Critical Acts

Sleeping Our Way to Consciousness
Jim Findlay’s Dream of the Red Chamber

Bertie Ferdman

Nothing more beautiful than playing to a room full of sleeping people at the golden hour of 5am with the moon creeping down the western wall. So read Jim Findlay’s 18 May Facebook status the day after the close of Dream of the Red Chamber, an immersive installation for a sleeping audience. Dream of the Red Chamber was directed by Findlay, a founding member of the Collapsible Hole and former Wooster Group collaborator, whose own work has ranged from stage and multimedia design to originally conceived performance installations. Findlay and Jeff Jackson conceived and wrote Dream of the Red Chamber together, loosely based on the epic 18th-century Chinese novel of the same name (Shítóu jì) by Cao Xueqin, also known as The Story of the Stone. Produced by Joel Bassin, with Collapsible Giraffe and 3-Legged Dog in partnership with Allied Partners and Brickman Real Estate, Findlay and his team built an underground environment that was a cross between a den-like brothel and a luxurious spa, filled with 40 red-sheeted cots—all in the basement of the Brill Building in the middle of Times Square.

The audience could come and go at any time between 5:00 p.m. and midnight; I was told to arrive on the early side so I would get a bed. The buzz around the show highlighted the fact that this was a piece for a sleeping audience. Yes, we could sleep, and were in fact encouraged to do so during the show—hence the late viewing hours and, on other days, additional overnight performances that lasted until 6:00 a.m. I figured arriving absolutely exhausted to this performance right after a long teaching day would be perfect. I could finally doze off watching a performance without feeling guilty.

When I got off the subway at Times Square, I tried my best to walk through the usual chaos and cacophony of traffic, tourists, massive digital screens, flashing billboards, and New York residents briskly walking past me. I focused down on the directions indicated by the Google Maps app on my iPhone and very intently ignored the tour operators trying to sell me city bus tours, the watch peddlers with briefcase showrooms, the surreal life-size SpongeBob SquarePants and Minnie Mouse asking me to pose for a picture, the multiple requests for loose change... I finally made it to 1619 Broadway.

As soon as I entered the building, a red carpet signaled a long corridor, which was lined on both sides with old-style cathode ray tube TVs planted on the floor leading to a dilapidated concrete and open steel staircase on the far right corner. The monitors displayed that grainy snow static that used to show up...

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when something was wrong with the reception. I remember thinking this was my brain after seven blocks in midtown Manhattan. I was glad for the mental pause. Time began to slow down. When I got to the basement level, I was standing with other audience members in front of a large sheer white curtain lit by red lights that shone through from the other side. The sheet blocked from view what we were about to experience. Two box office staff gently asked us to take off our shoes. They held aside the curtains and invited us into the main area, a large rectangular space that was approximately 45 feet by 65 feet, also fully carpeted and surrounded entirely by those same white, translucent, crushed voile curtains, which prevented us from seeing the walls that were about 10 feet away from the playing area. The space was very inviting; I felt a strong urge to enter and walk around. The curtains, which were also used to section off the space, gave the impression of multiplicity and privacy: wherever I stood there seemed to be a curtain separating me from another event, another audience member. Cots, actually rollaway beds, filled the room, and both spectators and performers milled about the space. We noticed each other; I felt complicit with the other audience members. Elevated miniature stages were set throughout the space: one was twice the size of a cot, and had a drum on it; another had a mirror with a small vanity table and costumes laid out. As we entered, we were told we could lie down on the beds, to rest or sleep, to close our eyes and dream. We could come and go as we pleased. Yes, I could step out, have dinner, and come back. No, there was no better or worse way to experience the piece and soothing my hunger would not be a detriment, so I was told.

In an interview with The Huffington Post during the run of the show, Findlay explained how the piece operated like a durational performance or art installation: “We show it durationally, so the show starts at 5 p.m. and goes until midnight some days and from 5 p.m. to 6 a.m. others [...] There is no beginning, middle or end. The narrative happens over the course of the whole performance so you might come in 4 hours after its started and see the very beginning of the play, or you might come in at the very beginning just in time for the end” (in Frank 2014). The immersive environment created an atmosphere that did not depend upon its audience. It was as if what we were experiencing had been happening forever on a loop and would continue once we were gone. We were privy to a world that existed without us.

While Dream of the Red Chamber shared the come-and-go-as-you-please-entrance/exit policy in place at other recent theatrical installation projects in New York—such as Paul McCarthy’s WS (2013) at the Park Avenue Armory or David Levine’s Habit (2012) at Essex Street Market—the sharp contrast here was that the Red Chamber audience visitor was not looking in on an “other” world but was surrounded by and immersed in it. As Josephine Machon describes in her book Immersive Theatres, contemporary immersive practice features not only the involvement of the audience, but also “a prioritization of the sensual world” and special attention to “the significance of space and place” (2013:2). Dream of the Red Chamber offered an array of sensorial stimuli: Jamie McElhinney’s sound design accentuated a heavy yet melodic bass drone that filled the room, with speakers placed even under the beds.
(or so it seemed). Throughout the night we heard birds chirping, female voices whispering into amplified microphones, tinkling bells, and distinct flute and carriage bell sounds—sometimes played live by Christina Campanella. Campanella was one of the six performers who prominently circulated the space during our slumber. She sang live (as did Liz Sargent and Okwui Okpokwasili on other nights): beautiful, mostly improvised melisma from an in-ear live feed of another actor reading the Chinese names of the characters in the original *Dream of the Red Chamber* novel.

At each of the six performances throughout the run, a different song composed by Elysian Fields was inserted into the sound environment, at a unique point for each show. These recordings, based on a series of poems from the novel were distinct from all the other sounds in the piece. Each was played just once throughout the entire run. As Campanella explained to me in an email, these directions were “another of Jim’s many rules of engagement that helped create a container for the work’s random nature... Part of the invisible structure that sustained us through those 7–13 hours” (2014).

We were also gifted with exquisite arias, recordings of Maria Callas, mostly from Puccini and Verdi, throughout the show. Lying on one of the cots, drifting in and out of sleep, I imagined these hymns lifting me up. I felt utterly weightless. The experience was not unlike sound meditations, where participants are surrounded by vibrations that potentially induce trancelike states. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Findlay explained how he and Jackson were inspired by a visit to composer La Monte Young and visual artist Marian Zazeela’s *Dream House*, a sound and light environment originally conceived in 1969, recreated and open to the public in downtown New York since 1993. Similar to *Dream House*, *Dream of the Red Chamber* played with repetitive cycles of sound in ways that distanced us sharply from the urban world that was only steps away, leading us deeper into a state of calm the longer we stayed.

The environment had a visual component that similarly led us on a journey, surrounding us with projections at many levels. There were TV monitors set among the beds at audience level, two suspended flat-screen TV monitors,
and two larger projections—onto the curtains—at opposite ends of the room. The screens showed a constant flow of changing imagery: close-up shots of live actions, objects, and textures were purposefully disorienting, playing with scale. Singly, the performers would walk a few steps towards one of the tiny hidden live camera feeds and display something—grapes, pearls, red beads, hair, dark painted nails, a shawl—as if they were surgeons using an endoscope to examine the interior of an organ, to reveal what the naked eye otherwise could not see. In this case, however, the repetitive revelations became quite sensual. We could see the performers’ fingers slowly caressing each object. By opening our eyes our focus would dramatically shift in an instant, from sounds heard in our sleep (I can still hear the words monk, rainwater, twelve, and the phrase ten years to prepare as if it was yesterday) to a grape that looked like it was the size of a car. There were a handful of moments of group choreography when all six performers would either move in unison, even if spread throughout the space, or join looped sequences of activities: two playing cards, one dropping and picking up a scarf, the next using a sewing machine, and so on.

Many of these images came directly from the source of the show’s inspiration, The Story of the Stone, copies of which could be found throughout the space (I found one next to a monitor and then left it on the floor beside a cot). The book’s opening couplet reads:

Truth becomes fiction when the fiction’s true;
Real becomes not-real when the unreal’s real. (Yu 1997:3)

In addition to its portrayal of Chinese culture, the Stone’s legacy has revolved around the fine line it draws between truth and fiction, as Anthony C. Yu points out in the very beginning of his book Desire and the Making of Fiction in Dream of the Red Chamber (1997:3), and as exemplified by the opening couplet. Findlay and Jackson’s adaptation seems inspired by the illusion and poetry that the Stone is known for, for example the dream sequence of one of the characters in the book, which foreshadows the character’s fate. However, it was not necessary to know the original text to fully experience the performance; it was the overall tone and style of the original that was reimagined in this installation, not its narrative.

Unlike immersive experiences where audiences are encouraged, sometimes even coerced, to either interact or engage in some form of exchange with the performers, Dream of the Red Chamber had an unbreakable fourth wall. Performers, whether portraying a character or not, never looked at or acknowledged the audience. We were in a dreamland whether we were asleep or awake; they existed whether we were there or not. The performance did not depend on our intervention or engagement. On the contrary, the live installation gave the feeling that it was happening in spite of our presence, a kind of “as if” world opening up before our eyes. Okpokwasili, one of the Chamberensemble members, explained to me how they explored specific tasks and meeting points during the run: “We were given notes that signaled us to shift into another module by ‘invisible’ robed performers who moved though the space like monks” (2014). Although we shared the physical terrain with the performers—in the space where actor and spectator coexist, famously coined “environmental theater” by Richard Schechner (1968)—we nevertheless maintained separate worlds where one was clearly the observer (when awake), and the other, clearly the observed. Okpokwasili described the sensation of playing in this world: “Only occasionally did I feel watched, but mostly I felt part of a sea, or a floating world that didn’t demand any more than being in an unending present [...] I found it freeing to perform for a sleeping audience” (2014).

Of course what makes this piece stand out from other immersive environmental worlds is the fact that here the performance is meant to induce sleep. However, more than a mere entertainment gimmick, this is an experiment that examines modes of spectatorship. As part of that experiment, the performers, a diverse range of prominent downtown women actors (as well as 14-year-old James Dawson, son of Trisha Brown Dance Company’s Associate Artistic Director Diane Madden and sound artist Jim Dawson, who played the main male character of the novel, Bao Yu) performed deliberate, task-based actions throughout the evening (including, as Okpokwasili told me,
“finding ways to give each other pleasure, to care for each other” in order to portray “ladies in waiting in court culture in dynastic China” [2014]. They became objects to stare at just like the objects they themselves displayed on the screens, not objectified, however, as they were clearly empowered and likewise empowered the space with presence and actions. In addition, by encouraging audiences to come and go as they pleased (physically and metaphorically) and creating a place where we were in fact encouraged to tune out (albeit in their presence), Red Chamber refigured our gaze on how we experience, rather than what we see, hear, or feel. It allowed for contemplation of how we experience dreams and how we experience reality. Andy Warhol’s Sleep (1963), his film of John Giorno sleeping for approximately five hours, is arduous to watch for its full duration; Dream of the Red Chamber inverses this spectating model asking us, instead, to watch ourselves sleep. Can we be conscious of our own letting go? Can we lose ourselves completely in this live present moment (knowing others can watch us sleep if they so choose)? “We prefer that you not pay attention,” Findlay explained in his Huffington Post interview:

One of the big things we found early on when we started doing research for this is once you disrupt that normal relationship between audience and performer, where the audience pays attention and the performer has the responsibility to be entertaining, once you disrupt that there’s a whole new set of parameters that come into what it is to experience a work of art. (in Frank 2014)

In the underbelly of the megalopolis, when technology is always and forever rapidly advancing, it is compelling to contemplate how enabling sleep, an altered state of consciousness, might be more difficult, and perhaps even more demanding, than getting your audience to watch intently. Asking us to deliberately not pay attention will have us doing the opposite, kind of like telling a child “not to touch.” Spend some time in New York City subway cars and you will notice how much effort urban dwellers put into effacing what is right in front of them, working hard to detach themselves from what is present. Video games, iPods, smart phones, books, magazines: we have long used handheld distractions to distance ourselves from our surroundings, which themselves are products of capitalist fantasies, all vying for our attention—Debord’s worst Society of the Spectacle nightmare come true ([1967] 1994). We are daily sleepwalkers. Where do we turn to escape, or wake up?

Findlay’s answer, clearly, is art—anything, an idealized, Adorno-esque and somewhat elitist form of art that exists in sharp contrast to mass-market forms of culture. Here expectations are challenged, and genres or artistic disciplinary frameworks are left at the door. It is an alternative world that Findlay and his creative team concoct. Like a David Lynch film, you either enter or exit, but it stays with you whether you like it or not. There is no fixed entry point or narrative through line, and as Findlay explains, “the more you engage the piece the more you get out of it,” just as with any artwork or conversation or relationship or physical exercise. On the one hand, Dream of the Red Chamber is itself a product of the media-saturated reality it has sought to seek

Figure 3. Projections surround audience members as they tune in and out. (Photo ©Paula Court)
refuge from, with an uncritical eye towards, for example, the depiction of women as objects of beauty—the portrayals of the many women characters were far from complex—and the rigorous manipulation of technology to mesmerize us in order to help us tune out. On the other hand, the performance was not necessarily meant as a formal critique of gender stereotypes or our tech-saturated society. This art experiment is not just about creating new content, but more about testing new forms and changing expectations about how performance can be experienced. At a moment when site-specific installations, urban sound-walks, immersive environments, and participatory experiences have (yet again) become the hype, Red Chamber alternatively embraces what seems like the most passive state par excellence, sleep—almost giving a sarcastic wink to the myriad shows that have premiered to international acclaim, most of them achieving “success” because of their adventure-oriented, thrill-satisfying approaches. Red Chamber is concerned with the opposite: a sleep-induced, interior state that permits us, paradoxically, to wake up, be present in the here and now, whether it is an illusion or not.

I remember dreaming that people were pulling me away. My hand and arm outstretched, and faces laughing. They were wondering why I was still there, half asleep. There was blood all over me, all over the sheets. I remember how red they were. I awoke not knowing where I was, and asked myself why I hadn’t left earlier. At another moment, I dreamed that a white man’s bald head kept appearing in and out of my viewing area, a close-up shot. I kept hearing female voices in my head, in particular words about magic potions and rainwater. The images, like the words, appear and disappear. I fear the bald head. I suddenly wake up and realize I had been gone and see an unexpected familiar face—a colleague—standing in front of my cot, looking up at the elevated drum stage above me. She notices me. I am back asleep.
In the Domain of The Nether
Theatre and Virtuality in a World without Consequence

Isabel Stowell-Kaplan

PAPA: For returning guests, it shows a desire to partake fully of what we offer here.

WOODNUT: And what is that?

PAPA: A life outside of consequence.

WOODNUT:

PAPA: Is that not something you can subscribe to, Mr Woodnut?

WOODNUT: It is something I find hard to believe is possible. (Haley 2014:48)

What might it mean to live in a world without consequence? What purpose is there to life if everything we do is without repercussion? All action, no reaction; at least none that sticks, none that adheres in any meaningful way. These are the questions at the heart of Jennifer Haley’s play, The Nether. Making its UK debut in July 2014 at the Royal Court Theatre, London, the play was directed by Jeremy Herrin for this coproduction between the British touring company Headlong and the Royal Court.1 Set in a time designated only as “soon,” the play explores exactly what might happen if we push the possibilities of the internet to their logical conclusions, allowing imagination to be the only limit on behavior, the only arbiter of action (Haley 2014:7).

The titular “Nether” of the piece is this internet realized. So developed is this virtual world, so sophisticated, that many can and do spend the majority of their lives within its interactive realities. Some even choose to “cross

1. The play had its world premiere in March 2013. Directed by Neel Keller, it was produced at Center Theatre Group’s Kirk Douglas Theatre in LA.

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over,” becoming “shades” who no longer live “in-world”—their term for the everyday life outside of the Nether—but exist only within its virtual domain. The play centers on an investigation into one of the Nether’s domains, the Hideaway. Morris, an employee of the Nether, has been tasked with uncovering and ultimately erasing this domain, the imaginative project of a man named Sims (“in-world”) and Papa (in the Hideaway). While not technically illegal, it has become what Morris calls “impermissible,” for this realm exists as a virtual space for what Haley describes as “crimes against children” (Haley 2014:18; Official London Theatre 2014). But the knot at the center of the piece is this: “no one involved is actually a child” (Haley in Official London Theatre 2014). The world is virtual; the appearance of children is a high-tech illusion, masking the adult identities of those involved. Iris, the “shining little girl,” is in fact, a “middle-aged science teacher” named Doyle (Haley 2014:7). Where then, asks The Nether, is the illicit behavior? Where are the consequences? Where is the meaning?

Moving back and forth between the high-tech, clinical space of an “in-world” interrogation room and the imagined space of the Hideaway, the production offers up two worlds for its audience to reckon with. The interrogation room is consciously high-tech, gray, and featureless. It has a pointedly utilitarian quality: one interactive touch-screen table, two chairs, and a host of shifting projections that cover at times both the table and walls but rarely move much beyond a black-and-white palette. In this space we witness a succession of interviews between Morris (Amanda Hale), the tightly wound, morally assured detective of the Nether—a woman who fits perfectly into this soulless bureaucratic office—and Sims (Stanley Townsend), the originator of the Hideaway, as well as Sims (David Beames), a middle-aged man whose connection with the Hideaway becomes increasingly clear as the play progresses.

The second space, that of the Hideaway itself, remains hidden until after the first interrogation scene, when the back wall of the room opens to reveal a vision of enchanting 19th-century nostalgia. The spaces in the Hideaway change throughout—a parlor, a child’s bedroom, a garden—but each time the space feels dreamlike, saturated with an aesthetic of magical perfection. Raised on a suspended platform of polished mirror, the rooms of the Hideaway—filled with rocking horses, dollhouses, and carved white wooden beds—hang precariously above the ground. Surrounded by an edging of poplar trees and yet more mirrored surfaces, the space, designed by Es Devlin, is a vision of enviable perfection and disturbing unreality. In the beauty of the Hideaway, we meet Sims, this time in the guise of Papa—performed charismatically by Townsend as a middle-aged man sinister in his geniality. He is found here along with Iris (Zoe Brough)—the “shining little girl” of the piece who skips about innocently, weaving her way between Papa and their guest, Woodnut (Ivanno Jeremiah) (Haley 2014:7). Iris, as we very gradually learn, is the virtual incarnation of Doyle. Woodnut, we find out, is Morris’s alter-ego, the virtual self she created in order to investigate firsthand the realm of the Hideaway.

As Woodnut, Morris decides to “partake fully of what [is] offer[ed],” agreeing ultimately to the task of what is rather euphemistically referred to as “avail[ing] himself of the axe” (Haley 2014:48, 41). This particular
suggestion—which involves a young child and a blood-stained axe—is so gruesome, so grotesque that it could have been lifted from a Victorian penny dreadful. Toward the end of the play Morris reflects on this encounter. Reading from Woodnut’s report (that is, her own), she fully articulates her fear of living in a world without apparent consequence:

I look down to find her body gone. What have I done, have I done something, have I done nothing, is this all nothing, is everything nothing? A giggle at the door, and she reappears, coming toward me with her arms open—and I lift the axe and I do it again. And I do it again. And I do it again. I want her to stop coming so I know I’ve done something. But she keeps coming, and now it’s not just my hands covered in blood, it’s my face, it’s my body, I can taste it in my mouth, it’s so exquisite I am crying, I have never felt so much with every nerve, felt so much, felt so much...feeling. Until I’m spent. And she comes to me again, eyes wide. But if there has been no consequence, there has been no meaning—no meaning between her and myself, between myself and myself—and if there has been meaning, then I am a monster. (Haley 2014:53)

Sims/Papa touts the possibility of living “a life outside of consequence” as something
desirable, enviable even. For Morris, as this speech (delivered by Amanda Hale with such moving distress) makes clear, this possibility is something quite terrifying. If there is no consequence, Morris concludes, there may also be no meaning. If there is no reaction, there was essentially no action. On the other hand, if we allow these actions to exist, to mean, then what might we be acknowledging about our world, about ourselves? This is the world into which *The Nether* suggests we might be sleepwalking: a world of virtual reality that is, at best (or perhaps worst), absolutely terrifying and, at worst (or perhaps best), devoid of meaning entirely.

The world of Morris’s fears is one ostensibly rooted in technology, one of virtual realms made possible by sophisticated programming and complex code. And yet these apparently hyper-contemporary fears and concerns are those that have dogged theatre itself for years. Josette Féral proposed in the 1980s that theatre is governed by what she calls the “law of reversibility”:

> Activities that violate the “law of reversibility” are forbidden. In the theater, this law guarantees the reversibility of time and event. As such, it opposes any act in which the subject is mutilated or executed [...] Such acts break the tacit contract between spectator and theater that guarantees that what one witnesses is representation, inscribed in a time and space different from the quotidian, in which the forward march of time is suspended and thus reversible, an act in which the actor reserves the possibility of returning to his point of departure. (2002:104)

Theatre, Féral suggests, is by definition reversible. The actor must be able to return “to his point of departure”—if not, the work may be theatrical but, according to Féral, it is no longer theatre. This quality is, moreover, that which has been invoked time and again to draw a line in the sand between theatre and performance art. Marina Abramović’s insistence in the *Observer* back in 2010 that theatre is fake while performance art is real, depends upon just such a distinction:

> “To be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre,” she replied. “Theatre is fake... The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real.” (O’Hagan 2010)

Implicit in this condemnation is the understanding that theatre is reversible; that is what makes it fake. Interestingly, Haley’s play, Féral’s theory, and Abramović’s statement all anchor themselves in violence. Mutilation, execution, physical pain; these are what are invoked in order to truly test the limits of our tolerance, our capacity for quite literal consequence. Both Féral’s and Abramović’s theories of theatre could be expressed as that which exists “outside of consequence.” If this is true, then Morris’s fear of the Nether holds for theatre itself—if it is really reversible, really fake, really un-consequential—might it also be without meaning?

It is worth noting here that it is precisely this lack of any immediate and literal real-life consequence that Antonin Artaud insists gives theatre its very real power. He argues in *The Theater and Its Double* that,

> once launched upon the fury of his task, an actor requires infinitely more power to keep from committing a crime than a murderer needs courage to complete his act, and it is here, in its very gratuitousness, that the action and effect of a feeling in the theater appears infinitely more valid than that of a feeling fulfilled in life. (1958:25)

Like Féral and Abramović, Artaud shares an understanding of the theatre as separate from reality—an actor’s passion is quite distinct from that of a murderer, he makes clear. However, for Artaud this discreteness is what gives theatre its power. The gratuitous nature of an actor’s feelings is what gives them their validity. Accordingly, the un-reality of Papa’s pleasures in the Hideaway would be accorded more rather than less weight, not in spite of but because of their apparent un-consequence.

And yet, *The Nether* seems to ask, just how distinct is theatre from reality? For just as the virtual world of the Hideaway seems tethered...
to the “in-world” reality of its participants, so too is Herrin’s theatrical production imbedded within our own world, thus complicating anything that would claim it as merely illusion. Holger Syme suggests that there is a flaw in the “representational logic” of Herrin’s production, which has failed to find a way to effectively differentiate between the bodies in the interrogation room and their supposedly virtual counterparts in the Nether: “The virtuality that governs both the real and the virtual on the Royal Court stage is the same. For the production’s dramaturgical logic, that’s a pretty serious problem” (Syme 2014). And of course, he is in some senses correct. There is supposed to be a difference between the people “in-world” and those virtual representations of people within the Nether. Though Devlin’s set does a nice job of drawing two distinct spaces, the people who populate each world are, in both cases, actors who are quite stubbornly live. I’m not sure, however, that this is quite the dramaturgical shortcoming Syme suggests; rather this apparently unsatisfactory directorial decision keeps the two worlds consciously intertwined. Although the audience knows that the Hideaway is a virtual space populated by computer-generated approximations of adults and children, the live actors of Herrin’s production ensure that the distinction between real and virtual remains blurred. By using live performers in both the virtual Hideaway and the “in-world” interrogation room Herrin ensures that the audience is never quite free of a nagging doubt that the Hideaway is entirely virtual, entirely unreal—whatever that might mean.

In fact, it is more than just a nagging suspicion. The refusal of Herrin’s production to make much dramaturgical effort to persuade the audience that these two worlds are conceptually different means that the audience must do the work instead. Syme recognizes this, proposing that “if the Nether achieves a status of greater virtuality than the interrogation room in this production, that has nothing to do with the acting, and almost everything with what we as an audience persuade ourselves to see” (2014). And this self-persuasion, as identified by Syme, is important, because it is self-conscious. This self-awareness of dramatic technique (or lack thereof) makes the audience hyperconscious of the process of illusion and its relationship to reality; something Bert O. States has famously argued is emphasized by particular artifacts that “retain […] a high degree of en soi”—clocks, running water, animals, and children (1985:29). “With running water,” States suggests, “something indisputably real leaks out of the illusion” (31). A child actor, he continues, is “an even better example”: “Who,” he asks, “has ever seen a child on stage without
thinking, ‘How well he acts for a child!’ or, of the doomed children in Medea, ‘Do they understand the play?’” (31). As cited above, Haley claims in an interview with Official London Theatre that despite the horrific accusations of “crimes against children” swirling around onstage, the “final twist” of her play hinges on the fact that “no one involved is actually a child” (Official London Theatre 2014). This, however, simply isn’t true. Or rather it’s half true—true in the “in-world” reality of her fictional play but fundamentally not true on the stage of the Royal Court. The character of Iris may be a virtual representation of “a middle-aged science teacher” named Doyle, but Zoe Brough, the child actor who represents this character in Herrin’s production, is just that, a child.2

Figure 4. Woodnut (Ivanno Jeremiah) and Iris (Zoe Brough) in the “Hideaway.” The Nether, Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, Royal Court, 2014. (Photo by Johan Persson)

Strangely, despite Haley’s confident assertion that no children are involved, she herself penned an Author’s Note stipulating that “it is important to cast Iris with an actress who will appear on stage as a prepubescent girl” (2014:66). Herself invoking States, Haley explains this is because “the child actor takes the audience out of the play […]”, which is desirable considering the contents of her scenes. The audience is assured nothing awful will be enacted upon the child, whereas they have no such confidence with an adult posing as a child” (66). In other words, the insistent reality that Zoe Brough carries with her by virtue of being a child should inoculate the audience against any real fear that harm will come to her. It keeps the audience safe by virtue of our own conviction that no 21st-century Royal Court production would actually hurt a child. This to me, though, is simply not the effect, nor, I think, what is implied by States. Rather, an awareness that Iris is in some real sense not a virtual representation but a young girl had me wondering, as States does of the children in Medea: What does she understand? How far are they willing to push this? Indeed, this sense of unease was palpable in the auditorium of the Royal Court’s Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, making many of its seasoned theatre-goers feel, as BBC 4 interviewer Kirsty Lang admitted, “very uncomfortable” (Lang 2014). And here we’re brought face-to-face with the quiet power of the theatre. For, as States suggests, “The illusion has introduced something into itself to demonstrate its tolerance of things. It is not the world that has invaded the illusion; the illusion has stolen something from the world in order to display its own power” (1985:34). Suddenly theatre doesn’t seem as neatly reversible as Féral would have us believe.

Instead, by playing at the limits of theatre and reality The Nether forces its audience to entertain the idea that a virtual realm entirely divorced from our own reality might be an impossibility. The unflagging connection between theatre and reality, as so unmistakably captured in the body of Zoe as Iris, challenges the belief that anything can be reversible in any meaningful way, that we can ever be truly cocooned from consequence. In his review for the Guardian, Michael

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2. Throughout the run the Royal Court alternated between two child actors, Zoe Brough and Isabella Pappas. The night I attended, the part was played by Brough and so I refer to her throughout.
Billington suggests that the use of just such a child actor, the threat of real and lasting harm to a child, was a cheap trick: “Behind the play lies an important debate about the extent to which we can, or even should, censor and control online fantasies. I would take Haley’s arguments more seriously, however, if she did not seek to shock us with the threat of present danger” (Billington 2014). In some sense I hesitate to disagree. It’s a problem with the play, with the production, which uses the real presence of a child to sensationalize, challenging its audience with the potential for real-life consequences, not safely reversible ones. It is ultimately impossible to gauge just how safe the girl remains, just how much she understands, and perhaps it’s simply not worth the risk. If we agree with Billington that she does remain safe, despite the threat, then is this merely a sensationalist trick or is it effective theatre looking for a way to shock its audience into contemplation of just how intertwined these different versions of ourselves might be? In a play so relentlessly future—with its virtual domains and interactive gaming—it is nonetheless the theatre, that ancient medium, that is so perfectly positioned to tease out its problems. Theatre, it seems, already inhabits that in-between space, carefully poised between reality and illusion, actuality and virtuality. In so many ways the anxieties of *The Nether* are the anxieties of theatre. Haley and Herrin use this insistent commonality to interrogate the ethical questions raised when theatre is virtuality is imagination is reality—or something somewhere in-between.

References


In his International Message for UNIMA on World Puppetry Day, 21 March 2011, puppetry scholar Henryk Jurkowski offered the following assessment of and prediction for the state of puppetry arts:

The widespread presence of the ancient figurative puppet is now linked to a movement in inverse proportion to the territory it occupied before. This is due to the invasion of the object and, on an even bigger scale, to everything related to matter. Because every object, all matter, when animated, speaks to us, each demanding its right to a theatre life. Thus from now on the object will replace the figurative puppet, opening a pathway for the artist that leads to a new poetic language, to creations full of rich and dynamic images. (Jurkowski 2011)

Responding to this view and to her own experiences, Margaret Williams, in “The Death of ‘The Puppet’?” struggles to make sense of the growing predominance of objects over figurative puppets in contemporary puppet performance, even to the extent that “Many people at festivals of ‘puppetry and related arts’ complain that there weren’t any puppets.” She asks “is it puppetry if there are no puppets in it?” (2014:18). She concludes her thoughtful analysis of four performing-object shows by suggesting that perhaps there is “a mode of spectatorship rather than any specific theatrical form, that identifies puppetry” (27).

While puppetry has a long and rich history (articulated puppet-like figures date from as far back as 2400 BCE [Blumenthal 2005:11–12]), it has not always been in the cultural spotlight. In Western cultures especially, scholars and audiences have often looked down on puppetry as an inferior version of human actor theatre, rather than appreciating its singular aesthetic interests. It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that as puppetry is today finding enormous cultural prominence, with puppets appearing on Broadway and in avantgarde houses, as well as on television and in film, the idea and presence of the puppet is simultaneously being replaced by objects, or at least by a new paradigm of the puppet that extends not only to Frank Proschan’s 1983 notion of the performing object as “material images of humans, animals, or spirits that are created, displayed, or manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance” (Proschan 1983:4), but even further, to what Dassia Posner in 2014 proposes as “material performance”: “At its simplest, this term assumes that puppets and other material objects in performance bear visual and kinetic meanings that operate independently of whatever meanings we may inscribe upon them in performance” (2014:5). Posner’s notion of material performance brings to bear Jane Bennett’s idea of “vibrant matter,” which posits that matter has an agency of its own that works in concert with human agency (Bennett 2010). And, as Posner says, “Bennett describes the agency of the inanimate material world in terms that...”

1. Union Internationale de la Marionnette, or the International Union of Puppetry, is the international organization for puppetry.

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are similar to how puppeteers have long articulated their interplay with puppets” (2014:6).

As I express in the Introduction to the coedited volume, *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance* (Orenstein 2014:2–4), the current “puppet moment,” the explosion of interest in puppetry, seems fueled by our interactions with and concerns over all kinds of objects that inundate our daily lives. These include consumer goods, advertised in terms of how they can reflect one’s identity or social status, and new technologies, like smartphones, offering myriad ways to take action and project experience and personality. In our present material culture context, objects are regularly conduits for, if not sources of, personal or character presentation, action, and agency. The preponderance of such objects and our continuous interaction with them perhaps accounts for the growing interest in such materials as substance for art, especially art that both reflects and questions these circumstances. The preponderance of such objects and our continuous interaction with them perhaps accounts for the growing interest in such materials as substance for art, especially art that both reflects and questions these circumstances. The current enthusiasm for puppetry and the adherent absorption of the puppet into material performance is perhaps an outgrowth of these circumstances.

Present questions and debates over puppetry’s shifting shape and expanding boundaries that include *vibrant matter* were put into high relief at the 2014 FIDENA International Puppetry Festival in the Ruhr region of Germany, located across the adjacent regional towns of Bochum, Herne, and Essen (16–24 May 2014). Curator Annette Dabs, who has directed the festival and *Figurentheater der Nationen* or Puppet Theatre of Nations—since 1998, following in the footsteps of her predecessor, Sylvia Brendenal, takes a strong hand in presenting, within the frame of puppetry, performances that push robustly against the boundaries of the art, this year with shows emerging from visual arts and dance as well as object performance. In speaking with the art journalists invited to the festival by NRW KULTURsekretariat, Dabs confirmed that putting the limits of objects and performance with objects into question, integrating these forms within arenas of human physical performance and visual art, was an intentional mission of the festival. The shows explored complex interactions between figures, spaces, and objects and expressed how the material world provides us with both predictable realms of operation and unknown possibilities.

In the grand opening spot, for example, was *Mystery Magnet* from Belgium’s Miet Warlop. The show went well beyond even the contemporary, expanded notions of puppetry. Warlop did her training in visual arts, completing her art degree with a series of *tableaux vivants* that unwittingly slipped her into the theatrical realms where she has spent the past 10 years. Untrained in theatre, she herself says she breaks artistic conventions simply by not knowing what they are.2

I read her piece as an abstract history of experimental art, told as an initially fun party gone terribly wrong. Beginning with a pure white backdrop and a black floor—an untainted three-dimensional canvas—that was inhabited by a male performer wearing a simple black suit (stuffed to make the performer look enormously fat), a series of actions, interactions, and interventions left the performance space an exhaustive mess of paint splatters, ruptured walls, liquid foam, and scattered objects by the show’s end. The audience’s engagement lasted beyond the presumed ending of the show; many remained to watch the performers clean up the ravages wrought by their actions, as captivated with the post-show as they were with the piece itself.

The series of actions began with actors in mop-headed wigs that obscured their faces, carrying onstage a woman in a girlish black party dress, her head dropped forward, her face obscured by her hair; she was holding a balloon. This image set up a party motif, but, as many parties do, this one got a bit out of hand. Among the many situations that occurred during the hour of performance, mop-headed figures, their wigs dribbling with the black and red paint that colored them, splattered that

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2. Warlop expressed this view in an informal discussion with myself and a group of journalists invited to the festival by the NRW KULTURsekretariat.
paint across the back wall, leaving Pollock-like drippings behind. Bright-colored foam exploded out of glass bottles that the wigged creatures had dropped some actant into, the foam spewing comically across the space. The actors executed their actions with physically nonchalant or playful demeanors, even when they came in carrying tools that sparked a sense of danger and anticipated unpleasant consequences: one figure stapled the white-gloved hands of another to the back wall, then used a box-cutter to slash open the other’s stomach. But unlike the performance artists whose self-mutilations these acts evoked, here the actors’ almost casual attitudes and the absurd and slightly comic nature of some of the materials they worked with discreetly communicated that no real physical harm was meant to occur: the stapled figure’s red entrails were fluffy streams of cloth, obviously packed into a box on the performer’s front, and we laughed as the character ran offstage, pulling his undamaged hands out of the white gloves that remained fastened to the back wall.

Despite the playfulness, the reality of potentially dangerous, very real objects hung in the air. In one particularly startling sequence darts flew from behind the audience and onto the stage, rushing toward the spectators like a tsunami. They forcefully pierced the floor just a few feet from the performers. Surely the trajectory of the darts was calculated so that they would land just out of danger... This balance between our sense of the physical reliability of objects and their unpredictability stood out as a theme throughout the festival. The show ended with epiphany amidst apocalypse: choir music played as if sung by the formation of white female torsos wheeled to center stage. In place of their heads, old-fashioned hair dryer caps inflated and deflated, air blown into them through tubes controlled from behind: a chorale of fragmented Grecian statues, animated by the detritus of modernity? Presented within the context of puppetry— the theatrical site where visual art and performance meet— Warlop’s Mystery Magnet articulates the contemporary artist’s struggle to resist materiality, through live performance,
while being immersed in it. Puppetry distilled down to its essence—with the figurative and anthropomorphic aspects of the puppet torn away—indulges in our marvel at and interactions with the material world.

Germany’s Eva Meyer-Keller’s *Pulling Strings* also explored both the playfulness and real danger of objects. In a small, nearly empty studio venue, *Pulling Strings* made the workaday things and structures of the traditional theatre space the stars of the show. Performers placidly arranged and rearranged such things as gaffer’s tape and carpentry tools, stuff usually hidden backstage. They tied some to strings or pulleys to lift and manipulate them. They wheeled objects like carts or chairs onstage and pushed others, like tape rolls, letting them reel freely across the floor. The movement that animated the objects read as their expressivity, sometimes supported or enhanced by accompanying music from Prokofiev’s “Romeo and Juliet” or Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring.” At one point, a variety of technical theatre objects—weights, a microphone stand, a garbage bin, a clothes rack—were each tied to different parts of a grid that the performers hoisted by pulleys, lifting the whole affair up from the stage floor, leaving the objects to float in space: a mesmerizing theatre-object cosmos. A cart dragged past the open doors at the back of the stage by one of the performers evoked Mother Courage trudging with her heavy load. When set in motion and left to express their own materiality and potential, these things, like Warlop’s objects, were both playful and menacing. Towards the end, heading for the finale, the actors tugged at the grid to make it sway forebodingly above us. Actors often talk about needing to take risks, to challenge themselves to go beyond their comfort zones when making artistic choices. As with Warlop’s darts, when objects are the onstage agents and we push them into new, risky performance territories, the audience can experience a true sense of danger. In this show, when the curtain fell, it really did: a heavy cloth hung by performers across the middle of the stage at one point in the show, dropped to the ground at the end.

Meyer-Keller’s work showcases the drama and potential expressivity of the unsung objects of the theatre, usually hard at work supporting the more heralded human art workers. The show reveals the unadorned materiality that human-actor theatre relies on, its centrality to artistic creation, and the delicate dance that goes into taming these objects to serve our own artistic purposes.

![Figure 2. Pulling Strings by Eva Meyer-Keller, 17 May 2014, PACT Zollverein, Essen. (Photo by Eva Meyer-Keller)](https://example.com/figure2.jpg)

Russia’s AKHE Engineering Theatre’s *Gobo*. *Digital Glossary* likewise engages with potentially menacing objects. In a surreal experimental laboratory of sorts, two clown-like characters subject each other to absurd yet still threatening acts through a series of 17 vignettes divided by titles that refer to various elements and aspects of the hero: the hero’s optimism, the hero’s perspective, etc. These actions (which incorporate shadow play, live screen projections, animation, and various other elements) include one performer or the other being strung upside down, shot with a toy gun, hit on the head by an ingenious Rube Goldberg device that requires a live flame to get started, held under water in a fish tank as a puppet swims by, and punching himself with a puppet boxing kangaroo—to name...
Critical Acts

only a few. By using toys aggressively in alarming situations that incorporate physical clowning, this show foregrounds the simultaneously comic and sinister presence of the objects and of materiality itself.

Even Yase Tamam’s *Count to One* from Iran, offering more figurative representations than these other shows, capitalized on the materiality of the substance at its center: clay. Three soldiers in fatigues sat surrounded by lumps of clay and six white, ground-level spinning pottery wheels. Throughout the performance, to the musical strains of a Japanese *koto* and other instruments, they quickly grabbed handfuls of the clay and shaped them in front of us, drawing us into the process of watching art being crafted and transformed in real time. At the opening, two of the soldiers were playing chess with two rows of clay figures facing each other, each move a new battle strategy. They then shaped an airplane, which they flew over to the adjacent spinning wheel that was already piled high with clay buildings that formed a small city. But in a moment of moral reflection and self-determination, instead of smashing the clay city with their own clay bombs, they used them instead to attack the plane itself. Destroying their own implements of destruction set the soldier-artists free to imagine new possibilities for shaping and crafting the world around them.

With their newly discovered freedom, they built clay railways and highways, lively with cars and people. They built a huge clay die to gamble with and a ballerina to dance. Finally, on the center wheel, they formed a majestic tree with a bird’s nest. Three clay figures, copies the performers have made of themselves, stretched out to rest beneath its branches. The soldiers themselves then lay down beside their own crafted vision of a peaceful future. Coming from Iran, the piece cries out for a new era and a new role for the military and the real people within its ranks. The repurposing and reimagining of common, everyday materials echoes the theme of many of the FIDENA shows.

The emphasis on both the constraints and latent possibilities of material reality in the festival performances illuminates the history and current experiments of Germany’s Ruhr region, the site of the festival. Once Germany’s industrial heartland, where small towns like Oberhausen and Gelsenkirchen grew up around coal mines and steel factories, over the last 50 years, with the collapse of those industries, Ruhr fell into disrepair, its economic woes amplified by the environmental degradation left behind after over a century of minimally regulated industrial growth.
Now, after a decade spent repurposing factories and mining facilities for artistic projects and museums, the region is committed to artistic growth as its economic engine, while preserving and honoring the local industrial culture of the region.

The experiments of the Ruhr region might also provide further answers to why some of the performances described above are presented in what continues to be called a puppetry festival and offer a different answer to Williams’s question of whether it is puppetry if there are no puppets. Like the industrial factory buildings of the Ruhr, the term “puppetry” links the present to the past, even as the understanding of the term continues to evolve. The excitement, pleasures, and problems of fabricating, animating, and performing with materials finds its home and lineage in puppetry and puppetry’s long history of experimentation and enactment with objects, as well as its accompanying critical discourse. While Bennett may be correct in her assessment that matter is not completely subject to human will, it nonetheless is materially impacted by these interactions and carries this history with it. The performances presented at the festival, as much as they explored materiality or spoke through their materiality, were still in dialogue with the histories and contexts that gave them meaning: Warlop and the history of modern art, Meyer-Keller and the conventions of staging theatre, Yase T amam and Iran’s military-political history. To indulge in materiality is not to swing free of human history and its reverberations but rather to engage with history and assess it, perhaps in order to redirect the future.

Moreover, even while humans may not be able to dominate matter, we continue to be interested in its impact on us. Retaining the word puppetry brings the figurative puppet to mind, reminding us of the humanist perspective that still motivates performance that focuses on materials and objects.

References