Of course, another reason for my hesitancy was that I knew all too well how easy it is for Iago to steal the play: it may be Othello’s tragedy, but it is Iago’s play. An actor of skill, given ample material to charm an audience, will charm that audience.

— Hugh Quarshie, “Playing Othello” (2016)

During the bombardment [of East Aleppo], TV networks and many newspapers appeared to lose interest in whether any given report was true or false and instead competed with one another to publicise the most eye-catching atrocity story [...].


“Does the willing suspension of disbelief really mean that I should accept that a play written over four hundred years ago by a white Englishman for another white Englishman in blackface make-up is an authoritative and credible profile of a genuine black man?” asks the Ghanaian-born British actor Hugh Quarshie, revealing the anxiety over racism that William Shakespeare’s Othello (1604) has elicited throughout its performance history (Quarshie 2016). According to Quarshie, who finally overcame his longtime unease with the part in 2015, when he took the title role in Igbal Khan’s production for the Royal Shakespeare Company, Othello requires “a radical re-reading of key passages” (Quarshie 1999:21). Like The Merchant of Venice (1605), Othello needs performance to both shed light on its complicity in spreading racist stereotypes and on reinventing the text for the new millennium. One trend has been to assemble a diverse cast that includes several actors of color, particularly in the roles of Emilia, Cassio, and Iago, so that the theme of the cultural construction of race is not left on Othello’s shoulders alone. Another has been to shift the emphasis from race to war and its debilitating effects on the collective consciousness, as was the choice of Nicholas Hytner’s 2013 production for the National Theatre. Sam Gold’s intelligent 2016/17 production of Othello at the New York Theatre Workshop put both themes—that of war and of cultural identity—in dialogue by exploring the politics of perception and the dissemination of fake news.

“Please do not walk onto the stage,” instructed the ushers as the audience members took their seats in the wooden bleachers erected around three sides of the set’s contemporary military barracks (designed by Andrew Lieberman). At first, I took this as a simple warning against accidently stepping on one of the many unmade mattresses strewn over the floor along with the radios, laptops, cell-phones, and other personal belongings of the characters. But after hearing one of the ushers repeat—“you’d be surprised how often...
it happens”—I was reminded of how often audiences have tried to interrupt performances of Othello throughout its production history. The 19th-century French war novelist Marie-Henri Beyle, known better by his pseudonym, Stendhal, recounts, for example, how, during a performance in Baltimore in 1822, a soldier shot at the actor playing Othello in order to save Desdemona’s life ([1823] 1962:22). This desire to intervene originates from the particular position of the spectators. Not only do we know more than Othello, but we also become complicit in Iago’s Machiavellian machinations by allowing him to speak to us directly.

Gold’s production made this complicity explicit when Iago, played with devious delight by Daniel Craig, addressed the audience during the infamous “And what’s he, then, that says I play the villain” soliloquy (2, 3:356–82). Iago climbed up the bleachers to stand at the same level as the audience and began to work his magic. The proximity of the star’s body to the audience created an unsettling seduction—a “haunting,” to borrow Marvin Carlson’s term, of Craig’s James Bond past (Carlson 2001). Moreover, Craig’s recently put-on muscular weight transformed him into a human killing machine and emphasized the fascist ideology that celebrates war as beautiful. As Tamzin Shaw noted in the New York Review of Books, Craig’s interpretation of Iago does not attempt to explain Iago’s motivations through “complex psychological contrivances,” such as a repressed homoerotic desire for David Oyelowo’s Othello, but rather revels in “sadistic delight” and in “laughter permitted by moral indifference” (Shaw 2016). Craig sure looked like he was having a jolly good time playing Shakespeare’s most notorious villain. The unapologetic charm and charisma that Craig’s Iago embraced made Gold’s Othello, as Tamzin Shaw puts it, “the necessary production for our times” (2016). In other words, in Gold’s production of Othello, the audience can be rendered speechless by a movie star’s charisma, even if that charisma is in the service of duplicity, war, and mass murder.

In Second Thoughts about Othello, one of the main issues that Hugh Quarshie takes with the stereotype of Othello is not his violent rage but rather his innocent credulity, a characteristic that Quarshie believes diminishes Othello’s tragic effect: “It is Othello’s credulity which alienates him from our sympathy, as his color alienates him from Venetian society. And Shakespeare seems to suggest that his color and his race explain his credulity, his jealousy and his violence” (1999:14). Yet, in our era of “fake news” and “alternative facts,” credulity belongs to all of us, not Othello alone. Gold’s production underscores how often we suspend our disbelief, whether in the theatre or while watching CNN. People choose what to believe and when to remain silent in the presence of charisma. Moreover, David Oyelowo imbues his Othello with such nobility and idealism that it makes it hard to see him as a naive simpleton. Instead, Othello’s leap of faith—“men should be what they seem” (3, 3:149)—provides a defiant alternative to Iago’s nihilism. Charismatic

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1. For examples see Philip C. Kolin, “Blackness Made Visible: A Survey of Othello in Criticism, on Stage, and on Screen” (2002).
Iago believes in nothing because for him love is “a lust of the blood and a permission / of the will” (1, 3:377); insecure Othello grapples with doubt because he loves.

Perhaps it is precisely to jolt his spectators out of their certainty that Gold literally and repeatedly plunges them into darkness during the first scene. An occasional light from a character’s laptop or cell phone cuts through the darkness to tease our sight and to give us glimpses of the characters’ movements. A soldier takes off his real prosthetic leg and goes to sleep. Desdemona (Rachel Brosnahan) takes off her shirt and joins Othello on his mattress. Then darkness again. Of course, the director’s aesthetic choice makes theatrical sense given the dramatic setting. Brabantio demands “Light, I say, light” (1, 1:160) and the general confusion of the characters at the start of the play suggests nighttime. The pitch darkness that lighting designer Jane Cox conjures accomplishes its own ethical task; it forces the audience to experience, however briefly, the sensations of doubt and disorientation that jealousy will stir in Othello as the play unfolds. In other words, the visual play between light and darkness, seeing and not seeing, plays not only with spectators’ sense of sight but also, more importantly, their sense of superiority. Like Othello, audiences are plunged into a search for “ocular proof” (3, 3:412). The resulting skepticism is, according to Stanley Cavell, a hallmark of Shakespearean tragedy in the sense “that true knowledge is beyond the human self, that what we hold in our minds to be true of the world can have at best the status of opinion, educated guesswork, hypothesis, construction, belief” (2003:7). In this manner, Gold’s _Othello_ also echoes French philosopher Alain Badiou’s recent reevaluation of blackness as an important concept in epistemology. Noting that the “non-color’s” negative associations are historical constructions, such as the racist creation of the black race, Badiou argues that black is darkness that can simultaneously conceal and disclose knowledge: “White is merely the phantom of ignorance. All knowledge is knowledge of black, which happens by surprise” ([2015] 2017:39).

In the dark, actors must rely on voice to navigate the stage and to make themselves known to each other and to us. Yet voice too proves unreliable, as when Roderigo (Matthew Maher) asks Brabantio (Glenn Fitzgerald) if he knows his name and the latter responds, “Not I, what are you?” (1, 1:104). When Roderigo states his name, Brabantio has to make the conscious decision to believe him. Two simple questions, both uttered in darkness—“what are you?”—and the very first question that Othello asks Cassio—“What is the news?” (1, 2:41)—may well serve as the poles of navigation for the entire production, connecting the theme of personal identity with that of public truth.

The way that this particular production manipulated its audience by turning off the light and turning on Iago’s unabashed charm uncovered the importance of those scenes in _Othello_ where Venetians discuss the maneuvers of the Turkish fleet (1, 3:1–55 and 2, 1:1–47). Although usually cut for the sake of time, as was the case with Gold’s version, these scenes involve minor characters piecing together international news from secondhand accounts. “There is no composition in these news,” says the Duke, “That gives them credit” (1, 3:1–2). One of the senators warns the Duke that the Turks are putting on “a pageant / To keep [them] in false gaze” (1, 3:23–24). In other words, fake news was already a problem for the Early Modern world. Indeed, characters in _Othello_ are obsessed with getting the correct news, both public, concerning the war between Venice and Turkey, and private, as when Desdemona asks Cassio (Finn Wittrock) and later her cousin Lodovico (David Wilson Barnes) about their well-being with a simple “What’s the news” (3, 4:127 and 4, 1:243). Moreover, Lodovico assumes there is something in the letter bearing news from Venice that moves Othello to anger in the presence of Desdemona. Presciently, Shakespeare’s _Othello_ shows both the difficulty of finding a reliable news source and the dangerous speed with which misleading information can become believable. Centuries before modern technology could disseminate fabricated news, as with reporting from Syria and Iraq, _Othello_ already showed how the news could
be manipulated through the vicissitudes of marine transportation.³

The problem is, of course, as ancient as the art of storytelling. As Ian Smith notes, “Othello presents a classic Shakespearean tragic conceit: the master storyteller undone by a rival storyteller, Iago, whose baseless fictions are the intended ‘pestilence’ (2, 3:341) poured into Othello’s ear” (2016:111). Stephen Greenblatt reads the web of lies that Iago spins “to ensnare as / great a fly as Cassio” (2, 1:183–84) as the process of “fictionalization.” That is, Iago “does not need a profound or even reasonably accurate understanding of his victims.” All Iago needs is the knowledge of “the master plots of comedy” that dictate that “a young, beautiful Venetian gentlewoman would tire of her old outlandish husband and turn instead to the handsome, young lieutenant” (Greenblatt [1980] 2005:234). In performance, this anxiety over information, hearsay, and deception plays out not only in the tragic plot, but also in the comic choice of having the soldiers dance to Drake’s “Hotline Bling,” a 2015 hip hop hit about the way feelings, and jealousy in particular, can creep into even the most casual and undefined amorous arrangements: “Ever since I left the city, / You got a reputation for yourself now / Everybody knows and I feel left out” (Graham [Drake] 2016).

Another site of speculation is blackness as a color assigned to people. Aware of the racism in the history of casting the title role, which included the use of blackface, Gold’s Othello explores the meaning of black across several identities and foregrounds the play’s encounters between Christianity and Islam. For example, Gold’s production engages in the archaeological work of unearthing the many layers behind the meaning of the word Moor. What did it signify for Shakespeare’s audience and what does it mean today?⁴

Although the Portuguese had already completed the first transatlantic slave voyage from Africa to the Americas in 1526 (and Othello mentions being “sold to slavery”), Othello was composed before the modern biological discourse surrounding race (1, 3:160). In Shakespeare’s time, Moors came not only from Africa, but also from Spain and from the Middle East. Thus, the very term “Moor,” as Anthony Barthelemy explains, is elastic. “Moor can mean, then, non-black Muslim, black Christian, or black Muslim. The only certainty a reader has when he sees the word is that the person referred to is not a European Christian” (1987:7). According to Ayanna Thompson, today’s use of the word “Arab” in the US and the UK context has a similar function in that “for some it will signify an ethnicity, for others it will signify a religious affiliation, for others it will signify a linguistic grouping, and for still others it will signify a race” (2016:26). David Oyelowo performs Othello’s Otherness with a slight Nigerian accent, alluding both to Othello’s Muslim identity and to his own Nigerian background.⁴

Marsha Stephanie Blake, an African American actor, familiar to the audience from Orange is the New Black, plays the role of Emilia. The role of Bianca (Nikki Massoud) is transformed from a Venetian prostitute to a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf trying to survive in a war-torn land, somewhere in the Middle East of the present day. The production thereby becomes as much about diverse interracial relationships as it is about Othello’s racial identity.

Throughout Othello’s production history, Othello’s Otherness has often been interpreted as a marker of race, thereby reinscribing the construction of black as a race. Yet, as Badiou notes, nature “has no bone to pick with black, whether it be coal, beetle, dog, or whale” and “[i]t is man and man alone who opened the case against black” ([2015] 2017:90). By performing the identity of a Muslim who marries outside of his faith, Oyelowo adds yet another layer to Othello’s alienation. In contrast to Quarshie’s fears of Othello being unsympathetic because of his

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³ For the problem of fabricated news coming from contemporary Syria and Iraq, see Patrick Cockburn, “Who Supplies the News?” (2017).

⁴ There is some evidence that Othello is a Muslim who converted to Christianity, as Iago mentions that “[t]o win the Moor, weren’t to renounce his baptism, / All seals and symbols of redeemed sin” (2, 3:342–44).
Christian wife an object pivotal to Islam and a source of controversy in the West. Emilia’s desire to “have the work ta’en out” (3, 3:340) and Cassio’s request to Bianca to “have it copied” (3, 4:218) reveal not only the beauty of the headscarf’s pattern, but also the invisible labor that Bianca and all the oppressed must perform in an economy that needs war as its motor and fetishizes handcrafted objects made by the same population it exploits. Bianca’s refusal to copy the pattern for Cassio (“I’ll take out no work on’t!”) transforms a jealous quip into a cry of defiance (4, 1:176). And Iago’s brutal murder of Bianca at the end emphasizes this production’s political angle, so that when Othello delivers his last poignant monologue, the line “that in Aleppo once, / Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk / Beat a Venetian and traduced the state” could not help but summon the awareness of the Syrian civil war and its manifold factions (5, 2:413–15).

The last tableau, which features Iago contemplating the dead bodies of his victims, covered with one huge, blood-soaked sheet, brings to mind the image of a military tent and of a handkerchief. Thus, the “magic in the web” (3, 4:81) of Desdemona’s handkerchief connects with Iago’s web of misinformation that the latter spins throughout the play — “the net / That shall enmesh them all” (2, 3:381–82). “[D]yed in mummy,” the handkerchief was always already touched by death (3, 4:86). The pleasure then that the audience sees in Daniel Craig’s acting is something more than “sadistic delight” or charm (Shaw 2016). It is also a twisted kind of aesthetic pleasure. In the last spotlight, Iago appears as a stand-in for the artist who delights in weaving the web of plot and in toying with characters all for the pleasure of his knowing audience. A similar process of fictionalization takes place in the dissemination of fake news and in the silent complicity with mass murder. The question that is posed at the end is whether the spectators have so suspended their disbelief that they too are enmeshed in that net or whether they will finally break their silence.

Innocent credulity, Oyelowo’s performance of trust and love radiates with delicate strength and tenacious tenderness, which leaves a haunting effect. Oyelowo’s Othello trusts and loves those around him not because he embodies a racist stereotype of a dupe, but because he bravely chooses that path of uncertainty in a society that is prejudiced against him for being Muslim.

The connection to the Middle East is further emphasized through the character of Bianca, who breaks at certain moments into Farsi, and through the use of present-day military costumes (David Zinn) and props (Kathy Fabian). Instead of functioning as a mere foil to the faithful Desdemona, Bianca’s character subtly acquires psychological depth and a politically relevant background. In this new light, Iago’s description of Bianca as a “huswife that by selling her desires / Buys herself bread and clothes” and “dotes on Cassio” unveils a more nuanced portrayal of a native woman (4, 1:113–15). Her selling of sex is not incompatible with her feelings for Cassio, which are rendered all the more torturous given his role as oppressor. This interpretation also politicizes the play’s infamous handkerchief, which appears onstage as a headscarf whose texture interweaves the private with the public. This charged and intersectional object connects several threads of the play—gender, race, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. Thus, Othello gives his white
Exorcism, Autobiography, and Une Chambre en Inde

The Soleil Stages Terrorism and Much More

Judith G. Miller and Rachel M. Watson

As Hélène Cixous tells us, “India” (never just India) has forever been a source of creativity for Ariane Mnouchkine and Le Théâtre du Soleil.1 Inspirational in terms of the forms and stories it has provided, sparking images to capture the abundance and chaos of our world, India has contributed history and legend (L’Indiade ou l’Inde de leurs rêves [The Indiadr India of Their Dreams]; 1987) as well as choreography (Les Atrides [The House of Atreus]; 1991 and La Nuit des rois [Twelfth Night]; 1981) to some of the Soleil’s most celebrated and innovative productions.2 Engaging again with India as catalyst, the Soleil’s latest collective creation,

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1. In an interview with Eric Prenowitz, Cixous, an eminent intellectual and artist and the company writer, explains the place of India in the Soleil’s work: “Asia is not Asia. It is theatre-Asia. I am always talking about another world, a second world: it is not a realistic continent, it is a reservoir, a giant cavern of images” (2004:19).

2. While L’Indiade dealt with the partition of India and the assassination of Gandhi, Les Atrides (which included Euripides’ Iphigénie à Aulis, Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, Les Choéphores, and Les Euménides) featured spectacular choral work inspired by bharatanatyam dancing. Bharatanatyam was also important to the movement patterns in the Soleil’s production of Twelfth Night.
Une Chambre en Inde (A Room in India), establishes onstage a mindscape—a space of dreams, projections, and trauma.³ Like the many living rooms in their soulful drama Les Ephémères (Ephemera; 2006), another room—here a bedroom suite in an Indian household—becomes the site within which the Soleil explores what torments the French, and more broadly, the global imaginary.

For the last 50 years, indeed the sum of its existence, the French-based but cosmopolitan Théâtre du Soleil has made theatre pieces that engage both local and global political conundrums and horrors while, at the same time, postulating the possibility of utopian community and responsible citizenship. From its earliest collective work, for example, 1789: La révolution doit s’arrêter à la perfection du bonheur (1789: The revolution must only stop at the perfection of happiness) in 1970, to its more recent Le Dernier caravansérail (The Last Caravansary) in 2003, and including Méphisto (Mephisto) from 1979 and La Ville Parjure ou le réveil des Erinyes (The Perjured City or the Awakening of the Erinyes) from 1994, the Soleil has skewered France’s failure to establish a viable democracy, highlighted the terrifying situation of Central Asian (and other) refugees, decried fascism and collusion with racist ideologies, lambasted medical practitioners in league with pharmaceutical companies and the government, and generally sought a way out of capitalist exploitation, war, and human greed.⁴

On occasion, fueled by its own disappointment with the little progress made towards cultivating a better world, the Soleil has also created a metatheatrical meditation on the role of the artist in society (Les Clowns [The Clowns], 1969; Et soudain des nuits d’éveil [And Suddenly, Nights of Awakening], 1997; and Les Naufragés du Fol Espoir [The Shipwrecked of Mad Hope], 2010).⁵ Une Chambre en Inde belongs to this latter category. In this production, conceptualized in the months following the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris,⁶ the company challenges itself to face questions

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essential to engaged theatre-making; the text of the play itself asks, “What purpose do we serve” and “What is the role of theatre when people are dying?” The Soleil seeks specifically to come to grips with what it means to do progressive theatre in a world in shambles: where terrorist cults seduce children and knife, truck, and gun attacks strike metropolitan France; where fathers and brothers rule grown women; where fundamentalist thinking replaces thoughtful dialogue; and where advanced technology creates cataclysmic breeches in understanding and in the ability to locate a self. Surprisingly and daringly, this piece turns to humor as both a balm for the weary and a satirical arm.

Their improvisational skills honed from, in some cases, 20 or more years of working together, the 32 actors of the Théâtre du Soleil, with Mnouchkine as director, guide, and muse, have created and curated some 30 episodes dealing with the above questions, resulting in an eclectic assemblage that gives shape not only to these pressing concerns, but also to four segments of the *Mahabharata*, the latter performed by actors from the Soleil who have trained with professional *terukkuttu* performers from Tamil Nadu, India. Moreover, elements of the company’s biography and of Mnouchkine’s own career path are injected into the performance in repeated scenes of the central character’s anxiety over how to go forward theatrically: Character Cornélia, the reluctant director, cannot find her vision.

If Cornélia loosely reflects Mnouchkine and her unending quest to guide the company towards relevant narratives and innovative forms, so too does the character of the Indian hostess, Madame Murti, who has welcomed the company into her home, commanding the bedroom space and those around her with a confident and steady hand. These biographical echoes of Mnouchkine the visionary, racked with the self-doubt that can accompany exacting creative work, and Mnouchkine the leader, fearless and unwavering in her orchestration of the life of her company, both take their place onstage, in this room designated for intimacy. Additionally, Madame Murti’s character, by introducing into the playing space specific Indian political and social issues, allows the Soleil to stage something of contemporary India.

In this piece, the Soleil engages in a new kind of intercultural work, in which India itself, instead of the metaphorical figure of “India” as source of creativity and inspiration, is theatrically rendered; and a *terukkuttu* performer takes the stage alongside permanent members of the company. Intercultural performance in this piece blends certain comic techniques and stances from *terukkuttu* with gestures from Italian *commedia*. As was true of *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, this production also de-centers the French language: actors perform in English, Tamil, Russian, Arabic, French, and Japanese, depending on the needs of the scene, and not on the actor’s mother tongue. The Soleil understands language itself as a form of mask: actors don a language when appropriate; supertitles translate other languages into French.

The plethora of interests in *Une Chambre en Inde* intersect in and emerge from the mind space represented onstage by the Indian bedroom suite. This space, filled with Cornélia’s dreams, nightmares, and visions, gives form and language to the mental process of a theatre artist’s search for her next play. The imagined or dreamed moments, ranging from fleshed-out

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7. *Une Chambre en Inde* is unpublished. Notes from viewing the production several times serve as the basis for our translations of the dialogue.

8. Ariane Mnouchkine and the Soleil spent the month of January 2016 in Pondicherry, India, where they worked on this production and also took classes with *terukkuttu* master Kalaimamani P.K. Sambandam Tambrian and his student Palani Murugan from Tamil Nadu, learning the vocal and dance techniques of this very old and popular dance drama form. *Terukkuttu* performers generally train intensively for four years, and begin as apprentices in a company. Performances are usually held outdoors, in villages in the south of India, and in the Tamil language. They frequently feature the episodes of the *Mahabharata* that focus on the character Draupadi.

9. Palani Murugan accompanied the Soleil back to France, helped create the play through improvisations, continued training the Paris-based actors in *terukkuttu* dancing and singing, and performed a variety of roles during the performance, including the role of Krishna.
sketches to human-size monkeys bursting onto the stage from the many windows and doors of the set, are periodically interrupted by the reality of the outside world—the telephone rings, a fax machine buzzes, Madame Murti appears with news from the village. As a consequence, two modes are established onstage: one of creative theatrical musing and one of present-day reality. While an alternation between these two modes loosely structures the work, they are not always clearly delineated: at times they overlap, at times they are indistinguishable one from the other. The result is an illustration of the artistic process by which something of the outside world is internalized and then reprocessed, distorted, and rendered dream-like. Ultimately, the push and pull between the world outside and the theatrical dreams and visions stages the search “for a resolutely contemporary and political theater” (Théâtre du Soleil 2016:n.p.).

*Une Chambre en Inde* invites the spectator to participate in this search, and together Cornélia and the public experience the task of trying to make sense of today’s chaotic world.

Over the course of four hours, the public is submerged in a river of events, an ocean of atrocities, just as it receives much of today’s news in an ever-flowing stream of broadcasts. The contemporary feeling of being inundated by tragedy is evoked especially well in a startling yet beautiful staged news storm in which a cyclone of newspapers floods the stage.

In the overall onslaught of events, one scene blends into the next, the constant movement accompanied by a soundscape of the shouts and murmurs of an Indian city, the calls of birds at daybreak, the percussive bells and wind instruments of southern Indian dance, the blasts of machine guns and bombs, and the clicks and whirs of phones, faxes, and computers. The end product is a work whose lines are much less clearly drawn, whose message is less obvious than in past Mnouchkine productions, and whose feeling of over abundance sometimes threatens to leave the audience behind. Yet the visual and aural richness, the exuberance of the performance, and the inventiveness—especially in the farcical scenes dedicated to mocking inept terrorists—inscribes the work in a similar trajectory to that which has always made a Soleil production the equivalent of a spiritual pilgrimage. For the thousands of theatre goers who trek out to the Cartoucherie de Vincennes from Paris, taking a long subway ride and then a bus to the site, the Théâtre du Soleil offers a space of joyful meditation. And in a theatre season that highlighted the fear, sadness, and anxiety in the collective unconscious — works like Thomas Bernhard’s *Heldenplatz* and Ivo van Hove’s staging of Visconti’s *The Damned* stand out as examples—the Soleil boldly chooses a different path, one that, while acknowledging the disquieting historical moment, hopes to renew the human spirit.10

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10. *Place des Héros (Heldenplatz)* by Thomas Bernhard, directed by Krystian Lupa, was performed in December 2016 at the Théâtre de la Colline as part of the Festival d’Automne. Ivo van Hove staged Visconti’s screenplay of *The Damned* with actors from La Comédie Française, first in Avignon in the Honor Court in July 2016, and then in repertory at La Comédie Française in Paris in the fall of 2016. In both instances, the fascist mentality and subsequent tragedy central to each play echo the political tensions roiling many European countries today.
The back story, delivered to the audience in the first expository episodes (four scenes), situates a French theatre company stranded in India. Their director, a certain Constantin Lear, has lost his wits because of the 13 November 2015 terrorist shooting spree in Paris. He has abandoned his actors and embraced the deluded notion that he has turned into a sacred white cow (an image that will haunt the stage throughout both acts). Cornélia, the “good daughter”/assistant director, is tasked with taking over his job and figuring out what to perform for the local Alliance Française. She must also decide whether to continue pursuing the company’s research into the traditional terukkuttu performances of the *Mahabharata*.

Anchoring and launching what happens from the big bed in which she dreams, Cornélia calls on company members and her Indian host, elementary schoolteacher Madame Murti, to help generate material for the new show. Surreal episode upon surreal episode and dream sequence upon nightmare vision juxtapose the improvised scenic suggestions for representing Islamic fundamentalism or other major world problems (water shortages, climate change) with scenes of a possible terukkuttu performance and with Cornélia’s creative dilemma: “What lives do we save? Our annual subsidy could feed an entire Indian family for 17 years.” The reality outside punctures Cornélia’s creative reverie in short sequences that give shape to her frenzied communications with French officials and the company’s Paris producer, and longer ones that portray Mme Murti’s angst-ridden supervision of her household and her own grappling with patriarchy.

A skilled clown, Hélène Cinque, the play’s Cornélia, waddles across the stage, collapses into deep sleep, and interrupts her cries for help (“This can’t be happening!! I must be dreaming!”) with sprints to the onstage bathroom where her anxiety manifests as a diarrhea attack. Grotesque but appealing in her disarray, Cornélia’s excessiveness finds a certain balance in the characterization of the earnest Mme Murti (by Nirupama Nityanandan), who castigates her rickshaw wallah for not sending his daughter to school, protects her housemaid Rani from being sold off to the highest bidder by Rani’s drunken father, and laments her lost love, a Sikh, whom her brother violently banished (as portrayed in a flashback) from their Hindu home.

Interestingly, thanks to the interspersed household scenes with Mme Murti at their center, thanks to what is specifically performed from the *Mahabharata*, and thanks to a particular emphasis on women in the satire of

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11. The *Mahabharata*, with the *Ramayana*, is one of two Sanskrit Indian epics that provide characters and story for most traditional dance (and other) theatre throughout South and Southeast Asia. Cultural staples, the meandering and ambiguous plots of these epics help to reinforce certain tenants of Hinduism, as well as highlighting Hinduism’s evolution as a philosophy of life. The *Mahabharata* tells the story of two warring families who nearly destroy the world in their quest for power. In production, the *Mahabharata*, often several days long, takes its audience on a spiritual journey in which fundamental questions about what it means to be human are pondered. Peter Brook and Jean-Claude Carrière produced an adaptation of this monumental work in 1988 that proved to be an extraordinary theatrical experience but also provoked a good deal of controversy over cultural appropriation (see Dasgupta 1987).
terrorism, *Une Chambre en Inde* might be seen as the most unabashedly feminist of any Soleil production to date. Not only is the bedroom space a distinctly feminine one, owned by one woman and occupied by another, but also three of the terukkuttu episodes concern the fate of Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandava brothers, heroes of the *Mahabharata*. Having been lost by her husbands in a dice game with their enemies, the Kauravas, Draupadi scolds her feckless husbands, refuses to bow down to the Kauravas, and calls on Krishna to protect her from humiliation. In a key scene, the singing and protesting Draupadi does not and cannot disrobe as ordered by the evil Kauravas, because her sari miraculously keeps on reproducing itself: Krishna transforms it into endless yards of red cloth.

The nexus of episodes highlighting fundamentalism, postcolonial immigration, and the radicalization of French citizens provides some of the most memorable moments of the production. Among these are also the most raucous and slapstick of the sketches proposed by the fictional company members. Desert terrorists, for example, line up in a Keystone-cop routine behind storage chests turned into bunkers. After bickering about how many virgins he can expect as a reward, the designated suicide bomber is sent off to blow up an adjacent American bunker. The martyr, however, cannot remember the number he is supposed to punch into his telephone command. He keeps confusing the number “six” with “sex,” and ends up blasting his own side. In an episode titled in the program as “Dreams of Purity and Hairiness,” and to the sweeping music from the 1962 movie *Lawrence of Arabia*, jihadists attempt to film a mock-up of the execution of an adulterous woman. The bungling executioner, twin to the idiotic suicide bomber, keeps blowing his lines, substituting the wrong adjective in his condemnation of sex before marriage: “Sex before marriage is adorable” (instead of abominable). Out of frustration with his ineptitude, a burka-clad female crewmember grabs a machine gun and mows down all the men. In another sketch aimed at the obtuseness of fundamentalist notions about gender, Saudi delegates consult Icelanders about how they might.
improve their international score on the gender equality scale. The Saudis roll their eyes, shake their heads in disbelief, and faint away when they realize the women they meet are not veiled, but instead, covered only because the temperature is 20 degrees below zero in Iceland, and that these women are, in fact, members of the esteemed human rights ministry. Worse, when the Saudis eagerly agree to meet with the Prime Minister, they learn to their horror that he is married to a man.

Cartoon-like, silly, and amateurish, these invented figures of fundamentalism transform Europeans’ daily concerns with terrorism into jokes that dissipate—at least momentarily—the fear of the terrorist other, while also condemning intolerance and violence through satire. Nevertheless, other sketches, based on the lives of fictional company members, examine how ISIL (or DAESH, as it is called in France) reaches into French homes through the internet and social media. Yacine, an acting intern with Lear’s company and a product of the French suburbs that now house primarily immigrant families, learns online that his buddy Meldi has run off to Syria and pledged, if necessary, to kill his own mother in service to the Islamist revolution. Neither playful nor regenerative, this kind of sketch points to the failure of French republican secularism, to a stalled model of assimilation, and to France’s inability to take into account a multicultural society.

Not only the worrisome present but theatre history as well enlivens Cornélia’s mindscape. This results in a metatheatrical layering of references that shake up chronological time, as the greats of theatre history live in her consciousness alongside DAESH and climate change. Shakespeare is obviously present through references to King Lear and his daughter Cordelia (Cornélia), as well as through the projection of a filmed scene in which actors perform Richard III under the bombs in Syria, and through a Shakespearean impersonator who enters the playing space to watch the terukkuttu and listen to a rendition of Feste’s “Come Away Death,” a song from Twelfth Night. At various points, Anton Chekhov, Akira Kurosawa, and the spirit of Antonin Artaud also join the party. Indeed, Lear, the director character costumed to resemble the Lear in Kurosawa’s film version of Shakespeare’s play, returns to the stage to join forces with the terukkuttu supporters who are trying to save their theatre. Without a second thought, Lear plunges his samurai sword into the real estate developer who announces that theatre is inessential: an actor jokes, “That’s what you call a Japanese coup de théâtre.” This moment is a miniature version of the entire production in which intertextual punctuations and intratheatrical pastiche recall the many and abiding artistic influences on Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil. Such references pay homage to how enduringly great theatre nourishes the artists and the public who attend to it.

And the persistent recurrence of the terukkuttu musical scenes, an art form at least 300 years old and itself symbolized by Draupadi’s infinite red sari, signals the imperishability of theatre in general—as well as the unsinkable optimism of Ariane Mnouchkine.

The final episode, a return to the farcical mode that undergirds so much of the show, stages the thickness of time and a metatheatrical (or in this case metacinematic) reference in a single remarkable image, one that

Figure 4. The Indian bedroom is visited by “The Three Sisters” of Chekhov who air out the room. From left: Dominique Jambert, Andrea Marchant, Alice Millequant. Une Chambre en Inde, directed by Ariane Mnouchkine. Théâtre du Soleil, 2016. (Photo by Michèle Laurent)
Critical Acts

highlights the urgency that energizes the production. The scene portrays actors interpreting two clumsy jihadists accompanying a comical Imam, paving the way for him to give a grand speech. But the Imam soon morphs into the Charlie Chaplin tyrant figure in *The Great Dictator*, eventually arriving at the point where Chaplin turns the film’s satire of Hitler on its head. Just as Chaplin moves out of the tyrannical mode at the end of the film to give a rousing call for thoughtfulness and resistance, the Soleil’s transformed Imam addresses the audience with Chaplin’s resonant words. As is true of many moments in the Soleil’s production, this image of the Imam-Chaplin creates a kind of Benjaminian constellation, a suddenly encountered layering of images that reflect back on each other and trace the past in the present. Confronted with this complex and layered image (Hitler, the Islamist Imam, and Chaplin the comic and the critic— all part of the same figure), the public cannot help but see the aesthetic and ethical continuity between Chaplin and the Soleil in the Imam’s condemnation of a world in which men have turned into “intolerant machines.” When jihadists cut this exhortation short by shooting the now open-minded Imam, the remaining actors on stage protest that the play cannot end that way. Amidst calls to “start again,” the Imam is resurrected and resumes his challenge “to fight for a new world and evacuate the poison that has sickened men’s souls.” On his final word—“Unite!”—all of the actors gather for a group embrace.

The rehearsal of the Imam’s killing—the silencing of his calls for peace and understanding and his theatrical rebirth— indicate both the outrage and the hopefulness that the Soleil locates in its art. The spirit of Chaplin, his carnivalesque humor and enlightened politics, thus live on. In the company of Chaplin and other noble figures from theatre history, the Soleil celebrates theatre’s capacity not only to revive the dead and link people together but also to decide which story to tell and how it will end. The production, then, encourages the public to consider that they too might have a role in choosing how today’s challenges will be met, especially if they are willing to “start again” in the face of complicated global problems. In *Une Chambre en Inde*, theatre survives the hell of today’s world; ridicule efficiently combats the darker forces threatening humankind; and endings offer the possibility of new beginnings. Reinvigorating the Soleil’s work and safeguarding Mnouchkine from becoming a “sacred cow,” laughter makes theatre relevant by providing the public the release so desperately needed in the present moment.

Figure 5. The Chaplinesque Imam (Duccio Bellugi-Vannuccini) suddenly calls for reason and tolerance. Une Chambre en Inde, directed by Ariane Mnouchkine. Théâtre du Soleil, 2016. (Photo by Michèle Laurent)

12. Chaplin filmed *The Great Dictator* in 1940, playing both the role of the dictator, a satirical take on Hitler, and the Jewish barber who is persecuted by his policies. The barber ends up impersonating the dictator and encouraging his military troops to start thinking before acting.

13. The palimpsestic nature of the Chaplin image from *The Great Dictator* mixes the horror of the dictatorship of the mind—practiced in fundamentalisms—with a loopy sensibility that suggests the possibility of a gentle opening of the heart. This last image brings to life the Gandhi quote written on the wall of the entry hall/dining area of the Théâtre du Soleil that welcomes the public into the theatre: “The world is tired of those who hate.”
Caught by Caught

Richard Schechner

The lobby of La MaMa’s Ellen Stewart Theatre was a pop-up art gallery featuring Chinese dissident artist Lin Bo’s installation, Jail Seeking Prisoners, 2016 (fig. 1). On the walls was a mosaic of video clips documenting Lin’s piece of the same name. The installation alluded to, but did not reproduce, the rancid, rat- and roach-infested cell Lin was packed into with dozens of other prisoners. Lin was imprisoned for two years, he says, because he called for an “imaginary protest” to commemorate the 4 June 1989 massacre of students occupying Beijing’s Tiananmen Square—the bloody end to China’s Democracy Movement. “Imaginary” because although Lin advocated a mass protest, he gave no location for it. Both protest and artwork were conceptual.

Lin’s protest was imaginary, but the installation was real. The video installed as Jail Seeking Prisoners is actually a documentation of The Cage (fig. 2), an artwork created in 2014 by Miao Jiaxin who emigrated from Shanghai to Brooklyn. Forty-two “guests” paid $1.00 per day to live in The Cage during its 110-day life. The clips on display at the La MaMa pop-up gallery showed 22 of these “prisoners”—presented as Lin Bo’s work. Not a word about Miao; programs for Caught, which included a “thank you” to Miao, were given to spectators as they left the performance. Instead of programs, before the performance spectators got a handout explaining the installation:

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To live in my jail cage, you don’t have to commit any crime [...]. However it is mandatory that you stay in the cage from 9:00am to 12pm (3 hours) every day. NO internet, electronic devices, books, radio, pens, instruments or craftwork. You CANNOT talk to anybody. You CANNOT do Yoga or any other exercises. You CANNOT sleep. Your activity is monitored and recorded. Any violation of above will result in the loss of deposit fee ($100 per day).

After about 15 minutes of viewing the installation, the spectators were guided into the theatre. There a woman introduced “the artist himself, Lin Bo.” I, like many in the audience, took this at face value. After all, many artists—Marina Abramović, for example—are present in their own retrospectives, occupying a conceptual space between curator and creator. Lin, speaking with a slight “Chinese accent” (as per the stage directions, which I read later1) detailed how his imaginary protest so enraged Chinese authorities that they arrested, interrogated, abused, and imprisoned him. Lin concluded his short lecture by asserting: “Even if no one ever knows you are here [in prison], the ritual must be practiced. Because somewhere, somebody must be the keeper of truth. Truth that ideas are founded on something real.” Listening to Lin’s assured, articulate, and gripping story, I was convinced that I was face-to-face with a dissident Chinese artist, the man who created Jail Seeking Prisoners, a mordant commentary on his own experience. As Lin spoke, I thought of Ai Weiwei and the severe limitations on free expression in China. At the same time, I measured Lin’s narration against my own positive experiences in China, Shanghai especially. Both accounts are true; China is a complicated place, I reasoned.

Lin finished his presentation and then, as the stage directions have it, “Suddenly, unexpectedly, a highly theatrical environment. An office at the New Yorker. LIN enters. JOYCE, a writer, and her editor BOB are already there” (fig. 3). Looking at the framed New Yorker hanging on the wall, I knew I was watching a play but I thought the scene was a reenactment of an encounter Lin Bo had at the New Yorker. I supposed the two people he was talking with were actors playing real people. Mixing a real artist with actors didn’t trouble me—an example of “theatre of the real,” the title of Carol Martin’s 2013 landmark study. I had no reason to doubt Lin Bo’s reality. I didn’t know there was a Miao Jiaxin.

Writing now, 10 months after seeing Caught in September 2016 at La Mama in New York,2 I am very aware that the Play Company production accomplished, as Martin has it, the “overlap and interplay between ‘theatre’ and ‘reality,’ the blurred boundary between the stage and the ‘real’ world” (2013:4). With regard to Caught, I am keenly aware that Martin is right-on when she asserts, “History, too, is an act of the imagination. [...] The process involves not only imagination but also traces of evidence that both provide an account and have to be accounted for” (6). Indeed, watching the

1. All quotations from the performance are from the unpublished manuscript provided to me by the Play Company.
2. Caught premiered in 2014 in Philadelphia at the InterAct Theatre Company. The production was directed by Rick Shiomi. Other productions prior to the one at La MaMa were in Chicago, London, and Seattle. The Caught I saw was directed by Lee Sunday Evans, with actors Louis Ozawa Changchien, Leslie Fray, Murphy Guyer, and Jennifer Lim.
New Yorker scene of Caught — and reflecting now on my watching — I am intensely aware of how much truth has “to be accounted for”: Lin Bo’s imaginary mass protest; his appropriation of Miao Jiaxin’s piece; his harrowing and moving tale of imprisonment. While watching Caught, I thought Lin’s story fact. Now I know it is imaginary, but does it matter? To what degree is the imaginary as good as true? Caught is somewhere out there with faux documentaries, truthiness, fiction, and representation.

In the New Yorker office scene the given circumstances of the play unravel. Under what increasingly becomes more cross-examination than friendly chat, Lin Bo is accused of exaggerating, distorting, lying, and plagiarizing. Bob and Joyce expose his prison story as being lifted from activist Jiang Qisheng’s 2012 My Life in Prison: Memoirs of a Chinese Political Dissident. Jiang was imprisoned from 1999 to 2003 for speaking out about the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. In Caught, Lin defends his plagiarism by arguing for poetic liberty:

All I can say is that... There is no way to accurately describe what it is like to be imprisoned. There is no way to truly capture the confusion or the way your mind fluctuates. The truth does not lie in the specific facts but in the sensations, the helplessness and constriction, the walls closing in and that is your entire world. And there is simply no way you will understand what it feels like to know this one life you have been given is disappearing before your eyes on some stranger’s whim and you can never get this time back. So did I eat cabbage or potatoes? What was this tasteless, watery mush made from? What does it matter? What does it matter?? Do you see?

Lin’s defense is compelling. The New Yorker editor, Bob, responds to Lin: “So it could be one of those things where someone else’s details seeped into your mind and they felt truthful to you so you retold them as your own.” Literal truth and poetic truth, right? But isn’t the public entitled to know which kind of truth is being presented? In Caught, literal and poetic truths are conflated. Not that this ambiguity is something new. Luigi Pirandello presented his “six characters” as real people; Spalding Gray enriched his autobiographical performances with flights of fantasy.

Bit by bit, Lin Bo’s story completely collapses, his Chinese accent evaporates. Joyce, the author of the New Yorker profile — which of course never was — shouts: “You lied... (Shrieking) YOU LIED!!... What else did you lie about? Was there even an imaginary protest?! Are you even a fucking artist?! Do you even know Yu Rong, the legendary artist Yu Rong?! Who the fuck are you!!?” It was months before it dawned on me that “Yu Rong” = “You Wrong” — a pun pointedly telling me that Caught caught me. An internet search shows no such “legendary artist.” As for Lin Bo, in Caught he tells us:

I’m really straight up American. I grew up near Venice Beach. I’m a performance artist. I just wanted to be part of the cultural elite so badly. So I figured the only way I could sneak my way into the club was to use my Chinese-ness to my advantage. So I came up with this story. [...] I’m Fred Goldstein. I was adopted.
Bob asks Fred if he wants to be white. “Yes. Yes I do.” Bob consoles Fred, “I am so glad you came clean [...]. We can finally move on.” They all weep, the music swells, blackout, lights up, curtain call.

Everyone in La MaMa applauds. The actors take their bows and exit. Everyone but the woman who introduced us to Lin Bo at the start of Caught, she who plays Joyce in the New Yorker scene. This woman faces the audience and says:

My name is Leslie Fray. I am an actress, as you saw, and I am also a visual arts curator. So it was back in, I think it was 2014? is that right? when Xiong Gallery and Play Company started collaborating on Chinese artist Wang Min’s newest work, which became the extraordinary hybrid theatre art installation piece you just experienced. I was so fortunate to have been brought into the process early, kind of as a...bridge...between the art and theatre components. I ended up working very closely with Wang Min, and it’s been such an amazing experience. We are so lucky to host her. She’s here with us tonight, all the way from China.

Wang Min enters the stage from the house to join Leslie Fray in a talkback (fig. 4). At this point, I know what many in the audience do not: Wang Min is Jennifer Lim, an actress I directed in Yokasta Redux (2005, La MaMa) and Hamlet (2007, in Mandarin, Shanghai Theatre Academy). Wang Min discusses her fabrication of Lin Bo in terms of Mike Daisey’s trenchant description of Foxconn/Apple’s assembly line in Shenzhen, China: The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs. Daisey’s monologue—which I saw at the Public Theatre in 2011—combines investigative reporting with fiction. On Ira Glass’s NPR program This American Life, Daisey admitted to inventing some parts of this story. Is there anything wrong with telling small lies to get at big truths? Isn’t this a definition of art?

The slippery slope here concerns the quality of public discourse in the epoch of multiple, mutually interacting media. Wang Min delves into the rules that govern journalism and other truth-dependent media, noting how different they are from the rules that govern art where imaginative elaboration and fiction are prized. She notes that increasingly these two are mixed, with troubling results.

So Mike Daisey is a theatre artist; and as per his perceived rules of his medium, he allows himself to stretch truth in order to craft a compelling narrative. But when placed in the context of NPR and This American Life, he runs into problems. Different medium, different rules. [...] What interests me is this rift that occurs when different sets of rules bump against each other. We open a great chasm of unknowing.

Which is precisely the action of Caught, falling again and again into a chasm of unknowing, a chasm created both by playwright Christopher Chen and the Play Company’s brilliant production. Caught swallows its own narrative tale as it steps onto an M.C. Escher staircase. Inside Chen’s Caught is Lin Bo’s installation-performance art, which is inside Wang Min’s play, which is inside Chen’s Caught. But Lin Bo’s jail is Miao Jiaxin’s cage. Neither Lin nor Wang exist outside of Caught, even if they talk about and show “real events”: Tiananmen Square, Chinese prisons, Shenzhen sweatshops, a Brooklyn art-jail cell, Daisey’s work and his appearances on NPR’s This American Life. In all this, Chen and the Play Company do their best to make the spectators believe in the literal truth of what they are seeing moment by moment. No programs, an art installation, an actor playing a visual artist and then the playwright who created him, followed by a discussion of a well-known theatre controversy about truth and fiction.

The scene between Leslie Fray the Curator and Wang Min climaxes when Wang hammers the Curator about the inability to distinguish truth from lies, facts from fictions, until the Curator says she feels sick and vomits into a bag. Wang then delivers a theatre of the absurd paradox-panegyric in defense of the lie:

A lie is not a bad thing. It is a natural occurrence and is totally understandable. Why do we lie? Because a lie is a new home. A place of return after long and lonely journeys in the dark. Now
comes the point in the work where we recognize the interview has changed into something else. Something new. We’re unmoored now. Drift at sea. We are witnessing the birth of a new lie as we speak. We see how in our search for truth we move into something artificial once again. [...] A lie is [...] thinking outside the box but then being inside the outside of the box so going further going outside the inside of the outside of the box by going back inside the box to be outside the outside of the box then leaving the box to find another box whose outside has an outer outside outside outside the outside.

Lost? So is the Curator. “Where are you taking me?” she asks. Neo-Buddhist cliché, that’s where: “It’s not a matter of end goals [...]. It’s only a matter of journey.” Then another swelling of music and a blackout.

Indeed, with its swelling music and blackouts, Caught is a conceptual art melodrama collapsing and confounding several genres: pop-up art gallery, Lin’s Ted Talk-like discussion of his installation, Oprah-style sharp-questioning of a celebrity, and soap opera. Caught twists roles, appearances, and the unreliability of what-you-see-is-what-you-get as people morph from one identity to another. Caught enacts an idea familiar to performance studies scholars: there is no real beyond representation and context; truth is an unstable construct. No real outside Einstein’s relativity, Heisenberg’s indeterminacy, and Austin’s performativity. And yet...knowing we are in a theatre, we ought to expect what Austin called an “etiolation” of truth, a weak structure given to false leads and distortions; funhouse mirrors and mis-cues; reveals that betray as they exult, Gotcha! Theatre in this case stands in for social and political life more generally. Serious, of course; but very funny too—a parody, and truthful as well as duplictitous.

After the scene between Leslie Fray/ Curator and Wang Min, the lights come up on set pieces being arranged with “no pretensions of trying to create any kind of singular environment. [...] The absurdist mashup should free the audience from trying to figure out the world, once and for all.” Lin Bo and Wang Min don their street clothes, power up their cell phones, snack, lounge, and talk (fig. 5). Once
again, the play is over. The actors wonder how the performance went, they say the audience was receptive. Backstage stuff. But this time, we know we are not backstage; we know these people are actors not performance artists or Chinese dissidents or Fred from Venice, CA, or playwrights. During this penultimate scene, Caught becomes just another play.

But not for long. As the conversation between Wang Min and Lin Bo continues they begin to discuss Yu Rong. Because I am not familiar with the roster of Chinese dissident artists, I accept Yu as real, but I am “rong.” Yu Rong—like Lin Bo and Wang Min—is a fiction. It turns out that Yu was the lover of both Lin and Wang at the same time. Their response to this peripeteia, one among the many driving Caught, is uncontrollable laughter.

“Uncontrollable”? No, because it is actors who are laughing—actors who have planned and rehearsed—actors who control characters who cannot control their laughing. But what are they laughing at? No longer a situation in the play, but the situation of the play: the absurdity of what Christopher Chen has crafted, a dizzying mix of actual people and inventions, truth and lies, facts and fictions. Some of the facts are in fact about how artists—Mike Daisey, for example—conflate fact and fiction.

Lin and Min wonder about Yu: “So he’s just a big liar? So we never really knew him?? The person we devoted our entire lives to?” Silence. The stage directions instruct what happens next:

LIN rises from his seat. He shakes his head in incredulous disbelief. He pauses. He crouches. He begins breathing deeply, then faster, as if he may hyperventilate. He rises. He paces back and forth like a caged animal, as if wanting to escape the stage. He may make violent movements with arms. He may swear or mutter violently under his breath. He stops when he’s let off enough steam. A beat. He crouches again, back turned away from WANG MIN, in a defensive position, the internal struggle not yet over. He puts his hands to his head, as if trying to hide his face.

All this venting and posturing to act out the paradox of the unreality of stage truth. In Caught, stage truth is not a “willing suspension of disbelief” but a demand for an impossible truth. Returning to stage fiction, Lin and Wang remember Yu Rong’s final message from prison. Lin finds it stored on his iPhone. Wang asks Lin to read Yu’s message. After resisting briefly, Lin reads:

I was born in a village of no lies. In this village, nothing was anything but the thing that it was. [...] I have searched for a return to my home village. I have looked for truth but have only seen lies. Within others, within myself. So I began negating all I saw. I negated so much I’ve negated my own negations. [...] To what end? I negated this question too.

Negating negations is the underlying action of Caught. As I watched and listened, I felt good that the play knowingly or not embodied my theory of “not...not not.”

Never revealing that Yu Rong doesn’t exist, the scene ends. The spectators—immersed in fake news, truthiness, performance art, and performativities—inhabit Caught’s village of lies. Doubting the reliability of each and every discourse is not new. Many philosophers, ancient and modern, European and Asian, have gone down this rabbit hole. In 1954, Gregory Bateson explored what happens to truth when one asserts, “All statements within this frame are untrue.” This is precisely what Chen does in Caught. What’s outside the frame is the paradoxical, recursive, and dizzying truth that all statements inside the frame are false, even the statement that all statements are false.

Thus, each scene undercuts the scene before it. The New Yorker exposé undercuts the installation and Lin’s talk about it. Wang Min undercuts the exposé by revealing it is part of her play. The backstage scene between Wang Min

and Lin Bo undercuts Wang’s play by letting the audience know there is no Wang Min, that her “play” is a play-within-a-play. Then the actors playing Wang and Lin argue about which of them was the lover of Yu Rong, who does not exist, concluding they both were his lover at the same time. Finally, many in the audience realize that Wang and Lin, and everyone else onstage, are “just actors” in Caught, but no one can say for sure just what Caught is—installation, drama, disquisition? If at any point in the performance you believe what’s going on—or, to put it classically, you suspend your disbelief, you are “rong.” But to not believe is to stop playing along with the performers. Why should this surprise me? Isn’t agreeing to participate in a fiction the core of theatre? Isn’t that just as true in a play about the unreliability of truth and the conflation of truth and fiction as it is in a play that is forthrightly invention?

In Caught’s final scene, Wang Min and Lin Bo directly address the audience. Even in this ultimate scene, they aver Yu Rong’s existence, that he is not a fiction. Lin Bo tells us:

Before he died, he started a new art project that consisted of smuggling words, phrases, and sentences out of prison. They were instructions for works of art that could either be or not be completed.

Wang Min immediately picks up Lin’s cue:

We decided to realize as many of his instructions as possible. [...] The instructions for this piece were as follows: “Cast doubt upon me. Negate me.” That was his prompt.

As I write these words I wonder if I’ve been tricked into thinking Yu Rong is unreal. That’s how successfully Caught wrought its own...unlie.

References

Not Just Adult Entertainment
Milo Rau and CAMPO’s Collaborative Five Easy Pieces
Debra Levine

At the opening of “an essay on submission,” scene 3 of Five Easy Pieces (2016), a disembodied voice describes the dungeon that convicted Belgian pedophile serial killer Marc Dutroux built to imprison and torture his victims. In dim light, several children wheel out a mattress on a platform. They pick up video equipment and surround the platform. Eight-year-old Rachel Dedain, the youngest and smallest of the child actors, a beautiful girl with porcelain skin, hops onto the mattress. She is illuminated like a Rembrandt painting. Facing her, kneeling, is Peter Seynaeve, the only adult actor onstage. The ensuing scene is enacted in

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ever, the angle of the livestream video image makes her appear completely naked, her bare legs bent to cover her torso. For the remainder of the scene, Rachel holds that pose. Another actor appears with a film clapper and announces “Five Easy Pieces, scene 3.” This is Rachel’s cue to recite the letters Sabine Dardenne wrote to her parents during the 80 days Dutroux kept her hostage, starved her, sexually assaulted and tortured her before her rescue by the police. Dutroux read but never mailed those letters. Our eyes shift from screen to stage and back again; director Milo Rau does not give the audience any place onstage to look away.

CAMPO, a Belgium-based arts presenter, collaborated with Rau to select seven children, ages 8 to 17, to participate in a theatrical work about the “Dutroux Affair,” a story that “horrified” all of Belgium.2 The “Five Easy Pieces” alluded to by the title references the musical exercises Stravinsky composed in 1917 to teach his children to play piano as well as Marina Abramovic’s 2005 reenactment of seven canonical works of performance art (CAMPO 2016). Rau makes each scene into a pedagogical exercise, a Foucauldian dispositif that teaches the amateur cast of child actors a lesson about performance. In an interview with Bella Todd, Rau lists each successive scene’s learning objective: 1. “how to play sick”; 2. “how to play a character on stage”; 3. “on submission, about the relationship between the actor and director” (what Seynaeve did with Rachel); 4. about “emotion: the children have to play parents who lost their children, they have to cry onstage”; and 5. about “rebellion: how to revolt against every-

1. All quotations from the performance are from the July 2016 video performance of Five Easy Pieces, supplied to me by Milo Rau/International Institute of Political Murder & CAMPO Arts Center (Rau 2016).

2. Marc Dutroux was convicted of abducting, raping, and torturing six girls between 1995 and 1996. Two of the six, An Marchal, 17, and Eefje Lambrechts, 19, died after being buried alive. Melissa Russo and Julie Lejune, both 8, died after starving to death in Dutroux’s dungeon prison. Sabine Dardenne, 12, and Laetitia Delhez, 14, were rescued. Dutroux had kept Dardenne caged and chained by the neck for 79 days (Evans-Pritchard 2004). Rau was able to obtain access to the letters Dardenne wrote to her parents while in captivity, recited by Rachel Dedain in scene 3, because they were read aloud into evidence during Dutroux’s 2004 trial. In 2004, Dardenne wrote her own account of the experience, I Choose to Live, with Marie-Thérèse Cuny.
thing they have just been asked to do” (Todd 2017).

The Dutch-speaking “real” children serve both as theatrical material and the basis for the work’s politics. Their presence evokes vulnerability, which gives rise to a swell of protective feeling in the viewer. Rau’s dramaturgy demonstrates how easily that affective response can be exploited for political gain and to override consideration of the historical conditions that produced the constellation of political effects that have come to be known as the “Dutroux affair.”

For Rau, the Dutroux affair has become an allegory of postcolonial Belgian politics. In *Five Easy Pieces*, he examines the impact of Belgium’s colonial domination of the Congo and its aftermath, a historical revision that insists on a much longer durée to the framing of the Dutroux narrative. Dutroux grew up in the Congo, once a Belgian colony; he committed his crimes near the French-speaking, economically depressed Belgian coal-mining city of Charleroi. In an interview with production dramaturg Stefan Bläske, Rau comments that the Dutroux “trial almost led to the implosion of Belgium and a rebellion of society against its own corrupt elites” (in Bläske 2016:18). While the Dutroux affair had become a nexus for public outrage about the leniency of sex offender laws, the ineptitude of the police, and the glacial progress of Dutroux’s prosecution in the Federal court system, it *did not* precipitate a public reconsideration of how Belgium’s colonial past impacted the conditions that produced Dutroux. That elision, Rau suggests, was in part due to narrative construction. The media portrayed Dutroux as a “monster,” and an “enigma.” In newspaper and television accounts he was unlike the everyday Belgian citizen; he was depicted as an exceptional subject who preyed upon innocent Belgians.

And in this public narrative, the abstract figure of the innocent child functioned in the very manner that queer theorist Lee Edelman describes in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Edelman observes that the state is more interested in what the signifier of the child can politically accomplish than it is in any “real” child. Edelman writes that the deployment of the child as an abstract figuration “invariabl(y) shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought” (2004:2). When the Dutroux affair reached the level of a national crisis, most Belgians viewed their politicians as ineffectual and corrupt. By responding to the public’s demand to enact new laws to shore up its control, with the justification of protecting innocent children and children’s innocence, the Belgian Federal government extended the logic of colonialism, successfully reaffirming the same terms of patriarchal political power.

In order to destabilize the myth of the innocent child, Rau transforms the figuraiive abstraction, noted by Edelman, into the real. Before the five scenes begin, each of the child actors engages with Seynaeve in an audition-like format and is afforded a solo

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3. The “rebellion” Rau references is the 1996 “White March,” where over 275,000 people demonstrated in Brussels to protest the judicial system’s mishandling of the Dutroux investigation and trial and demand increased government and judicial oversight of the nation’s children (Reuters 1996).
moment in the spotlight that renders them singular, recounting a quirky moment from her or his life story with enough detail to disarm the audience and gain their affection. Seynaeve, as Rau’s proxy, also poses questions to each about the nature of theatre, mimicry, violence, and mortality. The answers show each child’s capacity for philosophical and emotional reflection, and how well they absorb, respond to, or deflect the question. Later we understand how the dispositifs Rau has fashioned for each scene inhibit or expand any individual child’s capacity for reflexivity that they have demonstrated in the beginning. Clearly the system is not perfect; we also see, so well illustrated in Rachel’s “scene,” that reflexivity about the coercive quality of performance cannot always overcome the pleasures and rewards of theatrical compliance.

This is also an adult problem, but certainly even more troublesome when posed with and about children. But because *Five Easy Pieces* is an edited repetition of the behaviors that occurred during rehearsals (“do it like in rehearsals”), Rau shows spectators how learning to manipulate theatrical and narrative conventions can become a means to resist full cooperation, especially as the child actors become more compliant with performance’s rules of engagement. We see children learning about sexual violence, grief, and mortality while being taught to question the intent of the information’s communicative structure. By showing the audience the child actors’ capacity to assimilate both forms of knowledge through experiences of making, showing, and telling, Rau destabilizes arguments for increasing patriarchal protectionism based on the claims that all exposure to knowledge of human violence automatically traumatizes.

Portions of the text of *Five Easy Pieces* are taken from the child performers’ own words, elicited by Rau during rehearsals. Those phrases also make the past and present converge, as they uncannily sound like fragments of overheard, off-hand parental observations. The child actors recount dreams, sing songs, and tell stories, most of which were learned through mediated platforms: film, television, and YouTube. We understand how the media they consume and indiscriminately remix onstage performatively constructs their notion of theatre’s ontology. Occasionally a child shares a complicated notion whose source is unrecognizable or a philosophical observation that goes well beyond her/his years. We experience that expression as “adult.” Other times, when a child actor’s onstage reasoning is odd, contradictory, and associative, and her performance choices seem random, the resultant theatrical dramaturgy performatively reaffirms the qualities we believe to be “childlike.” The adult spectators in the audience admit a small ratio of “adult” logic, which Rau calibrates, while still recognizing the actors onstage as children. But we reaffirm the actors’ authenticity as children not only by their appearance, but also because we see a higher ratio of childlike behaviors: unruliness, singularity, obedience, and unpredictability.

Combined with documentary material from the Dutroux case, including trial evidence and television interviews, incorporating many principles of what Carol Martin terms “theatre of the real” (Martin 2013) Rau’s use of child actors as both metaphors and metonyms for Belgium’s political future transforms theatre of the real into an uncanny *theatre of the even realer*. The children onstage not only represent “the future,” they are the subjects who will bear the real life consequences of more stringent protections enacted because of the Dutroux affair. Rau doesn’t shy away from asking those performers to reenact portions of very ugly evidence, and we feel two things: asking them to do so is a risk; and that the idea of risk has been produced and naturalized by the protectionist logic. Rau banks on the fear he knows we as adults bring to the theatre: that the children might become “broken,” in some manner traumatized, by the show’s content. Instead however, we see that participation appears to build resilience and teaches how cultural mechanisms and narrative frameworks are constructed for specific political effects. Those who bear the consequences of those political effects learn how to call those same mechanisms and frameworks into question.

In *Five Easy Pieces*, understanding the “real” Marc Dutroux is never a goal — we only have access to him through memories of stories, documents, and scenes that show us the effects of his acts. The child actors, most of
whom were infants when Dutroux was on trial, when shown his uncaptioned photo, do recognize him, however only as a post-memory — the idea, following Marianne Hirsch (1997), that memory is not created from direct experience, but rather inherited from the previous generation’s retelling of their traumatic experiences. This moment of recognition is also the first time all the children onstage are allowed to erupt collectively and playfully as they retell the learned narrative about brutal violence — with no impact of the violent narrative evident in their behavior. The child actors recount what they heard about Dutroux from various second- and third-hand sources: From 1995 to 1996, after having been convicted and released for the abduction and rape of five girls in the 1980s, Dutroux abducted six girls and murdered four of them. Two victims were rescued. Their fragmented and overlapping phrases reference a conversation Dutroux had with his attorney, explaining that he intended to “carry out mass kidnappings of children and then create, in a mine shaft, a sort of underground city where good, harmony and security would prevail” (in AFP 2016).

As the children’s cacophonous rendition of the Dutroux story reaches a peak, Seynaeve, now acting as the onstage director and “adult,” sternly restores order. The children fall silent. To restore their spirit, he then offers them chances to perform, asking who among them would like to play Dutroux. This pattern, a disciplinary correction followed by an invitation to perform, is an authoritarian technique of governmentality that Rau implies Dutroux also used to his advantage, and it paces the entire production. After the abrupt halt to the heated shouting, three of the children — Polly, Maurice, and Pepijn — raise their hands, volunteering to play Dutroux. Two other children want different roles: Winne asks to be a king, and Willem, who told earlier of his desire to be a policeman, gesticulates wildly and asks to play one. Maurice, whose face is smeared with makeup from the outset, asks to play “old and ill.”

Later we realize that the earlier information the children confessed to Seynaeve is incorporated in the five ensuing scenes. When Seynaeve tells Rachel it is her scene, the genius of his coercion is that it appears more as a gift than a punishment. Rau demonstrates just how easy it is to exert control by rewarding individual desires. He shows how theatrical direction operates within that logic too. Theatre history is rife with stories of male directors elicit- ing compelling performances by manipulating actors in much the same way.

When the child performer Maurice is singled out before the beginning of scene 1 (where the dispositif is “how to play sick”) to tell about himself, he recounts how he was born with pneumonia and was “coughing in his mother’s belly.” He demonstrates to Seynaeve his “talent,” which is his ability to cough on cue, imitating his birth trauma. Moments later, as scene 1 begins, Seynaeve has Maurice play Marc Dutroux’s father, Victor, first as a young married Belgian living in the Congo and later as an 81-year-old man with emphysema living alone in Belgium (coincidentally, around the corner from CAMPO). We see Maurice play

Figure 3. Using chiaroscuro lighting reminiscent of a Rembrandt self-portrait, this press still references the optical theatrical effects artists have developed over centuries to construct indelible images of childhood and innocence. From left clockwise: Willem Loobuyck, Pepijn Loobuyck, Elle Liza Tayou, Maurice Leerman, Polly Persyn, Winne Vanacker, and Rachel Dedain in Five Easy Pieces. Concept, text, and direction by Milo Rau. Kunstenfestivaldesarts, May 2016. (Photo by Phile Deprez)
Marc Dutroux’s father as a young man watching the televised transfer of power from the young Belgian King Baudouin to Congo’s Patrice Lumumba, the first elected leader of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The child cast acts out the transfer onstage while a prerecorded adult cast acts out the same scene on the large screen behind them.

Elle Liza Tayou, playing Lumumba, is the only clearly identified person of color among the children, her father from Cameroon, her mother from Belgium. When Seynaeve singles her out for a conversation at the beginning of the play, he asks her, “Do you consider yourself more as an African or a European?” We then see her transition into playing Lumumba in the transfer of power ceremony and again later being assassinated by the Congolese accomplices of the American and Belgian governments and a Belgian execution squad.

As a mixed-race Belgian citizen, Elle Liza’s participation in the performance is even more over-determined than the other children’s, or Seynaeve’s, her white, blond, adult questioner. Elle Liza’s material presence, and the roles in which she is cast, both signify “race” and postcolonial subjectivity. At 17, on the cusp of adulthood, she is also the eldest of the child actors. Her androgynous onstage presence becomes a dramaturgical asset because when she dons the jacket preset on the chair she is invited to occupy during the prologue, her bearing resembles Lumumba’s as he participates in the historic ceremony. And her shared intimacies that Rau includes in the prologue tell of the type of misrecognition that are particular to race and gender. The ambiguity that is so useful onstage becomes far more of a political complication in real life. Pausing before replying with precision to Seynaeve’s question about her own concept of racialization, she explains, “In Africa I’m white, and in Belgium I’m black.” And Elle Liza’s exchange with Seynaeve is painfully unlike the questions he poses to the other children. His brief interrogation about racial identity tells more about his inability to comprehend how Africa and Europe have become bound together by European fantasies of dominance; how the state justifies its oppression by imagining an entire colony as a child in need of schooling, civilizing, and protection.

To highlight how new iterations of control and exploitation emerge from the legacy of colonialism, Rau fashions a transmedial theatrics that resists mimesis and singularity of focus because of its aesthetic potential to extend the terms of trauma. Onstage, he entangles live performance, cinematographic projections, and live video feed. When placed in different proximal relationships, the multiple media sometimes amplify and at other times undo one another. The five scenes, all enacted live onstage, are sometimes viewed on the back screen, live streamed. Rau also incorporates a second cast of adults who are only glimpsed as prerecorded cinema projections. The adult performers become the children’s doppelgangers; they function as literal as well as psychoanalytic screen memories. They share a remarkable resemblance to the child actors and to the historical figures both casts portray. The adult cast only appears as cinematographic images that look like old newsreels, and sometimes the filmed projections of the adults fade out as the live-stream video of the children, enacting scenes from the Dutroux affair and from Belgium’s 1960 handover of power to Patrice Lumumba, takes focus.

This dizzying transmedial mise-en-scène also unnervingly dissolves any possibility of locating a before or after of innocence. The

4. Robin Bernstein’s work on the phenomenon of “racial innocence,” is brought to bear here. She contends that 19th-century sentimental culture “had woven childhood and innocence together wholly. Childhood was then understood not as innocent but as innocence itself, not as a symbol of innocence but its embodiment. [...] This innocence was raced white” (Bernstein 2011:4). In a recent op-ed in the New York Times, Bernstein writes about the expansion of childhood innocence to children of color in the US: “The problem, however, is that every time we insist that the gates of innocence open to children of color, we limit ourselves by language, a ‚frame,’ as the linguist George Lakoff would say, that is embedded in racism. When we argue that black and brown children are as innocent as white children, and we must, we assume that childhood innocence is purely positive. But the idea of childhood innocence itself is not innocent: It’s part of a 200-year-old history of white supremacy” (Bernstein 2017).
combination of live and mediated performance confuses temporal markers of both childhood and maturity. Rau’s virtuosic metatheatrics evoke a “critical censuring of illusionism, identification, empathy, and other sensuous pleasures” (Chow 2012:24). In all this, however, the children keep the emotion present. That contradiction is effective because of the deep entanglement of alienated perspectival vision and amplified affect. Following the reasoning of Rey Chow, this strategy opens “an epistemic space from within an aesthetic spectacle [...] in which reflexivity can be staged—and non-correspondence—between the presence of the work as such and the way ‘it’ may be activated in reception” (23).

Rau shows two nonconcurrent histories enacted simultaneously—that of the child actors’ transformation from amateur to professional via the administrative and pedagogical tools of performance; and that of the Dutroux affair’s historical subjects. *Five Easy Pieces* implicates the role of theatre and performance in the present and past ambitions of the state. The simultaneous collapse and rearrangement of narratives also reveals how historical frameworks and contemporary repeated media accounts are culturally constructed to support Belgium’s conjoining of white heteronormativity to the reproduction of its political future.

But the stakes of the production’s emotional impact, although amplified and made reflexive by the transmedial, really rest on the Mobius-like tension between the onstage live actors’ capacity to understand the implications of what they enact and the preexistent doubt the audience brings to the theatre. At the conclusion of “Scene V What are clouds?” Polly, a serious and small girl with straight brown hair who in scene four embodied Julie Lejeune’s mother taping a painfully emotive televised plea for her daughter’s safe return, recounts a story about watching a film about puppets. Polly speaks the monologue simply. She has learned well how to capitalize on the concept of child innocence. The story is dramaturgically structured as an allegorical children’s tale. But because allegory, oral storytelling, and puppet theatre are naturalized as properties of childhood, the audience hardly recognizes them as also complexly transmedial.

In the story, the older male puppet mentors the younger female puppet, teaching her all the rules of the theatre, especially how to act, how to signify onstage. The puppets are sentient, but sheltered within the confines of the theatre. But the puppet theatre goes bankrupt, its puppets broken and discarded in the dump after the building is razed. Still, they retain their sentience, and for the first time, they see the sky and the clouds, which until that moment, have only been known in the puppet’s minds as representations because they have been sheltered from a direct experience of the outside.

Polly’s story, a quiet retelling of a cinematic encounter she had “as a child,” shocks on many levels. In part, the audience is startled because of her perceptive brilliance and how she speaks of her own childhood as a past phase of her life. She seems to have also mastered acting; there is a marked difference between her performance as Lejeune’s mother and later as...
herself. She projects a luminous stillness when
she recounts the puppet allegory. The insight
she offers also is not resonant with the perverse
narrative that gives the Dutroux story so much
media play. Instead, through her puppet story,
she tells what a child would find most bru-
tal about imprisonment in Dutroux’s dungeon:
the deprivation of clouds and sky. Polly’s reflec-
tion on the logic of “capture” echoes Chow’s
understanding of the political implications of
the aesthetic term through Walter Benjamin.
“Capture” has become the “capacity for further
partitioning,” which we see happening metahe-
atrically throughout the performance. Capture
effectively diminishes the subject’s possibility of
seeing and thinking beyond the given horizon
of her/his current imagination and it also “sets
reality into motion” (Chow 2012:4).

Chow warns that hypermediatized “screen-
ing and framing possibilities” can cross over
into porn, while the point of political reflexiv-
ity is to make the drama vulgar (25). And so, as
I wrote at the outset, Rau doesn’t allow us to
look anywhere that isn’t charged with the polit-
ical stakes of how narratives are staged and
framed within particular sociopolitical circum-
stances. When we look at Rachel’s naked body
onscreen and onstage as she recites Dardenne’s
plaintive words to Seynaeve, we have to reflex-
ively consider the scenes from the recent and
historical past at which we were not present—
scenes that looked much like this one of
Dardenne with Dutroux, Rau in rehearsal with
Rachel, all eliciting incredibly uncomfortable
disruptive feelings. For me, the vulgarity upon
which Chow insists in order to politicize reflex-
vity is most present in the moment when I
want to look away both from the film and from
the live Rachel, but Rau gives me nowhere else
to rest my eyes. I cannot dismiss now what I
now know occurred in the past. Still, the scene
passes; I watch Rachel recover. I track Polly’s
transition from embodying Julie Lejune’s shat-
tered mother to playing herself in her profound
and poetic monologue, which she delivers with
extreme composure.
Five Easy Pieces produces a haunting and inescapable ambivalence. I saw the production twice; in Belgium in the fall of 2016 and four months later, in Amsterdam. I first saw it in Aalst, a small Flemish-speaking Belgian province, at CC de Werf, and in order to look away momentarily from the stage during Rachel’s monologue, I had to look at one of the 200 teenagers all around me. There were only a handful of adults present—the local high schools had purchased blocks of group tickets. Throughout the 90-minute performance, I could hardly hear the teenagers breathing, save for bursts of joyous laughter when Elle Liza sang a few bars of John Lennon’s “Imagine” or when Winne Vanacker danced tremulously across the stage to the melancholic strains of Erik Satie’s Gymnopédie No. 1 played on a keyboard by Pepijn Loobuyck.

The teenage audience was captivated by Five Easy Pieces precisely because Rau conceived it for them as an inoculation against domination and oppression. But in his use of the “real” and the “realer,” he does not underestimate the risk of misunderstandings. The show is always clear about the negative effects of adults projecting and pursuing their own desires on behalf of children. Seeing the teenagers on either side of me was humbling. There was no question of their ability to collectively entertain the consequences of choosing formal storytelling devices to tell difficult and extreme stories of human action. I believe that is where hope resides. Rau’s collaboration with CAMPO affirms the creativity and resilience of real children who can entertain, in all senses of the word, the entanglements of the real and the realer. When given full information, some creative control, and knowledge of how the formal parameters of narrative frameworks convey very different stories, children are game to take up the challenge of doing it differently than in rehearsal—of engaging the past and then reconfiguring the present’s horizon of possibility.

References


To view supplemental materials related to this article, please visit http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/suppl/10.1162/DRAM_a_00699
Skam, a Norwegian television series directed by Julie Andem, depicts the fictional lives of students at the real coeducational Hartvig Nissen School in the upscale district of Frogner in Oslo, Norway. Filmed on location at the school, Skam premiered in 2015 and the final episode aired on 24 June 2017. The show’s innovative use of social media, as well as the way in which the show is broadcast, blurs the boundaries between the real and the fictional. Produced by NRK P3, the youth-focused radio station of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, Skam is a web-based series that follows a new character each season and explores topics such as relationships, gender and sexual identities, religion, and loneliness. The release of the episodes to coincide with the time in which they are set in the script places the events within the frame of the audience’s experiential reality. In addition, the use of online media such as messaging applications and social media accounts, both within the episodes and on the show’s website, purposefully plays with the distinction between the world of the show and reality. Thus, Skam questions our assumptions about the realness of the media we consume, and the connection between what we see onscreen and the reality that we inhabit.

The innovative way in which Skam is broadcast disrupts any clear separation between the world of the series and reality. Rather than broadcasting once a week as a self-contained episode, short clips are posted over the course of a week to the show’s website, skam.p3.no, then compiled and aired on television as one episode. The episodes are only accessible online in this format in Scandinavia, however the show has developed a global following through reposted videos with translations by fans. The title of each episode is displayed and when a viewer chooses to watch the episode the frame is immediately overlaid with a date and a time stamp for the moment the clip was posted. At the end of the week, the clips are compiled into one episode, running 20 to 50 minutes long. Situating the events of the show at a certain time and date directly correlating to when they are released on the online website makes it appear as if the events depicted in the television series are happening in real time. This method of broadcasting resembles the Apple Family Cycle, written by Richard Nelson. Each of the four Apple Family plays premiered at the Public Theater in New York at the same time as they are set: on the eve of the 2010 midterm elections, the 10th anniversary of 9/11, the 2012 presidential election, and the 50th anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The plays investigate these significant events from the perspective of three adult sisters in upstate New York. What Nelson’s plays do in theatre Skam does on TV. Skam unpretentiously forces an examination of the trials and tribulations of young people set in a way that foregrounds the reality of the events depicted. Indeed, viewers are encouraged to follow along with the series as if it were happening in the same world as their own personal stories. The broadcasting of Skam in what seems to be real time is similar to performances that Richard Schechner, following Victor Turner, calls “make belief,” which Schechner sees as occurring when “performances intentionally blur or sabotage that boundary” between the world of performance and everyday reality (2013:43). This is in contrast to “make believe” performances, where the boundary is clearly mapped. Skam’s intentional blurring of the boundaries between everyday reality and the world of the performance reinforces our growing awareness that

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these boundaries have lost their meaning in much of the media we consume daily.

While *Skam’s* method of delivering content to viewers is new, its use of social media and messaging applications within the show points to the inseparability of the online and offline worlds in today’s youth culture. On the website where the show’s clips are posted, there are also screenshots from messaging apps. These messages are connected to the world of the television series by the continuous presence of smartphones and social media. When the characters are texting or messaging each other, their texts appear onscreen, contained within the chat bubbles that are used by the messaging apps. For example, in a scene in episode six of the first season, Eva and Jonas have a conversation from either side of the schoolyard over iMessage. The messages appear next to each characters’ head, which avoids any suggestion that the world of online communication is separate from communication conducted face-to-face.

Furthermore, the show visually replicates messaging applications such as iMessage and Facebook Messenger, and the messages onscreen are colored accordingly, blue for the sender and gray for the recipient. In this scene, the messages from Eva, whose relationship breakdown with Jonas is the focus of season one, are blue, while those from Jonas are gray. This places the viewer in the position of Eva, as the color of the conversation reminds viewers that they are seeing the action from her perspective. Tension in each episode often escalates through the anticipation of further messages being sent.

As relationships in *Skam* are conducted as much via text message as in person, the presentation of messaging applications is central to the way in which dialogue is conducted and plot structure is developed. In the same scene between Eva and Jonas, Eva writes out “FUCK YOU,” lets the line flash unsent for a few seconds, and then deletes it. This introduces dramatic tension, as viewers wait for Eva to send this incendiary message—which she then decides not to, and deletes. Watching Eva make her decision draws viewers even further into her character as they see her thought process played out in the messaging app. This would not be possible without the visualization of the smartphone applications onscreen.

In addition to the blue and gray coloring of the messages to indicate sender and recipient, when the characters use Facebook Messenger they are represented by the pictographic icons they have chosen to pop up next to their messages in that app, which function as an extension of the identity of the character. The icons represent the way in which the character wants to be perceived. In episode seven of season three, Isak and Vilde have a conversation using messaging applications. Isak, who is struggling with reconciling his masculinity with his homosexuality, has chosen a cartoon drawing for his personal icon. This purposeful distortion of Isak’s appearance highlights his personal insecurities and his unwillingness to present his entire identity to the public. His representation stands in contrast to Vilde’s, a staged, portrait-style picture, in which she both attempts to control her own image while also projecting a confident and popular self. Vilde constantly seeks affirmation from...
those around her and struggles to balance staying close to her group of friends with her attempts to befriend individuals whom she sees as having a higher social status in the school. Representations like these function both as extensions of the characters’ own personalities and as curated versions of themselves.

The centrality of these messaging applications for the characters in *Skam* is also evident in the way that Isak and Even communicate. Again in episode seven of season three, Even, who becomes Isak’s boyfriend over the course of the third season despite his mental health problems and Isak’s previously closeted identity, sends a love note to Isak by placing it in his locker. Rather than writing in prose, Even hand-draws a mobile phone and writes his message in the style of a text message. This mimics Isak and Even’s conversations via text; however, by drawing the message by hand, the thought contained in the message seems more tangible and therefore authentic. Despite the different materials by which this note is conveyed, the retention of the messaging application structure in a hand-drawn note shows how central these messaging applications are to communication in *Skam*. In the same episode, Isak, with his group of friends, attempts to rekindle his relationship with Even. Isak’s friends give him advice on how to message Even so that, in response, Even will call Isak. Isak asks his friend Jonas, “Smiley?” inquiring whether or not he should put a smiling emoticon in the text. Jonas replies “No! ‘Chilling at home,’ no feelings.” Both this exchange and the note from Even to Isak point to how interpersonal communication is inseparable from communication on messaging applications. In her essay, “Site-Unspecificity in Physical Plant Theater’s *Dreams of Riley’s Friends*; or, Why Won’t Riley Respond to My Texts?” T. Nikki Cesare Schotzko relates how unsettling it is to see messages from Riley, a fictional character, alongside text messages from her partner, mother, and friends. This intermingling of everyday reality (texts from mom) and the fictitious play (messages from Riley) mirrors the meshing of the real and the fictional in the world of *Skam*. The online messaging platforms depicted in *Skam* are inseparable from interactions in the physical world, just as they are for the show’s intended audience.

In addition to the messages sent between characters within each episode, the show’s website includes snippets of messages. These messages are related to but not the same as those that are sent during the television series. Just as each season follows a certain character, the messages posted on the website represent an individual character’s perspective. While season three is airing, messages on the website are sent from Isak’s account. Viewers can see messages sent to Isak’s flatmates in a group chat room, as well as messages sent to Even, Vilde, Jonas, and numerous other characters. This makes it seem as if Isak is a user of these social networking sites — just like much of the audience — and for a short time we have the privilege of being a part of his story.

The way in which these chats are arranged on the website also points to how they are inseparable from the actual episodes. Chat threads appear on the same site that each episode clip is first released on. The two are integrated into a single column, which one can scroll through almost endlessly. This style of
website imitates the style of other popular social media websites, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr. There is no clear differentiation between the content produced as a television series, the clips of each episode, and the messages and images posted to image-sharing applications such as Instagram by the characters in the series. Furthermore, the style of presentation appears even more coherent when viewed in a mobile browser. While laptop computers are present in the show, the characters more frequently communicate over smartphones—and the show’s online format encourages spectators to do the same. The lack of any separation between the world of Skam and the world of the audience represented within social media has an unsettling effect for viewers. The presentation of Skam as just another semi-fictionalized online personal story challenges our understanding of the distinction between the fictional and the real. The inseparability of the characters’ online presence from the spectators’ own online identities is further established by the presence of each character on Instagram or Facebook—viewers can follow the characters, just as they follow anyone from their real circle of contacts. Currently, the Facebook accounts are offline; the links to the pages go to a site that states the content has been deleted or is inaccessible. The Instagram accounts, however, remain active. The last post on the Instagram account therealsanabakkoush, tied to the character Sana, the protagonist of season four, is dated 25 June 2017. The integration of these social media sites into the show’s structure not only offers a new way of interacting with a television series, but also breaks down the barriers between fiction and nonfiction in the medium of television.

While other television shows use social media as a promotional tool, and integrate messaging applications into the dialogue of the show, in Skam, there is no separation between the social media accounts of the characters and the filmed portions of the show. The world of the show goes beyond what we see onscreen to social media sites. Alongside the messages
that are posted, the photographs and videos uploaded to Instagram contain footage that is not part of each episode, providing another way to look into the lives of the characters. Sana’s Instagram account is regularly updated. This includes not only photos of herself, but also references to events outside the world of Skam. One example is a photo of a computer screen displaying a Twitter feed. The tweet shown is by Al Jazeera English and was posted on 4 May 2017. The tweet reads, “The ban on Muslim women wearing the hijab during professional basketball games was reversed today,” which references a decision by FIBA, the international governing body for basketball. This is a real tweet, from the actual Al Jazeera news network, but it also exists in the fictional world of Skam’s character Sana. Another example of this blurring between the fictional and the real through the use of social media occurs in a post to Sana’s Instagram account from 18 April, with a video of Melania Trump nudging her husband Donald Trump to place his hand over his chest for the national anthem. Sana comments, “When your immigrant wife reminds you to be a patriot.” This not only references Sana’s own status within the show as a Muslim but also her treatment by girls at school as an outsider, not one of the “cool, normal Norwegian party girls,” according to Ingrid (season 4, episode 2). Sana’s Instagram post also highlights the inseparability of the world of the television show and the world it represents: the world of the audience. These posts force viewers to reconsider how they understand sites such as Instagram, and the reality depicted within these social media networks.

This lack of separation is totally lost once a viewer follows any of these Instagram accounts. Following the social media accounts integrates the world of Skam into the world of the viewer. Although Instagram’s filters allow users to edit their photographs in myriad ways, the social networking application is used to document the real lives of real people who range from a user’s friends to celebrities. However, what is uncommon, and unique to Skam, is the representation of the fictional lives of fictional characters. Actors may have Instagram sites where they take photos of themselves backstage, however the account is tied to the actor’s actual identity. Any images of the actor’s fictionalized selves are associated with this identity, rather than the identity of the character. Skam does away with this separation. With both Instagram sites and messaging applications, Skam puts up no boundary between the world of the television show and reality. This is both unsettling and exciting. While we can feel even closer to the characters depicted in the television show, we are also reminded that we use these social networking sites to perform our own identities: what is posted to Instagram and Facebook is curated by users, presenting a particular side of their identity. The more unsettling part of this is that if we think of social media accounts as extensions of ourselves, then coming up against a fictionalized account can be a deeply unnerving experience, causing us to question our own reality.

Does the distinction between the fictional and the real still operate? Writing about the medium of theatre, Erika Fischer-Lichte notes:

Whenever and wherever theatre happens, it is characterized by a tension between reality and fiction, between the real and the fictional. For it is always real spaces where performances take place, it is always real time that the performance consumes, and there are always real bodies which move in and through the real spaces. At the same time, the real space, the stage, may signify various fictional spaces […] These circumstances quite often gave and still do give rise to a variety of transgressions between the fictional and the real. (2008:84)

This frisson between the real and the fictional is always at play in theatre, as there is less of the separation between viewer and performer than occurs in film or television. Skam overcomes this separation that is usually inherent in television by integrating social media into the program. As Fischer-Lichte observes, performances at the turn of the 21st century blended the real and the fictional, which created “a particular aesthetic experience which ran counter to our traditional understanding of what aesthetic experience is about, and in this way stimulated a new discussion of its very concept” (95). In this sense Skam forces view-
ers to reevaluate what the aesthetic experience of television is about, whether it is the literal depiction of our world, a world outside of the one we encounter experientially, or an emergent combination of the two. *Skam* reminds us that, as Carol Martin writes, “the fictional story is inseparable from the real times and people it represents” (2013:162).

In its innovative use of social media, *Skam* forces us to reconsider the boundaries between what we believe to be real and what we see as fictional. By integrating the world of the show with the online world, and by using instant messaging applications as part of the dialogue of the series, *Skam* blurs the boundary between reality and fiction to create a unique participatory aesthetic experience and in so doing critically reflects upon the purported realness of the media we consume and the connections between the screen and the reality we inhabit. The resulting aesthetic experience both mimics and investigates the role that social media plays in the lives of young people, and how the dominance of this mode of interaction forces a reevaluation of our understanding of reality and fiction.

References


