and laugh. Actually, we see more: we see an actor (let's call him Joe) playing Bottom in the donkey mask. Go one step further and we see ourselves watching Joe playing Bottom being an ass, because Joe is ultimately a person, like us and *for* us — he has gone on stage for us, in our place, and we therefore identify with him. Our essential link to the play is the person on stage. That is why we watch in the first place, and we keep watching because we are fascinated by the tensions between who he is (person) and what he's not (character) and by how he negotiates such tensions (acting). What I'm proposing in conceptualizing *charactor* — and in staging such *charactors* with my theatre company, One Little Goat — is that just as we see much of Bottom in the mask, so we should see more of the actor in his character. The actor, then, can be a person performing as opposed to a tool of the theatre, a mere Rude Mechanical. A theatre of *charactors* is a theatre of people.

In such theatre, there is little need for the audience's suspension of disbelief. Because *charactors* are just as much us as other — because, in short, they are fellow human beings — the stage becomes less foreign to the viewers, requiring less of a shift in our mentality. We are closer to the performers because they are less concealed from us. The choruses of Sophocles were comprised of civilians. Those civilians acted, but they were not "actors". Acting and performing in the theatre is far more important than being an actor or performer. The perpetuation of star actors is fundamentally detrimental to drama. When a famous actor is promoted, the audience comes for the star, not for the so-called supporting performers. Sophocles's audience, by contrast, came foremost to see the chorus, which included their brothers (regrettably not sisters)

and colleagues and friends — fellow citizens of Athens playing citizens of Thebes. Thus the chorus's bond with the audience was strong. Brecht's *Antigone* is brilliant not for recasting Creon *vs.* Antigone as fascist *vs.* freedom fighter,[1] but in tilting the tragedy toward the chorus, and therefore society, who witness but do not intervene in the fatal chain of events. They do not act — that is the tragedy. And in being personally associated with their fellow audience, these non-acting citizens bring the tragedy closer to home. It bleeds into society.

Brecht's "alienation effect" is uninviting in its nomenclature.[2] It has become associated with cold rationality — a stylistic choice that distances the play from the audience so that the latter may consider the former analytically. But after years of audiences losing themselves in spectacles (Richard Wagner), Brecht was helping us find ourselves again by appealing to our intellect *in conjunction with* our emotions — our full range of human faculties. Why must reason be cold? And why dissociate intellect from feeling when the two are ultimately intertwined? It is calculation that is cold, like conventional theatre that depends on such calculation — effects — to work on the audience. Hard to believe, but many theatre practitioners are still committing the aesthetic crime of "background music" (an insult to both music and theatre) for purposes of heightening key moments and manipulating the viewer emotionally. A theatre of *charactors*, by contrast, is more generous toward the audience, accommodating thought in addition to feeling.

Such generosity, though, shouldn't be confused with loving the audience or wanting the audience to love the play. If theatre-makers want to love the audience, it's just as important to loathe — anything else would be dishonest. A relationship with an audience, as between people, is always contradictory, and must contain contradictions to be dynamic, progressive and human. As Blake propounds in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to

Human existence" (250). This humanity of contradiction is also something to be learned, albeit less lyrically, from the "Fuck You Man" in California, a Berkeley street person who enjoys engaging in warm and lively conversation so long as a mutual "fuck you" is first exchanged. In a state (California) full of lobotomized smiles — much like the smiling entertainers in our very nice theatres — "fuck you" is his effective way of breaking his audience from its sunshiny pleasantness and borderline indifference. It is his way of awakening us to a more intimate conversation with a broader range of possibility. The "fuck you," in other words, is *for* you, not *against*, just as alienation can be *for* the audience, bringing us paradoxically closer to the performers and the play.

Wagner involved an entire town, Bayreuth, in his extraordinary productions. Townspeople schlepped carpentry, built sets, banged drums, etc., all in service to the Maestro's megalomaniacal enterprise — and they still do to this day. Those individual labourers, as we know, are supposed to disappear into the larger spectacle, just as Wagner's orchestra should be heard but not seen.[3] Similarly, Wagner's singers are caked in enough makeup and masked by enough costume to transform them into superhumans, raising them above humanity, including the lowly audience sitting in the dark theatre, from which Wagner must show us the light.[4] The field of vision is glaringly uneven: we are invisible to the actors, but they are spectacular to us. A Wagner opera, then, requires us to diminish our presence and submit to something that is both rapturously and rapaciously overwhelming. How fitting that Wagner begins *The Ring of the Nibelung* with the siren-like Rhinemaidens — it's hard not to fall under the visual and sonorous spell. The audience members serve as passive receptors, just as the actors are wholly in Wagner's service as they erase themselves in the embrace of their character to enter The Myth.

The less we see of the actors' nature, the more they are praised for embodying their part. They themselves are clearly *not* the message, but its vessel as Wagner's vassals.

The barrier between actors and audience in most conventional theatre is a kind of wall by which a "king of the castle" *vs.* "dirty rascal" dynamic plays out. When actors are on top, they condescend; when the positions are reversed, the actors grovel (an act which is sometimes sublimated into self sacrifice). In either case, the wall must be surmounted. Someone has to climb over it, forcing us, the audience, to suspend our disbelief about how differently these strange actors behave from us, and at how implausible their circumstances are, with all the twists in the "plots" of their lives.

With *charactors*, by contrast, the gap becomes a medium not to bypass, but through which performance communicates. It is neither a wall nor a pane of glass, but a prism dispersing the focused light of the performers into a spectrum as it travels toward the audience. The gap, then, does not result in power differences, nor is it bridged and overcome; rather, it is welcomed and exploited for ambiguity, achieving a broad clarity that reveals possibilities. This may not be the purpose of the gap. In fact its allure is its very purposelessness, which, like a blank page, generates potential. But in exploiting the gap I am using its uselessness, and in the process enabling the audience to see multiple possibilities in a single action, more than one aspect of a *charactor*'s face.

Is vs. Could-Have-Been: What a choice!

Actors make choices about their intentions on stage. This is good. The danger, however, is that some choices will preclude others, resulting in the unfortunate reduction of what could be a rich and clear ambiguity into a limited interpretation — a one-note performance, in other words,

lacking overtones. Robert Motherwell speaks to this when he writes (to Frank O'Hara) that "Every picture one paints involves *not* painting others! What a choice!" (149) Painting one way does not simply exclude other directions, but *contains their exclusion*, carrying traces of what could have been. I keep this very much in mind when directing, as I did when composing *Every Day in the Morning (slow)*, a new book whose words often align vertically, configured spatially. Here's the first page:

```
This
  is what
      happens in the morning of course many things
      happen                to         many        people
              in the morning                              but
this
  is what
      happens

when Sam wakes up it's
                     still dark
                                in
the                            window
                                and
                     still
                                in
the                                   room since Layla has left

for
work like the
           neighbours upstairs all gone to
work                                    to
                be                      together
                                 with      others leaving
```

Sam to wake alone and

walk past the window by

the piano

over

to the bathroom its cool

floor

cools his feet

covering

the

same steps from

bed

to sink under

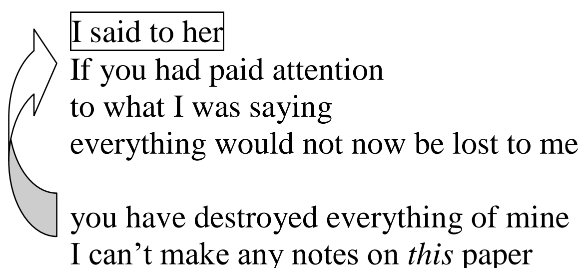
Right from the start we’re aware of possibilities, that writing-choices are being made in terms of which words and letters will align and repeat as others emerge. That the reader must actively move her eyes along an unconventional trajectory makes her all the more conscious of her participation in the construction of meaning. She must piece it together, gathering parts to whole, all the while knowing that the writing could follow entirely different lines with the smallest of changes. A letter, a word, a position could alter matters considerably by literally altering the very *matter* of the text. So the dynamics on the page depend on the tension between “this here” that *is* right before us *vs.* the “that there” that *could have been*. So-called inevitability lacks tension in this day and age. Anyone writing “flawless” lines or “inevitable” climaxes today is, at best, a Mozart in a post-Schoenberg age. Christian Bök’s *Eunoia* is an excellent book teeming with the vitality of invention. Bök’s claim in *Brick Magazine*, however, that certain letters have a sort of embedded code fating particular content, is intriguing but misleading, since each chapter in *Eunoia* could have gone in any number of directions. Rather than revealing “*the*

way" of each vowel, he has shown us "*a* way," opening our minds to potentials that could have been. That, in the end, is the forte of OULIPO, with Queneau's "100,000,000,000,000 Poems" being the perfect example: it creates dizzying permutations that suggest countless outcomes.

Thomas Bernhard brilliantly exploits the construction of multiple possibilities through enjambment. Here's an example from *Ritter, Dene, Voss* (a *charactor* play par excellence[5]), when Ludwig is speaking to the younger of his two sisters (Ritter) while the older one (Dene) is not present.

> If you had paid attention
> to what I was saying
> everything would not now be lost to me
> I said to her
> you have destroyed everything of mine
> I can't make any notes on *this* paper (121)

It's okay to quote somewhat out of context because the lines come up somewhat out of context in the play itself, as Ludwig follows several trains of thought almost simultaneously, jumping from one to the other without transition in a feat of verbal cubism. As a result, we don't know to whom the first three lines are addressed, until the fourth line appears: "I said to her". Had this fourth line come first – i.e.,



— there would be no confusion that Ludwig is showing Ritter how he scolded Dene ("If you/*Dene* had paid attention…"). But by simply delaying "I said to her," Bernhard has introduced the possibility that Ludwig is accusing "you/*Ritter*" of not paying attention. He is with Ritter, after all, when he suddenly says these lines. Thus Ludwig intends one thing ("If

Dene had paid attention”), which we interpret as another (“If *Ritter* had paid attention”), until we realize that Dene was the object of the outburst (“I said to her”). In this case, the actor playing Ludwig has *one* choice (recounting to Ritter his eruption at Dene) and yet, because of Bernhard’s placement of the lines and the resulting temporal gap, that one choice ends up being interpreted by the audience in *two* ways (“he is erupting at Ritter; oh no, wait, I see now, he *had* erupted at *Dene*”). Bernhard’s writing does the work for us. And it is entirely appropriate for us to be confused momentarily over whom Ludwig is mad at, since he has plenty of aggression to spare. Bernhard employs this device repeatedly, but it’s more than a mere trick — it’s clear and ambiguous at once.[6]

The knowledge that things could be otherwise and otherways is compelling. This is what’s staggering about Nora leaving Torvald at the end of Ibsen’s *A Doll House*. Nora leaves not in the midst of her crisis, but *after* it has resolved. Only once Nils Krogstad revokes the letter that could have ruined Nora does she change (literally changing her dress) and leave husband and home. Had Ibsen ended with the defamatory letter still valid, Nora’s leaving would make perfect sense as her ultimate, inevitable fate (either exile or suicide, both of which she considers as Torvald reads Krogstad’s letter), and we would still have an exceptional play. But Ibsen has Nora leave voluntarily. She leaves once the troubling letter is burnt, her past problems are erased, and the option of an ostensibly happy-ever-after marriage is available again. Now Nora’s action is entirely conscious and not merely the function of circumstances — a provocatively willful action as opposed to desperate reaction. Ibsen has written the voluntary emancipation of Nora, and in the process plays out woman’s rejection of domestic subjugation as well as the liberation of “character” itself, the freedom for a character to choose. And with woman/character making a choice that contains the rejection of other possibilities, perhaps the first *charactor* is born.

Nora caught between home and banishment, with audience not knowing which way she'll go — it's not a big step from here to Pirandello. Isn't the tension in every Pirandello play the result of a protagonist, often female, teetering between two clashing contexts, feeling out of sorts because she's out of place? In Pirandello's work, context is always doubled, creating a tension between "this here" and "that there". His scenarios often draw attention to a past place where "she" behaved otherwise, and the potential for her to behave that way in the current setting carries a destructive charm and charge. Already in Pirandello's first play, *Limes from Sicily*, we hold two contexts in mind from the moment Micuccio Bonavino enters. He is a visitor from elsewhere, an elsewhere where the prima donna Teresina was born and raised, setting the stage for us to think of a man from "there" now "here," and what the prima donna "here" (whorishly behaved) must have been like growing up in a small village "there" (modestly behaved). It can all be summed up with the title of another Pirandello play, *This Time It Will be Different*, which also involves a double context, but in the reverse of *Limes from Sicily*, revealing how Fulvia "here" (attempting to be maternal) must have been "there" (promiscuous). And the same goes for *As You Desire Me*, where the protagonist's identity is so difficult to locate, so volatile, that the text designates her indeterminately as "The Woman".

Does this make "The Woman" characterless? If so, she's a more complex person for it. Here's Strindberg on characterlessness in relation to *Miss Julie*, no stranger to volatility herself:

> I have made my people somewhat "characterless" for the following reasons. … [Character] must have originally signified the dominating trait of the soul complex, and this was confused with temperament. Later it became the middle-class term for the automaton, one whose nature had become fixed or who had adapted himself to a particular role in life. In fact, a person who had ceased to grow was called a character, while one continuing to develop… was called characterless, in a derogatory sense, of course, because he was so hard to catch, classify, and keep track of. … A character came to signify a man fixed and finished. (64)

And back to Pirandello on how, due to conflicting contexts, characterlessness occurs and one's

mask is torn off and trampled underfoot.

> "Then, all of a sudden," the critic says, "a flood of humanity invades these characters, the marionettes suddenly become creatures of flesh and blood, and words which sear the spirit and break the heart come from their lips."
>
> I should hope so! They have bared their naked individual faces from beneath that mask which made them the marionettes of themselves or in the hands of others…

The result exposes

> the defects of that fictitious construction the characters themselves have built of their personalities and their lives, or that others have built for them: the defects, in short, of the *mask* until it is revealed as naked. ("A Warning" 248-250)

Dissonant contexts and ways of being weaken conventionally consistent approaches to character, revealing fixed identity as an illusion. All we have left are people trying to find their way and selves. By *Six Characters in Search of an Author* Pirandello delighted in the discovery that the theatre is inherently split in two contexts: stage and audience. If people in life are characters, why can't stage characters be people too?

"Let me see your face."

This is the stunning opening line of Sophocles's *Antigone* in Richard Emil Braun's translation (consider the Greeks in actual mask).[7] It is an opening that calls for mutual, collective openness initiated by the players. In my reinterpretation of the tragedy, *Antigone:Insurgency*, three performers cover the full range of *charactor*. The nameless "chorus leader," played by Richard Harte, performs in two contexts, at times relating to the audience as an actor (and therefore fellow citizen), while at others as a character taking on the role of the Guard or Teiresias. Earl Pastko as Creon, on the other hand, is Creon through and through, with no diversions from the role: 100% character. Perhaps most intriguing is Cara Ricketts's transition from one end of the *charactor* continuum to the other, beginning on stage as an actor (person, citizen) before

descending into the depths of Antigone's character, where she continues to be, inexorably, for the remainder of the play. And it's from within these rigid confines of character that Antigone and Creon lock horns. The play's tragedy of mutual righteousness and single-mindedness, in this way, is reflected in the two actors' uncompromising commitment to their characters, making them intractable on two levels: Antigone and Creon cannot alter their fateful actions, just as Ricketts and Pastko cannot escape being Antigone and Creon. So the inevitability of the tragedy is also the tragedy of inevitability. Possibilities disappear, leaving blackout or death as the only ways out.

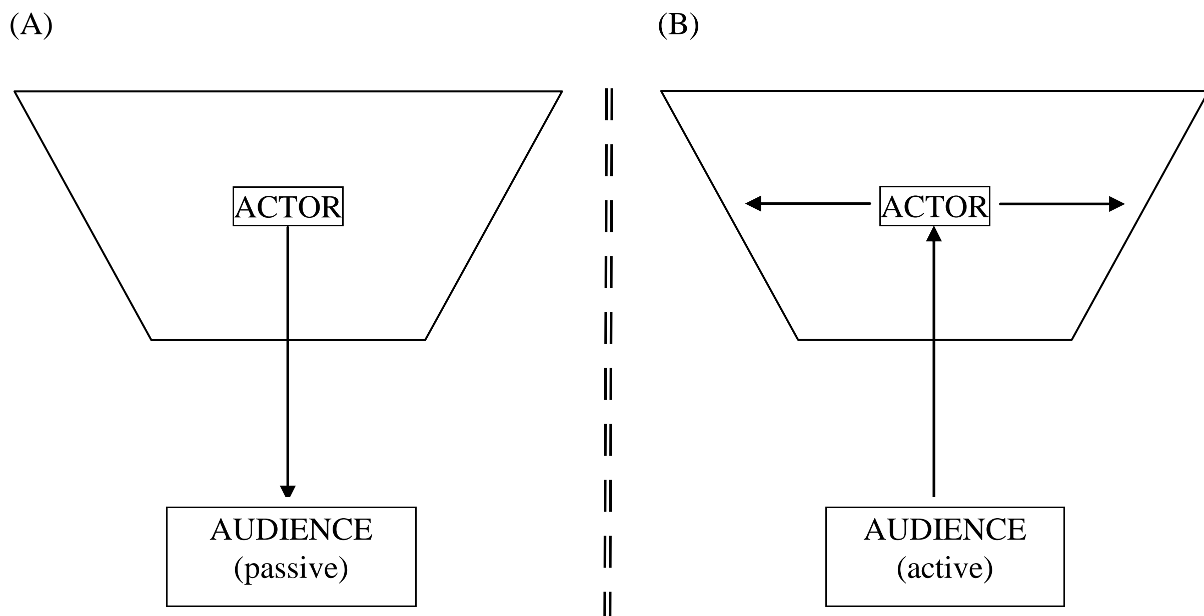
Only Richard Harte, as "chorus leader," and therefore more actor/person/civilian than character, remains directly connected to us, bridging the gap between the audience and the ancient personae inhabited by Cara and Earl. With the exception of two excursions into character (first as Guard, then as Teiresias), Richard remains with us throughout the play as a fellow citizen navigating his way through our shared situation in the theatre. But of course this fellowship wouldn't be possible without Richard's remarkable performance — remarkable precisely in its *lack* of show, allowing for some show of his being. When Richard is on stage in *Antigone:Insurgency*, Richard *is* on stage. His performance, especially his opening, single-sentence, 30-minute monologue, is dramatic precisely in its untheatricality, energized by the conspicuous absence of the "energy" conventional theatre requires of actors in order to command the audience's attention — the same hyperactivity Beckett rebuffs with the opening line of *Godot*: "Nothing to be done." Zeami, in one of his treatises on Noh, perfectly articulates the importance and impact of such "non-doing":

> It is often commented on by audiences that "many times a performance is effective when the actor does nothing." Such an accomplishment results from the actor's greatest, most secret skill.… When one examines why this interval "when

> nothing happens" may seem so fascinating, it is surely because of the fact that, at the bottom, the artist never relaxes his inner tension.…
>
> The actor must rise to a selfless level of art, imbued with a concentration that transcends his own consciousness, so that he can bind together the moments before and after that instant when "nothing happens." Such a process constitutes that inner force that can be termed "connecting all the arts [i.e. possibilities] through one intensity of mind." (97)

Beginning the play seated, listening to several bars of music, "doing nothing" as it were, allows Richard to open with a passive activity[8] — conscious and intensely focused, to be sure, but passive all the same, and thereby disarmingly unmasked.

In that spirit, Richard calls for lights up on the audience near the beginning of *Antigone:Insurgency*, allowing him to return our gaze. The result is a shift from the usual relationship between actor and audience, in which *actor-as-character* either begs or condescends to the audience (relating purely vertically), to one in which *actor-as-person* is open to the audience (relating more laterally), allowing us to lean in, listen, attend, rather than mindlessly "sit back". Thus the vertical dynamic of aggression/submission by the actor toward a passive audience (A) is replaced with a lateral openness by the former that activates the latter (B):



We, the audience, as more active participants in the play's dynamics (B), have been elevated, so to speak, above our usual position, and consequently the playing field is less uneven than in (A). Now we can see the actor somewhat more on the same level. That's not to say that we are seeing the actor's "true nature," no matter how much he is stripped of his mask, his character-function. At the same time, it would be impossible in this era of "reality shows" for us to believe we are seeing a human being sans artifice, even if we were. But the suspension of our suspension of disbelief in *Antigone:Insurgency* makes for less disparity between actor and audience, and thus a more open play. If Richard Harte is a person, we may all be actors.

Furthermore, if an actor comes at us too directly or forcefully (A), we tend to disengage. Some actors believe that the stage is their place to emote, always gunning for a "big moment." When actors push too hard, though, they are doing all the work for us, leaving the audience no opportunity to connect actively with the play. An actor's emotions on stage should be revelations that open up to us, opening us up in return. If a play is going to capture our imagination then it must unfold on stage like an alluring net rather than be thrown at us like an arrow. The arrow (A) may inflict, but the net (B) invites and enthralls.

The Prism/Gap

The dynamics of (B) are actually more nuanced than the model above, realizing a broader kind of clarity-through-ambiguity**.** When a play is poetic — meaning the text achieves ambiguity to create multiple possibilities for the actor and director — a few performance directions tend to emerge.

(1) Presented with two choices, between, say, “yellow” and “blue,” the actor can choose “green,” thus combining the two or splitting the difference. Between being overjoyed and simply pleased, the actor can be happy; between fear and comfort there’s wariness; or say an actor has the choice of approaching someone confidently or cautiously, they may choose to approach with interest, not sure of which way to be. And that uncertainty is key to energizing the moment. It’s not purely the action itself that’s intriguing, but the possibility that other actions could occur, could be chosen, might play out at any moment. This explains why Beckett claimed that “perhaps” is the most important word in (his) theatre. Anything can happen, especially when nothing does. Similarly, for Stanislavski the key word to opening doors is “if” (46).

Sometimes, however, the two choices are too concrete to combine or divide: e.g., sitting down or standing; walking left or right. In such cases, consider one and choose the other, or choose one while considering the other: i.e., don’t sit down, stand; walk to the left while considering the right. The chosen action will contain its alternative, its negative, its trace. Brecht put it well:

> When he appears on the stage, besides what he actually is doing he will at all essential points discover, specify, imply what he is not doing; that is to say he will act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible, that his acting allows the other possibilities to be inferred and only represents one out of the possible variants. He will say for instance “You'll pay for that”, and not say “I forgive you”. He detests his children; it is not the case the he loves them. He moves down stage left and not up stage right. Whatever he doesn't do must be contained and conserved in what he does. In this way every sentence and every gesture signifies a decision; the character remains under observation and is tested. The technical term for this procedure is “fixing the ‘not…but’”. (137)[9]

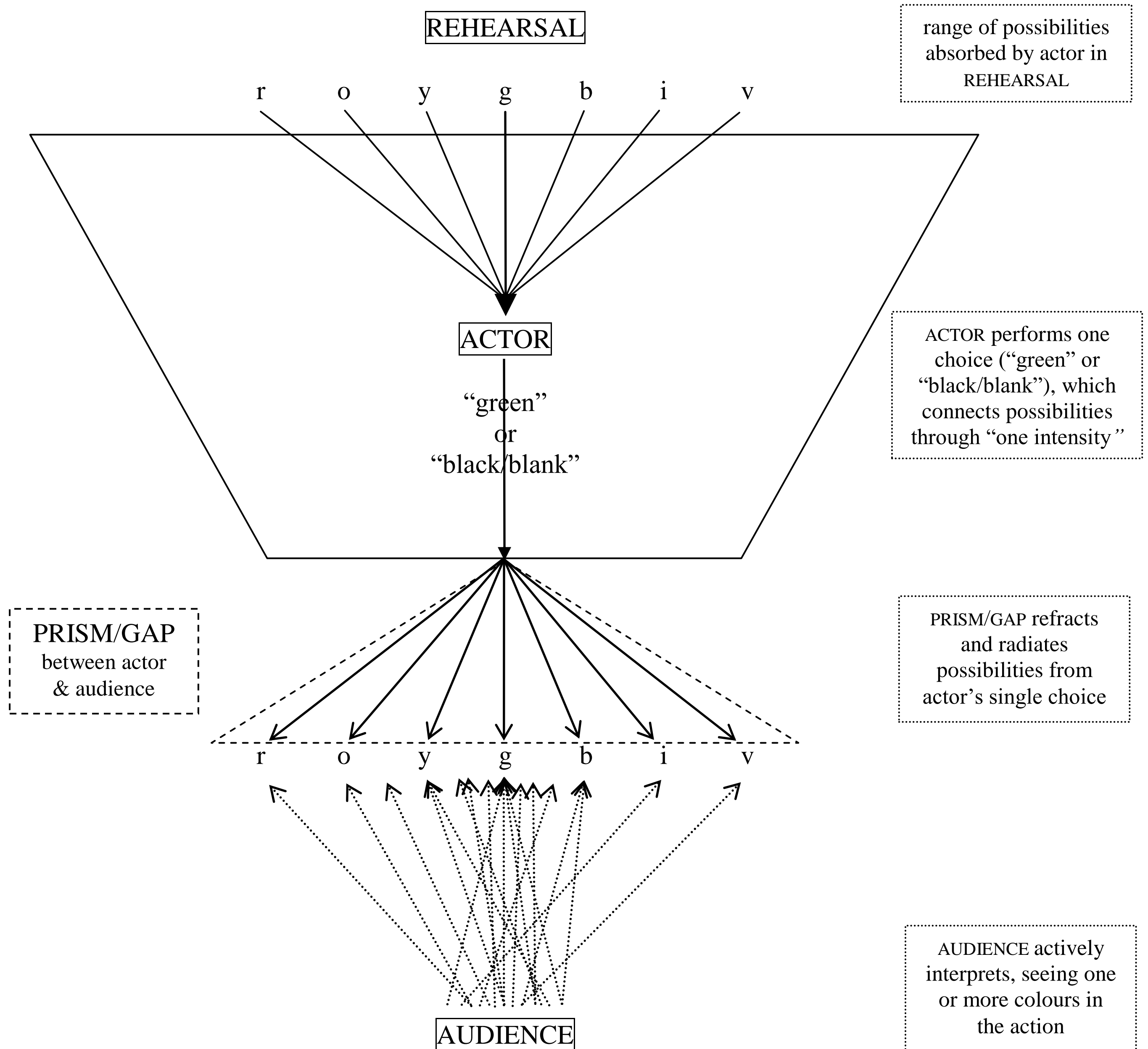
Zen priest Shunryu Suzuki has described the same phenomenon in different terms, going even further than Brecht's "not…but" by revealing how freedom and concentration are closely tied to the preservation of possibilities.

> Our way is not always to go in one direction.… If it is possible to go one mile to the east, that means it is possible to go one mile to the west. This is freedom. Without this freedom you cannot be concentrated on what you do. (112)

(2) If three choices are available, say yellow, green and blue, the actor may choose green, the middle one, since it contains elements of the other two.

(3) And presented with a multitude of red-orange-yellow-green-blue-indigo-violet, the actor again may choose the middle one (green); or go neutral (black or blank) to capture all of the above (black) or none (blank), allowing the audience to choose which colours we see.

Above all and in every case, instead of showing external *intentions*, the actor should generate internal *intensity*. "Such a process," to reiterate Zeami, "constitutes that inner force that can be termed 'connecting all the [possibilities] through one intensity of mind.'" Here's how the model now looks, drawing on (3) above, since it contains elements of (1) and (2):



Everything in rehearsal is absorbed by the actor, concentrating in the “one intensity” that generates a focused, singular performance for the audience to interpret actively. The actor’s *action*, in this way, is a *contraction* upon which the audience expands. The prism/gap further activates the actor’s single choice (or “intensity”), allowing possibilities to open up (to) the audience’s intuition. This space between is vital. And it is volatile, uncertain, open — a zone where “green” from the stage can be seen as a spectrum by the audience — or where “black”

might be read as “blank,” and vice versa, each carrying the possibility of the other, with both emanating the kind of glow you find in a Rothko. The canvas of poetic theatre is this space between. It radiates (coming from the stage) and is prismatic (seen by the audience). Another word for this zone of the prism/gap is “style,” the medium through which actors emit and audiences receive.[10]

Both “black” and “blank” draw us in, encouraging us to interpret — the former by layering, the latter by stripping away and eliciting our natural tendency to fill in the blanks. A temporal prism/gap can be generated the “black way,” through repetition and variation, the words and actions gaining definition with each accumulation; and it can be generated the “blank way,” with a pause in theatre, or through white space and line-breaks in a text.

Textually, black/blank is the sort of possibility that could occur in a work such as *Every Day in the Morning (slow)*, which is a kind of page-oriented performance activated by the reader. The spatial possibilities of the text, the expectations they arouse, and the “mistakes” they may cause the reader to make in confusing some words, all serve as the volatile, prismatic gap between emission from page and reception of eye. Again, the space between — what is *vs.* what could be, what’s written *vs.* what’s seen and interpreted — is critical to the textual tension.

Dramatically, Jon Fosse’s *Someone is Going to Come* exemplifies the prism/gap. The play’s title does not mislead — someone does come, namely The Man (played by Michael Blake in the recent One Little Goat production), who disrupts the attempted solitude of She and He (Stacie Steadman and Dwight McFee). It’s not merely The Man’s arrival that unsettles the couple, but the intentions behind his arrival, which remain highly questionable for both the audience and the couple throughout the performance. Consequently, when Michael offers Stacie a drink, the audience can interpret his action

as anything from a kind neighbour's gesture to the insidious prelude of a predator. It's a wide range, to be sure!, but the ambiguity allows Michael's one choice in that moment ("green" or "black/blank") to engender a full continuum.

Even as a director, I believe that *not knowing* an actor's intentions is often essential. Since I observe rehearsal from the audience's side of the equation, I don't necessarily know the actor's "green" or "blank/black" until I see the spectrum it has produced. At that exhilarating moment when a spectrum of possibilities radiates from the actor, I am careful not to "put words on it." It's not that the actor's intensity is ineffable, but analyzing it could translate that intensity into intention. Too much understanding jeopardizes being (much as, for Hamlet, over-calculation thwarts action). Identify the moment, yes, and articulate it through multiple repetitions, but don't describe it. It is crucial for a director to know when *not* to speak.[11]

Even something as concrete as the actor's body yields multiple interpretations when seen by the audience. We can't help but read into what is presented, making the stage a version of Cage's famous frame.[12] But it's more, because the actor feels the audience receiving and returning her presence — the energy flows both ways. Cage's frame has the quality of something aestheticized by distance, captured and beheld as a fixed picture, whereas the stage unfolds in time.

Music and Poetic Theatre

The ambiguity of poetic theatre is a form of music.[13] In Hermann Broch's terms, "the transformation of sequential to simultaneous perceived spatially: This is the essence of music" (12). Repetition, from Stein to Fosse and onward, is a way for words and actions to condense

time: they traverse horizontally across the play (sequential), thereby accumulating vertically in our minds (simultaneous). Words, phrases and actions, then, are tectonic plates whose potential collision could erupt within the viewer, or gradually rise to form a mountain in mind. And when the Brechtian "not…but" is involved, its negative space carries a series of choices that "could have been" within each moment, making the sequential virtually simultaneous — an array of possibilities radiating from each action. Ambiguity distills these sequential possibilities, enabling us to see the play in a single moment, and *as* a single moment — Blake's "world in a grain of sand." The "big moment" of conventional theatre is no longer distinct but infused throughout the performance, the "big moment" being the entire play itself.

There is one more level at which the sequential can be perceived simultaneously, and that is through *charactor*. Conventional productions present a character, followed by a curtain call during which, however briefly, we glimpse the actor. And for those of us who already know the actor, we experience a sequence of actor before the performance, followed by character during the "show," concluding with actor at curtain call. *Charactor*, as we've seen, conflates these "real" and "staged" identities, thereby endowing poetic theatre with another music-like quality of simultaneity.

If character and actor merge in poetic theatre, so too do characters and authors. With authorial energy pervading the work, differentiation between the writer and what's written, as between the *charactors* themselves, is not essential, eschewing the conventional requirement of externally defined dramatis personae. As *Flaubert's Parrot* reveals, the same author who famously claimed "Madame Bovary, c'est moi!" also confused his protagonist's eye-colour (Barnes 74).[14] The author's imagination is not one state, but rather a broad, shifting, evolving context that consequently undermines the specious autonomy of character.[15]

The imagination is the author's mind. As Anne Carson suggests, Aeschylus distills into his characters "his own method of work, his own way of using his mind, his way of using the theater as a mind" (4). Theatre as mind, or head, or *tête*, or *Teste*! Here is Paul Valéry on his own *charactor*, Monsieur Teste:

> I am quite astonished at the inventive powers of anyone who finds *subjects* for stories or plays, and very effective ones, it seems to me….
>
> But I notice that the characters in all these productions have no existence beyond the affair or the anecdote or the action in which they figure. They are created by these, as necessary parts of a mechanism.
>
> This is general in our time. Not one (literary) *being* is distinct from its local function, or becomes known as a type or possible living man outside the story of the moment.
>
> On the contrary, in the few instances where I have personified—as in Monsieur and Madame Teste…—I have tried to invent synthetic human beings. (142)

Just as Monsieur Teste is the synthesis of Valéry and a fictional personality, and just as *charactor* combines actor and character, so we experience poetic theatre in merging layers (simultaneously) rather than in discrete segments from one plot point to the next (sequentially). The audience's concern, then, is no longer "What are the next 3+ things that are going to happen?" (plot) but rather "What 3+ things are happening in this moment?" (experience); no longer "What will happen to her?" but "How is she now and how will she be?"

Finally, poetic theatre is reminiscent of music in its non-representational approach. As Leonard Bernstein asserts in his inaugural Young People's Concert, music does not *mean* anything, it simply *is*. Similarly, poetic theatre, through *charactor*, encourages actors to *be* more and *portray* less; to be present in lieu of pretending; to stop pointing and start being the point, not by being pointless or aimless, but in *doing nothing* with a singular intensity. In other words, to be keenly primitive. Shunryu Suzuki puts it thus, "if it comes out of nothingness, whatever you do is natural, and that is true activity" (109). The result may be a far cry from Naturalism and

Realism, but it is certainly natural and real in staging the actor's *real nature*. I say *real* nature, not *true*, since artifice is inevitably involved. Poetic theatre, regardless of its inclination toward presenting in lieu of representing, is still a kind of fiction. Imitation makes for lousy art, while escapism tries in vain to defy the gravity of reality. The fiction of poetic theatre, by contrast, presents an escape *into* reality, not the carnivalesque escape *from* or superficial imitation *of*. It goes beyond "aspiring towards the condition of music" (Pater 140) in favour of being music in its very structure and essence. And in drawing on the nature of the performers themselves, it is music not *about*, but *by*, *of* and *for* people.

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[1] This leftist conceptualization, though understandable in Brecht's post-WWII context, unfortunately nullifies the *mutual* righteousness at the play's core: that Antigone *and* Creon "both are talking sense" (Fagles line 812).

[2] Fredric Jameson points out that "alienation effect" is a far from perfect translation of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, but in English, it's the term that has stuck (85-86).

[3] The orchestra pit is Wagner's invention, after all.

[4] Seating the audience in the dark: another of Wagner's theatrical innovations.

[5] A *charactor* play par excellence in that it is named after the three actors for whom Bernhard wrote it — Ilse Ritter, Kirsten Dene and Gert Voss — and because, other than the role of Ludwig, the play's two sisters remain nameless, forcing us to refer to their characters by the actors' names. Christopher Hoile aptly elaborates on this point in his review of One Little Goat's English language world premiere of the play: "The title of 'Ritter, Dene, Voss' gives no clue to its subject matter. The title honours the three famous actors who first created the roles…. Such a title also highlights a theme in Bernhard that while a play may be 'about' a certain subject, it is also always about acting." Similarly, Bernhard wrote and named *Minetti* for the actor of same name because, as Gitta Honegger puts it, "Minetti was a Bernhard character before Bernhard invented him. Bernhard became a master at staging the actor inside his performance" (114).

[6] "I said to her" also links to both the line above and below it. Bernhard is adept at going two ways simultaneously, contributing not only ambiguity, but kinetic flow to the text.

[7] For variations in translating this first line, see William Blake Tyrell and Larry J. Bennett's introduction to their *Antigone*: http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/ant/antigstruct.htm.

[8] Montreal's PME-ART (Jacob Wren, Caroline Dubois, Claudia Fancello) achieved a similarly passive activity, or active passivity, by sitting and listening to records for much of their recent performance, *Hospitality 3: Individualism was a Mistake*, at Toronto's Enwave Theatre, 19-22 November 2008.

[9] This "not…but" sheds light on a moment in *Talking Masks* when "Mother 1" and "Mother 2" create various permutations and a broad soundscape out of only two words each: Mother 1 uttering "yes…and…" interspersed with Mother 2 saying "no…but…" (Seelig 36).

[10] In terms of Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetics, the prism/gap is the space where the "inscape" of the stage meets the "instress" of the audience.

[11] By the later rehearsals of a production, the director and the actors have ideally been in the zone of the play so consistently that they need not exchange many words to find the most resonant intensity. Earlier in the rehearsal process, when all are still searching for the right wavelength, much discussion is likely, yet even then it's often best for the director to say no more than "try something else" to the actor. The director may *know* the play, with a strong sense for how it passes through the prism/gap, but the actors *are* the play, living it from inside. That is why the most important part of directing, by far, is casting. The common notion that a director has a preconceived "vision" is

reductive. Any so-called “vision” should emerge from the process of not merely leading the actors, but following them first. Observe how they are and listen to their nature, because actions that emerge from the actors themselves usually trump those suggested by the director. A recent comment from a very good actor and well-respected director illuminates the frustration that can occur when a director imposes her vision on the actor. As she disclosed in her recent production blog, “I felt that uselessness of a director when confronted with that divide between what is so clear in my mind and what is unclear in the actor’s mind.” In poetic theatre, by contrast, it is this very divide that is most fruitful, with the actor's mind often being "clearer," as it were, than the director's. This director, however, is working with theatre as narrative, in which actors serve a story: “I believe my job as a director is to facilitate the creative process of telling a story.” And telling such a story, according to her, is best done boldly: “the core of the imaginative process of acting [is] making choices, bold choices, trying them on and discarding them if need be, but above all committing.” The result of such an approach is a theatre of primary colours — blue or yellow, say, but rarely green — a theatre where ambiguity is tacitly taboo.

[12] “I was with de Kooning once in a restaurant and he said, ‘if I put a frame around these bread crumbs, that isn’t art.’ And what I’m saying is that it is. He was saying it wasn’t because he connects art with his activity — he connects with himself as an artist whereas I would want art to slip out of us into the world in which we live” (Cage).

[13] “One must read or ‘examine’ these texts ‘as if one were listening to music’” (Fenollosa and Pound 37).

[14] "Flaubert does not build up his characters, as did Balzac, by objective, external description; in fact, so careless is he of their outward appearance that on one occasion he gives Emma brown eyes (14); on another deep black eyes (15); and on another blue eyes (16)" (Barnes 74).

[15] In my play *All Is Almost Still*, performed by One Little Goat at New York’s 78th Street Theatre Lab in 2004, the play’s young couple essentially switch identities in the second act, as if He is now She, and vice versa. The play’s setting, however, does not change between acts. Steinbeck’s *Burning Bright* is the inverse: the characters remain entirely consistent despite the four radical scenic changes in the play, from Circus to Farm to Sea to Hospital Room.

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