Acting as Hierophany:
Locating a Sense of the Sacred in the Work of the Actor

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Abstract

This thesis aims to locate the sacred in the work of the actor in the context of Western theatre and its religious roots in ritual. Throughout the thesis, my research draws on my extensive experience as an actor trained in the European tradition and employed to perform the Western repertoire. I ask: How can we, in the secularised environment of contemporary Western theatre, come to understand the way something of the sacred still remains to us in performance? How might the contemporary Western actor, who is far removed from the priest or priestess of ancient times, even now be seen as a hierophant, a locus for a spiritual force beyond the human?

In focusing on the actor's work as somehow still productive of something like the sacred, I rely on Richard Schechner's and Victor Turner's ideas of the actor's presence as liminal. For Schechner, the actor occupies the space "in between identities." In this mediatory position, the actor is not unlike a priest, or a shaman – a term Schechner often uses. The act of acting, in this light, might be seen as hierophany, a word I take from Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*. For Eliade, hierophany (*hiero* – sacred, *phainein* – to show) serves as a manifestation of the sacred. A hierophant might be a priest. I think he might, also, be an actor.

This thesis sits between Theatre and Performance Studies. Its methodology as such, is one of close reading of play texts and contexts, and of interpretation and reflection. The case studies – play texts, live, and mediated performances – analysed in this thesis have been drawn from the wider repertoire. The first chapter aims to unpack conventional understandings of the relationship between ritual, theatre, and the sacred, in ancient Greek and Elizabethan theatre, through the analysis of the actor's work in Euripides' *The Bakkhai* and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Chapter Two leads to a re-consideration of the secularity of modern drama by focusing first on Stanislavski's theories of acting, and then on

two plays: Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The third chapter turns to Jerzy Grotowski's idea of the *secular sacrum* in his direction of Ryszard Cieślak's performance in *The Constant Prince* – a performance that, for me, is the epitome of hierophany. In my conclusion, I turn to what I experience and see in the actor's work on stage today.

What I have found in this research is not what I expected. The actor rarely serves as a locus for the sacred, whether in Elizabethan or Modern Drama. Instead, what I have come to understand is that what we can see in the actor's work is more a desire for the sacred, which is often located just out of reach. It is to this unseen force – which might be termed "the sacred" or might be the art that Stanislavski once idealised, or in any case something beyond the limits of our daily human experience – that the actor's work, and the audience's attention, is directed.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Name: Mihailo Lađevac

Date: 29th March 2024.

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Introduction

Positioning myself

I am an actor. With a career spanning more than twenty-five years of professional experience in theatre, I have performed as a full-time member of the National Theatre in Belgrade on stages in Serbia, and across Europe, Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand. Since my training began in 1995, I have acted in a wide range of different genres of theatre, in both classical and contemporary repertoire. I was educated at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade, Serbia, under Professor Predrag Bajčetić.[1] Throughout my studies, Bajčetić's students engaged with the characters from the classical Euro-American repertoire. This is the same repertoire that I have performed onstage for the National Theatre in Belgrade, and others ever since. Even though there was nothing religious in Bajčetić's work with his students, from my perspective, something spiritual could be found. My thesis research sits between theatre and performance studies, and aims to locate the sacred in the work of the actor, as my way of reaching a better understanding of my job as an actor in the context of Western theatre and its religious roots in ritual. In *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, Richard Schechner proposes: "Performance studies – as a practice, a theory, an academic discipline – is dynamic, unfinishable. Whatever it is, it wasn't exactly that before and it won't be exactly that again" (ix). He later adds: "There is no finality to performance studies, either theoretically or operationally. There are many voices, themes, opinions, methods, and subjects" (1). Schechner concludes that "this does not mean performance studies as an academic discipline lacks specific subjects and questions that it focuses on" (1). Following Schechner,

[1] More about my own education as an actor and the work of Professor Bajčetić (1939-2018) as an "actor educator" (as he used to call himself) can be found in my MA thesis, "Professor Predrag Bajčetić – The Life and the Method," and in my article, "(Re)discovering the Self through an 'Other': reflections on the spiritual education of the actor in the remnants of Yugoslavia," published in *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training Journal*.

performance studies seem too broad-ranging, and positioning one's departure is vital. To do so, I must situate myself in this context, both as a human being and as an actor.

I was raised in a very paradoxical ideology. The Communist Government at the time I was growing up was proclaiming Marxist ideology, in which "God does not exist," and "every religion is the opium of the people." My family has "non-religious" and "religious" members. However, let me define why I have these terms in inverted commas. The "non-religious" were the members of my family who proclaimed themselves as atheists, such as my paternal grandfather, who sang in the church choir and who was the only one who knew all the prayers by heart, and my father, who made icons and carved crosses in wood or stone. They were atheists who did participate in all the main religious events, but who were there to respect other "religious" members. The "religious" members, such as my maternal grandmother and my mother, were practising the rituals mostly as a way of paying respect to our ancestors, or such as my maternal grandfather and my sister, who were rebellious against the system. There were neither real atheists nor truly religious members in my family. Among all of them, there was I, always curious about the world that is beyond the one we see in our everyday lives. I have been seeking to understand the understandable, ever since I became aware of the world around me. This might be the reason why I chose to be in this profession, hoping that being an actor[2] would help me find the better understanding of the invisible worlds around us – the worlds of our ancestors and our descendants.

As a very young child I embarrassed the family in front of the school psychologist, confessing to her that I want to be a priest when I grow up. My parents were (immediately) invited to the school and warned about my "confession." I could have put my parents in a very difficult position with my answer, but luckily the school psychologist was our

[2] Most people think that acting is all about lies, but what I think (and I assume many other actors) – acting is the best way of finding the truth.

neighbour, and kept my "confession" secret. When I was asked by my parents where I found the ridiculous idea of being a priest, I was only quiet, having no words to explain my mistaken wish for my future profession. However, I should have said what is still central in my heart: it was because I am aware of something bigger than me, and I am keen to better understand what it is.

Even though I never mentioned that wish anymore and changed it into a much more suitable future "profession" – a waiter in a restaurant – I have never stopped believing that there is something bigger than us and that it is very hard to be in touch with it. You can call it a universe, a, a god… and I am not a conventional Orthodox Christian; first of all, I am a gay man, and married with a man, which is not acceptable in my church. I also have some deep issues with how the Church moved noticeably from spirituality towards the secularity of politics, including the abuse of faith and religion for political purposes.[3] I question the way people in the Church understand the idea of the God, but I still believe there is a greater force that we are a part of. I love different approaches and understandings of spirituality and admire all of them. In saying this, I accept that my Orthodox Christian religion is only one way of sharing our understanding of being spiritual. My religiousness and spirituality are much more complicated than all this, but for the purpose of positioning myself in my research, I have tried to summarise what I mean when I say I am religious.

While the Western world was led by the capitalist ideologies, the Eastern European countries, including Yugoslavia, where I was born, were ruled by the communist regimes. Both had their advantages and disadvantages, and I am not going to immerse myself in their differences by trying to claim which was better and which was worse. But there is one of those differences that I find is very important for my research: the way the governments and societies were set against religion. In the Western world, after the Holocaust, the end of God

[3] For example, the role that the Church had in the wars in the 1990s, across Yugoslavia.

was an option that conquered the hearts of the young and the rebellious. Fighting for secularity in western Europe and the United States of America (USA) was a fight against all the horrific crimes that had been committed under the guise of religion and purity. As such that fight was a rebellious act against injustice and for equality. While in the Western world, Black theatre was wrestling with the racist setting around them, feminist theatre was striving for its own voice in theatre, and indigenous theatre struggled to shed some light on its existence.

On the other hand, in eastern European countries ruled by the Soviet Union and other communist regimes, religion was forbidden, illegal, and sometimes punished by death. In that environment, being religious and a person seeking any kind of spirituality, meant being a rebel, a brave revolutionist who fought against injustice and for equality. Rebels in the eastern corner of Europe were fighting their own battles against oppression in their own environments. Some of those rebels were Konstantin Stanislavski, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Tadeusz Kantor, and Jerzy Grotowski. In that light, I see Grotowski as a rebel, and his work, in particular his search for the "secular sacrum," as a rebellious act against the absolutist regime in Poland (*Poor Theatre* 49). One of the rebels was my professor, Predrag Bajčetić, and I probably carry this influence throughout my work on stage, including the way I think of life in general. That is how I place myself in this research: a religious person who seeks spirituality as a rebellious act against the totalitarian regime in which I was brought up. Even though this is not the only reason, and certainly not the main reason for searching spirituality, I think it is important to highlight this aspect, and how I place myself in this research in regard to religion.

My educational influences

At the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade, Serbia, the very first task in the very first class of my acting studies under Professor Bajčetić, was seemingly simple; students were told to introduce ourselves in two different ways: "Social status" – that is, name and surname, place of residence, school completed, and "Funky status" – which had us put forward information such as our nicknames, origins, a favourite family member, one of our successes, and one of our failures in school and acting.[4] These tasks revealed our social masks, which, we were informed, are false and harmful for an actor. The point of the lesson was that only if the actor could remove his social masks in search of a genuine answer to the question "Who am I?" would he discover the true essence of his own "Self."[5]

This was a version of the Stanislavskian system,[6] in which the actor can only begin to be genuinely creative in building the "Who am I?" of his character once he has been purified of his everyday sense of who he is in the world. I was taught that Stanislavski did not give a so-called "bag of tools" to the actor. Rather, his system invited the actor to undertake committed and constant work on his body and mind. In Maria Shevtsova's words, Stanislavski's principles for training and performance were to be directed towards "the actor's thoughtful, conscious and probing 'work on himself'" (334). This work of the actor on himself goes beyond the everyday through ritualised practices, in which he develops the spirit and the human being so that the "more the actor grows spiritually, the greater the resources of the actor become" (336).

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[4] English translations of the tasks "Social status" and "Funky status" were given to me by my professor, Predrag Bajčetić (1934-2018) for the purposes of my Master's thesis (about his actor training). The way I understood them during my studies was that "Social status" was a serious, formal way of introducing myself and "Funky status" a funny way.

[5] For the purposes of this thesis I will be generally referring to the actor as "he." This acknowledges: a) my own gender, which informs my experience as an actor, and b) the fact that much of the literature on acting (in particular by Stanislavski and Grotowski) assumes a male actor.

[6] The system that is derived from the teachings by the Russian actor, director and the writer of the first "system" of acting, Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938).

Throughout my studies (and my whole career) I have been exposed to this question of "Who am I?" over and over. Both who am I as a human being and, who am I as a character. Every time I have a new character to perform, I ask myself the same question. This question triggers for me a sense of confession, of opening my Self to the audience as a kind of invitation for them to look at me closely, beyond the protective barriers that govern social interactions outside the theatre. My confession in acting becomes an offering. This process of exchange with the audience was important for us as student actors, and for me now. I offer my Self to the spectators as a gift, and invite them to reciprocate by joining the same process of self-study.

Furthermore, as a student I was engaged with the "superhuman" characters from the classical repertoire – from the ancient gods in ancient Greek tragedies and heroes of the Renaissance play texts – ever since our first class in the first year of studies with Professor Bajčetić. This work almost inevitably led to the emergence of the sacred. Professor Bajčetić reminded us that, as actors performing on stage, we would live in that "sacred space" suspended between the ordinary world of our own daily lives and the invisible worlds of our characters. In this liminal time and space, we would be in close conversation with our characters, using the characters' fates to investigate ourselves, through their bodies and their actions, rather than just their expressions of emotion. We, as actors/students in his class, would create better characters the more we understood who we were in this world. The professor would then continue, saying that through this ritual-like process of rehearsal and performance, through what we as actors do on stage, the invisible worlds of our characters can be made visible for the audiences.

After twenty years of my professional work in theatre, I took a break to do my Master's studies on the work of Professor Bajčetić, and the life circumstance that had shaped his approach to actor education. From that distance, and reflecting on my education and work

as an actor at the National Theatre in Belgrade, I noticed that my belief in theatre as something that can change things in society, has become weaker over the years. That is, after more than two decades of my theatre practice, I could not see the change in this world; it had not become better. So, I took a break to do my Master's studies, and I started to look closely at what I was doing, by reflecting on my own educational process under Professor Bajčetić. Then, I realised, I still believed in theatre as a platform to change the world for the better. The problem was, that I could not see that my colleagues and I were doing it right through our theatre practice. The key issue I noticed was, that I, somehow, had lost the focus from that spirituality I was educated must be in my work as an actor. As soon as I finished my Master's thesis, I was back on stage at the National Theatre in Belgrade, performing the repertoire of seven different productions. I was looking for that spirituality, but with not much success.

Discouraged, I took a leave again from the National Theatre in Belgrade and came back to Aotearoa New Zealand. While continuing to act on stages both in Serbia and here in Aotearoa New Zealand, I decided to enrol in a PhD. This research project, thus, has arisen from my sense of loss, and my desire for the restoration of a sense of the sacred in performance – both my own and others'. I started with the premises that the theatre, as we are told, has its roots in the sacred, in ritual. I believe that the historical connection to the sacred roots lives even now, when we perform on the secularised stages of the 21st century. The explicit aim of this thesis was to locate this in the work of the actor.

This thesis, thus, explores Western theatre's roots in religious ritual, and its subsequent secular evolution, in order to locate a sense of the sacred in the actor's work today. That the theatre has its origins in religious ritual is not generally in question at this point, and nor is the understanding that over time, the theatre has left, or repressed, its religious underpinnings. Actors today are far removed from the priests that we assume they once were. Their actions are, for the most part, no longer aimed toward an invocation of the

sacred as they might have been in the time of Greek tragedy; rather, in the present day, actors invoke characters on stage, transforming them from scripted, imagined beings to embodied presences created to be perceived by an audience. That is, the actor stepping into the light, becomes what the audience sees and hears as the character. Even though there is nothing necessarily religious in this performance of an imagined person, the residue of the sacred still might be seen in this effect and in the ritual-like process of the actor's work today.

Non-Western influences on Western theatre

In his book *Sacred Theatre* (2007), Ralph Yarrow reminds us that leading practitioners and theorists of the modern theatre, from Konstantin Stanislavski in the late 19th century, through mid-20th century theatre practitioners such as Jerzy Grotowski, Richard Schechner, and Peter Brook, to contemporary artists including Phillip Zarrilli and Nicolas Núñez, "in some way lay claims for an 'otherness' of theatre which they often describe in a vocabulary which draws on or implies the "sacred'" (Yarrow 17). These theatre artists, each in their own time, looked to non-Western theatre practices for their ritual components as a way of restoring a sense of the sacred to the Western theatre. Their practices and theories, in relation both to their desire to locate something of the sacred in their work, and to the problematics of appropriation and the potentially colonising effects of such work, are considered in this thesis.

In this light, William H. Wegner suggests in his "The Creative Circle: Stanislavski and Yoga" (1976), that Stanislavski

> found a hint in the practices of the wise men of the Buddhist religion – and thenceforth he required his actors to practice long psychophysical exercises as a means of cultivating concentration of attention. […] Following these teachings of Oriental metaphysics, his followers strove to visualize the elusive "ego" – to live, while on the stage, the life of the spirit and to become acquainted with strange phases of spiritual life. (85, inverted commas in original)

Wegner, then, moves on to propose that these practices taken from the Buddhist religion

became 'the characteristics of the actors of the Moscow Art Theatre' (page). He tells us that Stanislavski, in his autobiography, discusses his practice of meditation in relation to the discovery of the "creative mood" through psychophysical exercises. Wegner reminds us that Stanislavski

> describes his central concern of that period as the need for "not only a physical make-up but of a spiritual make-up before every performance," of knowing how to "enter the temple of that spiritual atmosphere in which alone it is possible to create." (85, inverted commas in original)

It seems that the point of these exercises for Stanislavski was not religious in any sense. However, some spiritual aspects still might be seen in it. As Dorinda Hulton and Maria Kapsali point in their "Yoga and Stanislavski: reflections on the past and applications for the present and future" (2017), Stanislavski "claimed that his teaching cultivated a 'perception of the "I" as independent from the body, the latter merely being an instrument for use'" (3). This body-mind connection that we often call "embodiment" or "presence on stage" was the key reason for the use of the psycho-somatic practices of Yoga.

The non-Western influences on Western theatre can be traced to the late 19th century and early 20th century, when Stanislavski, in developing his system,[7] turned to the ancient Indian practices of yoga.[8] Moving forward to the mid 20th century, Grotowski, in re-discovering ritual in Western theatre, approached Asian traditional practices, in particular Indian Kathakali, Peking Opera and Noh theatre.[9] Then too, Grotowski's work can be seen to reflect something of Georg Gurdjieff's philosophical and mystical explorations, even though

[7] Worldwide, Stanislavski's early explorations of the actor's work have been known as the "System." *The System* is, also, a Serbian translation of Stanislavski's first book *Работа актера над собой в творческом процессе переживания - Дневник ученика*, that is better known in English translation as *An Actor Prepares*, or more recent translation – *An Actor's work*.
[8] There is more about how yoga influenced Stanislavski's work in Sergei Tcherkasski's *Stanislavsky and Yoga*.
[9] Find more detailed exploration on Asian influences on Grotowski's work in Donald Richie's "Asian Theatre and Grotowski."

he often denied the connection.[10] The link between Gurdjieff and Grotowski may in fact have been indirect, a product of Grotowski's work with Peter Brook, who was more directly attracted to Gurdjieff's teachings, and who directed a film about Gurdjieff in 1979. Like Brook and other late 20th century innovators, director/theorist Richard Schechner also sought inspiration in the rituals of African and Asian indigenous tribes. At the end of the 20th century, Phillip Zarrilli's influential theories and practices were widely inspired by the Eastern traditional martial arts: Indian Kalarippayattu, and Asian T'ai Chi Chuan.[11] More recently, still, Nicolás Núñez investigates the sacred within indigenous and pre-Hispanic Nahuatl rituals.[12]

Research questions

In chapter one of the *Sacred Theatre*, Yarrow says that speculations about the nature of the sacred in theatre could be found in the works of artist that span from the ancient times to the contemporary time: from Abhinavagupta to Zeami, from Jean Cocteau to Peter Brook, from Antonin Artaud to Shakespeare (not forgetting Maurice Maeterlinck, Aleister Crowley, Rabindranath Tagore, Kavalam Pannikar and Nicolas Núñez) (14).[13] Further on, Yarrow defines his terms, and in defining the sacred in the context of the theatre, he proposes:

> if there is a sense in which the sacred is an entry to a particularly vital condition, then theatre – as a praxis – is one of the primary sites for its activation, and the forms and methods of theatre may lead to it and disclose what it is. (15)

[10] More about the connections between Grotowski and Gurdjieff might be seen in Catherine Christof's *Rethinking Religion in the Theatre of Grotowski*, Jerzy Grotowski's "A Kind of Volcano*,"* and Ralph Yarrow's *Sacred Theatre*.
[11] For more in depth explorations, see Phillip Zarrilli's *When the Body Becomes All Eyes*, *Asian Martial Arts in Actor Training* and *The Kathakali Complex: Actor, Performance & Structure*.
[12] More about non-Western influences in Nicolas Núñez's theatre might be found in his *Anthropocosmic Theatre*.
[13] Look, for example, at Jean Cocteau's *Les Monstres sacrés* (*Sacred Monsters*), Peter Brook's *Empty Space*, Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double*, Aleister Crowley's *Rites of Eleusis*, Nicolás Núñez's *Anthropocosmic Theatre: Rite in the Dynamics of Theatre*.

Following Yarrow's observations on the sacred in theatre, one can see that the sacred has been thoroughly investigated in drama, in theatre, and in performance. However, there is very little, if any study, that explores the sacred in the actor's work in particular. Unpacking the sacred in the theatre through this research will help me locate and apprehend a sense of the sacred in the actor's work.

The thesis, therefore, asks: How can I as an actor, in the secularised environment of contemporary Western theatre, come to understand the way the sacred – or at least something of the sacred – still remains to us in performance? How might I as a contemporary Western actor, far removed from the priest or priestess of ancient times, in performance even now be seen to serve as a locus for a spiritual force beyond the human? This thesis begins by exploring the movement from the sacred to the secular in Western theatre, in particular by examining again the ritual and religious underpinnings of Greek and Elizabethan drama. It then looks at the actor-centred work of theatre artists such as Stanislavski, Grotowski, Brook, and Schechner, as part of a search for a sense of the sacred on contemporary secular stages. For instance, I ask how might "the actor's consciousness," as proposed by Stanislavski in his *An Actor's Work*, help us understand the ongoing quest for something beyond the everyday onstage? Also, how might "the actor's self-penetration and self-sacrifice" as proposed by Grotowski in his *Towards a Poor Theatre*, and taken up by his contemporaries, help us perceive a sense of the sacred in the actor's work today?

Methodology and Methods

This thesis was built on the examination of key play texts and live or mediated performances which were selected as case studies for analysis.[14] The methodology as such, is one of close

[14] These chosen case studies constitute, in effect, my data.

reading, interpretation, and reflection. My analysis was informed by theories drawn from theatre and performance studies, as well as from a number of other fields, including anthropology, literature, and comparative religious studies as appropriate. Textual and performance analyses are key to performance studies, and as such they underpin the methodology of this thesis. They are also the primary methods by which I, as an actor, create my work in the theatre. In the theatre, as practitioners, we read play texts as pretexts for performance – that is, for clues to what drives the dramatic action and the characters, for the mise-en-scène, and so on. When I am a spectator, these habits of looking and analysing, form part of how I watch a performance unfold and how I interpret its meanings afterwards. This is what I bring to the work of a performance scholar: an understanding of plays that is informed by my embodied habits of reading and viewing. As an actor, even when I am not performing, I think physically and viscerally about how meanings are being produced in time, space, and the imagination. My analyses of the plays and performances that provide the material for my research, thus reflect my experiences, both on the stage and in the audience.

For example, the first line of the translation of *The Bakkhai* used in this thesis, is for me, tremendously evocative. In this line, although there are no stage directions, it appears that Dionysus speaks to the audience directly: "I'm back! – a god standing on the ground" (Euripides 19). It is not, for me, just words on a page. My intuitive response is to speak the line in my own imagination, as an actor might at a first reading. I see the exclamation mark, and immediately begin to hear and sound out for myself ways of delivering that line – an exuberance in the god's voice, his manner of announcing himself to the audience. I picture the actor on the *theologeion* (literally, the gods' platform), the platform on the roof of the *skene* (back of the stage), on which actors playing the gods would appear. I then imagine the

actor being lowered by the *deus ex machina*,[15] down to the stage level. I remember that the actors were heavily costumed and masked, so that they were larger than life, facing a festive audience that was there to celebrate the god Dionysus, and that both the festival and the theatrical performance itself were residues of earlier ritual observances (such theories and speculations about their activities are strongly supported by many excavated objects from the ancient Greek theatres). According to Oliver Taplin and Rosie Wyles (2010),[16] the so-called Pronomos vase, excavated in 1835, is "universally agreed to be the most important and complex material object we have which is directly related to ancient Greek theatre" (1).

The Pronomos vase is a large, decorated ceramic vase from around 400 BC that depicts the whole production team – including the ancient Greek actors, the writer, and the producer – gathered around the god Dionysus to celebrate his cult. It might be seen as a "green room"[17] of the ancient Greek theatre. The actors on the vase are contemplating their masks. It looks as if they are looking at their masks that represent their characters, so to absorb the invisible characteristics they need to perform on stage. According to the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1953), a persona[18] is "a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual" ('The Persona as a Segment of the Collective Psyche' 192). The actors might be seen then, as if they were observing their masks so as to capture the character's features to use as a shield for their individual nature. In so doing, the actor used himself as a vessel for

[15] *Deus ex machina*, a Latin phrase that means "god from the machine," was "a lever-and-fulcrum apparatus located behind the skene would raise the actor(s) high above the façade to suggest their movement through the air, and then lower them onto the roof of the skene-building" (Rush Rehm 34).
[16] In *The Pronomos Vase and its Context*, edited by Oliver Taplin and Rosie Wyles, various authors offer different perspectives on the vase itself, in the context of speculating on the way ancient Greek theatre worked, and as such, is useful for imagining ancient Greek actors and their work on stage at that time.
[17] A green room is usually a room with open access to all the members of the theatre production. However, in this room it is mostly actors who gather to relax, go through their lines and prepare for their scene when not performing.
[18] In his "The Persona as a Segment of the Collective Psyche," Carl Jung reminds us that the term *persona* originally "meant the mask once worn by actors to indicate the role they played" (157).

the character to be channelled to his audience. The actor, we can say then, was a kind of a screen on to which he projected things unseen to the audience. In this process, we can see the objectification of the actor. That is, through his mask/character, the actor becomes an object, not so different from a puppet.

In *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, Richard Schechner tells us: "Performances are actions. As a discipline, he says, performance studies takes actions very seriously in four ways" (1). In the first instance, Schechner considers behaviour as an '"object of study' of performance studies" (1). In this thesis, following Schechner's lead, I consider what the actor does on stage – the behaviour prescribed by the play text as anticipated by theatrical convention, and where possible, described or represented in the record of the performance – as the object of my research. "Second," Schechner goes on, "artistic practice is a big part of the performance studies project. […] The relationship between studying performance and doing performance is integral" (1-2, my ellipsis). My position in researching and writing this thesis is as an academic who can draw directly on the practice of acting, that is, on my personal experience as an actor, in exploring possible ways of answering the questions I have raised. Third, Schechner proposes, the work of the performance scholar is centred on acts of "participant observation" (2), what he calls "a much-prized method adapted from anthropology and put to new uses" (2). This way of looking at things positions me as an academic-actor in two ways: "at a Brechtian distance, allowing for criticism, irony, and personal commentary as well as sympathetic participation" (2). Further, I hold Schechner's more cautionary view, that "social circumstances – including knowledge itself – are not fixed, but subject to the "rehearsal process of testing and revising" (2). This is in keeping with Schechner's fourth point: "performance studies is actively involved in social practices and advocacies," and many of us who practise "do not aspire to ideological neutrality" (2). "In fact," Schechner concludes, "a basic theoretical claim is that no approach or position is

'neutral.' There is no such thing as unbiased" (2). He places the challenge to me as a researcher: "to become as aware as possible of one's own stances in relation to the positions of others" (2). It is this self and socially aware position as an academic who is also an actor, that I seek to occupy throughout the thesis.

As someone whose position is centred in a lifetime of work in the theatre, in this thesis I make a point of following what we call in the theatre, its "logic." I treat the script as a prescription for a performance that would be underscored by the conventions of the theatre of the time, including how it was set in relation to its audience. Following both the theatre's logic and Schechner's notion of the necessity of moving from "as if," to maybe not "it is," but at least "it could be" (*Performance Theory* xvii-xviii), as I work from play texts throughout this thesis, I exercise my theatrical imagination to consider the play as it might have been seen in performance. This might also be termed "speculation" in the sense that Sharon Mazer proposes in her essay "The Speculative Act in Theatre and Performance Studies" – as a "speculative triangulation between the play text, its socio-historical context, and my own visceral understanding of how the theatre works in time and space" (86). For example, in the case of *The Bakkhai* by Euripides, in speculating, I can produce my analysis of dramatic encounter between an actor channelling a god, and the contemporary (i.e., ancient Athenian) audience. Then, I ask, is this encounter between the-actor-performing-the-god and his audience inviting worship, or is this more a terrifying moment for his audience, or is the-actor-performing-the-god for his audience comic, or is it all of these and more, and if so, why would that be? I accept, in the process, that my interpretation of the evidence provided – both with text and context (as per Mazer 86) – cannot be considered authoritative in the conventional sense. But it is, nonetheless, a way of making sense of the plays I contextualise in my thesis, and of beginning to theorise about how they might be seen to have functioned to invoke a sense of the sacred for their audiences.

Guided by my chosen methodology, this is the approach that I am taking to my search for the sacred in the ostensibly secular Western theatre. I consider plays and performances from a theatrical perspective: that is, how the actors were seen to have constructed their performances in the context of their place and time. I also look at the texts dramaturgically, for how ideas of the sacred are scripted into the lines, actions, and interactions of the characters. Dionysus is a "god standing on the ground" (Euripides 19). He is costumed and speaking to the audience as a god might onstage, before an audience in ancient Greece, and calling himself a god who has come to Earth with a purpose that will be unfolded in the course of the play. For the purposes of this thesis, I suggest that the first recognition requires theatrical thinking: the second, dramaturgical. In taking a theatrical approach, I am looking at the form of the theatre, including its historical relationship to religious ritual, and also taking into account what we know of the acting style of each period. How might the actor's role in ancient Greek tragedy, for example, be seen to be an evolution from that of a priest in earlier generations? How might the way the stage was set and the audience seated, be seen as something like that of previous congregations? And how might we now see that long-ago actor in relation to his audience as serving some similar function – a performative legacy that can be perceived in performances even now?

In taking a dramaturgical approach, I am looking for the way the sacred is literally written into the words, the actions, and the characters. Remaining with the example of *The Bakkhai* and its first line, I note that the character is a god, and that he is making a dramatic statement about his presence amongst mortals on the earth. This allows me in the first instance to be very literal: the sacred in this play is located in the figure of the god, who will proceed to insist on his divine power to the detriment of those who deny his status. I understand this effect better when I take into account the way the actor would have been costumed, and his place onstage, as one latterly occupied by a priest, or perhaps in this case,

an icon of the god himself animated for this theatrical event. In this way, the dramaturgical and the theatrical are intertwined in the work of speculating about how the sacred might have been invoked on the newly secular stages of the ancient Greeks.

This thesis proceeds cumulatively, building from one historical period to another, until we arrive at the present day. This is how we, theatre people, tell the story of the theatre in the West, by drawing a continuous line from the ancients to the Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, and Romantic periods, and onward through Modernism and Absurdism to contemporary theatre and performance.[19] We begin, always, with Aristotle. The *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE) provides us with a basic understanding of the principles of Greek tragedy from the perspective of a philosopher, who, coming of age just after the period, was himself working primarily from texts rather than seeing the original productions for himself. In this way, he might be viewed as the first dramaturg as well as the first theatre historian and theatre critic. It was Aristotle who set the stage in theory and practice for theatre scholars even now.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle identifies six key elements of tragedy, and presents them in order of importance: Plot, Character, Thought, Diction, Spectacle, and Song (62). He both derives this framework from his analysis of the Greek plays as well as applying it to them. He further divides these elements into two groups of three, from which it is possible to see a kind of tension proposed between the dramaturgical (plot, character, and thought) and the theatrical (diction, spectacle, and song). The first three elements form the basis of the text that we can read, and that is delivered via the theatrical devices represented by the second three elements. In my thesis, these fundamentals of tragic theatre as first put forward by Aristotle, serve to ground my analyses of the ways the sacred is both represented in my

[19] I acknowledge that contemporary theatre historiography is avidly critiquing and destabilising this continuous line. There are more recent debates in theatre histories – such as Zarrilli et al *Theatre Histories* and Steve Tillis' *The Challenge of World Theatre History*, that include wider perspective at the theatre history. However, I am looking at the Western theatre history as an actor trained and involved in such a theatre repertoire. Thus, when I say 'we, theatre people' I am referring to the academics that trace the roots of the Western theatre to the ancient Greece.

selected play texts, and (potentially at least) made manifest through the actor's work in performance.

My reliance on Aristotle as my first model and theoretical framework extends beyond his place as the first theatre historian and critic. Aristotle's influence on the development of Western theatre – both the way in which it was made, and how it is analysed and understood – is immeasurable. Even though it is possible that Shakespeare did not read Aristotle's *Poetics*, he was probably familiar with Aristotelian perspectives on tragedy through Philip Sidney's *A Defence of Poesie*. Further, and perhaps more significantly, it is evident that Christopher Marlowe was familiar with the work of Aristotle, perhaps including the *Poetics,* as can be seen in the first lines in the first scene of *Doctor Faustus* – "Having commenc'd, be a divine in show, Yet, level at the end of every art, And live and die in Aristotle's works" (Marlowe 51). While this line is perhaps a reference to Marlowe's education at the University of Cambridge, and as such, can be read more as a critique of scholarly vanity, it also might be seen to inform the way in which Marlowe constructed his tragedy.

Already by the early 19th century, theatre theorists were talking about the "well-made play," (a term coined by the French playwright, Eugène Scribe) in ways that reflected Aristotle's fundamentals of play structure. One of the authors who built upon this concept of the well-made play was a Russian playwright Anton Chekhov, a close collaborator of Konstantin Stanislavski. Stanislavski was strongly influenced by the work of Aristotle, in particular by his *Poetics*, and traces of this might be seen in his work.[20] When quoting Stanislavski's first book, I am always quoting Stanislavski from *An Actor* Prepares. I am acknowledging both *An Actor Prepares* (a 1936 translation of Stanislavski's System) and *An Actor's Work* (2008, the most recent and more accurate translation of his System). However,

[20] See more about Aristotle's traces in Stanislavski's work in Jonathan Pitches' *Science and the Stanislavsky Acting Tradition*, in particular in his discussion of 'Stanislavsky and Aristotle'.

I am quoting *An Actor Prepares* in my thesis as it uses language closer to the interest of my thesis. It is possible that the more religious terms might be found in *An Actor Prepares* as this book was published before his Russian version *Работа актера надъ собой* that was published in 1938 in Stalinist Russia, where Stanislavski was forced to self-censor himself. As Bella Merlin suggests in her "Where has the spirit gone":

> One of the issues that had struck me on my initial reading of the new translation was how rarely the words 'spirit', 'spirituality' or 'soul' were to be found, since the original versions of *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character* include the words over 130 times. I was aware from the history of Soviet censorship of Stanislavski's writing that this was a tricky issue, and that even the single reference to prana energy in An Actor Prepares was removed from his 1938 Russian edition.

I am not ignoring the most recent translation of the Russian version *Работа актера надъ собой*. I am quoting *An Actor Prepares* only because I could find more spiritual language in Stanislavski's words there, those he had to avoid in his original version from 1938 to escape censorship of the Soviet Russian regime.

In focusing on Stanislavski's early writings, I am talking about his radical changes in the actor's work at the end of the 19th century. My focus is on his work on The Seagull and thus I use his early explorations of the actor's work closer to Realism not so much to the Method of Physical Actions (his later explorations). I am aware of the difference between the two, System and Method as those both are the fundamentals of my actor training. I write more about this difference and how both System and Method played crucial role in my actor training in my article[21] based on the teaching method of my late Professor.

Samuel Beckett was not the first to break with Aristotle's dramatic principles, as some theorists point towards Shakespeare[22] and Romantic playwriters[23] to do so before him. However, Beckett is certainly one of the most prominent figures in 20th-century theatre

[21] "(Re)discovering the Self through an 'Other': Reflections on the Spiritual Education of the Actor in the Remnants of Yugoslavia."
[22] Look at David Bevington's 'Tragedy in Shakespeare's career', edited by Claire McEachern.
[23] Terryl L. Givens provides some this context in his 'Aristotle's Critique of Mimesis: The Romantic Prelude.'

known for challenging and subverting traditional dramatic structures that can be traced back to Aristotle's ideas. Here I am following Elinor Fuchs, who proposes "that there is much to be discovered by aligning Aristotle-on-plot with *Waiting for Godot*" ('Waiting for Recognition' 532). That is, Fuchs acknowledges that Beckett is considered one of the first non-Aristotelian postmodernists. Still, Fuchs suggests that reading *Waiting for Godot* through the Aristotelian plot description, actually "ties the play's radical departures to a lineage of dramatic form stretching back 2500 years" (541).

More on all these influences of Aristotle's *Poetics* to the theatre practitioners throughout the time is discussed later. In theatre history classes now, we start with the ancient Greek theatre and Aristotle's foundational theories on what the theatre was at that time. Even if the result was sometimes to oppose Aristotle in favour of more avant-garde ways of making theatre, like everyone before me, I am beholden to Aristotle and his two-tiered approach to the work of understanding how theatre works.

My thesis is positioned at the intersection between practice and theory, between theatre and performance studies. In this, I am following, to a large degree, the seminal, collaborative work of American theatre director and theorist Richard Schechner with the British anthropologist Victor Turner. Ever since they met each other in 1977, Schechner and Turner became close friends and collaborators exploring ritual from the two distinctive positions of performance studies and anthropology. It appears to me, through the work on his performances, that Schechner, tracing the theatre's roots in ritual, became fascinated by ritual itself. Later, throughout his travels in Asia and Africa, and particularly in his collaboration with Turner, Schechner fully invested himself in exploring ritual in all its depth, in order to better understand theatre. Turner, however, developed his discussions of Social Drama from Arnold van Gennep's "The rites of Passage." For Turner, in close partnership with Schechner, theatre and dramaturgy allowed him to explore what he understood of ritual in

diverse cultures and extend that understanding to contemporary life in the West. There are some conventional understandings of theatre's roots in ritual, the movement from ritual to theatre (in Turner's terms),[24] and perceptions of the future of ritual (in Schechner's terms)[25] that are revisited in this work. I discuss these concepts and their relationship with my research in further depth later in this introduction.

Grotowski called his studio a "theatre laboratory," based on the idea that his work with actors was experimental, in the way of a scientist, a way of testing theories in practice as a process of discovery and path to challenging existing knowledges. John Freeman notes in his article "Writing the Self: The Heuristic Documentation of Performance," that

> … experiments can never be repeated, because the conditions, the human conditions, of performance are never even remotely the same from one experiment to the other. Performance is creation. It moves and transmutes, even as we watch. It amounts to a type of knowledge that one could not be in possession of before the fact. We can say, therefore, that performance work is not comprised of knowledge about something else – it is the fullness of its own knowledge. (101)

My research aims to connect both ends of theatre, its two aspects: theory and practice, working between analyses of examples from theatre history and my own reflective experimentation. The thesis begins with an in-depth exploration of ancient Greek tragedy and its roots in ritual. Following that, I take a closer look at Elizabethan tragedy, which carries forward the relationship of theatre and ritual into the Christian period, before turning to the modern, and presumably secular theatre, of the late 19th and 20th centuries. Finally, I look directly again at the theatre of Grotowski to see how this theatrical heritage and its ritual underpinnings return to the surface in *The Constant Prince*. In each example, I look for the representation and the residue of sacrifice and the sacred, to build an understanding of the actor as a hierophant.

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[24] In this, I take my cue from Victor Turner's theories in *From Ritual to Theatre*.
[25] I take my cue here, from Richard Schechner's exploration of ritual in *The Future of Ritual*.

Defining the terms

The actor as a hierophant

In focusing on the actor's work as somehow still productive of something like the sacred, I rely on Richard Schechner's and Victor Turner's ideas of the actor's presence as liminal.[26] The actor, in this construction, occupies the space "in between identities" (*Between Theater and Anthropology* 123), at the threshold of "not me, but not not me" (112) on stage. In this mediatory position, the actor is not unlike a priest, or a shaman – a term Schechner often uses – or perhaps a *hierophant*.[27] Acting might be then seen as *hierophany*, a word I take from *The Sacred and the Profane* by Mircea Eliade. For Eliade, hierophany – *hiero* meaning sacred, *phainein* meaning to show – serves as a manifestation of the sacred (*The Sacred and the Profane* 12). A hierophant might be a priest, but he might also very well be an actor. That is, the actions of a hierophant, as well as of an actor, can be seen to be aimed at invoking a presence from the realm of the imagination for the benefit of other watchers/participants – whether congregation or audience. In religious ritual, the priest invokes the sacred, a divine spirit, using his human being as a vehicle. With theatre's shift to the secular, the actor perhaps retains some residue of this function as a locus for something otherwise unseen and unseeable. The actor is at once himself and not himself in performance, or in Schechner's formulation, in performing a character, the actor is not himself, but he is not not himself.

This thesis looks at the way how the actor's relationship with the sacred, with its move from the manifest to the absent, even as a longing for it remains. There is a conventional way to tell the story of the movement of Western theatre from the sacred to the secular. Traditionally, it is believed that Western theatre emerged in ancient Greece,

[26] In this, I take my cue from Victor Turner's theories in *The Ritual Process* and *From Ritual to Theatre* and Richard Schechner's theories in *Between Theater and Anthropology* and *Performance theory*.
[27] A hierophant (Ancient Greek ἱεροφάντης, as a combination of ἱερός – meaning *sacred* and φαντός – meaning *to show*) was a priest in ancient Greek Attica; one who interprets sacred mysteries, a "revealer of holy things," and "one who shows the rites of sacrifice" (see Britannica.com, Oxforddictionaries.com and Etymology.com).

specifically in the region of Ancient Attica. According to Aristotle (*Poetics* 4), the ancient Greek tragedy has its roots in the dithyramb, a religious hymn in honour of Dionysus, the god of (among other things) theatre. Discussions of theatre in the European Renaissance, particularly of the Elizabethan tragedy, often point to the way the theatres and their dramaturgies were tied to the religious plays of the Middle Ages, and to the persistence of Christian imagery and ideologies in the theatre of the English Renaissance. After the Enlightenment, as the theatre moved indoors and its dramaturgy became more preoccupied with the "domestic," its status was generally understood to be that of secular entertainment. For example, Stanislavski's theories of acting were explicitly aimed toward the production of characters who were *like life* – not *priestly* at all.

In Jerzy Grotowski's theatrical experiments of the mid-20th century which were centred on his idea of the "secular sacrum" (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 49), we see a return to the struggle to invoke the sacred on a secular stage in a world that has been defiled by war and the Holocaust. Grotowski's direction of Ryszard Cieślak's performance in *The Constant Prince*,[28] for me, epitomises the idea of acting as hierophany, where the actor is seen as a hierophant, a conduit for a power beyond the rational.

Hierophany and the Sacred

In reaching for an understanding of how the actor in performance goes beyond the rational, by approaching a ritual or sacred state of being, I have turned to Mircea Eliade's definition of the sacred in binary opposition to the profane or the mundane; the *ideal* is, in this paradigm, set against the *real*, in his words, the "beyond the human" against the "all-too-human" (*The Scared and the Profane* 12-13). The actor's representation of a character is, as such, not quite

[28] The video of *The Constant Prince* is available on *YouTube* under the Italian title *Il Principe Constante di Jerzy Grotowski da Calderon/Slowacki Ricostruzione di Ferruccio Marotti*.

a manifestation of the sacred in the ancient or religious sense, but neither is it not not a manifestation of the sacred. That a character is not a real person is obvious. But a character as given life by the actor, acquires some of the animating force of a person regardless. This animating force might very well be the residue of the sacred that was once called into being by priests and priestly actors in past generations. The actor might be seen as an ordinary being whose transition into a character in performance is achieved through ritual (or ritual-like) action, becoming in the process a "vehicle of transition between the sacred and the profane" (Boldea 25). The actor's status thus becomes ambivalent, neither fully himself, nor completely someone else, in order to make something that would otherwise be unseen – the character and the world of the play – visible to the audience.

Eliade builds his discussion of the sacred and the profane on Rudolf Otto's concept of the "wholly other" in *Das Heilige* (*The Idea of the Holy*). *The Idea of the Holy,* published in 1917, has been considered the first systematic study of the sacred. Eliade explains that instead of "studying *ideas* of God and religion," Otto examined "modalities of *the religious experience*" (*The Sacred and the Profane* 9, emphasis in original). For these experiences Otto (1917) coined the term "numinos" (from Latin *numen,* meaning God), as for Otto, such experiences are induced by the divine force. Eliade reminds us that for Otto, the "numinous presents itself as something 'wholly other' (ganz andere), something basically and totally different" (*The Sacred and the Profane* 9). He goes on to say that sacred stones or sacred trees in some cultures "are not adored as stone or tree; they are worshipped precisely because they are *hierophanies*, because they show something that is no longer stone or tree but the *sacred*" (*The Sacred and the Profane* 12, emphasis in original).

Read through a Schechnerian lens, the sacred stone is not stone any more, but not not the stone; the sacred tree is not tree any more, but at the same time not not the tree. Is this not how an audience sees an actor? In Western theatre, at least, the audience is often invited to

see the actor as a character that is the product of a series of imaginings – by the playwright, the director, other actors, and so on – and as such, a different sort of being, potentially (if not actually) holy or sacred. In terms of this thesis, I explore the idea of hierophany as a transitional or liminal state, in which the actor's corporeal and conscious persona becomes intertwined with that of an imagined other being for a time on the stage. In doing so, I consider the actor's presence on stage as liminal, a term Schechner shares with the anthropologist Victor Turner, with whom he collaborated in theatrical experimentation.

Stanislavski famously suggested to actors – "love *art* in yourself and not *yourself* in art" (*My Life in Art* 295). Stanislavski's actor, as we commonly understand from his writings, must give himself over to the character without indulging in the vanity of the spotlight. The act of acting in this light is not necessarily a sacred act, but it does require a kind of sacrifice of ego in service of a higher ambition. Some decades later, the actor in Grotowski's theatre transcended his everyday self by surrendering his body and mind to the character performed – that is, in performing a character, the actor explored his own true self in order to "confess" it to the audience. In Grotowski's words:

> The actor who, in this special process of discipline and self-sacrifice, self-penetration and moulding, is not afraid to go beyond all normally acceptable limits, attains a kind of inner harmony and peace of mind. He literally becomes much sounder in mind and body. (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 45)

With this approach, the actor reveals one by one, all the different layers of his being, unveiling "his soul," in Grotowski's words (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 80). To be able to reveal his soul, the actor needs to work on self-searching, which is not just "the right of our profession, [but] our first duty" (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 244). This request triggers in the actor a sense of confession beyond the protective barriers that govern social interactions outside the theatre. The actor's confession in acting becomes an offering, a kind of sacrifice; the act of acting itself takes on an aura of ritual, and the theatre becomes the locus for the sacred.

By "sacrifice," I am not referring to a blood or life sacrifice, but more to the act of offering, as a gift – "where the thing given is personal to the giver and has some value for him/her" (Firth 12). In *The Gift,* Marcel Mauss suggests that sacrifice is "an act of giving that is necessarily reciprocated" (20). That is, when we sacrifice, we do so in exchange for something. René Girard, in his most recent work, *The One by Whom Scandal Comes* (2014), echoes Mauss in examining the meaning and significance of gift-giving and the three obligations in it: "to give, to receive, and to reciprocate" (13). In Grotowski's theatre, as perhaps in earlier more sacred theatres, the actor on stage makes a gift of his confession to the audience, inviting them to both see themselves reflected and, perhaps, to engage in acts of profound reflection themselves.

This act of self-penetration and self-sacrifice that makes Grotowski's actor appear to be illuminated from within by the character, might be seen in its full light in Ryszard Cieślak's performance of his character – the Constant Prince. When we look at Cieślak's performance, even on film, we remember Grotowski's assertion that the "actor must learn to use his role as if it were a surgeon's scalpel, to dissect himself" (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 37). The idea of Cieślak's performance as a kind of dissection, and as such, a sacrifice, seems very apt. In this, Cieślak embodies the very heart of Grotowski's ideas about the actor's work as sacrifice – a key aspect of ritual – and the performance, thus, as a ritual act through which some sense of the sacred might be perceived.

Ritual roots

In *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982), Turner bases his discussion of Social Drama on Arnold van Gennep's three phases in a rite of passage:[29]

[29] Turner refers to Arnold van Gennep's definition of rites of passage as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (*Ritual Process* 94); for example, any kind of initiation rituals: Christian baptism, Jewish bar or bat mitzvah, marriage, or even a graduation from school.

separation, transition, and incorporation. The first phase, separation (from the everyday circumstances), sets the boundaries between "profane or secular space and time" and "sacred space and time" (*From Ritual to Theatre* 24). Turner calls the second phase in the rite of passage, the transition (from the profane – through the sacred – to the profane), the "liminal phase" in which "the ritual subjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few (though sometimes these are most crucial) of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses" (*From Ritual to Theatre* 24). The final phase, Turner calls "reaggregation" or "incorporation"; it includes "symbolic phenomena and actions which represent the return of the subject to their new, relatively stable, well-defined position in the total society" (*From Ritual to Theatre* 24). In Turner's terms, this phase is a return to the previous status quo, only changed somewhat by the memory of the experience.

This three-phased ritual process is echoed by Schechner when he writes that "training, workshop, rehearsal, and warmups are preliminary, rites of separation" (*Between Theatre and Anthropology* 20). Schechner continues that the "performance itself is liminal, analogous to the rites of transition" (*Between Theatre and Anthropology* 20) where the actor is neither here nor there; he is suspended between the mundane world of his everyday life and the sacred world of the performance, the imaginary life of the characters. Finally, "[c]ooldown and aftermath are postliminal, rites of incorporation" (*Between Theatre and Anthropology* 20). This last phase starts with the curtain call, when the actor is back to mundane world, somewhat changed,[30] and reincorporated with the world of his everyday life. The aim of this research was to investigate that liminality of performance within the context of the work of

[30] Schechner notes that the performer he talks about, such as Cieślak, is vulnerable in the act of revealing his personal experiences, and in that process, decisions "made and actions done during performance may change the performer's life" (*Performance Theory* 54).

the actor. That is, it I set out to examine the actor's existence on the threshold of the two worlds, in a way that it might be considered to be something like the sacred.

Rationale for the research

The main reason I have undertaken to explore the sacred within the context of the actor's work, is that it came from my own lack of understanding of where the meaning of my work on stage has been, over the last decades. By reflecting on my own experience as a full time employed actor with the National Theatre in Belgrade, I could not see the full meaning for, or importance of my work any more. I once had the deep meaning for and clear importance of the actor's work on stage, when studying acting and in the early years of my professional work in theatre. The developing lack of clarity later, forced me to depart my acting journey and search for the deeper value and significance of my work on stage. In this study, I was informed by the relevant literature around the sacred in the work of the actor, but also, I reflected on my own work on stage as an actor today, in order to locate where the work of the contemporary actor might sit on that spectrum between the sacred and the profane, and how to better understand how the sacred manifests in the actor's work today.

The intention of my research was to examine the historically submerged assumption that acting is a continuous search for an unknown truth that is bigger than us and our everyday lives. I want to give value to the idea of acting as a manifestation of the sacred, and to the actor as a hierophant. Given the theatre's roots in religious ritual and its subsequent secular evolution, I ask: how might an ancient sense of the sacred even so, be located in the actor's work and the theatre now in the 21st century? How, that is, might the act of acting be seen as *hierophany* – a manifestation of the sacred ("Hierophany")? Following Richard Schechner's and Victor Turner's conceptualisations of the relationship between theatre and

ritual, this thesis considers the actor's presence on stage as liminal, as a conduit between the everyday world of the audience and the imagined world of the play.

The thesis research begins with an examination of the ritual underpinnings of classical tragedy (following René Girard), and the idea of the actor in the Greek and Elizabethan periods, as exemplified in *The Bakkhai* by Euripides and in Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*. This leads to a re-consideration of the supposed secularity of modern drama in analyses of both Stanislavski's psychophysical theories of acting, as I understand them from my own training and professional experience, and two plays: Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Finally, the thesis turns to Jerzy Grotowski's idea of the *secular sacrum* (Grotowski 49) in his direction of Ryszard Cieślak's performance in *The Constant Prince* – which for me, epitomises the idea both of acting as hierophany and of the theatre as a place where actors and audiences come to be in the presence of the sacred. This thesis therefore aimed to investigate the idea of the actor as a vehicle for the sacred throughout the history. In doing so, this thesis suggests that even today, in the most secular environment, the actor might be seen as a hierophant, and his work on stage as hierophany.

Chapter outline

Chapter One: Ancient Greek and Elizabethan Theatre

In the first chapter, this research aimed to unpack conventional understandings of the relationship between ritual, theatre, and the sacred, in ancient Greek and Elizabethan theatre. In ancient Greek tragedy, the *theatron* (viewing place, usually seating), *orchestra* (dancing area) and *skene* (stage), together with the temple overlooking the area, still held the fragments and memory of ritual construction. In Elizabethan tragedy, the structure of the playhouse retained some of the verticality of medieval Christian drama, with the "gods" at top of the scenic structure and lurking beneath the trap, the devils below. This chapter investigates the

proximity of actor to priest, and thus to hierophant, through the analyses of Euripides' *The Bakkhai* and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus.* My analysis of ancient Greek and Elizabethan theatre and tragedy is informed, in the first instance, by Aristotle's *Poetics,* and the more recent theories of René Girard,[31] whose explorations of sacrifice and gift-giving, mimetic desire, and violence in tragic theatre directly inform my thesis.

While Aristotle focuses on the relationship between religious ritual, mimesis, and tragedy, Girard, in *Violence and the Sacred*, explores tragedy in the context of ritual sacrifice, mimetic attributes of violence, and the sacred. Rene Girard suggests that scholars are still "disputing about which cult Greek tragedy should be ascribed to. Were the ancients correct in assigning tragedy to Dionysus, or does it rightfully belong to another god?" (*Violence and the Sacred* 315). Girard considers this as "a genuine problem" but goes on to propose a far "more important, but far less discussed" topic: "the relationship between tragedy and the divine, between the theater in general and religion" (*Violence and the Sacred* 315). While this chapter explores the ancient ties between theatre and religion rituals, it is not trying to rediscover the conventions and already established understandings of the ritual roots in theatre. Rather, it considers how the role of the actor at the time might be seen as a locus for the sacred in the context of the ancient Greek and Elizabethan theatre.

Chapter Two: Locating the Sacred in the Work of the Modern Theatre Actor

The second chapter of the thesis aimed to explore whether the sense of the sacred might still be located in the work of the actor in the theatre of the 19th century realists and the mid 20th century modernists and experimentalists. Moving from the religious to the profane, theatre of the 19th century went from studying universal, objective truths, to focus on subjective human

[31] Particularly René Girard's explorations of "mimetic desire" in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, "sacrifice and gift-giving" in *The One by Whom Scandal Comes*, and "violence in rituals" in *Violence and the Sacred.*

experiences. The theatre went from the religious themes to unpacking the everyday lives of the average man. This change can be seen more clearly in the work of the actor, that moved rapidly forward with the new (for the first time very systematically proposed) theories of acting proposed by Konstantin Stanislavski. In thinking and analysing the actor and his work on stage in the modern theatre, my main theorists are Aristotle and Stanislavski.

In his *The Actor's Freedom* (1975), Michael Goldman reminds us that the actor "enjoys a kind of omnipotence, a privilege and protection not unlike that accorded sacred beings" (9). He then assures us of the secular perspective to the actor's work. He adds that the actors are suspended between the higher and lower positions they have been prescribed. Goldman explains: "elevated above the community by the role they take on, but their elevation exposes them; they serve at their audience's pleasure" (13). On the other side, William B. Worthen's exploration of the actor and his work on stage in his *The Idea of the Actor* (1984), provides some additional insights into the work of the actor. More specifically, Worthen closely explores the Beckett's actor and proposes that "Beckett's drama makes extensive demands of the actor" (203). The Beckett's actor, as Worthen further suggests, "invariably articulates this dynamic equipoise between the actor's implied absence as 'representer,' and his immediate presence as 'interpreter"' (206). These (somewhat) secular theories of the actor's ambivalence on stage serve me in exploring and better understanding of the actor and his work on the 20th century secular stages.

Chapter Two leads to a re-consideration of the secularity of modern drama in analyses of both Stanislavski's theories of acting,[32] and two plays: Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull,* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Chekhov's plays are the best representatives of modern secular theatre. In his *Russian and Soviet Theatre*, Russian theatre theorist and critic

[32] For more about the System and the Method, see Konstantin Stanislavski's *An Actor's work* and *Building a Character,* and Vasily Toporkov's *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*.

Konstantin Rudnitsky marks Chekhov's *The Seagull* as "one of the greatest events in the history of Russian theatre and one of the greatest new developments in the history of world drama" (8). Its premiere in 1898 introduced audiences to the innovative acting approach shaped by Stanislavski in what later became known as his System. While Chekhov's plays and Stanislavski's theories of acting have been seen as secular, they do both contain some spiritual aspects, and the remnants of ritual might still be seen, in particular in Chekhov's *The Seagull.* In *The Seagull,* the characters are driven in large part by an appeal to the unseen forces that drive us as human beings to act. In its own way, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* carries with it an equivalent search for meaning. The circulation of the characters' movements in the *Waiting for Godot* from "should we go" to "better to stay," still keeps some of the ritualistic repetition in it. The characters sacrifice their time, in waiting for the "uncoming" force – God(ot). This chapter considers the absence of the divinity in the secularised environment of the mid 20th century, in order to investigate the actor and his work on the secular stages of the Western theatre, as a vehicle that still brings, if not the sacred, then surely some spiritual notions to the discussion.

Chapter Three: Grotowski, Cieślak, and The Constant Prince

The last chapter looks for signs of the sacred in the work of Jerzy Grotowski. As Ionesco proposes, being "cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost" (qtd in "The Absurdity of the Absurd" 671). With the "death of God," in Nietzsche's words, the existential crisis is aroused (*The Gay Science*). The crisis in theatre, according to Grotowski, was obvious too:

> I do not think that the crisis in the theatre can be separated from certain other crisis processes in contemporary culture. One of its essential elements - namely, the disappearance of the sacred and of its ritual function in the theatre - is a result of the obvious and probably inevitable decline of religion. (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 49)

Grotowski goes on to propose the solution – we need to create "a secular **sacrum** in the theatre" (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 49, emphasis in original). Being "brought up on Stanislavski" (15), Grotowski is the best lead to follow in rediscovering the sacred in the actor's work.

In addition to that, this research was interested in Grotowski's work even more, as his idea of theatre makes the actor the first and foremost element of theatre. In his words, his idea of the Poor Theatre considers "**the personal and scenic technique of the actor as the core of theatre art**" (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 15, emphasis in original). In order to locate the remnants of religious rituals in the secular theatre of the mid 20th century in the context of the actor's work and through the actor's mediation as hierophant, this chapter turns to Jerzy Grotowski's idea of the *secular sacrum* in his direction of Ryszard Cieślak's performance in *The Constant Prince*. Cieślak's performance, for me, carries the whole idea of acting as hierophany, in which the actor might be seen as a conduit for a power beyond the rational.

Conclusion to the chapter

This thesis is devoted to the exploration of the idea of the sacred in the work of the actor. Even though my initial idea was to restore the sacred in the actor's work (where the word "restore" assumed that the sacred has been vanished and lost), I came to a more accurate term, "to locate," in order to be more precise. I do not assume that the sacred is lost. However, I have noticed, within my professional experience on stage, that it has often been neglected by us (by us, I mean theatre practitioners in the first instance, but consequently by the audience as well) within the realms of the Western theatre. The sacred is not lost, then. It is more lost within, and this study aims to locate it. The question of "how to locate the sacred in the actor's work" is clearer, and gives more precision for the purposes of this research. The intention of my research was to locate the sacred in order to understand and develop its

meaning in the actor's work today. That is, to (re)develop the idea of acting as a manifestation of the sacred, and the actor as a hierophant.

In order to locate, understand, and develop the sense of the sacred in the work of the actor today, in the 21st century, this research investigates how the sacred has been manifested through the centuries, from the roots of Western theatre in Ancient Greece, to the secularity of the modern theatre in the late 19th and mid 20th centuries. That I do not use any examples and theories from the 21st century, might be seen as a limit of this research. However, the focus of my research was on locating the sacred for the actor in the Western repertoire theatre of the 21st century, to gain a better understanding of the actor's work on stage in the context of its religious roots in ritual. The thesis is not a debate with, or challenging of the obvious developments of the sacred in the 21st century theatres, such as in the indigenous, feminist, or ensemble theatres. I am an actor trained in the Western, male-dominant repertoire, and it is this tradition I am wanting to make sense of – both because it is who I am and what I do, but also because the premise that it is grounded historically in ritual and worship, is belied by the current experience. The aim of this research was thus to locate the sacred in the actor's work in order to understand and (re)develop the sense of acting as hierophany, and the actor's role on stage as a hierophant, in the contemporary Western theatre.

Even though ritual, sacrifice, and the sacred have been studied and discussed in theatre and theatre studies widely for a vast number of years, the relationship between acting and hierophany is yet to be explored. The aim of my thesis, therefore, was to locate, examine, and give value to the evocation of the sacred as part of the actor's work, both to double my own sense of who I am as an everyday person, with whom my character might become in the imagined world of a play, and to make present on the stage, the social and spiritual forces active beyond the everyday. The theatre is for me, as Grotowski suggests in his *Towards a*

Poor Theatre, an encounter with others, and with the self that requires a dedication to actions that might be seen as ritual, culminating in an experience of sacrifice and the sacred (55).

As an actor immersed in the European and American repertoire, mostly performed within the National Theatre,[33] the institution that epitomizes the traditions of the Western theatre, I ask the question: How the act of acting might be seen as hierophany, and the actor as a hierophant, even now, in the contemporary Western theatre? Yarrow goes on in his investigation of the sacred in theatre, and asks: "Why bother to write about the 'sacred?'" (*Sacred Theatre* 14). He then answers his own question as follows:

> Firstly, because there is a substantial, if varied, body of work relating to theatre and performance which hovers around this area, and it is a useful way of bringing much of it together and seeing what it might be about. Secondly, because we need a redefinition of the terms which tend to get used, in order to release the theatre and performance processes relating to this area from claims of exclusivity and ownership by doctrines, dogmas and reified ideologies. Thirdly, because theatre activates forms of knowing and stimulates ways of being and doing – many of which are currently more specifically approached under the heading of performance. (14)

In "The Phenomenology of Nonidentity: Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*," William Haney reminds us of Richard Schechner's observation that

> … the drama is what the writer writes; the script is the interior map of a particular production; the theater is the specific set of gestures performed by the performers in any given performance; the performance is the whole event, including audience and performers (technicians, too, anyone who is there). (*Performance Theory* 87)

Growing out of that, Haney suggests that:

> … in terms of sacred experience, while reading the script can no doubt evoke the liminal, the optimal intersubjective experience of liminality, one that interfuses the verbal and the transcendental, the sacred and the profane is certainly that of the performance itself. ("The Phenomenology of Nonidentity: Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*" 69)

Therefore, close reading of the chosen plays for my research aided me to summon the liminal, by recognising the elements of the sacred within the written material, so I could

[33] I acknowledge the other evolutions, such as in feminist theatre or in ensemble work in Massive theatre and Equal Voices Arts theatre. However, here I am writing about the theatre that I am most experienced with, and about my own experience of acting in repertory theatre. I want in this research to locate the sacred in the work I find myself doing, in formal, Western theatre, where it is often most overlooked.

explore them in practice through the rehearsal process, in order to understand not just the sacred itself, but the experience of it as well. This research might also be seen as a self-reflective journey, and sometimes I use my own experience on stage as practical examples.

In each chapter, by looking for the representation and the residue of the sacred throughout the history of the theatre and the selected play texts, this research aimed to follow Yarrow's suggestion in preparation, to gain a deeper knowledge and comprehension of what acting as hierophany might mean today. That is, this thesis aimed to gather the substantial body of work relating to the theatre and the sacred and to redefine the meaning of the sense of the sacred, in order to build a deeper understanding of the actor's work as a manifestation of the sacred and the actor as a hierophant, in a way that it could not be possible otherwise.

Acting, as a commonplace in everyday life, has a very unfortunate connotation: it means lying and pretending. Even in the theatre, directors often say to actors: "just don't act, please." But acting for me, is a continuous search for the truth that is greater than us. The actor is not merely pretending on stage; by being present in the moment, his being becomes something more fluid, opening a channel between the place where he stands and the imagined world of the performance. Being centred in that moment, suspended in time, in that flow in between the two worlds, verges on an experience of sacred. It makes everything I do as an actor purposeful and meaningful. It is profound. Apprehending an idea of acting as engaged in finding, transmitting, and surrounding people with the truth that is bigger than us, in the same way that we might have once done in ritual, is what I sought to achieve with this research. Finding that clarity, purity, and the danger that we can see as resistance, resignation, and sacrifice in Cieślak's Prince, is what I wanted to understand as the sacred in the actor's work.

Chapter One: Ancient Greek and Elizabethan Theatre

Introduction to the chapter

I was taught at school when learning about ancient Greek theatre, that the theatre's roots are in religious ritual, rites performed at the Festival of Dionysus, the god of grape-harvest, wine and fertility. The theatre was outdoors, built into a hillside in the shadow of the temple. The stage, the *proscenium*, was a narrow platform, backed by the *skene* – a backdrop most often depicting a palace, with great doors at the centre. It was on the proscenium – the forestage – that the actors performed, portraying heroes, and gods, as well as ordinary people. Above the skene was the *theologeion*, on which the gods would appear, transported to the stage floor by a *deus ex machina* – literally translated as the god in the machine.[34] On the ground in front of the proscenium was the *orchestra*, or dancing place, on which the chorus performed. At the orchestra's centre was a *thymele*, an altar around which we believe they danced. The chorus entered on either side of the orchestra via the *parodoi* (side entrances). The audience was seated in a banked semicircle around the orchestra, rising in tiers in the *theatron* – the viewing place. The 20,000 or so spectators (all male citizens were required to attend), were organised according to status: from priests and city leaders in the front rows to the lower classes high up at the back. Like the chorus, spectators entered and exited via the *parodoi*.

In the same way, I learnt that Greek tragedy was largely fixed on stories of human heroes – kings primarily – who were, in the course of the dramatic action, confronted with the power of the gods, as witnessed by the other characters – nobility, priests, and servants – in ways that led to their downfall and death. The chorus represented the ordinary people and would sing, chant, and dance, in response to the awe-full story being enacted. Reading

[34] This is a Latin phrase, arising after the period of the great Greek tragedies, but even though there was a Greek term for this (ἀπὸ μηχανῆς θεός), in our theatre history classes this is what we used. In the former Yugoslavia where I learnt this, the atheism of the state dictated that "deus" would be translated as "ghost."

Aristotle's *Poetics* in class, we came quickly to see that in feeling pity for the fallen hero and fear that the gods would turn against more ordinary people, the audience was expected to experience a catharsis – a kind of purification – as they reconciled themselves to the powerlessness of human life in the face of forces beyond human control. The stories were well-known to the original audiences, and so we learnt that the point was to be present as the performance unfolded, to bear witness alongside the chorus and the minor players, to the power of the gods to punish those who crossed them. The theatre of the ancient Greeks, as I was given to understand when I was training as an actor, thus carried within it, multiple aspects of religious ritual, even though it was placed in a newly secular society and aimed as much towards affirming the power of the state, as it was to reinforce the might of the gods.

When the time came to attend my first classes on the theatre of Shakespeare's time, the same pattern was impressed upon me: the formerly religious drama of the Middle Ages was made newly secular as the modern English state came into being. When I first studied Shakespearean theatre, it was the outdoor stage – the Globe – that was our focus. I learnt that the Elizabethan theatre retained remnants of the Medieval period, in particular with the verticality of the playing area reflecting three tiers of human existence: Heaven with God and the angels above, Hell with Satan and the devils below, and Earth for the rest of us in the middle. The placement of the audience reflected the hierarchy of the theatre as a whole: the poor stood in the pit, on the ground in front of the stage, while citizens of the higher classes were sat in the three semi-circular galleries above; the nobility sitting on the third gallery overlooked both the stage and the lower classes below. The theatre in newly Protestant England was superficially secular and itself a low entertainment, but even so, the highest point in the stage house was referred to as "the gods,"[35] and the trapdoor at the centre of the platform made way for devils and other denizens of Hell. The plays made reference to gods –

[35] Ironically, in contemporary playhouses, "the gods" refers to the cheap seats in the highest balcony.

both Christian and archaic – and to the Devil or Devils, but were very much a part of the early modern world. Actors were thus positioned against a physical backdrop representing the order of the world from high to low, and sacred to damned, and appeared within a metaphysical universe in which religious belief and ritual were still pre-eminent, albeit at some distance. They sometimes embodied gods and demons, but more often the characters they portrayed, from kings to the most ordinary people, were quintessentially human, caught between Heaven and Hell.

In this chapter, I recall these lessons in the emergence of a secular or civic theatre from religious ritual in order to look again at the actor's role in relation to the invocation of the sacred in tragic theatre during the ancient Greek and Elizabethan periods. I begin, as my theatre history classes invariably did, with Aristotle's *Poetics*, because he was the first to talk of the emergence of theatre from religious ritual. Other key readings include Victor Turner's and Richard Schechner's explorations of ritual and theatre, as well as Rene Girard's *Violence and the Sacred,* which offers insights into the relationship between ritual and dramatic action in the Hellenistic period. Here I turn to the works of Keith Thomas and Michael Goldman to better understand the Elizabethan era and the work of the actor. Even half a century after it was first published, Thomas' *Religion and the Decline of Magic* is still foundational to understanding the theatre of the English Renaissance period. In *The Actor's Freedom: Toward a Theory of Drama*, Goldman explores the drama's transformation into performance through the work of the actor, proposing that acting "transforms adaptation into assimilation as the actor's special kind of mimesis transforms the terror of what is outside the actor into the terrificness of his performance" (90). Goldman adds that:

> The actor is a figure of power and danger, of pity and fear, because he is at once the otherness that threatens - now uncannily animate - and the threatened self, daring in its exposure and ambition. We "identify" with the character he plays, with him-playing-the-character, because we respond to the energy with which he inhabits his new identity. (122-123)

This chapter looks for signs of Goldman's idea of "special kind of mimesis" (90) as the actor invokes the terror of the divine and the demonic in *The Bakkhai* and *Doctor Faustus*. I explore the structure of the stages in ancient Greece and Elizabethan England to discover how they can be seen to reflect the theatre's ritual antecedents. In taking an approach that works between the dramaturgical and the theatrical – that is the text and its performance – I ask: How do the words of the play make its world – both sacred and secular – visible to us? How does what the characters say and do, along with the place and the shape of the theatre itself, reflect and construct ideas about the actor's work insofar as it serves to provide a locus for the sacred?

To answer these questions, I have selected a key play text from each period for close reading and analysis in its original social and theatrical contexts: Euripides' ancient Greek tragedy *The Bakkhai*, and Christopher Marlowe's Elizabethan tragedy, *Doctor Faustus*. Both plays explicitly engage with the question of how human beings are to stand in relation to the divine. In *The Bakkhai*, the god Dionysus is the protagonist, represented on stage by an actor whose performance might have been not so far removed from a priest in its invocation of divine power. In *Doctor Faustus*, the Christian God is absent from the stage, but the character of Mephistopheles representing the powers of Hell, is omnipresent throughout. How might we view the work of the actors in representing a god, in the first, and a demon, in the second? What cues might remain to us, dramaturgically and theatrically, that can point the way towards coming to understand the actor as a conduit for forces beyond the human, then and there, and, also perhaps, even here and now?

The structure of ancient Greek tragedy and the actors' place in it

For the purposes of my thesis, my literature starts with Aristotle and spreads to the second half of the 20th century. I am using the theories within this spectrum, as each of the theorists

used to support my argument was a contemporary of an author I explore throughout my case studies. In exploring the birth of Western theatre and its roots in ritual, it is inevitable to begin with Aristotle and his *Poetics*. Aristotle starts his investigation of theatre by suggesting that the core of all forms of art lies in "mimesis," that is, in imitation. Aristotle goes on to propose that the forms of art "differ, however, from one another in three aspects – the medium, the objects, the manner or mode of imitation, being in each case distinct" (49). The objects of imitation, according to Aristotle, "are men in action" (52). He, also, goes further to explain that "we must represent men either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are" (52). Later on, in the same chapter, Aristotle offers the distinction between two forms of theatre, Comedy and Tragedy, proposing that "for Comedy aims at representing men worse, Tragedy better than in actual life" (52). Aligned with this, is that both Comedy and Tragedy aim to represent men beyond the everyday lives of the audiences. In Tragedy, Aristotle suggests, the figures of the drama should be elevated, above ordinary men. They are most often representations or personifications of heroes and kings, and sometimes, gods. Because the stories are from the ancient past – i.e., Greek myths and legends[36] – a time when the power of the gods was closer to the world of men – these characters in Greek tragedy as scripted and as represented, might be seen to carry something of the manifestation of the sacred within them.[37]

My reading of Greek tragedy is in two intersecting parts: the dramaturgical and the theatrical. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle proposes six main elements of tragedy: Plot, Character, Thought, Diction, Spectacle, and Song (62). For Aristotle, the main principle is Plot, which he says is "the soul of a tragedy" (63), and with Character and Thought, can be seen to serve

[36] We might say that myths and legends are the stories of the past religion and history, and they are often more closely intertwined. In this, I mean no disrespect to call faith "myth." I pick up this thread when I come to discuss Schechner's ideas later.

[37] This is not unlike the way that O. B. Hardison Jr. discusses the Mass as both rite and spectacle. More about this might be found in the section on Elizabethan tragedy.

as the dramaturgical infrastructure of Greek tragedy: its action, figuration, and ideas or meaning. The second three elements – Diction, Spectacle, and Song – are theatrical. That is, these elements are the way in which the ideas of the play are brought to fruition. By following Aristotle's model for analysis, it is possible to ask with some precision, first, how might ideas of the sacred be seen to be represented in the plot, character, and thought of the tragedy, and second, how then might these be made visible to the audience through the tragedy's use of diction, spectacle, and song. In this thesis, however, it is still useful to begin the analysis of *The Bakkhai* by setting the stage, so that we can better see how it provided a platform for the actor to draw the spectator's attention towards the ideas of the sacred he was thus representing.

Francis Fergusson reminds us in his introduction (1968) to Aristotle's *Poetics*, that "Greek tragedy has been understood as an outgrowth of the rites celebrated annually at the Festivals of Dionysus" (36). In this, Fergusson directly reflects Aristotle's claim that tragedy "originated with the authors of the Dithyramb" (63), and his discussion of the *Poetics* can be seen to be in line with those of earlier classical scholars. For example, according to Jane Ellen Harrison (a turn of the 20th century British classical scholar whose *Themis, A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* [1912] is considered foundational to the field), the Dithyramb "is a *dromenon* of the New Birth" (xi, emphasis in original). She suggests that the *dromenon* is a rite and "in its sacral sense is, not merely a thing done, but a thing *re*-done, or *pre*-done with magical intent" (xi, emphasis in original). Thus, she concludes, in tragedy "we may expect to find survivals of a ritual" (xi). Following Harrison, I am interested in exploring further the survival of ritual in the work of the actor. That is, if I look at the actor's work on stage as something re-done, with the magical intent of making the invisible world of the play text – a visible world of the performance – then it might be possible to see that the actor still has a somewhat priestly role in the theatre today.

In studying the ritual origins of Greek Tragedy, British classicists Gilbert Murray and Francis Cornford, who gathered around Harrison in the early 20th century in Cambridge, United Kingdom (UK), developed influential theories on the relationship between ritual and theatre in their subsequent studies: Harrison's *Themis*, Cornford's *The Origins of Attic Comedy* and Murray's *Five Stages of Greek Religion*. Harrison's *Themis* also includes "Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy" in which Murray proposes that "Tragedy is in origin a Ritual Dance, a *Sacer Ludus*" (341, emphasis in original). Murray adds that "the Dance in question is originally or centrally that of Dionysus; and it regards Dionysus, in this connection, as the spirit of the Dithyramb […] an "Eniautos-Daimon," who represents the cyclic death and rebirth of the world, including the rebirth of the tribe by the return of the heroes or dead ancestors" (341). He continues with a suggestion: "while the content has strayed far from Dionysus, the forms of tragedy retain clear traces of the original drama of the Death and Rebirth of the Year Spirit" (342). It may be that Harrison, Murray, et al. were indirectly at least responding to the Dionysian assertions made by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Regardless, even now, in the 21st century, Western theatre scholars and practitioners take as read that the theatre has its beginnings in Greek tragedy, which had its roots in the Dithyrambic ritual dance performed in honour to Dionysus, the god of grape-harvest, wine and fertility, but also the god of insanity, ritual madness, and religious ecstasy.

Following the theatre historians' suggestion that the theatre of ancient Greece emerged from ritual, we can look for the residue of ritualistic structures and practices in the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides as they were originally performed. The place of the actor, from this perspective, was still something like that of the priest, and his actions were patterned in ways that could be seen to resemble those of a leader of a congregation in worship. The actor, in presenting a character, would be giving form to gods

and heroes from this earlier time, and in his performance, he shows us these figures in action in order to invoke recognition of their power and the truth of the stories they enacted. As a result, then, there would have been a kind of collective agreement in the rightness of that representation. Aristotle points towards this way of understanding Greek tragedy in its original frame, when he tells us that the scene of recognition and reversal was a prelude to the scene of suffering, thus evoking pity and fear, as well as catharsis in the audience. In more contemporary terms, we might look to Victor Turner's articulations of the ritual process for his ideas of the liminal and liminality in relation to communitas.

From religious ritual to ancient Greek theatre

First introduced in his *The Ritual Process*, and after collaborating with Richard Schechner, exploring in the context of theatre, in his *From Ritual to Theatre*, Turner brought attention to the importance of liminality and the sense of communitas in ritual. Turner links the idea of the individual in transition to that of a society in transition, when he puts forward his theories of Social Drama. Turner builds his theories, following van Gennep's rites of passage.[38] He reminds us that van Gennep's first phase of the rite of passage, separation (from the everyday circumstances), sets the boundaries between the "profane or secular space and time" and "sacred space and time" (24). Turner goes on to say that van Gennep calls the second phase in the rite of passage, the transition, limen, or margin, in which "the ritual subjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few […] of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses" (24). The final phase, van Gennep calls "reaggregation," and it includes "the return of the subject to their new, relatively stable, well-defined position in the total society" (24).

[38] Turner refers to Arnold van Gennep's definition of rites of passage as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (*Ritual Process* 94); for example, any kind of initiation rituals: Christian baptism, Jewish bar or bat mitzvah, marriage, or even a graduation from school.

Turner structures his concept of Social Drama by both building on van Gennep's ideas of the rites of passage, and by looking at the sacred drama of the ancient Greece. In the development of his concept, Turner follows the Aristotelian structure of the classical tragedy and ritual process in ancient Greece – where the structure of the tragedy needs to have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Turner, then, sets his four phases of Social Drama: breach, crisis, redressive action, and reconciliation/separation (*From Ritual to Theatre* 92). I see this in Aristotle's terms, as beginning (breach), middle (crisis and redressive action) and end (reconciliation/separation). Moving closer to the theatrical perspective, in *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, Richard Schechner suggests that the actor goes through the similar three stages: separation (rehearsals), transition (a liminal stage of performance), and incorporation (a curtain call). Further on, in *Performance Studies*, Schechner reminds us that Turner coins the term "liminoid" to distinguish the ritual-like action such as theatre, from rituals per se. As Schechner explains: "If the liminal includes 'communication of sacra' and 'ludic recombinations and inversions,' the liminoid includes the arts and popular entertainments" (67). For the purposes of my thesis, I am most interested in this transitional, liminal phase of the ritual, or what Turner calls, "the liminoid phase," the one that includes "communication of sacra" and "ludic recombinations and inversions" (*Performance Studies* 67). That is to say, the one in which the participant is neither here nor there, and neither what he was before the ritual, nor what he is becoming.

If we think of the liminal stage in theatrical terms, as Richard Schechner does, we can see the actor as being neither himself nor the character he is enacting, but somehow both at the same time. This is what Schechner observes in his *Between Theater and Anthropology* as a key notion in the actor's work on stage – the "transitional phenomena," inspired by the

work of Donald Winnicott[39] – being "not me, but not not me" at the same time. Schechner further explains:

> Elements that are "not me" become "me" without losing their "not me-ness." This is the peculiar but necessary double negativity that characterizes symbolic actions. While performing, a performer [. . .] no longer has a "me" but has a "not not me." (*Between Theater and Anthropology* 111-112)

Schechner uses the example of the famous performance of Laurence Olivier as Hamlet, to observe that:

> During workshops-rehearsals performers play with words, things, and actions, some of which are "me" and some "not me." By the end of the process the "dance goes into the body." So Olivier is not Hamlet, but he is also not not Hamlet. The reverse is also true: in this production of the play, Hamlet is not Olivier, but he is also not not Olivier. (110)

Following Schechner, we might say that Olivier-as-Hamlet exists in this transitional space and time of the performance, when he is neither himself nor the character, but also both at the same time.

When it comes to the ancient Greek theatre, we know that the actor wore a large head-dress and big shoes, that he was larger than life and projected his voice beyond what is ordinarily humanly possible. While performing, the actor knows that he is not himself any more, as he does not walk, talk, or think as himself, he breathes differently, he does not wear his own clothes, and he does not verbalise his own thoughts. However, at the same time, the actor is absolutely aware that he is not the character, that that is just a thing to be performed, and that he himself created that same walk, talk, and breath, during the rehearsal process, that he wears a costume, and that those thoughts belong equally to the performer, to the character, and to the writer. Thus, as Schechner suggests, the actor while performing on stage, lives somewhere in "between denial of being another (= I am me) and denial of not being another

[39] See more on the notion of "transitional objects" in Donald Winnicott's *Playing and Reality*.

(= I am Hamlet)" (123); in other words, the actor dwells "in between identities" (*Between Theater and Anthropology* 123).

The actor, who dwells in between identities then, is visible to the spectators in a way that mediates between their world – the world of the audience – and the world of the play. The actor as a character exists as the illusion for the audience in their own "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment" (Coleridge 5).[40] Building on Coleridge's concept of the willing suspension of disbelief, Schechner proposes the difference between "make-belief" and "make believe" performances (*Performance Studies* 43). For Schechner, "make-believe performances maintain a clearly marked boundary between the world of the performance and everyday reality," while "make-belief performances intentionally blur or sabotage that boundary" (*Performance Studies* 43). In other words, when we watch the international touring production of *The Lion King*, the lights in the audience slowly dim, and we know we are about to watch the illusion where the actor is not a lion, but an actor pretending to be a lion, and when we look at Grotowski's *The Constant Prince*, we can see that there was a wooden wall in front of the audience and they had to peek over it to see the ill fate of Prince Ferdinand of Portugal. The lights did not change in order to announce the performance was about to start, and there was no curtain call to mark the end of the performance. Instead, we had a wall in front of us, so the need for us to not watch but only to peek, and the non-changing lights and no curtain call, all suggest that the event was already happening, and we were only witnessing it. No matter which kind of performance the actor is in, the one in which he makes audience belief, or in which he makes the audience believe, it is not real – the actor's urge to cross the boundaries and go beyond the real world as well as his need to become something more than himself is always there, as seen in both *The Constant Prince*

[40] Here I am turning to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his term "willing suspension of disbelief" - coined by Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria*. This suspension means that one allows oneself to believe something that is not real and true in order to enjoy the entertainment.

and in *The Lion King*.

Rather than seeing theatre and ritual as separate entities, Schechner observes the relationship between ritual and theatre as "the efficacy-entertainment dyad" (*Performance Studies* 79). He suggests that "efficacy and entertainment are not binary opposites […] they are the poles of a continuum" (79), and he distinguishes ritual as "efficacy" that offers some "results" as an outcome, and theatre as "entertainment" that offers fun (80). Schechner goes on to attribute to ritual, qualities such as timeless time (the eternal present), in which the performer is possessed (in a trance), he is using traditional scripts and behaviours, with the possible outcome of transformation of his self (80). The audience in ritual participates and believes (80). On the other side, Schechner ascribes to theatre the following counter qualities: it has a historical time (or now), in which the performer is self-aware (in control), he is using new and traditional scripts and behaviours, but the possible outcomes of transformation of his self is unlikely (80). The audience in theatre observes, appreciates, and evaluates (80). Schechner then concludes that "the move from aesthetic performance to ritual happens when an audience of individuals is transformed into a community," and adds that the "tendencies to move in both these directions are present in all performances" (81). We might say then, that every theatre has some of the qualities of ritual – most of them (as we could see in *The Constant Prince*), or only a few of them (as possible to be seen in *The Lion King*) – depending only on how much ritual a production chose to include.

In discussing performance theories, Schechner moves forward to distinguish two types of liminal experiences – being transported and being transformed (*Performance Studies* 72). He suggests that liminal rituals "are transformations, permanently changing who people are" (72). On the other hand, theatre performances are "effecting temporary change – sometimes nothing more than a brief communitas experience" – and roles that are played for several hours are transportations" (71). That is, in a liminal ritual, the participant was one

person before the ritual, a liminal neither-nor person during the ritual, and a changed person (unmarried man to neither unmarried nor married man, to married man) on exiting the ritual. In terms of the theatre and its actors, then an actor is one person before the performance, neither-nor person (with the qualities of the both at the same time) during the performance, and back to his (mostly) unchanged self after the performance (actor to neither actor nor the character, or both the actor and the character merged together, to actor). However, in a liminal ritual, the priest goes through a similar transportation as does the actor in a theatre. The priest serves the ritual, and through that, transports the participant, but comes out of the ritual (mostly) unchanged. In this, then, we may recognise the priestly role that the actor still pertains in theatre today.

Thus, we can see that the work of the actor lies in this liminal existence somewhere in between belief and disbelief (or believe and disbelieve), in between ritual and play (efficacy and entertainment), and in between identities (actor and the character). In addressing the audience's willing suspension of disbelief and the liminal space between real and not real, that exists in both ritual and theatre, Schechner adds that the "hierarchies that usually set off actuality as 'real' and fantasy as 'not real' are dissolved for the 'time being,' the play time" (*Between Theatre and Anthropology* 110, emphasis in original). In this light, the actor in performing in a transitional or liminal state, for the time being, sets the stage for the audience to perceive the unseen other in a shared act of imagination, and through the action of the play to come to an experience of, if not an Aristotelian concept of catharsis, then perhaps an experience of communitas (in Turner's terms) in recognition of the greater truth represented as a result.

Hierophany and the work of the ancient Greek actor

In studying ritual, Victor Turner suggests that his concept of liminality offers a "blend of

lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship" (*The Ritual Process* 96). Turner finds that this notion of the sacred comes from the liminal phase in the *rites de passage,* in which participants change their positions. He adds that something of "the sacredness of that transient humility and modelessness goes over, and tempers the pride of the incumbent of a higher position or office" (*The Ritual Process* 97). Turner continues to suggest that we "are presented, in such rites, with a 'moment in and out of time,' and in and out of secular social structure which reveals […] some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond" (*The Ritual Process* 96). He concludes that it is "a matter of giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be *no* society" (*The Ritual Process* 97, emphasis in original).

If we come full circle from Turner back to the theatre from which he drew his inspiration, then we can see the actor in ancient Greek tragedy as entering a liminal state onstage where he becomes the locus for the sacred by representing the character and creating a liminal space in interacting with the other characters and chorus over the course of the performance, (potentially) expanding this to encompass the audience, which then experiences communitas. Given the power of the State and the force of the gods thus represented, this communitas can be assumed to be ideological rather than spontaneous, a prescribed response to the invocation of the sacred and its alignment with the power of the State.

In the ancient Greek theatre, we can see that the plays inscribe the same journey as the rites of passage suggest, from a status quo, through crisis, to a new status quo. It might also be said that the actor and audience occupy a transitional state that lasts for the duration of the performance before returning them to the former status quo. Turner, as discussed in previous paragraphs, describes the liminal in ritual as the phase in which subjects are separated from their everyday lives and set in "a period and area of ambiguity," in a "sacred space and time." However, Turner also highlights that:

> … it is more than just a matter of entering a temple – there must be in addition a rite which changes the quality of *time* also, or construct a cultural realm which is defined as "out of time," i.e., beyond or outside the time which measures secular process and routines. (*From Ritual to Theatre* 24, emphasis in original)

Turner's idea of time out of time echoes Schechner's notion of the time being, or the play time in both ritual and theatre.

Schechner's and Turner's explorations of time drew my attention to the similar observation made by Mircea Eliade in studying sacred time and myths. Eliade reminds us of a proposition from an ancient Indian text: "[w]e must do what the Gods did in the beginning" (*Shatapatha Brāhmana*, as cited in *The Sacred and the Profane* 98). Following this, Eliade argues that the core of each ritual lies in the re-enactment of primordial acts performed by gods. "A bacchant," Eliade then suggests, "through his orgiastic rites, imitates the drama of the suffering Dionysos" (*Cosmos and History* 22). He then proposes that the "rite makes the myth present." (*Rites and Symbols of Initiation* 6). That is by performing the rite, the ancient man "detaches himself from profane time and magically re-enters the Great Time, the sacred time" (*Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* 23). The sacred time, or "*illo tempore*" in Eliade's terms, refers to "*ab origine*," the time in the beginning (*Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* 23). In re-enacting primordial divine acts in *illo tempore,* the participant in ritual hopes to re-establish the ontological or social orders of his own time.

If we follow Eliade's concept, then the same might be said for the ancient Greek actor while acting on stage. In performing Greek tragedy, the ancient Greek actors re-enacted what the gods and mythical heroes did "in the beginning," and in doing so, detached themselves from the profane time of the audience and entered the sacred time of the tragedy. Through the actor's work on stage, by watching the tragedy, the audience could also enter that sacred time. Following both Eliade's concept of the sacred time and Aristotle's idea of catharsis, in "*illo tempore*" the audience witnesses the powerful deeds of the gods and the sufferings of mythical heroes, so through the fear and pity of the audience, order can emerge from chaos.

Eliade's "*illo tempore*," Turner's "time out of time," and Schechner's "play time" are all set in liminal time and space, in between now and then, here and there – that liminal sacred time and space in which the audience, even today, witnesses the actor who is not himself, but not not himself, on stage. In performing tragedy, the Greek actor was perhaps not a god, but was still recognised as a god by the Greek audiences; this process might be seen as hierophany, and the actor as such, a hierophant.

By looking at the real world community around himself, Turner used Greek tragedy as his lens, to better understand social development, particularly the transitional phase of its process. As I am also interested in the liminal phase in theatre, where the actor's work on stage belongs, I use a close reading of not just theatre theorists, but also sociologists who used Aristotle as a lens for their own studies. Thus, I ask how, do other theorists re-read Aristotle in order to locate the sacred in the actor's work (i.e., sociologists, rather than theatre scholars)? However, the social input of theatre and how that reflects the wider society, helps me observe theatre and the actor's work in a way that merely reading Aristotle cannot do. That is, by looking closely at how others re-read Aristotle, I might better understand the question I am asking in this thesis, in a way that I would not understand otherwise. That is, if we accept that this liminal, middle part, where the actor performs on stage, is the actor's world in which the process of hierophany arises, then we understand that while in that part, the actor dwells in a space wherein the communication of the *sacra* (that is, sacred), the mythic action, and the crisis happen.

Violence and remnants of sacrificial rites in Greek tragedy

In order to better understand the connection between the myths and violence, I now turn to Rene Girard and his theories. In *Rene Girard: Violence and Mimesis*, Dr Chris Fleming, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Social Analysis at Western Sydney University,

Australia, proposes that myth narrates the sacred. He starts by reminding us of Jean-Pierre Vernant's seminal work *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, in which Vernant argues that since ancient Greece, myth has been considered as both fictional and irrational. However, Fleming points out that Carl Jung insists on "myth's epistemological acuity and even ontological supremacy over other forms of thought and knowledge" (Fleming 77). He then invites Girard into the conversation by suggesting that "Girard does not ultimately endorse either" (77): Fleming goes on:

> Rather, he suggests, myth possesses elements integral to both of these characterizations and yet is not quite reducible to either. Girard argues that myths stand as partial representations *and* partial obfuscations of mimetic violence, and operate primarily via (specifiable) processes of narrative transformation; myths, in other words – like ritual […] – recall something they don't clearly *comprehend*. (77 emphasis in original)

In this ambiguity, we might observe the sense of the sacred in the myths. Fleming, then, concludes that for Girard "it is not 'suppressed desire' that is at the heart of mythology, but the terror of violence" (78).

I now turn to Rene Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, a study of the origins of myths and religion, in which Girard explores the notions of the "sacrificial crisis," and the role violence plays in sacrificial rites. Myth represents, he proposes, a "retrospective transfiguration of sacrificial crises, the reinterpretation of these crises in light of the cultural order that has arisen from them" (*Violence and the Sacred* 64). As he reminds us: "The Cambridge Ritualists and their disciples have based their interpretation of the role of the pharmakos on the idea that seasonal change – the 'death' and 'resurrection' of nature constitutes the original model for the rite" (95). However, he argues against this, suggesting that "there is nothing in nature that could encourage or even suggest such an atrocious sort of ritual killing as the death of the pharmakos" (96). In Girard's opinion, "the sole possible model remains the sacrificial crisis and its resolution." (96). Again, the terror of violence sits as a central point of the myth. In Euripides' *The Bakkhai* (and also in Marlowe's *Doctor*

Faustus) the heart of the story is the terror of the violence. It could therefore be said that the remnants of myth are present in both plays.

This brings me back to René Girard and his re-reading of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Girard claims that in exploring and studying tragedy, "Aristotle failed to penetrate the secret of sacrificial rites" (*Violence and the Sacred* 291). In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard thus decides to study Greek tragedy as a residue of ancient sacrificial rites, and explore in more depth the role of violence has in this. Girard notes that historians usually agree that Greek tragedy was born in the transitional period in Athens, between the old state order ruled by theocracy, and the new secular state (42). He adds that before "its decline the archaic order must have enjoyed a certain stability; and this stability must have reposed on its religious element – that is, on the sacrificial rites" (42). Girard argues that "[t]o a real extent it is sacrificial religion that provides the language for these dramas; the criminal in the plays sees himself not so much as a righter-of-wrongs as a performer-of sacrifices" (43). He proposes a "sacrificial crisis" as the key element of sacrificial rites and as such, a useful tool in understanding Greek tragedy.

Girard goes on to indicate symmetry as a core aspect of Greek tragedy: "If the art of tragedy is to be defined in a single phrase, we might do worse than call attention to one of its most characteristic traits: the opposition of symmetrical elements" (44). As he explains, there "is no aspect of the plot, form, or language of a tragedy in which this symmetrical pattern does not recur" (44), reminding us that even the "symmetry of the tragic dialogue is perfectly mirrored by the stichomythia, in which the two protagonists address one another in alternating lines." (44). So, how does this symmetry become crucial in Greek tragedy to Girard? The tragedy is, according to Girard, "the balancing of the scale, not of justice but of violence. No sooner is something added to one side of the scale than its equivalent is contributed to the other" (45). He goes on and concludes: "The conflict stretches on

interminably because between the two adversaries there is no difference whatsoever" (45). We can say then, that the newly established disbalance, the lack of distinctions, the "opposition of symmetrical elements," drives people into confrontation, that is, into a sacrificial crisis, which ignites the tragedy (44). This calls upon the sacrificial rites, and invites violence in to re-establish the previous order, so peace can again be summoned.

We can agree with Girard's proposal that "[o]nly violence can put an end to violence, and that is why violence is self-propagating" (*Violence and the Sacred* 26). Girard, then, goes on to propose that everyone "wants to strike the last blow, and reprisal can thus follow reprisal without any true conclusion ever being reached" (26). That is why the key role of sacrificial rites is "to "purify" violence; that is, to "trick" violence into spending itself on victims whose death will provoke no reprisals" (36). This purification of the violence, the "trick," the ritual sacrifice that "serves to protect the entire community from its own violence," might be seen as the locus for the sacred in ancient Greek sacrificial rites (8). Girard suggests that the scapegoat sacrificed within the ritual, or *pharmakos* in Ancient Greek, like Oedipus in the Sophocles' tragedy, "has a dual connotation":

> On the one hand he is a woebegone figure, an object of scorn who is also weighed down with guilt; a butt for all sorts of gibes, insults, and of course, outbursts of violence. On the other hand, we find him surrounded by a quasi-religious aura of veneration; he has become a sort of cult object. This duality reflects the metamorphosis the ritual victim is designed to effect; the victim draws to itself all the violence infecting the original victim and through its own death transforms this baneful violence into beneficial violence, into harmony and abundance. (*Violence and the Sacred* 95)

As I assume that the actor carries the residue of the ritual, and the resonance of this duality, I am keen to explore the actor's work on stage in this light. In performing a character, the actor's own self is surrounded by the aura of the self of the character he performs. He is both himself and the character he performs, but at the same time he is neither of them. By investigating the duality of the *pharmakos* (scapegoat) in Ancient Greek tragedy, I aim to

understand the ambiguity of the actor's work today, when we might still see the residue of the sacred in the secular world.

Euripides' *The Bakkhai*

In order to better understand the work of the ancient Greek actor in the context of the sacred, I now look at the actor and his work through a theatrical lens. I also turn to the dramaturgical aspect of the actor's work, analysing words he was uttering/singing in three scenes from Euripides' *The Bakkhai*: the first scene in which Dionysus tells us who he is and what his plan is, the scene of misrecognition when Pentheus fails to recognise the god, and the final scene of revelation, when other characters (along with the audience) through fear and pity, see the real god and his power.

At the beginning of the play, the audience sees the actor representing Dionysus alone on the stage. The first lines tell us that he, Dionysus, is in disguise as a human priest. His purpose is to avenge himself on the city for failing to recognise his divinity. The audience is always aware that he is in fact, a god, because he has announced this. However, none of the other characters is so aware. Throughout the play, Dionysus is recognised by the other characters as a Stranger. The failure to recognise him as a god is literalised in the text and performance of the play. This failure is crucial throughout the play, as the misrecognition of the god, actually emphasises the audience's recognition of Dionysus' divinity. The dramatic action then, is directed towards the moment at the end when the actor performing the character of Dionysus reveals himself, much to the awe and terror of the other characters – a result that rewards the audience, who already knew better.

The ambiguity of the character that is a god masquerading as a human priest, would have been etched into the iconography of his costume, mask, and headdress, and while we do not know exactly how this would have worked, we can imagine it. In "The Masque of

Dionysus," Helene Foley suggests: "In the *Bacchae* Dionysus reveals himself to Thebes primarily through means which are common to theater and the larger Dionysiac tradition – voice, costume, music, dance, and song" (108). Dionysus is costumed as a god in disguise, and the audience can see that he is not who he is pretending to be. However, the audience also learns from his opening monologue that Dionysus is on the ground only because he is disguised in "the body of a man" (Euripides *The Bakkhai* 19). Foley proposes that we "know that the mask of Dionysus is smiling" (108)[41] and adds that the "language of the play refers with remarkable frequency to the visual and musical experience on stage and emphasizes that both honoring and comprehending the god are essentially theatrical acts, an exploration of the nature of illusion, transformation and symbol" (108). She concludes:

> Sound, gesture and symbol express the god even more effectively than language. Pentheus, the ruler of Thebes, is destroyed through his inability to understand truth in the symbolic form that Dionysiac religion and theater offer to the adherent or spectator. (108)

Unlike Pentheus and the other characters, the audience is well aware of the divinity of the god, not only because he has identified himself as such from the beginning, but also due to the fact that they can see the symbolic mask of the god and know how to read the theatrical signs performed by the actor (e.g., gestures, costume, and sound). The audience is positioned to witness both the failure to recognise the god, and the penalty for so doing. In this, while the actor portraying Dionysus provides a locus for recognising the sacred in the performance, the other actors portraying characters in varying degrees of ignorance do likewise, providing a locus through their failures to see. At the end of the play, when Dionysus has fully revealed

[41] See more in E.R. Dodds' *Euripides Bacchae,* and in R. P. Winnington-Ingram's *Euripides and Dionysus: An Interpretation of the Bacchae.* From Dodds and Winnington-Ingram, this idea spread widely, and the majority of scholars have followed this idea adding their interesting and provocative new readings on this assumption. Foley's "The Masque of Dionysus" is considered one of the most interesting discussions on this topic. However, more recently, several authors have expressed doubts about this theory, including Joshua Billings, who expressed his views in "The 'Smiling Mask' of Bacchae."

himself as a god, the characters (i.e., the actors who portray them) then serve to reinforce his status through their acts of recognition and contrition.

Furthermore, we can imagine that the actor who performs Dionysus, would have done something of the same to remind the audience of his divinity throughout the performance. Perhaps he pointed to details on his mask, their symbols, and the iconography, or perhaps hints would have been given in repeated gestures, or the tonality of his speaking and singing. As Foley tells us, Dionysus would have appeared to the audience as a god first, by telling them so – "I am a god, standing on the ground" (Euripides *The Bakkhai* 19) – and then throughout the performance with "sound, gesture and symbol" ("The Masque of Dionysus" 108). That is to say, by making full use of the theatrical tools available at the time, the actor would have been positioned to "express the god even more effectively than language" (108). His status as a god would have been evident to the audience in his words, his costume, his mask and headdress, and in his performance. Given that the tragedy was first performed as part of The Dionysia festival, we can also imagine that the audience would have been well-primed to bear witness to the consequences of failing to see the god for what he was.

In his commentary on the lines in *The Bakkhai*, E.R. Dodds suggests that from a dramaturgical point of view, it is "quite clear to the audience that the speaker, whom they accept as a god, will be accepted as a man by the people on stage" (*Euripides' Bacchae* 67). In her reading of Dodds' commentary on the performance of Dionysus, Helene Foley adds her own thoughts about the theatrical cues, taking particular interest in the role of the mask and costume in identifying the character one way to the audience, and another to the other characters on the stage. In Foley's imagination, what the audience would see is a rather sloppy approximation of humanity on the part of the deity: "Dionysus thus enters the play poorly disguised as human in the fashion of Homeric gods" ("The Masque of Dionysus" 128). By implication, the carelessness with which the god fashions himself as a human,

signals something about his attitude towards humanity. If the audience can see through the disguise, why not the kings and priests on the stage? She also speculates about the actor who performs Dionysus, proposing that "[h]is mask is not (and perhaps this is true of his costume as well), by the conventions of Greek tragedy, human," adding that "simply by his costume he manifests his godhead, his unhumanness to the audience" (128). The character of Dionysus is thus set apart from the others in the audience's view in ways that are almost extra-theatrical or meta-theatrical. The actor is thus showing us Dionysus acting as human, whereas the other actors are simply acting.

Foley builds on Dodds' dramaturgical analysis of the words in the tragedy that point to this "unhumanness," to speculate how this might have worked theatrically on stage. She examines the mask worn by the actor who portrayed Dionysus, and its symbolic representation on stage, exploring the correlation between the mask and its understanding by the audience and the other characters on stage. Foley reminds us that "for the audience Dionysus' mask represents smiling divinity in human disguise, [and] for the characters, a man" ("The Masque of Dionysus" 128). Thus, she goes on to propose that Dionysus' "mask represents two meanings" (128). From this, we can say that the actor playing Dionysus is at a double remove from the Stranger, while other actors on stage are at a single remove only. In other words, the actor who portrays the god, performs the character of Dionysus, who performs the Stranger. Other actors only perform their characters. Therefore, it is possible to say that the character of Dionysus is set apart as neither human actor nor human character, and as such, is liminal in the way that an "unhuman," that is a god, might be.

Our basic knowledge of the theatrical conventions of Greek tragedy allows us to imagine how the idea of the sacred was to be attached to the way the actor was positioned on stage. In ancient Greek theatre, the actors who performed divinities generally appeared above

the stage,[42] in the *theologeion*. Or they would be transferred to their place by the *deus ex machina*. The actors who performed the gods, occupied what the ancient Greeks called the *hieron*, a consecrated place, the place that has been declared sacred.

The stage on the ground, including the *proscenium* and *orchestra*, was reserved for the actors who performed humans. This juxtaposition of the actors in Greek tragedy, between the higher and lower positions on stage, provided the audience with a clear image of who were the gods and who were the humans in the course of the play. In this way we might consider that the actor's location conveys the sense of the sacred in Greek tragedy. That is to say, the physical placement of the gods facilitates the actors' marking of the place of the sacred in the world of the play, as well as the world as it is. In *Theatrical Cast of Athens*, Edith Hall reminds us that "the classical Athenian world-stage relationship is that the relationship that they have posited between the fictions represented on stage, and the world inhabited by its spectators, is fundamentally binary – one reflects the other" (2).

For example, Dionysus opens the play by positioning himself as "a god standing on the ground," the place where human beings are located (Euripides *The Bakkhai* 19). This is contrary to the conventional expectation, that the actor portraying a god would be positioned above the stage, more proximate to the heavens than to human characters, the chorus, and the audience. As the play progresses, the character of Dionysus is positioned in an even more degraded setting, the stable, as a further sign of the failure of the other characters to accord him his rightful place, both in the imagined world of the play and on the stage itself. Throughout the tragedy, the character of Dionysus' physical position is appropriate to the plot; he is in disguise as a human, his divinity unrecognised until the final scene when he is

[42] There are obvious exceptions to this expectation; Medea, for example, is marked as semi-human by her position on the ground, and her ascension in the chariot marks her transition to semi-divinity (Euripides, *Medea*). So too the final play in the *Oresteia*, where Athena and Apollo it seems might have conducted their parts in the trial in closer proximity to the human characters than might otherwise be expected (Aeschylus, *Oresteia*).

revealed as a god, and takes up his rightful place above the stage, on the roof of the *skene,* carried by the *deus ex machina*.

That the god Dionysus is represented by the actor as out of place on the stage, and misrecognised as a result, adds a layer of meaning to the play regarding how the sacred is to be located in the mundane world. It is the misplacement of the sacred that provokes the conflict that leads to the tragic outcome, the revelation of the king's savage murder at the hands of his mother; what Rene Girard would term the "sacrificial crisis" (*Violence and the Sacred*). The actor playing Dionysus is thus mirrored by the actor playing Pentheus; because the god is out of place, so too must be the king, and the only way to restore the god to his higher place is to destroy the king. Put another way, in the physical map of the performance, with the god out of place, everything and everyone else is mis-placed as well, most notably, the king, who ends up at the top of a tree in women's dress, before being dismembered and paraded on a pike by his mother.

Greek tragedy is structured, so the dramaturgy is located in the way the actors show the audience what is not recognised or not understood. Following Aristotle's *Poetics*, the scene of the misrecognition of Dionysus might be seen to set the stage for the scene of recognition at the end of the play. That is, what is not recognised in the earlier scene, will be recognised in the final scene of the play. Every scene from this point in the play shows us the misrecognition of Dionysus. Following the general understanding that drama is action, and acting is doing, both dramaturgical and theatrical aspects of this scene (and all the other scenes of misrecognition) help the actors on stage to enact this misrecognition for the audience. In doing so, the actors enable the audience to feel pity for Pentheus and fear of Dionysus' revenge. The audience, knowing that Dionysus is a god, anticipates the scene of recognition that is, according to Aristotle, a prelude to the scene of suffering. Finally, through pity and fear, the scene of suffering ideally evokes catharsis in the audience.

In the scene of misrecognition, Dionysus is standing bound in chains next to the Soldier. Pentheus pronounces his observations about the Stranger: “wavy hair at your cheeks,” “wrestling is not your sport,” “creamy skin,” and his “pale beauty” (Euripides *The Bakkhai* 34). What we can read from these words, is that Pentheus sees the “girlishness of Dionysus” (in Dodds’ terms). Dodds reminds us that “[t]hese lines give one of those relatively detailed descriptions of stage personages which are characteristic of late-fifth-century tragedy” (*Euripides’ Bacchae* 133). It might be that Pentheus is repeating Dionysus’ appearance so as to describe a god for the audience. It is clear that Dionysus is not seen as a woman by Pentheus, but we can see that he is definitely not fully recognised as a man either. Pentheus’ illustration of Dionysus describes a creature that is neither woman nor man, and aims towards the audience’s re-recognition of the god. The audience knows that Dionysus is a god, as he told them in his very first lines in the play. In this scene, Pentheus observes the “strangeness” of Dionysus’ appearance, and fails to see the god, so those in the audience can remind themselves that Dionysus is not a Stranger, as Pentheus (and other characters around him) sees him, but actually a god (Euripides *The Bakkhai* 34).

In this scene, the actor who performs Pentheus is representing a dominant figure, while the actor who performs Dionysus is representing a position of weakness. All the characters on stage are aware of this, and only the audience knows that this disposition is not correct; we might consider the hold of power to be misplaced in this scene. Everything on stage shows us that Dionysus is chained, interrogated, and treated as a prisoner, and Pentheus, as a king, holds all the power in the Thebes. Towards the end of this scene, Pentheus is sure of his superiority: “You have no power, you’re not in command here. I am” (Euripides *The Bakkhai* 36). Dionysus responds with: “you’re not even in command of your own life! You don’t know what you are doing, or who you are” (36). However, it only appears that the whole power sits with Pentheus.

Foley is right to propose that the audience can once again witness "a failure to recognise Dionysus' divinity, a failure to know who he was, or simply a failure to know what he was getting himself into due to his madness" ("The Masque of Dionysus" 119). Following Foley, we can say that the audience is again in a better position than is Pentheus. Pentheus positions himself as a mighty one, and in doing so, he actually highlights his weakness for the audience. We can also say that Dionysus' response is cynical, and could be seen as mocking Pentheus' inability to see things for what they actually are. However, Dodds informs us that Professor Hermann Fränkel[43] suggested to him that Dionysus in effect, tells Pentheus: "You do not realize your status as a mere mortal" (qtd. in *Euripides' Bacchae* 140). Professor Fränkel suggests that there is no irony in Dionysus' words here. What he does really in this line, as Professor Fränkel suggests, is to provide the last chance for Pentheus to open his eyes, see himself for what he is, and in turn, recognise the god. Even though the characters of Pentheus and Dionysus are placed in this scene as a master and slave, the actions of the actor who performs Dionysus places himself in a superior position to the actor who portrays Pentheus, so the audience can see the real location of the power.

This is not the only time that the actor who performs Dionysus points to himself as a god. The actor gives many opportunities to be recognised as divinity throughout this scene, providing hints hidden in his words and theatrical signs. Both dramaturgical and theatrical cues performed by the actor who portrays Dionysus, vividly point at Dionysus as a god. However, as Foley suggests, "Euripides represents Pentheus' inability to understand and control Dionysus not only through the king's failure to interpret his words, but through his failure to discern the god within the theatrical forms that express him" ("The Masque of Dionysus" 112). Pentheus thus hears the words pointing to the god and sees the theatrical signs, but still fails to recognise Dionysus as a god. From the very start when he encounters

[43] Hermann Fränkel was a Stanford University Professor of Ancient Greek philology.

the Stranger, he seems ambiguous to Pentheus – as divinity might be – but Pentheus refuses to recognise him as a god. For the audience, in turn, the actor who performs Pentheus, through the character's inability to read the spoken and performed signs, is constantly pointing at Dionysus as a divinity.

How does this scene in the barn set the misrecognition so there can later be a scene of recognition and reversal at the end? In the final scene, we see Agave proudly marching on stage with the severed head of her son in her hand, and we also know she is not aware of what she has done, being still in trance. She thinks she slaughtered a lion's head and holds it victoriously, high up in the air. "I caught this one, and my bare hands tore his limbs off," she tells us (Euripides *The Bakkhai* 60). Everyone on stage and in the audience knows it is her son she has slaughtered. She does not. Her father, Kadmos, appears on stage with the other parts of Pentheus' body. Kadmos calms Agave down, taking her from the trance, and focussing her attention on the head she is holding in her hand. She slowly realises it is her son she has killed and torn apart. While Kadmos laments over Pentheus' dismembered body, Agave is meticulously trying to put it together. This is the moment in which Dionysus appears as the god he is, on the top of the palace, above the stage, finally, where he belongs. In his final monologue, the god recapitulates for other characters on stage, as well as for members of the audience, the crises that brought them to this tragic end. He reminds them "these are not human words [he] speak[s] but words of Dionysus, son of god" (66). Now, everyone can see the god, including all the other characters on stage and the members of the audience (who knew it all along). The recognition of the god comes through fear, and the reminder given by the chorus: "The gods can do anything. They can frustrate whatever seems certain, and make what no one wants all at once come true! Today, this god has shown it all" (68).

In discussing this final scene of recognition and reversal, how do we see the actors construct the process of recognition? The actor playing Dionysus is a point of recognition. Other actors mirror the audience, standing in fear and respect, pointing at the god above. In her *Ritual Irony*, Foley proposes that "[o]nly in the final scenes, when Dionysus has left the level of human action, does the audience experience fully the distance between secular reality and the order and vision created through myth and ritual" (208). That is, the actor performing Dionysus would carry within himself, a sense of the sacred. It is only when this actor carrying the sacred is re-established in his rightful position, that the realms of the sacred are finally achieved. The other actors on stage, by pointing above to the god, equally contribute to the process of locating the sacred. In positioning themselves according to the re-established order – god above, humans on the ground – Greek actors might be seen to help their audiences to be transported from the realms of the secular to the realms of the sacred, resulting in pity and fear, as well as catharsis in the audience.

Could it be that the actor who performs Dionysus misplaces himself on the ground at the beginning of the play, to create an imbalance of the hierarchy on stage, when he places the sacred where it does not belong? In doing this, the actor who portrays Dionysus creates a sacrificial crisis that sparks the violence in the tragedy. In *The Bakkhai*, violence perpetually multiplies – from the god's announcement of the violent punishment to those who do not recognise him at the very beginning, to Pentheus' bullying of Dionysus in the interrogation scene, to the mad women killing animals in the woods. Only violence can re-establish the correct order, Girard reminds us, and adds "[o]nly violence can put an end on violence" (*Violence and the Sacred* 26). However, Girard highlights, only the "purified" violence can do so (26). Thus, for Girard, the sacrificial rite is the only way to put an end to all the mayhem. Following this notion, we might consider Agave's killing of her son Pentheus, in a most ritualistic way, almost like a priestess being possessed by a higher sacred power.

Pentheus might therefore be seen as a scapegoat, the victim that "draws to itself all the violence infecting the original victim [Dionysus] and through its own death transforms this baneful violence into beneficial violence, into harmony and abundance" (95). Following Girard's theory and looking at the placement of the actor on stage, we could say that the actor's placement on stage in ancient Greek theatre correlates with the placement of the sacred on stage. That is, it is possible to see the actor as a channel for the sacred on stage, and as such, his work might be seen as hierophany.

Building on Girard's idea of Pentheus as a scapegoat, I turn to Dodds and his commentary in *Euripides' Bacchae*. Dodds explains: "'you bear the burden for this State' which to P[entheus] means 'you toil on its behalf,' but to the audience 'you suffer for its offences.' Perhaps a hint that P[entheus] is like the pharmakós or scapegoat who carried the sins of the people and is put to death after being ritually mocked and pelted" (69). Foley, then, following Dodds, speculates that during Dionysia, a sacrifice to Dionysus took place on the first day of the theatrical festival – a goat was sacrificed on the altar (*thymele*) in the theatre. She points at Walter Burkert's "Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual" for an interesting argument about the relationship between the original sacrifice in the theatre, and the dramatic sacrifices in Greek tragedy. It is possible, Foley reminds us, that in the theatre, before *The Bakkhai* (the first performance of the festival) a goat was sacrificed for Dionysus on the *thymele*, centred in the *orchestra*. Then, in the tragedy, a mirroring action occurs: Pentheus is sacrificed for Dionysus on the same stage. Foley reminds us that "Dionysus adjusts Pentheus' costume, touching his head, hands, and feet, thereby 'concentrating' his victim, setting him apart from the profane world" (*Ritual Irony* 209). These actions performed on Pentheus by the actor playing Dionysus, could be seen to mirror those of a priest performing a sacrificial ritual just before the tragedy opens the festival. In this way, following both Dodds and Foley (and to some extent Girard), the residue of religious ritual in

the theatre becomes more obvious, as the role of the actor on stage closely resembles the role of a priest conducting a sacrificial ritual.

Furthermore, the character's relationship to the audience (and other characters) is precisely circumscribed. Throughout the play, Dionysus speaks one way to the audience, another to the chorus, and yet another to the other characters. This tragic irony in *The Bakkhai*, involves an element of meta-theatricality in a way that other tragic plays do not. From the opening scene and ongoing, the character of Dionysus calls attention to his "performance" of the Stranger and the priest. He speaks of himself in terms of acting; that is, he needs this "human disguise" so people will think he is someone else, so he behaves differently, is dressed differently, and has a character to perform: a stranger, a priest, and a rapist (or whatever Pentheus and the other characters see in him). He also convinces the other characters to costume themselves and perform in ways that are out of character: Pentheus as a woman, and Cadmus and Tiresias as bacchantes. As Foley notes: "He maddens the king, dresses him in the robes, fawnskin, sources, and long hair of a female follower of the god, and instructs him in the movements of maenadic dance (*Ritual Irony* 209). Dionysus not only costumes Pentheus, but also directs and choreographs him, as in a theatre. At the end, when he casts off his disguise, the actor remains costumed, of course, albeit now explicitly marked as Dionysus himself, and he takes the god's position in the theatre (above). This raises a question: is this the fulfilment of the actor in providing a locus for the sacred in performance, the culmination and revelation, in which all the characters/actors, as well as the audience partake? The audience is privy to his masquerade throughout, and is told that Dionysus is a god, so clearly, the sacred rests within the actor performing the god. The actor must show us the sacred he carries within himself even as he performs misdirection: one way for the chorus, and another for the other characters.

Both the chorus and other characters have roles to play in locating the sacred in this tragedy. The chorus demonstrates worship, albeit ambivalently (again) because the false god that Pentheus sees is also the real god that Dionysus is. The other characters show us the perils of misrecognition, in failing to see what is obvious to the audience. Each scene in which they interact with the god-priest or with the god-who-has-driven-the-women-mad is designed to provoke the audience to recognition: ah that is him, the god, and they do not see him as we do. In the end, the production confirms what the audience knows; I suspect this is what Aristotle means by "recognition" in its most fundamental sense. The god is recognised, because the actor and company have performed as they should in a way that leads to the inevitable (*ananke*)[44] result. In this way, the tragic performance is a performance of reification – the actors construct a characterological matrix in which they either represent the sacred (they are positioned to show us where the sacred is), or in failing to see the sacred, reinforce the audience's knowledge of what and where the sacred is. Following this, the ancient Greek actor might be seen as a significant element in assisting the audience to locate the divine and its power throughout the performance. That is, the actor himself and the actions he performs, might be seen as a locus for the sacred on ancient Greek stages.

The shift from Catholicism to Protestantism in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*

This thesis now turns to the challenge of locating the sacred in the work of the Elizabethan actor, which is complicated by the transition in England from Catholicism to Protestantism. In the English Middle Ages, theatrical performances were aligned with the Church, and as such, infused with its doctrinal imperatives, whereas the theatre of the English Renaissance was resolutely secular in its outward manifestation.[45] In *Religion and the Decline of Magic*,

[44] *Ananke* – from Greek Ἀνάγκη, meaning necessity, demand, force). In Greek literature, *anake* represents necessity or fate personified (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).
[45] See David Bevington's *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England* (1965). Also: Bevington 1975; Tydeman 2003; Twycross 2003.

historian Keith Thomas tells us that "The medieval Church [. . .] acted as a repository of supernatural power which could be dispensed to the faithful to help them in their daily problems" (32). Observing that the medieval Mass could be viewed as a performance, Thomas adds that the "Mass, in particular, was associated with magical power" (33; see also Hardison 1965/2019). In breaking with the Catholic Church, the Protestant Reformation first ruptured and then repressed the way people understood and practised their faith (such as it might have been) both in their churches and on their stages. Thomas tells us that "the distinction between magic and religion had been blurred by the medieval Church" (51). Indeed, it is possible to see in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, an almost direct representation of the struggle between these two concepts: the desire of Faustus to embody power beyond the everyday, and the sure knowledge of damnation for his enactment of such blasphemy. He overreaches. Instead of performing wonders and miracles as might have been seen on a medieval stage, the Faustus of the Elizabethan theatre performs magic tricks that are parodied by clowns, and lead to his ultimate downfall.

One of the most obvious residues of medieval theatricality in Elizabethan theatre, is its verticality, the way the stage was set to align from its highest point, the gods, to its unseen "hell" accessed through the trapdoor. This hierarchical staging of socio-religious values from the sacred to the secular, carried forward ideas from the 5th century AD, as Ken Wilber points out. First coined by a Christian mystic named Saint Dionysius (who, like the Greek God after whom he appears to have been named, was the patron saint of Athens) the word "hierarchy" has Greek roots: *hiero*, meaning sacred; and *arch*, meaning rule (Wilber 54).[46] While the coincidence between the name of the Christian saint and that of the god of theatre may simply be fortuitous, this word he coined allows me to see the Elizabethan stage as a physical

[46] See, for example, Arthur Oncken Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* (1936/1964) which looks at the ways Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *History of Animals* conceive of the hierarchy from the sacred to the secular.

alignment of sacred and secular values that was carried forward over generations and may in fact be in play to this day. From that it might be seen that the habits of seeing continue to reflect habits of believing, as facilitated by conventions of performing no matter what the era.

This thesis looks at Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus,* because of the Elizabethan plays, it is perhaps the most explicit in its dealings with the problem of the sacred in a secular society. In "Religious Values in Doctor Faustus," Leo Kirschbaum writes that "there is no more obvious Christian document in all Elizabethan drama than Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*" (77).[47] The figures of virtue and the vice, as might have been seen in Middle English drama, along with the positioning of Heaven (above) and Hell (below), are all written into the text. The driving dramaturgical structure seems to be more like a moral play than are most other plays of the time, and the actors in presenting their characters might be seen as much to embody unseen forces as they are representations of the recognisably human.

In discussing the shifting place of the sacred on English stages, Karol Cooper (2014) builds on Kirschbaum to put forward that the representation of the soul "is not, as it was in the medieval drama, staged as a demonstrable object made evident by the play's apparatus of signification" (2). By this, Cooper seems to refer to the way the allegorical plays of the English Middle Ages presented the sacred on stage. Cooper goes on to explain the representation of the soul in Elizabethan drama: "It has become a set of conflicts raised by the mimetic representation of a soul-in-process (instead of progress), a character who uses language to point towards the mutation – perhaps even the complete dissolution – of individual personal identity" (2). That is, the character's theatrical aspect (what the actor does and how he behaves) sets in contrast to the character's dramaturgical aspect (what the actor says). As Catherine Belsey suggests: "[t]he humanist subject is always other than itself, can

[47] In his introduction to Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Michael Keefer suggests that the "year in which this play was first written and performed cannot be established with any precision" (lv). However, there are two different versions of this play printed in 1604 and 1616, and Keefer reminds us that they "differ in length by more than six hundred lines" (vii). I am using a 1604 version of the play, edited by Michael Keefer and published in 1991.

never be what it speaks" (52). She uses Hamlet as an example, as his interior struggles drive the dramatic action of Shakespeare's tragedy. In the case of *Doctor Faustus*, the struggle is externalised, with the unseen (and perhaps unseeable) forces of the divine, and how the desire of its protagonist to embody such unspeakable powers destabilises his society and leads to his destruction.

Belsey helps us see how the actor playing the character of Doctor Faustus might have worked to demonstrate the impossibility of desiring to be something more than human. From a Protestant perspective, that is, a man can only be what he is – singular in belief and action – any attempt to be more than that by doubling-up, will inevitably lead to tragedy. In *The Idea of the Actor*, an investigation of the actor's work, William Worthen reminds us that "the actor's doubleness inspires an intensely antitheatrical spirit that is thoroughly and appropriately realized in the moralistic literature surrounding the stage" (4). The Elizabethan audiences, Worthen suggests, wondered: "Is the actor a blasphemer, a Satanic deceiver undermining the order of creation, or is he a creating god, […] whose performance affirms the transcendent power of human creativity" (*The Idea of the Actor* 4)? Worthen concludes that the doubleness of the actor's work is contradictory "both divine and demonic" and might be seen "as a magical extension of human potentiality and as a monstrous deformity of it" (*The Idea of the Actor* 4). At best then, in Elizabethan tragedy, the actor's work on stage and the characters he performed might be seen as ambivalent. The actor on stage (and his characters) seem to be trapped between the two opposites. As such, they are in conversation with the demonic and the divine, and through actors' actions, make visible and tangible for their audiences, the consequences of vice and virtue in their everyday lives.

The pervasive presence in *Doctor Faustus* of characters identified in relation to virtue and vice points towards the places where the Elizabethan theatre continued to make use of medieval systems of Christian symbolism in its physical structures and dramaturgical

conventions. As Karol Cooper demonstrates in "The Modernisation of the Medieval Staging of Soul in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*," abstract notions of the sacred can be seen to have been made manifest in the staging of *Doctor Faustus*. Cooper's analysis was useful for my exploration of the tension between what can be seen on stage and what must be imagined. She considers the way Faustus appears in the play to want physical proof, both of the sacred and of his knowledge of the sacred. As Cooper frames it:

> Marlowe places Faustus between *knowing* himself as a soulful representation made and transacted by language, and *believing* himself to be an eternally soulful being who, although he can never be identical to a representation, is nevertheless identifiable by God as a singular individual who will be held accountable for his sins. (3-4, italics in original)

Following Cooper's logic, each scene can be seen to show how the reality belies the aspiration: Faustus' encounters with the Pope, the Emperor, and Helen of Troy, all rhetorically and theatrically move from the heroic to the vulgarly comic, and are then parodied by the characters of Wagner and Robin. Each action Faustus takes in pursuing his desire for divine revelation, that is, takes him further from the sacred, while making it all the more powerful in contrast to his overwhelmingly human limitations, as shown in my analysis of selected scenes from the play.

The way Marlowe represents the uneasy reckoning with the question of where audiences could place their faith in the still in-process shift between Catholic and Protestant world views at the end of the 16th century, has troubled audiences and scholars for generations. In "Casting Doubt in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*," William Hamlin explores the scepticism in the play, and in the first sentences suggests that "Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* can be and has been deemed a skeptical play" (257). He reminds us that the existence of the God could have been seen to trouble the 16th century intellectuals. He refers to the French Protestant author, Philippe de Mornay, and his late 16th century book *De la Verite de Ia Religion Chrestienne*, translated into English by Sir Philip Sidney and Arthur Golding.

Mornay tells us that "[t]here were in deede a kinde of Philosophers called Scepticks (that is to say Dowters) which did rather suspend their Judgement concerning the Godhead, then call it in question" (Mornay qtd. in Hamlin 259). Mornay goes on:

> But yet for all that, let us see after what maner these kind of people do reason, Against the thing which the world preacheth, which Nations worship, and which wise men wonder at; these folke say at a worde for all, how shall wee beleeve that there is a God, sith we see him not? (Mornay qtd. in Hamlin 259)

Following Mornay's quote, Hamlin unpacks Mornay's concept of scepticism as an investigation of God's existence through the lens of Saint Thomas' doubt that Christ was risen; we do not believe in what we cannot see, "we demand 'ocular proof'" (Hamlin 260). In this sense, Hamlin calls on John Richard Green and his suggestion that Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is "the first dramatic attempt to touch the great problem of the relations of man to the unseen world, to paint the power of doubt in a temper leavened with superstition" (Green 421). In reading *Doctor Faustus*, then, we can see how the power of doubt and Faustus' encounter with the unseen world might be seen as the locus for the sacred in the play.

Locating the sacred in *Doctor Faustus*

The plot of *Doctor Faustus* is familiar and simple enough on the surface. Faustus, in his desire for knowledge and power beyond his human reach, summons Mephistopheles,[48] sells his soul to the devil, and after 24 years, is taken to Hell. For the purposes of this thesis, I analysed three key scenes: the first monologue of Doctor Faustus (act 1, scene 1); the scene in which all of the play's supernatural creatures (Lucifer, Mephisto, devils, Good and Evil Angels, and the Seven Deadly Sins) appear (act 2, scene 3); and the final scene, in which Mephistopheles and the rest of the devils drag Doctor Faustus to the fires of Hell (act 5, scene 2). Reading these scenes in terms of the theatrical conventions of the time, we can imagine

[48] In this thesis, the character is referred to as "Mephistopheles" and "Mephisto" interchangeably.

how the actor performing Doctor Faustus would have shown audiences the character striving to become something more than human, while being reduced over the course of the play to the all-too-human, by the not-so-human figures he has conjured. Next, I explore the ways the work of the actors in these scenes might have been to provide a physical presence for what cannot otherwise be seen, either by enacting those supernatural or allegorical roles, or by standing in contrast to them, as Faustus and the other human characters must do, from one scene to the next.

From the start, *Doctor Faustus* is filled with supernatural beings. Aside from the Good Angel, there is no God represented, and nor are there other figures of divinity in the play's text. As such, much of the actors' work in the play is to show us the human in relation to the malevolent spirits of evil, and in so doing, to mark the absence of God and the divine from the world of the play. In this play, it seems that the sacred is more malevolent than it is beneficent. The character of Mephistopheles dominates the play, and as such represents the force of the unseen world of Hell. He occupies the liminal space between Lucifer and Faustus, between the unseen not-human and the seen human. The actor playing Mephistopheles might be seen as a vehicle for the force of the sacred, in its not-so-nice sense, on stage.

To better understand this malevolent side of the sacred, I turn again to the seminal works of Rudolph Otto and Mircea Eliade. Otto was a late 19th and early 20th century philosopher and theologian, whose *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), the first systematic study of the sacred, was written at a time when interest in the Middle Ages was strong, and the situation in Europe, torn apart with the World War I, was quite fraught. Eliade was a mid to late 20th century philosopher and historian of religion, whose work was substantially influenced by Rudolph Otto. Both philosophers explore notions of the sacred in the context of the "homo religiosus," in Eliade's terms, that is an ideally religious person (*The Sacred and*

the Profane). Even though Otto and Eliade turn their interests to all religions, their predominant Christian background might be seen in their use of Latin terms when defining key elements of a homo religious and his understanding of the world around him.

Eliade builds his premise, that the sacred sits in opposition to the mundane, on Otto's exploration of the sacred in *The Idea of the Holy* (1917). Eliade reminds us that Otto "finds the *feeling of terror* before the sacred, before the awe-inspiring mystery[49] (*mysterium tremendum*)" (*The Sacred and the Profane* 9, italics in original, my footnote). This terror that both Otto and Eliade identify as a sign of the sacred is what Mephisto makes manifest in *Doctor Faustus*. In Otto's terms, the appearance of Mephistopheles as performed by the Elizabethan (and perhaps even contemporary) actor, might be understood as somewhat *numinous* – that is, god-like. Otto explains his understanding of the numinous by setting Lucifer in relation to the God: "The 'ferocity' is the origin of Lucifer, in which the mere potentiality of evil is actualized" (*The Idea of the Holy* 110). Otto suggests that Lucifer is "the mysterium tremendum" cut loose from the other elements and intensified to *mysterium horrendum*" (110, italics in original). Moving from a Christian understanding to a more general look at the malevolent part of the numinous, Otto concludes:

> It is a horror that is in some sort numinous, and we might designate the object of it as the negatively numinous. This also holds good for other religions than that of Bible. In all religions "the devilish" plays its part and has its place as that which, opposed to the divine, has yet something common with it. (*The Idea of the Holy* 110)

Following both Otto and Eliade, when we look at *Doctor Faustus*, the character of Mephistopheles, standing for Lucifer and opposed to God, becomes a negative, numinous, a god-like figure who, through the actions of the actor, materialises the forces of the sacred on

[49] There is a range of discussions around the way mystery is linked to the sacred in the context of theatre. See for example: Yarrow 2007; Chamberlain 2007, Haney 2007; Lavery and Yarrow 2007. We can look again at the way Girard connects mystery and violence, in which myths, "inspire mystery and terror – […] calling attention to the violence" (*Violence and the Sacred*).

the Elizabethan stage. As in *The Bakkhai*, much of this work is achieved in the way the other actors, as characters, react and interact.

The actors playing supernatural characters make manifest on stage the power that extends beyond the human reach. For instance, the actor who performs Mephistopheles, both provides a locus for the apprehension of the devil on the stage as well as inviting the audience to anticipate the appearance of Lucifer as a more fulsome manifestation of malevolence. The actor playing Mephisto serves, that is, as an opening act, to spark the audience's imagination and raise its expectations, carrying on throughout the play as a reminder of an even greater power just beyond human perception. In much the same way, the actor who performs Faustus, in making his contract with the negative numinous, directs the audience's attention to the not-so-humans on stage. The actor points (for the audience) both towards what can be seen – the Devil(s) – and towards what cannot, for the most part, be seen – God and His angels. The other actors that perform human characters in *Doctor Faustus,* whose enactments of fear and scepticism direct the audience's attention towards the actors who play not-so-human characters, do so to invite recognition of the supernatural. As in *The Bakkhai*, the actors in *Doctor Faustus,* in representing the relationship between the human and the not-so-human, keep the audience's attention on the not-so-human characters – the figurations or spirits of evil – who, as such, provide the locus for the sacred on stage.

Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*

On the surface, *Doctor Faustus* appears to be a play about the perils of playing with the Devil, and a lesson in Christian faith. However, what we see in the play in light of what we know of Marlowe, is less certain and more ambivalent. Christopher Marlowe (1564 – 1593) was Shakespeare's contemporary, renowned as a playwright and poet. He was also rumoured to have been a papist spy. Some scholars argue that Marlowe was a secret Catholic. Some

reject this in favour of viewing Marlowe as an adherent of the new Church of England. Others again make a case for him as an atheist (Bezio 135). All use the play *Doctor Faustus* as part of their arguments for or against his religious inclinations. As editors Frank Romany and Robert Lindsey note in their introduction to *The Complete Plays by Christopher Marlowe* (2004), it is perhaps sufficient to say that even though we cannot be certain of Marlowe's religious views, his work points to a critique of the religious practices of his time. For the purposes of this thesis, I take as read, that at the very least, Marlowe was ambivalent about the shape and practice of Christian faith in his time, and that this ambivalence is actually at the heart of his play, by inviting audiences to see what happens when the Devil is conjured up in the first act. If the plot of *Doctor Faustus* plays out like a psychomachia – that is, a battle between virtue and vice for the soul of mankind – then it is the actors who provide us with the figurations necessary to perceive what is otherwise not to be seen.

Marlowe based his tragedy on a medieval German myth, which may indeed be based on an historical person. In his introduction to Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, Michael Keefer tells us that:

> Given the obviously legendary or mythic quality both of Marlow's play and its principal source, the prose *Historie of the damnable life, and deserved death of Doctor John Faustus*, the fact that a historical Doctor Faustus can be identified with some clarity may come as a surprise. (xxxiii)

To make his case, Keefer identifies a young man who studied at the University of Heidelberg in "the nominalist *via moderna* of the arts faculty" (xxxiii, italics in original). This modern way of learning was critical and sceptical of theology and the traditional sciences, Keefer writes, in contrast with *via antiqua,* the old way of learning. This young man, according to Keefer, "whose career as a magician, beginning some fifteen years later, made name of Doctor Faustus notorious throughout Germany" (xxxiv). The German legend, like the play by Marlowe, centres on the story of a man named Faustus, a successful scholar who is

discontented with theology – the divine knowledge – signs a pact with the Devil, and after some adventures, ends up in Hell.

In the introduction to *Faust Adaptations from Marlowe to Aboudoma and Markland*, Professor Lorna Fitzsimmons reminds us that "Marlowe's tragic adaptation, *Doctor Faustus*, stimulated a wave of other theatrical adaptations when it was performed in Europe, and the theme was increasingly adapted into music and other forms" (2). The dramatic authors inspired by the same German legend, most famously include Johan Friedreich Goethe's *Faust 1* and *Faust 2* (1808/1831),[50] Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* (1947), David Mamet's *Faustus* (2004) and most recently, *Faust 3* by Peter Schuman and his "Bread and Puppet Theatre" (2016).[51] In "The Chapbook of Doctor Faustus as Source and Model," Erhard Bahr recalls the "German puppet plays of Doctor Faust that were performed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries at country and city fairs" (23). He goes on to suggest that the "texts of the puppet plays were not influenced by the chapbook directly, but by the texts of the theatre companies" (23). Then, Bahr informs us that both the puppet play texts he is referring to, start with the "iconic scene of Faust in his study from Marlowe's tragedy" (23). When reading Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, it might be seen that for the most part, the characters are de-humanised, so the use of puppets in performing the Faust legend seems very logical. How better to represent Lucifer, the Good and Evil Angels, and the creatures from Hell, than with puppets? What would be a better way to perform the characters of Seven Deadly Sins, representations of Pride, Covet, Wrath, Envy, Gluttony, Sloth, and Lechery, than through the object of a puppet? That is, by looking at Marlowe's play text and its roots, it could be said that the story itself asks for object-ification. In this context, the act of disavowing the human aspect of the actor on stage might be seen as the actor's key task in performing his character.

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[50] Johan Friedreich Goethe's *Faust* is a tragedy in two parts: *Faust, Part One* (first published in 1808) and *Faust Part Two* (published posthumously in 1831).

[51] Some notable adaptations include novels such as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* (1967), and the opera *Faust*, by Charles Gounod (1859).

In Marlowe's play it is possible to see that the sacred is ever-present, largely as a malevolent force. Aside from the Good Angel, the benevolent Christian God is absent from the stage; indeed, that absence is one of the key points of the play. The truth of God must be taken on faith. Evil, however, is everywhere. This is what the play shows us, and what the actors perform. Actors being embodied human beings cannot, in this play's world view, possibly be godly in the way that faith demands. They can, however, embody the various sins, towards which, mankind is perpetually inclined. In my analysis of how the actors show us the sacred in *Doctor Faustus*, I therefore explore key scenes in which Faustus' interactions with Mephistopheles, the Angels (Good and Evil), and the Devils to see how the representation of the forces of evil provide a locus for the audience to perceive the workings of powers beyond our human comprehension.

When we read act 1, scene 1, we can see Faustus attached to the idea of unlimited power in the arts of a magician. His final words in his first monologue are: "A sound magician is a mighty god: Here tire, my brains, to get a deity!" (Marlowe 199, 8). In contrast to *The Bakkhai*, in which Dionysus is a powerful god, Faustus is a human who wants the power beyond the human reach. According to Keith Thomas, this was not uncommon in the early 17th century. In *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Thomas reminds us that "magic and science had originally advanced side by side" (643). He suggests that the "magical desire for power had created an intellectual environment favourable to experiment and induction" (643). Thomas then reminds us of some key discoveries at the time, in medicine, mathematics, and astrology, that emerged from the conjunction of magic and science. He also adds that "[s]cholastic learning was said to have included the arts of divination" (68). So, it could be said that the character of Faustus, through his first monologue, represents a common scientist of the time reaching for the arts of divination.

The play starts with Faustus alone in his study, talking to himself in a monologue. In lines 3 to 5, he says: "Having commenc'd, be a divine in show, Yet level at the end of every art, And live and die in Aristotle's works" (Marlowe 1991, 5). Michael Keefer comments on this final line, reminding us (in his notes) of a Norwegian professor and Marlowe scholar, Roy Eriksen. According to Keefer, Eriksen's understanding of these first lines in the play is as follows:

> A reminiscence, Roy T Eriksen suggests, of Giordano Bruno's dialogue *La cena de la ceneri* (1584), I.34, where the scoffer Frulla mocks those who, without understanding so much as the titles of his books, "*voglion vivere e morire per Aristotle*….." (Keefer's notes in Marlowe 1991, 5, italics and ellipses in original)

Marlowe's Faustus uses identical words to those of Giordano Bruno to express his yearning for the knowledge that is beyond the human reach. It seems that Marlowe echoes Bruno in Faustus, as both are keen to learn magic.

Giordano Bruno was a Dominican priest, philosopher, and cosmological theorist. He was also, among other things, extensively interested in magic. For his unorthodox views on science and religion, he was excommunicated by both the Catholics and Protestants. Soon after, in February 1600, he was burnt at the stake by the Roman Inquisition; his death was just four years before this version of *Doctor Faustus* was published by Marlowe. This analogy might be seen as a suggestion that Faustus, in his first lines in the play, anticipates his own fate for the audiences – we could even speculate that the audience at the time might have known about Giordano Bruno's case. So, both Bruno and Faustus seek knowledge out of the common world. They cross the boundaries of the everyday world and dwell in the world of the "mysterium tremendum" (in Rudolph Otto's terms). As a result, Bruno is burnt at the stake, and Faustus is dragged to the pits of Hell; they both end up in flames.

If we accept that the audiences at that time were aware of Bruno's fate, we could imagine that the audiences foresaw Faustus' fate as well. After Faustus' first monologue, the Good Angel and the Evil Angel appear in front of him. While the Good Angel tries to

persuade Faustus to leave the magic and return to reading the Scriptures, the Evil Angel encourages him to pursue his interest in magic and become the lord and commander on Earth. This sets the main question of the play – not so much religious (following Marlowe's religious ambivalence), but more ethical. That is, through the spiritual crises of the time (the choice between God and Satan), Marlowe presents a much wider ethical crisis – the choice between the good and the evil. Faustus fails to choose good over evil, and thereafter we see the consequences.

Returning to the work of Rene Girard, we can perhaps see Marlowe's ambivalence at play in the violence that is performed in *Doctor Faustus*. In the first chapter of the exploration of "The Biblical Knowledge of Violence" in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Girard locates the violence of the sacred in the shift from the desire to *have* something, to the desire to *become* someone. Girard is keenly interested in the way that Satan (Lucifer) stands in contrast with God, and as such, represents the mimetic rival in the unseen world. Satan, in Girard's view, shows himself as a model of human desire – to be like God. This unfeasible human desire leads to failure. Then, Girard suggests, failing to be like God, we turn to Satan instead, who is a personification of the God-like. The Girardian idea of Satan showing himself as a model of human desire might be seen in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*.

The central battle in the play – between good and evil – can be seen in act 2, scene 3. This scene can be roughly divided in three sections, each representing a separate battle between good and evil. The first section is a dispute between Faustus and Mephistopheles, in which Mephistopheles challenges Faustus' understandings of Heaven and Hell. The second section is the battle between the Good and Evil Angels, set to assist Faustus in deciding whether to repent or not to repent. The third section is the one in which Lucifer appears with his creatures from Hell (including the Seven Deadly Sins), in which we can see the contest

between the (absent) God and (elusive) Lucifer in his only appearance in the play.[52] In this section, the Seven Deadly Sins seduce Faustus in a medieval pageant-like procession. In the end, Faust chooses Hell and signs a contract with Lucifer, convinced he made the right choice – he will receive 24 years of supernatural powers, by selling his soul to the Devil. The actors in this scene have more allegorical roles, standing in for the unseen world of human desires (the actor playing Faustus) and the unseen world of Heaven and Hell (the actors performing supernatural characters).

In this light, the characters in *Doctor Faustus* can be divided into characters that represent the good world, and those that represent the evil world. The characters of the good world are those humans who strive to be like God and the Good Angel, and the characters of the evil world are Lucifer, Mephistopheles, demons, the Seven Deadly Sins, and the Evil Angel; the actors performing supernatural characters were a kind of channel for the audiences to recognise the symbolic representations of characters from beyond our world. Even though Faustus is, at first glance, seen as a human, psychological character, this is not completely true. Faustus is actually set in between the worlds, to represent us in the audience, and our desires (that belong to the unseen world as well). He is the one who represents our desires and needs to choose between the two worlds for us. In this scene, the desire of the main character in divination is not aiming for the new discoveries, but represents a greed for supernatural powers, those that go beyond human existence and belong to God. In failing to be like God, Faustus turns to God-like Satan, who provides Faustus with the magic and power beyond human knowledge. As a result, Faustus may not be like God nor God-like, but becomes almost devil-like, although still a kind of a numinous. As such, Faustus was both removed from the human and from the numinous. His character was not human any more, but

[52] In the 1604 version of the play that I examine here, this is the only appearance of Lucifer in the play. Even though in the 1616 version Lucifer also appears in the last scene when he comes to drag Faustus to the pits of Hell, Lucifer is still elusive throughout the rest of the play.

not not human; he was not god-like, but not not god-like. The actor performing Faustus directs the audience's attention towards that liminal space in between the seen world of humans and the unseen world of not-so-humans, as a dangerous place to exist in. That is, the actor performing the human through his contract with Lucifer, becomes a not-so-human. In doing so, the actor reaches, in a not quite god-like way, more devil-like supernatural powers. As such, the actor provides a kind of a vehicle for, maybe not-so-sacred, but nevertheless supernatural powers on the stage.

In the final scene of the play, the characters of Scholar 1, Scholar 2, and Scholar 3, Faustus' colleagues, enter the stage. Together with them, Faustus appears. While the characters of the Scholars represent good choices in life (and life as such), Faustus represents wrong choices in life (and death as such), and the dialogue sets these two in contrast. While the Scholars always call on prayer and the mercy of God, Faustus convincingly suggests there is no hope in this. The actors portraying the Scholars use their words to offer hope to Faustus, and their actions (probably) do the same. What these actors do is to point towards the elusive God as a place of hope, a way of moving forward, a life itself. The actor playing Faustus is, to the contrary, set at odds with those words (and actions). Nevertheless, the actor playing Faustus does the same thing, pointing towards an elusive God, but in a different context – as a lack of hope, as no way of moving forward, as death itself. Even when there is no God to be seen, the actor's work was to point at the elusive God so the audience's imagination would make it visible to their eyes.

The Scholars farewell Faustus and leave the stage. Faustus is alone on stage, talking to himself. He utters his last monologue, telling the audience there is "but one bare hour to live" (Marlowe 86). Still, he, again, desires miracles:

> Stand still, you ever-moving speres of heaven,
> That time may cease, and midnight never come!
> Fair nature's eye, rise, rise again, and make
> Perpetual day, or let this hour be but a year,

> A month, a week, a natural day,
> (That Faustus may repent, and save his soul.)
> *O, lente lente currite noctis equi!*[53] (87, italics in original, my footnote)

Dramaturgically, this section of the Faustus monologue might be seen to tell the audience that he tries to stop the time. Faustus desires to access what Eliade calls "*illo tempore*" (the time that we go to, to re-enact primordial divine acts). He wants, in Eliade's terms, to detach "himself from profane time and magically re-enter the Great Time, the sacred time" (*Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* 23). One might see Faustus here trying to evoke a sacred time and space and conjure up an elusive God, but it only appears like that on the surface; he actually knows that this is the end. He knows there is no going back in time, and his faith in elusive God disappeared decades ago. These words are not a prayer, they are regret; they do not ask God for help, and they convey his doubt with "if only this is possible" (Marlowe 87).

The dramaturgy here may suggest that the actor playing Faustus, in this moment in the play, is not performing ritual-like actions with the hope of evoking the time 24 years ago, in the hope of re-enacting the acts of making bad decision of signing a contract with the Devil. The actor's movements do not offer the audience any possibility of re-establishing the right order in the time of the scene, when he can go on to live his life naturally. Instead, the actor might be doing the completely opposite movements to what the words suggest. As Karol Cooper suggested earlier, what the actor does on stage (theatrical) is set in opposition to what the actor says (dramaturgical). In this way, the actor who performs Faustus is pointing at the invisible, as impossible. He uses his prayer-like words to invoke the sense of the sacred in the minds of his audiences, and then he uses his movements, that are set in opposition to those words, to point at the elusive sacred as impossible.

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[53] In *Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus,* Michael Keefer explains in his notes that "*O, lente lente currite noctis equi"* means "O gallop slowly, slowly, you horses of the night." Keefer, then, goes on suggest that Marlowe is taking this quote from *Amores*, the first completed book of poetry by the Roman poet, Ovid, and develops further discussion on this. For the purposes of my analysis, I look only at those words that represent the idea of "stopping the time."

The clock strikes, and the audience is signalled there are 30 minutes left before Faustus ends up in the flames of Hell. Faustus regrets and despairs, adding "if only" to his prayer-like words (Marlowe 89). The clock strikes 12 – the time has come. Thunder and lightning announce that the Devils are coming for the Faustus soul. Faustus looks up, uttering his final words before he is dragged to Hell: "My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!" (89). The actor, here again, focuses the audience's attention on the (invisible) God, the benevolent sacred power. Devils appear and drag Faustus to the flames of Hell. Faustus moves the audience's attention to the (visible) flames of Hell, the malevolent sacred power: "Ugly hell gape not, come not Lucifer, I'll burn my books, ah Mephistophilis!" (89). The actor, in these last moments on stage, is all the time pointing towards the sacred, either the benevolent or the malevolent part of it. Similarly to the ending in *The Bakkhai*, the chorus reminds us of divine powers, and the ways we need to respect them in order to live our lives to the best.

All the actors performing their characters in *Doctor Faustus* might be considered to have their allegorical, and perhaps more symbolic roles to play in locating the sacred in this tragedy. The actors performing as members of the chorus demonstrate the reasoning, reminding the audience where the right choices are. The actors portraying the good-world characters, those that represent humans with the knowledge and powers that belong to the human reach (including one supernatural character, the Good Angel, who does its job of reminding the humans to stay where they belong) are there to show where the good aspirations are: in the arms of the elusive God. The role of the actors portraying the evil-world characters, supernatural creatures from the pits of Hell, is more allegorical; they symbolise bad aspirations that seductively offer humans powers out of their reach. The actor playing Faustus is set in between the two worlds, representing the humans and their desire to gain powers beyond the human reach. In each scene, we see the contest between good and

evil, with evil winning only because it was made visible. In the end, the play shows to the audience what the audience would expect with pity and fear – that Faustus will be dragged into the mouth of Hell. At the end, God is still elusive, but the visible consequences of the contract with the creatures set in contrast with God, are horrific and fearful.

In this way, the actors in *Doctor Faustus* might be seen to perform their characters in a way where their job is to point towards the invisible sense of the sacred (still positioned above the stage), to symbolise its malevolent double coming from Hell (positioned below the stage, hidden behind the trapdoor), or to represent the human desire to become the sacred. In each way, the actors assist the audience in recognising what (benevolent or malevolent) and where (above or below) the sacred is on stage. Following this notion, the Elizabethan actor might be seen as a significant element in assisting the audience to locate the divine and its power throughout a performance, as it was the ancient Greek actors. That is, the actor himself and the actions he performed, might still be seen as a locus for the sacred on the Elizabethan stages.

Conclusion to the chapter

This chapter investigated the relationship between the actor and his work on stage on one hand, and the sense of the sacred on the other, by examining Euripides' *The Bakkhai* and Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. First, the chapter closely examined the actors' work in the ancient Greek tragedy. The residue of the religious ritual was ever so present in the ancient Greek theatre, so the role of the actor on stage was somewhat inherited from the priests.

In the Greek tragedy, the divine was explicitly on stage. For example, in *The Bakkhai*, the god Dionysus, who carries the sense of the sacred, opens the play by introducing himself as "a god standing on the ground" (Euripides 19). While the actor portraying Dionysus provides a locus for the sacred on stage, the other actors performing their characters are doing

the same job, by pointing towards the sacred – some in recognising the god, and some in failing to do so.

Then the chapter turned to the movement from the sacred to the secular in the English Renaissance. In *Doctor Faust,* the sense of the sacred is more malevolent than benevolent, and it is hard to be seen. Thus, the actors in presenting their characters in *Doctor Faustus,* might be seen to embody the unseen forces of the tragedy as much as they were representations of the recognisably human characters. The work of the actors preforming the supernatural and allegorical roles might be seen as a locus for a physical presence of what cannot otherwise be seen. By standing in contrast to them, the work of the actors performing human characters, was to point at the unseen world of Hell, as a sense of the force of the sacred, in its not-so-nice sense, on stage. As in *The Bakkhai*, the actors in *Doctor Faustus* represent the relationship between the human and the not-so-human, by keeping the audience's attention on the not-so-human characters – the representations of the malevolent forces – who, as such, provide the locus for the sacred on stage.

This chapter, thus, looked at how these theatres negotiated with the ritual and religious roots of theatrical performance to its extremes. In looking at early tragic theatre, in which the divine was explicitly represented on stage, and the Renaissance tragedy in which the absence of the divine was at the centre of the tragedy, this chapter suggests that we can see that actors in ancient Greek and Elizabethan theatres have played a significant role in locating the sacred for their audiences. This serves as foundation for this thesis to move forward with the next chapter, which explores the sense of the sacred in Modern theatre. Modern theatre is mostly secular. How can we look at the role of the actor as a locus for the sacred in Modern drama, that is so much more removed from its ritual roots? Whether the actor performs the desire to see it or the actor performs the impossibility to see it, the divine in Modern theatre is totally elusive. The following chapter will look closely at how elusive

the sacred is in Modern theatre, and in what way the Modern actor is, then, creating an imaginary space for his audiences where it would be accessible for the human eye to see it.

Chapter Two: Locating the Sacred in the Work of the Modern Theatre Actor

Introduction to the chapter

This chapter explores the actor's work in locating the sacred on the secular stages of the Modern theatre. It explores the way the dramaturgical and theatrical innovators and theorists of the late 19th and early 20th century – in particular, Émile Zola, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Konstantin Stanislavski – provoked a rethinking of the purpose of theatre, and consequently, the art of acting in representing the human experience of the everyday. In this chapter, I analyse Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*,[54] as a representation of the beginnings of the reformation of acting and Western theatre as such, and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, as a play at the very edge of the end of Modernism. Whereas Chekhov's play represents a milestone in the development of Realist theatre, Beckett's appears as an antithesis, and often referred to as a paradigm of Absurdist drama. Both plays are a product of their time. *The Seagull* arises at the end of the 19th century, during a period in which the idea of the theatre had been resolutely secularised as a kind of social science on one hand, and pure entertainment on the other. Written and produced in the immediate aftermath of World War II, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is often viewed as the final stage of the theatre's movement from the sacred to the secular, where the possibility of representing human experience in a coherent and cohesive way itself is called into question.

According to premiere Russian theatre historian, Konstantin Rudnitsky, *The Seagull* is "one of the greatest events in the history of Russian theatre" (Rudnitsky 8). In effect, Stanislavski's production, when it premiered in 1898, revolutionised the way artists and audiences approached the theatre. Stanislavski's innovative approach to the work of the actor,

[54] In analysing the chosen scenes from *The Seagull*, I draw on my own experience of performing the Chekhov's play. I performed the role of Treplev in the production of *The Seagull* at the National Theatre in Belgrade in 2000. The production was on the repertoire for over three years. Throughout its season, this production toured Europe, but the most vivid was the three day season in the Maly Theatre in Moscow, from 19th to 25th November 2002.

which became what is known as his System (and later his Method), was the cornerstone of my own training as an actor. In contrast to the realism of *The Seagull*, with its detailed sets and costumes and its character-driven plot, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is staged in a kind of void, and its characters and plot (such as they are) abstracted from whatever we might recognise as real life. First staged in Paris in 1953, *Waiting for Godot* is often understood to be a comment on the futility of faith following the catastrophes of the world wars and the Holocaust. This thesis, then, asks where might the sacred still be found, in a play that represents such a world view? The analysis of these play texts along with a critical reconsideration of my own training and practice as an actor is aimed towards understanding the ritual undercurrents of apparently secular modern theatre, and how the actor continues to stand between two worlds: the one we can readily perceive, and the one beyond us, which is, if not sacred, still a powerful force that determines the course of human experience.

From Renaissance to Modernity

In the first volume of his exceptional seminal study *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, titled *The Rise of Modern Paganism*, Peter Gay suggests that the period between the 14th and 18th century might be seen as the "prehistory of the Enlightenment" (256). This was the time, Gay continues, "when the critical mind resumed its interrupted conversation with classical antiquity and moved toward independence" (256). It might be seen, here, how Gay is suggesting that the Renaissance was the prehistory of the Enlightenment. As Gay describes:

> The central intellectual problem of the Renaissance was to find [...] a compromise formula [...] that would enable men to live comfortably with classical forms and Christian convictions, trust in man and trust in God, vigorous secular energies and a tenacious ascetic ideal. (270, my ellipsis)

Following Gay, the Renaissance can be perceived as the time that was breaking its ties with the Middle Ages, setting the stage for the new man, who is now "free, the master of his

fortune, not chained to his place in a universal hierarchy but capable of all things" (266). Gay reminds us of Diderot's idea of an ideal philosopher, as one who

> …tramples underfoot prejudices, tradition, antiquity, universal assent, authority, in a word, everything that overawes the mass of minds, who dares to think for himself, to go back to the clearest general principles, examine them, discuss them, admit nothing save on the testimony of his experience and his reasoning. (Diderot, qtd. in *The Rise of Modern Paganism* 160)

This is not far from Marlowe's description of Doctor Faustus. His aim to become "free, the master of his fortune," might be read as prehistory of the Enlightenment, first stepping from the Middle Ages, heavily dependent on religion, through the Renaissance, with its "compromised formula," (270) to the reasoning of the Enlightenment led by science and knowledge.

In this way, the Renaissance can be understood to leave to the Enlightenment the key task of breaking out of, in Gay's terms, the "holy circle" (358). He goes on to define the break as "the appropriation of Christian labors for secular purposes" (*The Rise of Modern Paganism* 359). With its idea of bringing the focus to reasoning, the Enlightenment removed itself from Christianity. As Gay concludes in *The Science of Freedom*, his second volume of *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*: "The limits of rational inquiry into ultimate mysteries, the impotence of reason before the passions, were [. . .] themes that haunted the Enlightenment" (188, my ellipsis). The task of moving from the mysterious to the rational, and secularising society, was not fully successful in the Enlightenment. In his more recent study, *The Enlightenment and Religion*, S. J. Barnett reminds us that before "the 1970s the characterization of the Enlightenment was most usually that of reason against religion" (2). He further suggests: "Since then many academics have preferred the formula reason versus the Church, recognizing that most of the enlightened still retained a belief in God, even if they were hostile to the Church" (2). Barnett then adds that it might be seen "that the revision of the character of religion in the Enlightenment was not as thoroughgoing as it might have

been" (2). The task of the Enlightenment – to secularise society – was left to modernity, the period that follows. Barnett then concludes that "the traditional linkage of modernity and Enlightenment – in the form of the secularizing deist movement – has continued to be propagated by some and still acknowledged by others" (2).

In *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy*, Dan Edelstein builds on Gay's fundamental exploration of the Enlightenment. Edelstein starts his Introduction with: "Every age needs its story. In the story we tell ourselves about our values, our government, and our religions, the Enlightenment plays a starring role. Countless books inform us that the Enlightenment was the founding moment of modernity" (1). He agrees with Gay's exploration, and suggests that the Enlightenment emerged among 18th century French scholars and writers, from "an intellectual quarrel over the relative merits of the Ancients and Moderns" (2). The quarrel echoed throughout the whole 18th century, suggesting, according to Edelstein, "that the path to potential Modern superiority led straight through the study of the Ancients" (42). In the same context, Edelstein reminds us that according to Gay, "the Enlightenment picked right up where antiquity had left off" (45). It is not strange, then, to see so many writers and theatre theorists of the modernity, to draw their attention back to the ancient Greek philosophers, writers, and theatre makers.

With the Enlightenment (1685 – 1815), the Age of Reasoning, science and philosophy developed in a way that detached themselves from the Church and the predominant Christian influence. The shift to enlightenment moved from the human desire to be like God, to Girard's exploration of a "desire of being" as outlined in his *Violence and the Sacred*. This shift could also be seen through the lens of Rene Descartes' "cogito ergo sum." In *Panorama of the Enlightenment*, Dorinda Outram reminds us that the "new philosophy" of the French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) "announced a break with scholasticism," that was "strongly linked with efforts by the Church to maintain the truths of revelation" (12-14).

Even though his philosophy was still concerned with the unseen world, very soon after Descartes, the Dutch Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) challenged "the then-orthodox religious belief" that still "depends on the unseeable" (Outram 14). Only a couple of decades later, Isaac Newton's (1643-1727) "new theories of light and planetary motion […] seemed almost to expel God from the universe" (Outram 11, my ellipsis). Rapidly, with the development of science and philosophy, throughout the Enlightenment, God was becoming even more and more elusive, until He was fully absent.

The absence of the sacred on the Modern stage

The 18th and 19th century social revolutions changed Europe, moving from monarchies to democracies, with the rise of industrialism. The late 19th century was marked by the new evolutionary theories of the English naturalist and biologist Charles Darwin (1809-1882), political theories of the German-born philosopher Karl Marx (1818-1883), and German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). The theatre at the time was undergoing a change as well. It was fully secular, distanced from its religious roots. With the expansion of the natural sciences seeking to understand how the world and universe works, naturalism found its way into theatre, introduced by the French novelist and playwright Émile Zola (1840-1902). It is possible that most influential to the revolution in the Modern theatre was the development of psychology throughout the Enlightenment. Particularly the method of psychoanalysis founded and developed by the Austrian Jewish psychologist, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). A psychological approach to the characters and the story, as such was the central point in Realist theatre. Realism marked the turning point in the Modern theatre. The key theatre theorist and practitioner of Realism in theatre was Konstantin Stanislavski.

Before I move forward with my thesis, it is important to highlight the difference between Naturalism and Realism, specifically in the context of Stanislavski and his work. In *Stanislavski: An Introduction*, Jean Benedetti reminds us that, for Stanislavski, Naturalism:

> implied the indiscriminate reproduction of the surface of life. Realism, on the other hand, by taking its material from the real world and from direct observation, selected only those elements which revealed the relationships and tendencies lying under the surface. (17)

It is in this distinction between the two genres that Stanislavski was revolutionised the work of the actor. The actor in Realism seeks to perform the realities that exist but are not so visible in nature. That is, the Realist actor points to his audience towards the realities hidden under the surface of life and invites them to create a reality of the play together. Stanislavski explains:

> But the detail must be characteristic and typical of whatever you want the audience to see. That is why naturalism is poisonous to the theatre. Naturalism cheats the audience of its main pleasure and its most important satisfaction, that of creating with the actor and completing in its imagination what the actor, the director and the designer suggest with their techniques. (Stanislavski in Benedetti 18)

The Stanislavskian actor, thus, was to unveil the hidden aspects of his character by providing clues for his audiences to see the psychological truths of his character.

In understanding the work of the actor in ancient Greek theatre, we have Aristotle's *Poetics* that can offer us some deep insights. In Modern theatre, we have Stanislavski, who built on Aristotle's work and developed a detailed system for the actor's work on stage. Even though it has been suggested that Stanislavski started to compose his ideas around the actor work while working in his First studio in 1912, it might be possible that he explored his ideas of the new theatre and new actor on stage even earlier, while working on Anton Chekhov's play, *The Seagull*.[55] Anton Chekhov became his constant writer-collaborator throughout his

[55] As Jonathan Pitches reminds us: "Stanislavsky's famous System did not begin to be formulated until 1906, after Meyerhold had left the MAT, but his first experiments in realising a text with the emphasis on psychological truth were already being made as early as 1898 – with the revival of Chekhov's text, *The Seagull*" (*Vsevolod Meyerhold* 6).

further explorations around the actor's work on stage. The opening night of *The Seagull*, directed by Stanislavski, was on the 17th of December 1898, at the Moscow Art Theatre. This performance was marked as "one of the greatest new developments in the history of world drama" (Rudnitsky, 8). It changed the work of the actor on stage. Mirroring the time and the political environment of the Stanislavski's actor, his work on stage was somewhat removed from his religious roots, and as such appeared fully secular, with the sense of the sacred absent from the stage. However, we still might look at the Modern actor and see that he remained in conversation with, if not the sacred, then in dealing with its absence.

Stanislavski's actor and the remnants of hierophany

As already outlined in the Introduction of this thesis, the 19th century theatre centred itself more in the profane world, by changing its focus of the universal, objective truths, to the subjective human experiences of the world. The dramaturgy was not any more preoccupied with gods and heroes, but instead, the modern dramaturgy was mainly involved with the lives of ordinary people, those that are not so much different from the ones sitting in the audiences. This change might be seen more clearly in the work of the modern actor. The emerging new theories of acting and theatre proposed by Konstantin Stanislavski, were positioning the actor in relation to the characters that were more life-like than before, where the actor was unveiling the psychological truth of his character. Even though modern secular theatre dramaturgy was concerned with the domestic, and more life-like characters, the sense of the sacred might still be observed in the work of the actor at that time.

There is a common misunderstanding about the Stanislavskian actor, that the actor fully gives himself over to the character. This is only half true. The other half of the truth lies in Stanislavski's observation of the "sincerity of emotions" (*An Actor Prepares* 54). Stanislavski tells us, through the character of Tortsov, that "Our great poet Pushkin wrote

[…] "Sincerity of emotions, feelings that seem true in given circumstances – that is what we ask of a dramatist." I add from myself that that is exactly what we ask of an actor" (53-54, my ellipsis). Then he explains what he means by "seem true": "By true seeming we refer not to actual feelings themselves but to something nearly akin to them, to emotions reproduced indirectly, under the prompting of true inner feelings" (55). The "seem true" is the key to better understanding the Stanislavski's actor and his work on stage (55). The actor here creates a parallel reality, that only seems real for the time of the performance. This seeming to be true recalls in me the concept of the unreal world of the actor's work, a concept I was taught at university.

While I studied acting, my professor, Predrag Bajčetić, insisted on differentiating three important stages of theatrical reality that are particularly significant for an actor: reality, non-reality, and unreality. Professor Bajčetić contextualised the theatrical reality of the actor in the following way: reality is defined by the actor's mundane life, non-reality is suggested by the life of the character in the play, and unreality is determined by the life of the actor as a character (Bajčetić 2019). This final stage of reality exists only in the liminal world of the performance, when the actor is suspended between the reality of his own life and the non-reality of his character's life. The main roles in the creation of a successful unreality were Stanislavski's concepts of "Magic If" and "Given Circumstances" proposed in his *An Actor Prepares*. Building the unreal world of the performance was crucial for the actor's further work on character creation. The creation of a character was considered successful if the inner life of the human spirit was made visible on stage.

Stanislavski tells us in *An Actor Prepares* that "[t]he fundamental aim of our art is the creation of this inner life of a human spirit" (15). Taking this as read, the formulation for the inner life invokes the spiritual. Later on in his book, Stanislavski goes on to acknowledge that in creating the inner life of a human spirit, the actor needs to use material that "is difficult to

obtain because in large part it is intangible, indefinable, and only inwardly perceivable" (102). Then, he tells us how to be sure, as actors, to make this invisible material visible to the audience: "many invisible, spiritual experiences are reflected in our facial expression, in our eyes, voice, speech, gestures" (102). Stanislavski, then, insists on the importance of the invisible material for the actor's work on stage:

> Some think that our external, visible movements are a manifestation of activity and that the inner, invisible acts of spiritual communion are not. This mistaken idea is the more regrettable because every manifestation of inner activity is important and valuable. Therefore learn to prize that inner communion because it is one of the most important sources of action. (*An Actor Prepares* 222)

In this system, it might be seen that Stanislavski was finding the way to lead his actor through the secularity of the Modern stage and keep the realistic portrayal of the life-like characters, while still retaining the sense of the spiritual tensions between the visible and invisible within the actor's work.

Discovering and presenting the "truth" was also central to Stanislavski's approach to the work of the actor. Rather than discussing definitions of the truth, which is beyond the scope of this thesis, I turn to Stanislavski's understanding of the term in the context of the theatre and the actor's work itself. Stanislavski proposes:

> What we mean by *truth* in the theatre is the scenic truth which an actor must make use of in his moments of creativeness. […] Put life into all the imagined circumstances and actions until you have completely satisfied your *sense of truth*, and until you have awakened a *sense of faith* in the reality of your sensations. This process is what we call *justification* of a part. (*An Actor Prepares* 141, italics in original)

Stanislavski, then, concludes:

> *Truth on the stage is whatever we can believe in with sincerity, whether in ourselves or in our colleagues*. Truth cannot be separated from *belief*, nor *belief* from truth. They cannot exist without each other and without both of them it is impossible to live your part, or to create anything. (141-142, italics in original)

It seems Stanislavski suggests that in order to create anything, the actor must reach a "sense of truth" on stage, through his imagination (*An Actor Prepares* 141). Throughout the rehearsal process then, the actor's imagination uses Stanislavski's "Magic If" and "Given

Circumstances" to create the world of the performance that becomes his parallel reality (*An Actor Prepares*). The actor must fix his eyes on the unseen world around and within himself, first. Only then his "sense of faith" arouses, and in doing so he makes the invisible truths exposed to the eyes of his audiences. The actor immerses himself into the character, while his consciousness fluctuates between the actor's reality and the reality of the character.

Stanislavski's actor, then, might be seen to exist in what Denis Diderot calls a "double personality" (*The Paradox of Acting* 11). Henry Irving summarises this notion in his preface to Diderot's *The Paradox of Acting*: "It is necessary to this art that the mind should have, as it were, a double consciousness" (xv). That is, the actor is conscious of the character's circumstances, but at the same time conscious that he is only performing the character. This double consciousness might be seen to echo Eliade's concept of the sacred, where sacred stone and sacred tree "are not adored as stone or tree; they are worshipped precisely because they are *hierophanies*, because they show something that is no longer stone or tree but the *sacred*" (*The Sacred and the Profane* 12, italics in original). Stanislavski's terminology is not so far from those of religious writings. Throughout his System, he insists on the unseen world, seemingly echoing a verse from the Bible: "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (*James Moffat Bible*, 2 Cor. 4:18). He systematically emphasises the importance of belief and faith in the actor's work. But he also recognises that he is writing and working not just in a secular modernity, but also in post-revolution communist Russia. His writings must be secular, but he still finds a way to maintain a sense of hierophany in the work of the Modern actor.

Stanislavski's aim in introducing his innovative approach to making theatre, and the provocative new style of acting, converged with the aims of the Russian playwright and director, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, to reform the theatre so it would be accessible to wider audiences. In October 1898, they set up the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) that opened

with Tolstoy's *Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich,* directed by Stanislavski. However, it was only with the premiere of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*, directed by Stanislavski, that the MAT and the new theatrical and acting style shaped by him, became famous. In his article, "Slaughtering Sacred Seagulls: Anatoly Efros's Production of The Seagull at the Lenkom in 1966," Ros Dixon reminds us that "*The Seagull* was also a triumph for Stanislavsky in the evolution of a new theatrical aesthetic and can be said to have laid the foundation of the future development of MAT" (2, italics in original). Throughout his experimentations with actors in the MAT, Stanislavski developed both his System and Method of Physical Actions. Bella Merlin reminds us that Stanislavski was very interested in classics such as the works of Shakespeare and Molière, and it was Nemirovich-Danchenko who diverted Stanislavski from fantasy and history and "plunge[d] him into the most ordinary every-day realities, filled with our most ordinary everyday emotions" (Nemirovich-Danchenko qtd. in "Which Came First: The System or 'The Seagull?'" 219). This helps shed some light on his theatrical innovations and better understand the constant tension between the secular and the sacred in his work, both as a theatre theorist and practitioner. Stanislavski's actor who deals with ordinary characters from our everyday lives might be removed from a priest, but with the actor's close relationship with the imagination, magic (if) and fantasy, these are still not far from the role of a hierophant.

Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*

Anton Chekhov wrote *The Seagull* in 1895. It was first produced by the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St Petersburg in 1896, where it failed. The more successful and famous production was two years later, directed by Konstantin Stanislavski for the newly formed Moscow Art Theatre. As Tatiana Shakh-Azizova reminds us in *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, "Chekhov's dramatic innovation in *The Seagull* was daring" (164). She quotes Chekhov

(from his letters), who admits that even though he wrote *The Seagull* "against all the rules of dramatic art," he hoped it would still successfully reach his audience (164). Shakh-Azizova suggests that the 1896 production "was doomed to fail" shows how the "old conservative, traditional stage failed to pass the test set by the new drama" (164). By "new drama" Shakh-Azizova looks at the lack of outer action that the play is bult on, but she also appears to point us towards Stanislavski's radically realistic production of Chekhov's play, with its innovative approach to acting, and detailed, rather overly determined sets, costumes, lighting, and sound.[56]

The story of the Moscow Art Theatre's landmark production as a paradigm for both realist drama and acting technique is familiar to most, if not all of us, who have studied and worked in the theatre.[57] However, what is of most interest for this thesis, is the way the realist drama is set against the symbolist play-within-a-play. When the character of Treplev announces that "We need new forms. We must have new forms, and if we don't we might as well have nothing at all" ("The Seagull" 42), the character is rejecting realism with its mundane preoccupations and limitations in favour of a more spiritual theatre. The play Treplev produces, which we see in the first act, is more akin to the experimental plays of Maurice Maeterlinck. Maurice Maeterlinck was a Nobel Prize-winning theorist and playwright, whose experiments in symbolist theatre, according to Montrose Moses' *Maurice Maeterlinck: A Study*, had a tendency "to seek for the unseen, to fathom the true essence of the symbol" (64). From the glimpse we are given in *The Seagull*, Treplev's play appears,

[56] Chekhov famously was not fond of this production for exactly these reasons: "I cannot judge the play dispassionately, because the Seagull [Roxanova] gave an abominable performance, kept sobbing violently; and the actor playing the part of the writer Trigorin [Stanislavsky] walked and talked like a paralytic. He interpreted his part to be that of a man without a 'will of his own' and in a way that absolutely nauseated me" ("Letter to M. Gorky, 9 May 1899").

[57] As Ros Dixon reminds us, in *The Seagull* "Stanislavsky's aim was to create a setting which would present as great an illusion of reality as possible" (2).

much like Maeterlinck's, to offer its audiences a symbolist drama centred on showing the ways in which the human world is intertwined with the unseen spirit world.

With its representation of the tension between two distinctive modes of theatrical performance – the realist and the symbolist – Chekhov's play sets the stage for actors to embody the mundane realities of daily life while yearning for a connection with unseen forces: the spiritual, or indeed, the sacred. In this, *The Seagull* is very much a part of its time and place, showing us a world that is moving rapidly and uneasily, from Enlightenment to Modernity. By removing itself from Christianity, with reason and science, the Enlightenment did not bring the answers to the questions emerging from our existence. Among other things, the symbolists were searching, in Krasner's terms, "to understand the structures of our failures to know" (*A History of Modern Drama* 148).

In exploring the symbolists of the time, in particular, Maeterlinck, Katherine Worth reminds us that "'not knowing,' 'not remembering,' 'not saying' become vital modes of expression" in Maeterlinck's dramas (77). Krasner, then, concludes that "It is not hard to understand Maeterlinck's appeal to Chekhov, who called his work "odd wonderful plays" that "make an enormous impression" (*A History of Modern Drama* 148). This *negative action*, that is, the action of not doing, might be seen as what Krasner calls, a "boredom"[58] in Chekhov plays (113). Krasner explains in Chekhov's four major dramas that "[t]he plots are immaterial – the frequent criticism of Chekhov is that 'nothing happens' in his plays – yet everything that surrounds his characters has seismic consequences" (110). He concludes by quoting Chekhov's letter: "On stage everything should be just as complicated and just as simple as in life. People eat their meals, and in the meantime their fortune is made or their

[58] In Volume 1 of *A History of Modern Drama*, David Krasner defines boredom thus: "The concept of 'boredom' arose alongside the modern bourgeoisie and the modern novel and took root in the nineteenth century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes the first appearance of the term 'boredom' in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852), citing the 'malady of boredom.' By the late nineteenth century the malady of boredom is a reoccurring phenomenon in literature and drama" (113).

life ruined" (Chekhov qtd. in Krasner 110). But what force was making their fortune, and where the power was that ruined their lives, remains as a question unanswered. The not talking about it, and the unknowing of this force form beyond the everyday could be seen to be in *The Seagull* as the main issue throughout the play.

For further understandings of the rise of symbolist drama, Worth suggests that for symbolists, "going down into the depth of the mind meant also reaching out, making contact with the mystery of the universe, galvanizing into active life the part of the mind that dreams and is passive and has intuitive knowledge the conscious mind is blind to" (11). The abortive performance of the play-within-the-play, at first might be read as a parody of Maeterlinck's symbolist drama, but it also carries the seeds of the central conflict of the realist play that surrounds it. The cries of Nina and Treplev, and their ultimate despair, might be heard to echo the words of Maeterlinck, as quoted by Montrose Moses: "If I listen [. . .] it is the universe and eternal order which thinks in my place, and, without fatigue, I shall go beyond myself. If I resist, one might say that I am struggling against God" (67). This is the challenge for actors in *The Seagull*: to perform the struggle for and against the sacred – God or the spirits – while showing us ordinary people trying to live happily enough from one day to the next.

Stanislavski tells us in his *My Life in Art*, that the "scenery and properties of Treplev's theatre are poor and modest" (354). Then, he goes on to remind us: "But listen to the essence of his art and you find that it is a complete grammar for the actor of to-day" (354). What he means here is not so clear, however, what we see is that taken together, the play and the play-within, show us the wide range of actorly possibilities offered by the theatre of the time. For Stanislavski, the provocation was to develop his System to meet the challenges and aspirations he was experiencing as an actor and director who perhaps was over-identifying with the character of Treplev in asking: "Can the provincial mother understand the complex

longings of her talented son" (354). Chekhov's play may have been parodying the work of Maeterlinck, but it is likely that Stanislavski was staging the scene in earnest. Stanislavski's production of *The Seagull* was a huge success with its audiences, and with Chekhov's play text, continues to be foundational to our understanding of realist theatre, the conventions of which are cast into higher relief by being set against the symbolist play. For example, the performance made use of what came to be understood conventionally, as *the fourth wall*– a key component of realist theatre in the way actors perform as characters with each other, rather than presenting themselves to the audience across the footlights.[59] In the opening scene of *The Seagull*, the characters of Masha and Medvedenko are shown in the garden talking to each other as if privately, without regard for the audience. Later in the act, when, along with the others, they watch Treplev's play in performance, we can see in the images of the production that these characters were seated with their backs turned to the audience in the Moscow Art Theatre auditorium. At the same time, we also see over their shoulders and as if from a distance, Nina in another theatrical world entirely on the little stage set for her by Treplev. How we are to see the play-within-the play over the shoulders of the manifestly distracted onstage audience is a question that is left largely unresolved. What we do see, however, is Nina's ardent striving to point us towards something more profound. Her failure to bring this unseen force successfully on to the stage, that is, to provide a locus for the sacred in the theatre, might be seen as recalled for us at the end of the play.

The play is set in a *dacha* (a holiday home) outside Moscow, where the famous actress, Arkadina, accompanied by her lover, the equally famous writer, Trigorin, is visiting her family. Her son, Treplev, is preparing for a performance he has written and directed, in which his beloved Nina will play the starring role. Mesmerised by Arkadina and Trigorin,

[59] In this, Stanislavski was building on the early 1890s productions of André Antoine and Otto Brahm, whose experiments with naturalist theatre were (in)famous throughout Europe (see Jean Chothia's *André Antoine*; also, Bettina L. Knapp's "The reign of the theatrical director: Antoine and Lugné-Pöe").

Nina sees the possibility of a life beyond her rural environs. She wants more: in life, in love, in art. At the end of the third act, she abandons Treplev, running away with Trigorin to find herself in Moscow. We discover in the fourth and final act, that Trigorin has left her to return to Arkadina. Having fallen pregnant and lost her child, Nina has also failed as an actress. She returns to the dacha, in hopes of reuniting with Trigorin. Treplev begs her to stay, but she refuses his vision, both of their love and of the theatre. Nina leaves again. Treplev shoots himself.

The Seagull is widely considered a landmark in the development of realism as a form, but at its heart is the performance of Treplev's symbolist play, which is about the impossibility of creating art at a time when the old world is crumbling around them. It was presented as a very bad play, disrupted by the bad behaviour of Arkadina, Trigorin, and the others in the audience. The collapse of the performance precipitates the dramatic action that unfolds over the rest of the play, and remains unresolved in the end with Nina's temporary return to the scene and Treplev's suicide. What makes *The Seagull* most suitable for this study, is the way it gives form to the desire for an art that transcends the limitations of everyday existence. The characters, each in their own way, express their spiritual, erotic, and artistic yearnings, and each scene offers audiences a vision of their struggles between desire and despair.

As first performed by the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898, *The Seagull* actually contains two plays: the realist play, directed by Stanislavski, and the symbolist play-within-the-play, also directed by Stanislavski (of course) but as a counterpoint to the realist play, as the desire for a spiritual experience of art and the artistry is made manifest. The tension between the secular theatre and the sacred is thus animated by the actors, who appear trapped by the methods of a realist performance – the detailed sets, costumes, lights, and sound – except when on the little stage constructed by Treplev. In the end, Nina laments her lost spiritual

wholeness – "I'm a seagull… No, that's not it. I am an actress. Yes, that's right!" ("The Seagull" 87, ellipsis in original) – which she nonetheless continues to pursue in the same way she does Trigorin, even as it destroys her.

In analysing *The Seagull*, I begin with an analysis of the play-within-the-play, with its evocations of the (thwarted) desire for the theatre to transcend the everyday. The next scene examined is in act 2, in which the figure of the seagull itself is introduced to us in the form of a dead bird offered by Treplev to Nina as a symbol for his shattered hopes and dreams. The third scene, which I discuss last, is when Nina and Treplev are briefly reunited, so that we can see how they choose to endure (or not) their inability to attain transcendence whether on the stage or off, to live their lives in art or in the everyday. What *The Seagull* shows us through its contradictory theatricalities and the work of its actors is the desire for the spiritual and its impossibility. Its loss is marked in each scene, even as realism prevails.

In the famous black and white photograph of act 1 of Stanislavski's production, we see, very far upstage and slightly to the left of centre, Nina performing in Treplev's play. The stage on which she appears is slightly raised and set against the rustic backdrop of the garden. A white sheet can be seen draped to one side, perhaps as a stage curtain. Nina is on the little stage. She is draped from her head to the stage floor in a long white veil. Her dress may also be white, but it is difficult to see in the monochrome of the photograph. She is standing in profile, facing stage left, her chin slightly raised. From the play's text we can imagine that she is looking at the lake, and the moon's reflection on its surface, as it says in the stage directions: "*The curtain rises; a view of the lake is unveiled; the moon is on the horizon, its reflection in the water*" ("The Seagull" 46-47, italics in original). Directly upstage centre, just to one side of the platform on which Nina is performing, we can see a character dressed in white with a white cap, who appears to be Treplev as director/prompter. He is standing in profile, facing left, his head slightly tilted towards Nina. His back is to a small rotunda with

temple-like columns constructed in the ancient Greek style. This might be seen as a reference to classical theatre, in which the ancient Athenian stage was overlooked by a temple. It remains empty and unremarked on, as everyone on stage – both in the play and in the play-within-the-play, is looking elsewhere.

In the photograph, we can see five characters sitting downstage centre on a long white bench. They face upstage, with their backs turned to the audience. There is a tree stump downstage right, on which a female character (possibly Masha, as she is the only one in black) sits, in profile, her elbows on her knees, her face in her hands turned slightly, so that she appears to be looking over the shoulders of the others towards the stage on which Nina is performing. Another tree stump is placed to the left of the long bench, on which a male character is seated, facing upstage. To the far left downstage, another male character is seated on a smaller, rougher bench, with his back to the audience, and his view of Nina's performance slightly obscured it seems, by foliage. In this way the audience in the MAT auditorium could be seen to watch this play-within-the-play over the shoulders of the characters who perform the role of audience to Treplev's play. The question of how the way they watch is thus informed by the performance of watching, is left unanswered.

In his account of the production, Stanislavski asserts that we have "the fashionable and trivial" world represented by Treplev's audience: "To the accompaniment of tasteless conversation and jokes, the domestic spectators take their places on the long bench and the tree stumps, their backs to the public, very much like sparrows on a telegraph line" (*My Life in Art* 354). Over the shoulders of this onstage audience, we see Treplev's play, which from Stanislavski's perspective seems to have been staged as a kind of attempted rebuke against the hyperrealist mundane chatter of the other characters. While the realism of the onstage audience may have been artfully staged, that is, on the stage-within-the-stage, the performance is art itself. In Stanislavski's words: "How talented is this Treplev with the soul

of Chekhov and a true comprehension of art" (354). This tension between the fashionable – the new emerging realist genre, born with the Enlightenment, and the avant-garde – the antirealist genre of symbolism, is ever present throughout Chekhov's *The Seagull*. What we see, it seems, is the conflict between the proposition of the Enlightenment that there is no god, and the symbolist search for the meaning of life, asking, "where are you, god?" For Stanislavski, if not for Chekhov, the theatre remained a place where the striving for transcendence was staged against the backdrop of everyday life.

In the play's text, Chekhov provides a full description of how he imagines the play-within-the-play is to be staged: "*The curtain rises; a view of the lake is unveiled; the moon is on the horizon, its reflection in the water; NINA ZARECHNAYA sits on a large rock, dressed all in white*" ("The Seagull" 46-7, italics and block letters in original). In his memoir, *My Life in Art*, Stanislavski describes his vision of the scene as he directed it, at some length:

> The moon rises, the sheet falls, one sees the lake, its surface broken with the silver gleams of the moon. On a high eminence that resembles the base of a monument, sits a grief-stricken female figure wrapped in manifold white, but with eyes that are young and shining and cannot be grief-stricken. This is Nina Zarechnaya in the costume of World Grief, the long train of which, like the tail of a snake, is stretched over grass and undergrowth. (354)

We might see Nina as a bride, dressed in white, a vision of the virginal female ideal. For both Chekhov and Stanislavski, Nina's costume and her pose seem more directly to allude to the spiritual and the biblical. Nature is predominant, presented however, in a way that bridges the naturalist and the symbolist, the realism of *The Seagull,* with the spiritual aspirations of Treplev's play.

While Stanislavski's vision of Nina is excessively poeticised, Chekhov's description rather tersely echoes the Christian trope of an angel sitting on a rock. In the Bible there is a verse describing the moment in which the reader learns that the Christ has risen. The Apostle Matthew tells us of the angel who came to pass the message of Christ's resurrection:

> There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. (Matt. 28:2-4)

Following this image, the character that Nina performs in Treplev's play, then, might be seen as a kind of an angelic figure. On one hand, her figure symbolises the messenger that comes to reveal to her audience what they cannot see, the horrible human end: "Cold, cold, cold. Empty, empty, empty. Terrible, terrible, terrible" ("The Seagull" 47). However, Nina's character also represents the unseen force of the "universal soul" and its collective consciousness, that is set against "the devil, master of all material matter" (47). Throughout the whole performance-within-a-performance, I suspect that Chekhov might provide clues for the actor who performs Treplev that Treplev could be seen to be drawing on Maeterlinck's work and that of other symbolists of the time.

In the scene of Treplev's and Nina's performance, we can see that it aims to reveal the unseen world of the human distant future: "thousands of centuries have passed since the earth has borne any living creature" (47). The performance represents the symbolist approach, dealing with the mysticism of the unknown force that goes beyond (and in this instance, after) the human reach. If not God, who or what is the force? The Devil is present: "And you, too, pale fires […] Fearing that you will spring to life, the father of all matter, the devil, changes you" (47). However, the Devil is there only as a counterpoint: "My mighty opponent, the devil, approaches" (48). Therefore, the Devil is not the invisible force they talk about: "One thing, and one thing alone in this universe, stays eternal, unchanging – and that is the eternal spirit" (47). This invisible eternal soul is represented in the character Nina performs in Treplev's play: "And I, I am the universal soul" (47).

As a counterpoint to Treplev's and Nina's aim to reach transcendental performance, Chekhov sets against it a very mundane world of other characters in *The Seagull,* that pose as the audience of this performance. This trivial world of the audience three times interrupts the

spiritual world of the performance, mostly in a way of mocking either the symbolist approach, or Treplev's desire to achieve his aim. This culminates in the moment when Treplev terminates the performance. The curtain falls down, so we never see the full performance. Treplev, with his performance, was trying to reach the unseen world that lies beyond their everyday world – he tells Nina that the point of his play "is not to show life as it is, or as it should be, but as we dream to be" (44). However, this world of Treplev's play remains invisible, not just to his audience, but to his performer, Nina, as well. Nina complains to Treplev: "It's so hard to be in your play… There are no living characters in it […] there's so little action in your play, only speeches" (44, my ellipsis).

This is not so much different from the scene of misrecognition in Euripides' *The Bakkhai*: in *The Bakkhai*, no one could see the god in Dionysus; in *The Seagull*, no one can see what Treplev is trying to tell us. Whereas the scene of misrecognition of Dionysus is setting the stage for the scene of recognition at the end of the play when Dionysus punishes Pentheus by death, at the end of *The Seagull*, Treplev remains unrecognised, and punishes others with his own death. In depicting the misrecognition in *The Seagull*, Chekhov intentionally interrupts the play-within-the-play with superficial chatter:

> Arkadina: (*Whispers.*) Something from the Decadent School?
> Treplev: (*Pleasing, reproachful.*) Mama!
> […]
> Arkadina: It smells like sulphur. Is this really necessary?
> Treplev: Yes.
> Arkadina: (*Laughs.*) Ah, yes, special effects!
> […]
> Polina: (*To Dorn.*) You took off your hat. Put it on, or you'll catch cold.
> Arkadina: The Doctor's taken his hat off to the devil, the father of eternal matter. (47-48, italics in original, my ellipsis)

In this way, Chekhov's dramaturgy, along with the way Stanislavski positions the actors watching Treplev's performance in between Moscow's audience and Nina, helps the actors in *The Seagull* to enact the misrecognition of Treplev's performance for the audiences in the MAT. In so doing, the actors enable the audience to better perceive this tension between the

two worlds: the mundane world of the chatter and the spiritual world of Treplev's performance.

In the Nina-Treplev scene in act 2, Treplev enters the stage with a gun and the seagull he killed just a few minutes prior. He lays the seagull down in front of Nina's feet, and warns Nina he is going to kill himself too, in the same way. Nina is irritated by Treplev's behaviour and says she does not understand him, because he talks and behaves in symbols. Treplev explains that he thinks she does not love him any more, since his play failed a few nights earlier. He says he knows that she is cold to him as everyone hated his play, and therefore she despises his work, too. For that reason, Treplev says that he took his play and burned it, right down to the last page. Nina does not reply to Treplev. However, her gaze beyond him, leads Treplev to notice Trigorin approaching them. Before leaving her, Treplev tells Nina: "This sun has scarcely shone upon you yet, and already you are smiling, your eyes are melting his rays. I won't stand in your way" (59).

In this scene, both dramaturgical and theatrical aspects of Treplev's words and actions might be seen to retain some ritualistic structure. When Treplev brings the dead seagull and lays it down to Nina's feet, Treplev could be seen to mirror the act of making offerings to gods in religious rituals. As such, the seagull might also be seen as a scapegoat. Later on, Treplev threatens that he will sacrifice himself too: "Soon, in the same way, I shall kill myself" (59). Also, when talking about his play and how he burnt it (repeating what he does at the end of the play: "*For the next two minutes, in silence, he tears up all his manuscripts*" [89, italics in original]) Treplev's action could be seen as a kind of a ritualistic act, and his script, a sacrificial gift. So, what does the actor do here that is set in the context of the sacred, hierophany and the hierophant?

In the production of *The Seagull* at the National Theatre in Belgrade, where I performed the role of Treplev, I remember performing this scene: Nina finishes her

monologue that comes just before our scene. She is dancing, filled with happiness. Throughout her last words of the monologue, I enter from the depths of the stage, slowly becoming visible to both Nina and the audience. I appear almost as a ghost-like figure. I hide the seagull behind my back and ask if she is alone. When assured no one else is there, I start my performance; I say my line: "Today I have done something despicable – I have killed the seagull" (59). I kneel if front of her, make the seagull visible for the first time, putting the seagull just in front of her feet, and say the rest of my line while looking ap at her: "I lay it at your feet" (59). The actor who performs Nina comes down to the seagull, takes it into her hands, and looks at it saying her line: "What's the matter with you?" (59). Then there is a long pause, in which we both kneel; I stare at her, and she stares at the bird. After a while, I whisper my next line to her, in a prayer-like way: "Soon, in the same way, I shall kill myself" (59). She changes the pace of the scene, quickly moves with the seagull to the bench, and leaves me kneeling alone, and the seagull becomes a kind of offering. To Treplev, the seagull is himself, an offering made as a sacrificial symbol of his love for her; for Nina, the seagull is herself, a symbol of her freedom sacrificed for the sake of Treplev's obsession with her. Even though there is nothing religious in the scene, it is not that hard to see in this scene, a structure that is akin to that of a ritual. The key for the scene to be perceived as a kind of a ritual is not so much in the role of the seagull as an offering, but more in the actor's ritual-like actions. What the actor does in this scene recalls in the observer, a sense of ritual. In this, the actor is surely not a priest, but in the actor's actions one might still recognise the remnants of a priest-like role.

The final scene of the play takes place two years after the turbulent events that occurred during the play-within-the-play in act 1, and the following couple of days in acts 2 and 3. At the beginning of the final act 4, Treplev tells us what happened in the two years between the third and fourth act: Nina "ran away from home and met up with Trigorin. […]

They had a child. The child died. Trigorin fell out of love with her and returned to his former liaison" ("The Seagull" 79). When Treplev observes Nina's personal life, he informs us that it "hasn't been a complete success" (79). In addition to her failure in pursuing her love life, Nina has an even worse professional life, according to Treplev: "She made her debut at a summer theatre outside Moscow, and then she went away to the provinces. […] She played all the big roles, but she overacted badly, gesticulating, ranting and raving" (79, my ellipsis). Treplev does give her some credit, however, letting us know that "[t]here were moments when she showed some talent – she played hysteria and the death scenes well – but those were only moments" (79-80). This, though, might be more attributed to her tragic fate than to her talent. What we saw at the beginning of the play was Nina's yearning for love and art. At the end of the play, we see her left by Trigorin, acting in provincial theatres, with not much success.

If we trace Treplev's personal and professional life, we can see that in act 1 he is in love with Nina and aims to create new forms in art. Already, by the end of act 3, we can see that Treplev is losing her, and at the beginning of act 4, we learn she left has him for Trigorin. Soon after, in act 4, Trigorin brings the journal with Treplev's new story, and informs him:

> Your admirers send you their regards… There's a lot of talk about you in Petersburg and Moscow, everyone asks about you. They want to know: What's he like, how old is he, does he have dark hair, or light? For some reason, they all think you're an old man. ("The Seagull" 81, ellipsis in original)

We see that Treplev has achieved, that he is to be published, and already has readers. What we learn later however, in Treplev's monologue before he meets Nina, is that Treplev did not create new forms. Indeed, Treplev observes his failure to make new forms: "For so long I've been going on and on about the need for new forms. And now, little by little, I'm falling into the same old rut myself" ("The Seagull" 85). The reason his readers assume he is old might be because he is not the same Treplev presented at the beginning, who yearned for new forms

in art. Instead, he seems to have become more Trigorin-like, even admiring his work: "Trigorin has technique, it's easy for him" (85). Treplev has become someone, who in order to get his audience, is "falling into the same old rut" himself (85). We see at the end of the play, that neither Nina nor Treplev achieved what they yearned for at the beginning. We see Nina as an unknown provincial actress left by Trigorin, and Treplev as stuck in the old forms, and abandoned by Nina.

Both Treplev and Nina have undergone a complete transformation from when we first saw them in act 1, to when we see them in the final act. At the end of the play, even though they did not achieve what they were longing for, we see them both still filled with a strong sense of longing. Treplev tells Nina in this scene:

> I call out your name, I kiss the ground you walk on – wherever I look, I see your face before me, your tender smile, that smile which illuminated the most precious years of my life… […] I'm alone, with no love to warm me, I'm cold, it's like living in a grave […] Stay here, Nina, I beg you, or else let me go away with you. ("The Seagull" 87, my ellipsis)

In the same scene, a page later, just before she leaves, Nina tells Treplev: "When you see Trigorin, tell him nothing … I love him. I love him even more than ever […] I love him, I love him passionately, I love him to distraction" ("The Seagull" 88, my ellipsis). They both failed in love, but what is left is hope. What we see in Chekhov's play is that the central point of human existence is not gods or faith any more, but humans themselves, and hope. In Chekhov's plays, particularly in *The Seagull*, these ordinary people fail in their hopes, and when they fail, they keep waiting and still hope, because when there is no hope, Chekhov tells us, the play ends: "Konstantin Gavrilovich has just shot himself… CURTAIN" (89).

The waiting for and the absence of the sacred in *Waiting for Godot*

Samuel Becket wrote *Waiting for Godot* in French, between 1948 and January 1949. The play was first performed in Paris in 1953,[60] with its English language premiere in London in 1955 (Ackerley and Gontarski 172). The plot, such as it is, is simple. Two characters, Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo), await the arrival of Godot. While Godot never appears, other characters come and go: Pozzo and Lucky, as well as the Boy, who announces at the end of each act that: "Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening but surely tomorrow" (*Waiting for Godot* 37). From the start, one of the most prevalent interpretations has been that the play represents an existentialist crisis – perhaps following Nietzsche's famous proclamation: "And lately, did I hear him say these words: 'God is dead: of his pity for man hath God died'" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 96).

There have been numerous assumptions, even though consistently deflected by Beckett[61] throughout his life, that the name Godot is a reference to God. Robert S. Cohen asserts the strong possibility that Beckett was being at least somewhat disingenuous in his denials of this connection in his 1963 article "Parallels and the Possibility of Influence Between Simone Weil's *Waiting for God* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*." Simone Weil's widely influential text was posthumously published in 1951, only a year before the Beckett's play. In his essay, Cohen makes his case:

> Weil was born in Paris in 1909 making her three years younger than Beckett, an Irishman. They both came to the famed *Ecole Normale Superior* in 1928, Beckett as Lecteur d'Anglais and Weil as a student of philosophy. At that time the school was a burning intellectual center; also studying there was Jean Paul Sartre. In 1930 and 1931 Beckett and Weil left the *Ecole* and lived during the most part of the next twelve

[60] The French actor and director, Roger Blin, directed the premiere of *Waiting for Godot* at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris. Blin also originated the role of Pozzo in this production.

[61] Many scholars have been arguing that it is not strange that Beckett quotes Bible in his work, as he was brought up in a religious surrounding. In "Beckett's Godot: Nietzsche Defied," Mary M. F. Massoud reminds us: "According to his biographers, Deirdre Bair, Enoch Brater, and others, Beckett had a religious upbringing which engraved into his consciousness the Biblical significance of Good Friday [Becket was born on Good Friday in 1906] with daily prayers and Bible readings" (43). Massoud, then, reminds us "that although Beckett attacked institutional religion, as in the interview with Driver, and also in some of his letters, he always denied being an atheist" (44).

> years in Paris and southern France, and although their acquaintance has never been authenticated, it may be presumed. Simone Weil became quickly recognized by her intellectual confreres; Andre Gide called her "the most truly spiritual writer of this century." (425-426, italics in original)

This is not the place to wade into this debate. Instead, I want to take a moment to look at the way Weil frames her discussions of an absence, and the notion of waiting, in the context of religious and mystical philosophy. Cohen tells us that "Weil's major concern in this work is with a set of characters she calls "the afflicted," characters not unlike the strange persons who inhabit the Beckett landscape" (426). In Weil's words:

> Affliction makes God appear to be absent for a time, more absent than a dead man, more absent than light in the utter darkness of a cell. A kind of horror submerges the whole soul. During this absence there is nothing to love. What is terrible is that if, in this darkness where there is nothing to love, the soul ceases to love, God's absence becomes final. The soul has to go on loving in the emptiness, or at least to go on wanting to love. (120-121)

It is possible, of course, to perceive echoes (intentional or not) here of Beckett's words in his novel *The Unnameable*, published in 1953, the same year that *Waiting for Godot* had its world premiere. The final words of *The Unnameable* are: "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on". The necessity to fail yet still endure in life, might also be seen in Beckett's later novella *Worstward Ho* (1983), where Beckett writes: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (8). It is possible, also, to see that Weil was, like Beckett and so many others, responding to the post-war, post-Holocaust zeitgeist. Weil concludes: "Then, one day, God will come to show himself to this soul and to reveal the beauty of the world to it, as in the case of Job" (121). As Cohen observes:

> … over the denial of Beckett himself […] the reasons for linking Godot with the deity are plentiful and obvious, and stand corroborated by the personal evidence of Beckett himself. The most direct examination of the play reveals that Godot stands for salvation of one form or another. (427-428, my ellipsis)

Taking the play's words at face value, and leaving Beckett's own stated views to one side, it is easy to see Cohen's point proved.

> Vladimir: We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. Unless Godot comes.

> Estragon: And if he comes?
> Vladimir: We'll be saved. (*Waiting for Godot* 70)

In the actors' work in *Waiting for Godot* I must therefore begin by agreeing with both Cohen and Beckett that wherever the sacred might be, it is not located on the stage.

The stage setting – largely empty, except for a leafless tree and a boulder – makes the "emptiness" articulated by both Cohen and Weil palpable. The play begins with a performance of affliction: Estragon's foot. Its dramatic action is simply about filling the time while hoping against hope for the purpose of being there to be revealed. The play shows us their desire, as when Vladimir cries: "It's Godot! At last! Gogo! It's Godot! We're saved" (57). Then it shows us the futility of their situation, and their resolve against the evidence of their experience to carry on waiting. The persistent waiting of Vladimir and Estragon is not so different from that found in religious faith, such as when a congregation performs rituals in anticipation of the second Coming – except perhaps in this case, the arrival of Godot would be a first.

The quality of that waiting might be found in Weil's concept of waiting as attention. Weil suggests that "[t]he Greek word which expresses it is ὑπομονή, and *patientia* is rather an inadequate translation of it" (196, italics in original). She then explains: "It is the waiting or attentive and faithful immobility that lasts indefinitely and cannot be shaken" (196). In exploring this notion of attention, Weil suggests that the "key to a Christian conception of studies is the realization that prayer consists of attention" (105). If we look at the original titles in French – *En Attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*) and *Attente de Dieu* (*Waiting for God*) – we can see that both French words for waiting have "attention" at their core. In discussing this quality of waiting as attentive and faithful immobility, Weil tells us: "In our acts of obedience to God we are passive; whatever difficulties we have to surmount, however great our activity may appear to be, there is nothing analogous to muscular effort; there is only waiting, attention, silence, immobility" (194). In Beckett's play, we see this paradox

performed as the characters repeatedly sigh "nothing to be done" – a kind of passive acceptance of the condition of waiting for the arrival of an absent other – while also continuously inventing ways to keep busy: 'Let's hang ourselves immediately" (*Waiting for Godot* 13).

The parallels between Weil's famous text and Beckett's famous play aside, it is probably unwise to disregard the playwright's denials of a correlation between the absent figure of Godot and a God whose existence was particularly debatable after the devastating events of the mid-20th century. Perhaps the ambiguity itself is meaningful, creating another kind of empty space into which the audience might project their desire for answers that would not be forthcoming. In *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), Martin Esslin tells us: "when Alan Schneider, who directed the first American production of the play [in 1956], asked Beckett who or what was meant by Godot, he received the answer, "If I knew, I would have said so in the play" (12). According to Esslin, this "highly obscure, intellectual play […] had produced near riots among a good many highly sophisticated audiences around Western Europe" (*Theatre of the Absurd* xv, my ellipsis). While I accept Beckett's dismissal of the assumptions regarding the alignment of Godot with the idea of God (though he insists he does not know who Godot is), for the purposes of this thesis I want to explore the ways the play points to a powerful force that remains out of sight, but never fully out of mind.

The play is definitely of its place and time. Esslin goes on to tell us that absurdist drama, emerging as it does in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, "can be seen as the reflection of what seems the attitude most genuinely representative of our own time's contribution" (*The Theatre of the Absurd* xviii). He explains: "The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies. All this was shattered by the war" (xviii-xix). As Herbert Blau, who with Jules Irving, co-directed one of the most famous

productions of the play in the San Quentin penitentiary in 1957, recalls: *"*It is the atmosphere out of which *Godot* was born – the despair, hunger, and disease of post-war Europe – being defined by Winston Churchill" ("Notes from the underground: Waiting for Godot and Endgame" 190, italics in original).[62] Esslin points to the way Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, articulates the rupture of conventional understandings of the way the world works:

> A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity. (Camus qtd. in *The Theatre of the Absurd* xix)

For Esslin, the concept of the Absurd, as identified by Camus, can be understood as a "sense of irrationality of the human condition in the form of highly logical constructed reasoning" (*Theatre of the Absurd* xix). Esslin sees the Theatre of the Absurd as a new genre of modern drama that "strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (*The Theatre of the Absurd* xix-xx). After the Enlightenment, in which the power of the sacred was made to give way to the realities of human existence, and after the wars and genocides of the early 20th century, the actor's role, as can be seen in *Waiting for Godot*, comes to show the dislocation of the sacred from the stage. What is performed in Beckett's play is what is left when humanity finds itself bereft, but still clutching to a shred of faith that an unseen other might yet arrive to help us make sense of the otherwise empty space. The tramps wait. For what? In the waiting, they are not unlike a congregation, cycling through actions that would be meaningless without faith in the return of the Messiah, which

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[62] The actors were members of the San Francisco Actor's Workshop company. The audience were the convicts of the San Quentin state prison. In *The Anti Theatrical Prejudice*, Jonas Barish tells us that the "audience of convicts instantly grasped its kinship with the two tramps going through their time-killing ritual" (457). It is the prisoners that could fully identify with this act of waiting. They knew the full meaning of it. (Also, more about Blau's and Irving's production of *Waiting for Godot* at San Quentin can be found in Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (xv - xvii).

continues to be deferred for reasons beyond the believers' comprehension. While Beckett was adamant in his repudiation of any link between Godot and God, even so we can still see that the actors in his play are, like the Christian faithful, directing our gaze towards a mysterious figure that remains tantalisingly out of sight.

In Sails of the Herring Fleet: Essays on Beckett, Herbert Blau suggests that "Beckett begins where Chekhov leaves off" (27). Blau continues:

> I remember a drawing by Robert Edmond Jones of the last moment in *The Cherry Orchard* as produced at the Moscow Art Theater: a brooding pointillist darkness; a sliver of light, like the vertical beam of the Cross (which you complete in your mind), the slumped figure of old Firs crawling toward the couch to die. Look again: it might be the opening of *Endgame*. (27, italics in original)

It is possible to see traces of Chekhov's world in the work of Beckett. In both worlds, their characters are involved with performing negative actions. In *A History of Modern Drama* David Krasner calls this "inaction" (117) for Chekhov's characters and "anti-action" for the Beckett's (337). "Chekhov's characters," Krasner suggests, "suffer from aboulia – the loss or impairment of the ability to act or to make decisions" (110). At the same time, Krasner adds, in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* "[t]he action taking place on a pseudo-lunar landscape is fundamentally anti-action; like Chekhov, nothing happens, yet a great deal happens" (337). It is also possible to see the spectre of Beckett's empty stage with its stranded characters in the final scenes of *The Cherry Orchard*: the emptied space, the wandering in and out of characters who have lost their sense of place, the final solitary figure of Firs, waiting without knowing any longer what for. Esslin suggests that the Theatre of the Absurd, having "renounced the function of telling the story, of exploring the character, of discussing ideas, of solving problems, it has been able to concentrate on the presentation of what is essentially a *sense of being*" ("New Form" 9, italics in original). Esslin, then, continues to define a sense of being as "an intuition of the tragicomic absurdity and mystery of human existence" (9). It is this mystery of human existence that might be traced throughout the Beckett's play.

In his practice-informed analysis of *Waiting for Godot*, Blau suggests that "For the actors, identity has to be rehearsed into being. As there is no biography, there is no other way" (*In Sails of the Herring Fleet: Essays on Beckett* 30). Beckett's characters, with no way to know what exists beyond the stage, must find a way forward regardless. In their ragtag costumes, which only indirectly point to who the characters might be, they are thrust on to a stage that holds only the most rudimentary markers of place. What becomes then, of the work of the actor to provide a locus for the sacred when there is none of that to be found? In the analysis that follows, I focus on the way the profound sense of absence is activated by the actors, who must somehow even so find ways to point us towards what is never seen – the powerfully imagined figure of Godot, who might just be able to help them (and us) make sense of their predicament. As they rehearse their characters into being, the actors do the same for Godot, imagining his power to shape their identities and destinies as a kind of divine force, without which they remain stranded in a void.

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

In this section of the chapter, I explore three scenes from *Waiting for Godot*. First, I analyse the opening scene in which Beckett introduces the two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, and establishes the central theme of cyclic waiting. Following this, I examine the final scene between Vladimir and Estragon and the Boy, who again arrives to announce that Godot will remain elusive. Through an examination of the three chosen scenes, this section of the chapter aims to further our understanding of how actors work to provide a locus for the sacred, even when its absence is the point of the play.

At the start of the play, Vladimir and Estragon appear on a largely empty stage. The script tells us, succinctly, that it is evening. They are somewhere on a country road. There is a tree. The tree is leafless. Estragon asks: "Where are the leaves?" and Vladimir responds: "It

must be dead" (*Waiting for Godot* 9). Apart from the mound on which Estragon sits to remove his shoe, the stage is otherwise bare. It is empty of the totems of everyday life that audiences were accustomed to seeing in the clutter of a realist stage, but this does not mean that it is failing to represent reality. What we can see might be the fallout from Hiroshima, or the rubble of Dresden – a ruined landscape, in which the human figure nonetheless persists.

If we look at the images of the first production of *Waiting for Godot* (1953), we can see that the wooden floor stage looks fairly small. The set follows Beckett's instructions from the play text: "*A tree. Evening. Estragon, sitting on a low mound*" (6, italics in original). The stage is otherwise empty of scenic elements. In the photograph, we see two middle-aged men on stage, Vladimir and Estragon. They both look like tramps, costumed not unlike Chaplin's famous figure, with their bowler hats and ill-fitting suits. Estragon is sitting on the mound, holding one of his boots in his hands. He wears scruffy black trousers, a black jacket buttoned up to his neck, and a scarf. Vladimir is standing. He is dressed in an oversized black suit that looks worn out, with a white shirt and tie; we can see a white stain on the left leg of his trousers. With its minimalist approach to stage decoration, the scene appears desolate, the two human figures stranded in an almost-void. In the opening beats, as Estragon struggles with his boot, the futility of their situation is voiced in his first line: "Nothing to be done" (6). They wait. They tell each other they are waiting. They try to find ways to pass the time. They consider leaving. They carry on waiting. The questions of for whom they wait, and for what – that is, of who or what Godot might be – are left open to interpretation.

While a Weil-informed reading might best imply stasis, the way the act of waiting is repeatedly represented might be seen as cyclical, even ritualistic. As such perhaps, the waiting performed in the play might be seen to resonate with what Eliade calls "the cyclical recurrence of what has been before, in a word, eternal return" (*Cosmos and History* 88). Eliade tells us that certain actions and rituals are repeated to connect with the sacred and as

such, transcend the ordinary. In this light, the cycling between hope and disappointment performed by Vladimir and Estragon might be seen as ritual-like, the tramps serving as a locus on to which the audience (and scholars) project their beliefs in something beyond the human, without knowing for certain what that might be. Whoever or whatever Godot might be, it is the failure to materialise that is continually marked and remarked in the actors' performance – a kind of im-materiality that, if not a reference to the sacred, at the very least might be confused for something sacred regardless.

Uncertainty permeates the play text. So too, do references to the Bible and to Jesus Christ.[63] The characters repeatedly ask questions for which the answers, even when they are forthcoming, are unsatisfactory. We hear, over and over again, the questions of why and why not – questions that are both the most basic, as those parents hear from toddlers, and the most profound, when those philosophers begin their existential disquisitions with. Priests also ask these questions, taking the place often both of Christ's followers and of Christ himself in the liturgy. The tramps also both appear to take both sides, as in this brief exchange:

> Vladimir:
> But you can't go barefoot!
> Estragon:
> Christ did. (*Waiting for Godot* 39)

The questions are repeated further on, when Vladimir tells the story of the two thieves who were crucified next to Christ:

> Did you ever read the Bible? […] Do you remember the Gospels? […] Ah yes, the two thieves. Do you remember the story? […] It'll pass the time. (*Pause.*) Two thieves, crucified at the same time as our Saviour. […] Two thieves. One is supposed to have been saved and the other . . . (*he searches for the contrary of saved*) . . . damned. […] And yet . . . (*pause*) […] how is it that of the four Evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved. The four of them were there – or thereabouts – and only one speaks of a thief being saved. (*Waiting for Godot* 8-9, my ellipsis)

63 Iain Bailey suggests that since a 1983 article by Kristine Morrison, "Beckett scholarship has continued to locate an abundance of material in his work that it calls allusions, echoes, or references to the Bible" (353). However, it is important to note that there is a big difference in the French and English versions of *Waiting for Godot*. According to Chris Ackerley, "[r]eligious echoes are more prevalent in English than in French" (53).

Pozzo and Lucky also spout biblical allusions, misrecognising the tramps and misquoting the Bible in their nonsensical outpourings. For example, when Estragon misrecognises Pozzo, and apologises by explaining that they are "not from these parts," Pozzo responds:

> (*halting*). You are human beings none the less. (*He puts on his glasses*.) As far as one can see. (*He takes off his glasses*.) Of the same species as myself. (*He bursts into an enormous laugh*.) Of the same species as Pozzo! Made in God's image! (*Waiting for Godot* 18, italics in original)

Then Lucky stutters:

> … a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly. (*Waiting for Godot* 32)

In this way, the audience is continually being reminded of the divine while at the same time being confronted by the refusal of the play to make that kind of sense.

As the characters invoke conventional ideas of the sacred – God, Christ, salvation – and then point towards its absence, it is possible to see oblique parallels to a Christian service or catechism. The actors might be seen as priests or congregants. Their job is to provide a focal point for, to give voice to, and enact their faith in, the redemptive power of an unseen other and to demonstrate the virtue of waiting, even as the rewards for so doing remain out of reach. It is the desire for the sacred that they perform, and in so, doing invite the audience to reflect. To align Beckett's play with a Christian service and his tramps with priests is most certainly a stretch of the imagination. Perhaps it is easier to see them as congregants, holding tight to the promise that Godot will surely come tomorrow, in the same way that those people in the pews are to take heart from a benediction that rests on an as yet unrealised promise: the return of the Messiah, and life after death. If this is so, then we must turn to the figure of the Boy to see how at least one actor in this play is called upon to perform hierophany.

In the final scene of *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon encounter the same boy from the end of act 1, who has already informed them that Godot will not be coming today but will surely come tomorrow. In their encounter at the end of the play, the same boy

brings the same message – Godot will not come today but will surely come tomorrow. The repetition of the boy's appearances and messages underscores the monotony in which nothing is to be done in the relentless cycle of waiting. This cyclical appearance and promise might be seen to reflect the perpetual nature of waiting and the uncertainty embedded within questions around the meaning of human experience. In addition, this repetitive encounter with the boy, introduces another layer of Godot's ambiguity. The ambiguity that surrounds Godot's identity and the cyclic nature of the waiting process amplify the existential angst of the main characters in the Beckett's play. This ambiguity becomes a metaphor for the inherent uncertainty of life and the human struggle to find purpose in a post-war and post-Holocaust world. Vladimir and Estragon may not have clear understandings of their purpose and meaning, but they have hopes that Godot will come one day. At the end of the play, Godot is still absent, and we all accept that, but the boy's second appearance threatens to shatter the hopes that he is ever going to arrive.

The boy's message(s) also raises questions about the authenticity of the communication. That is, are the messages genuinely from Godot, or is the boy merely a messenger with no real connection to this figure of a higher power? If not Godot, who then sends the messages, and why? Beckett keeps the source of the messages intentionally unclear, forcing the main characters in his play, along with his audiences, to confront the possibility that Godot might be a construct of their own desperate desire for purpose and meaning, rather than a representation of reality. The ambiguity surrounding Godot's identity and his perpetual elusiveness in *Waiting for Godot* allows for diverse interpretations of Godot's existence, that range from the divine to the abstract. Beckett's deliberate ambiguity might be seen to prompt audiences to confront the complexities of human existence, the quest for meaning, and the enduring nature of waiting in a world where answers may remain elusive. If there is no faith, what there is to hope for? If there is no hope, what else then, is left?

Conclusion to the chapter

When we looked at *The Bakkhai* and *Doctor Faustus* in the first chapter, we could see that in *The Bakkhai* there was a god on stage and the actors' job was to point, for their audience, towards the god. In *Doctor Faustus,* although the god was not on stage, the actors' job was still to point, for their audience, but this time towards the absence of God on stage. However, when we look at *The Seagull* and Stanislavski's production at the MAT, and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and its first production, not only is the God not on stage, but the God does not exist. Where might the sense of the sacred, then, be found here? It seems it is not on stage, not off stage, not anywhere. This absence of the sense of the sacred is what defines these plays, and the actors' roles were to deal with its absence in their own ways, depending on the genre.

In *The Seagull,* the characters are not driven by the power of a divinity or divine-like creatures, but instead are driven by the appeal of the unseen forces that drive us as human beings, to act. However, the most interesting aspect is the tension between the two forms: the realist play that interests Stanislavski, and the symbolist play of Treplev (written by Chekhov). At the very start and at the very end of each play, there is a tension between these two world views and the two theatricalities. That is, at the heart of the play, there is a tension between the secular and the sacred. It seems that the theatre, no matter how secular it is, always provides for representation of at least the desire for something more than we can see. And in fact, the mechanism of theatre itself does that. The tension in the two different dramaturgies (*The Seagull* and *Waiting for Godot*), and theatricalities, and both, is also about how the everyday, the mundane, remains at odds with the spiritual, and the desire denied by the everyday. This is no difference, in many ways, to the tension in *Dr Faustus*, however, it is much more vividly rendered in *Waiting for Godot*.

Chapter Three: Grotowski, Cieślak and The Constant Prince

Introduction to the chapter

In his 1970 article, "On Grotowski: A Series of Critiques," Stefan Brecht discusses the theatre's turn to its ritual roots in the 1960s. He tells us:

> Interest in myth and religious matters, or quasi-religious matters (I do not mean that as a pejorative), represents the next step after absurdism: the search for those central, harmonizing energies, whose existence was denied by the absurdists. We have gone through absurdism and come out the other side. (194)

Brecht is interested in Grotowski's refusal "to continue to live with the absurdist vision" (194). For Brecht, the work of Grotowski offers audiences a deeper view of what can be glimpsed only briefly in plays like *Waiting for Godot*:

> We can't survive in such a bleak landscape. It is worth remembering how Beckett affirms life in small, subtle ways: to depict man slowly decaying in a cold world and yet taking small, occasional pleasure in little signs of life, is to reaffirm the mystery. (194-195)

In Grotowski's theatre, even more than in that of Beckett, Brecht tells us: "We turn to myth to regain a sense of connection to something of substance" (195).

To better understand this new search in mid-20th century theatre, this chapter turns to the profoundly radical theatre work of Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999) and his key collaborator and actor, Ryszard Cieślak (1937-1990). In particular, this chapter focuses on how Grotowski's search for "a secular **sacrum** in the theatre" (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 49, emphasis in original) came to fruition in his production of *The Constant Prince* (*Książę Niezłomny,* 1965). Ryszard Cieślak's performance in *The Constant Prince* was the starting point for my thinking in this thesis about how the actor's work might be seen to serve as a locus for the sacred. For me, the best example of hierophany in the work of the actor is embodied by Ryszard Cieślak, in particular in his collaborations with Grotowski. This effect can be seen in the video archive of the performance that is available on *YouTube* under the Italian title "Il Principe Constante di Jerzy Grotowski da Calderon/Slowacki Ricostruzione di

Ferruccio Marotti,"[64] which was composed of two performances in fact: a silent video made secretly in early 1966, which was later combined with an audio recording made 16 months after, under Cieślak's direction (*The Grotowski Sourcebook* 498).

Grotowski's production began with the 19th century adaptation for the Polish stage of a three-act Spanish Golden Age play, *El Príncipe Constante* (originally written by Pedro Calderón de la Barca, 1628/29), authored by the prominent poet, Juliusz Slowacki (1809-1849). For his radical 20th century revisioning of the play, Grotowski maintained the title *Książę Niezłomny,* which is (like Calderón's version) most often translated as The Constant Prince. The plot of *The Constant Prince* is centred on the martyrdom of Don Fernando (1402–43), often referred to as Fernando the Holy Prince of Portugal, the Saint Prince, or the Constant Prince. In Calderón's drama, Don Fernando finds himself captured by the enemies and imprisoned in Morocco. Although offered his freedom in exchange for disclosing the strategic port of Ceuta to the Moors, Don Fernando refuses to disclose the secret. As a result, he dies of exhaustion in captivity – an act of self-sacrifice that renders him, in the words of the play, a "Holy Prince" (Blige, n.p.). For Grotowski, Slowacki's adaptation "went deeper [than the original by Calderón] and was supplemented by elements exploring spiritual transformation linked to the readiness for the complete sacrifice of anything sensual and corporeal for supernatural values" (qtd. in Blige, n.p.). These two texts were the starting point for a lengthy process of experimentation in what Grotowski called his "Laboratory Theatre" (*Teatr Laboratorium*). The first performance was presented to an invitation-only audience on 20th April 1965 in Wroclaw, and opened to the public five days later.

[64] This 4K version on *YouTube* is the most recent restoration of the recording, performed by the internationally acclaimed Italian artist and scholar, Ferruccio Marotti.

In "Monologues of Ryszard Cieslak as the Constant Prince: steps towards his summit," the critic, Josef Kelera describes Cieślak as a Constant Prince: "the culminating moments of the role, everything that is technique is as though illuminated from within, light, literally imponderable. At any moment the actor will levitate… He is in a state of grace" (109, ellipsis in original). The words of Kelera (and those of many other theatre practitioners, historians and theorists) used to describe Cieślak's performance consistently incorporate a theological vocabulary in ways that are closely connected to hierophany.[65] In this chapter, I analyse Cieślak's performance in Grotowski's *The Constant Prince* in order to understand that change in the actor's state, whereby he, in Keller's words "illuminates himself from within" and steps into the "state of grace" (109). This allows me to make a case for the potential of the actor to act as a hierophant, as such both pointing towards the sacred and, at least momentarily, becoming its locus onstage.

In the "Preface" to Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre*, renowned British theatre director Peter Brook tells us that Grotowski's work in the theatre was unique, adding that "no-one else in the world, to my knowledge, no-one since Stanislavski, has investigated the nature of acting, its phenomenon, its meaning, the nature and science of its mental-physical-emotional processes as deeply and completely as Grotowski" (11). Echoing Brook, in his introduction to *The Grotowski Sourcebook* (1997), Richard Schechner tells us that "Grotowski is one of the four great directors of Western twentieth-century theatre" (xxv), adding: "After Stanislavsky, acting changed; after Meyerhold, directing; after Brecht, playwriting. But after Grotowski?" (xxvi). Further, Schechner asserts:

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[65] See, for example: Seymour Rudin's "Theatre Chronicle: Fall 1969" – "the sufferer, the sacrificial victim, baited, reviled, beaten, sometimes consoled by the others, participating in and, in a sense, encouraging his own martyrdom. (Ryszard Cieslak's performance was, in physical virtuosity and emotional conviction, one of the most awesome feats in my experience)" (118); Stefan Brecht's "On Grotowski: A Series of Critiques" – "a corporeal monologue of spirit itself. An incarnation" (185)… "Perhaps someone in a trance – Cieslak in The Constant Prince" (193)… "When The Constant Prince is only a tortured body, the same unearthly smile lights up Cieslak's face" (203); Peter Brook's "Remembering Ryszard Cieslak" – "the image of Ryszard the actor from the Constant Prince: the pale body defying darkness, center and pivot of the action" (12)

> Grotowski's effects on the theatre will not be through the establishment of a method of actor training, an approach to mise-en-scène, or an insistence on a dramaturgy of political purpose. Grotowski will affect theatre through the influence he had on the people with whom he interacted on a personal, even intimate, level. […] Grotowski could change the way a person experienced and understood the ground from which theatre grows. In other words, Grotowski changed lives and therefore changed theatre. (xxvi-xxvii, my ellipsis)

Schechner acknowledges that he is one of many whose approaches to actor training and direction, the rehearsal process and the idea of performance itself, were deeply influenced by Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre: "He was one of my teachers, most especially so at the moment I was forming The Performance Group" (xxvii). The impact of Schechner's engagement with Grotowski's theories and practice can be seen in some of his most notable productions, including his adaptations of classical plays examined in this thesis: *Dionysus in 69,*[66] adapted from *The Bakkhai,* and *Faust/Gastronome* (1994).

Grotowski's lineage

In *The Future of Ritual*, Richard Schechner notes Grotowski's interest in non-Western cultures, rituals and performance practices. Schechner explicitly connects *The Constant Prince* and Ryszard Cieślak's performance to his ideas about the actor's work in the context of ritual and the sacred in both Western and non-Western cultures. In Grotowski's writing, we can see how he was concerned for "the disappearance of the sacred" in modern life and art, and for the loss of "its ritual function in theatre" (*Poor Theatre* 49). As Donald Richie, in "Asian theatre and Grotowski," concludes, Grotowski and his actors "rediscovered ritual theatre for the West" (144). As such, discussions in this thesis have been laying the groundwork for my discussion of Grotowski's work with actors, and Cieślak's performance in *The Constant Prince*.

[66] The full recoding available on YouTube, titled "Brian De Palma Dionysus in '69 (1970)."

In *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Grotowski informs us that he has "studied all the major actor-training methods of Europe and beyond," including: "Dullin's rhythm exercises, Delsarte's investigations of extroversive and introversive reactions, Stanislawski's (sic) work on 'physical actions,' Meyerhold's bio-mechanical training, Vakhtanghov's synthesis" (16). Turning to non-Western models, Grotowski adds: "particularly stimulating to me are the training techniques of Oriental theatre – specifically the Peking Opera, Indian Kathakali, and Japanese No theatre" (16). Still, Grotowski tells us, the centre of his experimental approach to the theatre remained the theory and practice of Konstantin Stanislavski. He was, he says, "brought up on Stanislavski" (15). From Grotowski's perspective: "Stanislavski asked the key methodological questions" (16). Thomas Richards, who collaborated closely with Grotowski in the latter part of his career and carried on with the work after his death, quotes Grotowski: "Russians say 'Grotowski is Stanislavski': that is because I *continued* his research and did *not just repeat* what he had already discovered" (Richards 105, emphasis in original). Grotowski, as cited by Richards, adds: "After the 'System' of Stanislavski, came his 'method of physical actions.' Do you think that Stanislavski would have stopped there? No, he died. *That is why he stopped*. And I simply *continued his research*" (105, italics in original). Being "brought up on Stanislavski" (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 15), Grotowski is the best lead to follow in rediscovering the sacred in the actor's work.

In "Stanislavsky to Grotowski: Actor to Performer/Doer," Maria Shevtsova tells us that for Stanislavski, the actor is more than an actor. She goes on to explain that "the idea in this particular context refers not solely to the actor's consciousness of himself/herself as an aware, sentient, and responsive performer […] but as an actor who has a dimension other than a visible, immediately physical one" (336, my ellipsis). "For Stanislavsky," Shevtsova continues, "the actor's invisible dimension involves emotions, which the actor learns to materialize in performance" (336). Shevtsova concludes that the place where these emotions

sit within the actor, is where Stanislavski termed as "the life of the human spirit" (336). Through this process, the actor is trained to create this human spirit, and in doing so, ideally develop his own human being, and in that way, acting becomes more than just a simple imitation and presentation. As Shevtsova suggests:

> the more the human being grows spiritually, the more he/she evolves along what Grotowski called "verticality," that is, along the ascending ladder (to use a biblical image) that leads to the divine – call it a vision of perfection, or transcendence, or God. (336)

These Stanislavskian explorations around "the life of a human spirit" (336) might be seen as a seed for Grotowski's idealisation of an actor "who undertakes an act of self-penetration, who reveals himself and sacrifices the innermost part of himself – the most painful, that which is not intended for the eyes of the world" (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 35). This is what we see in Cieślak's performance in *The Constant Prince*.

Religious influence on Grotowski's life and work

At the end of *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, titled "Exoduction: Shape-shifter, shaman, trickster, artist, adept, director, leader, Grotowski," Richard Schechner presents a biographical context for Grotowski's work. He informs us that Jerzy Grotowski was born in 1933 in Poland, just six years before World War II. When Germany invaded Poland, Grotowski's father, who was a sculptor and forest ranger, left the family and joined the army; he died in Paraguay in 1968 without having ever been reunited with his family, having vowed never to live in a Poland dominated by the Soviet Union. As a result, Grotowski was raised by his mother, a schoolteacher. The family spent the war years in rural Poland, where Grotowski spent his time in close proximity to his uncle who was a Catholic Bishop. His religious influence might also be traced to his mother, as Grotowski (quoted by Schechner) tells us:

> She always kept books of different religions on the shelf [where young Jerzy would have easy access to them]. Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist. She would say that these were all different but also really the same, they are all speaking about the same essential truths. ("Exoduction" 462, brackets in original)

Having been immersed in a deeply religious environment as a child, Grotowski came of age in the emphatically secular Soviet dominated post-war society. This personal history, it seems, underpins Grotowski's somewhat paradoxical conceptualisation of the "secular sacrum" (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 49). Richard Schechner observes: "In Catholic Poland he said he was an atheist, but no one who knows his work believes that" ("Exoduction" 460). In more practical terms of course, Grotowski would have been required to declare himself an atheist in communist Poland. Even so, we can see a profound sense of the sacred in his theatre work, especially in *The Constant Prince* and also, a few years earlier, in *Akropolis* (1962) and *Doctor Faustus* (1963).[67]

Cieślak's performance of Don Fernando in *The Constant Prince* has been considered the first fulfilment of the "total act" envisioned by Grotowski in his theoretical writings[68] (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 125). Some of the religious vocabulary in *Towards a Poor Theatre*, can be traced to Antonin Artaud and his theories on acting. Grotowski builds on Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, outlined in his *The Theater and Its Double*, to create his own idea of the "total theatre."[69] Grotowski writes:

> If I speak of "a total act," it's because I have the feeling that there is an alternative to "the theatre of cruelty." But Artaud stands as a challenge to us at this point: perhaps less because of his work than his idea of salvation through the theatre. […] It's worth quoting this phrase [… that] holds the very foundation of the actor's art of extreme and ultimate action. "Actors should be like martyrs burnt alive, still signalling to us from their stakes." (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 125, my ellipses)

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[67] See Barba's "Theatre Laboratory 13 Rzedow," and Robert Findlay's "Grotowski's Akropolis: A Retrospective View."

[68] "Presentations of *The Constant Prince* during The Laboratory Theatre's foreign tours in the late 1960s earned Cieślak international fame and iconic status in contemporary theatre" (Blige n.p.). It is he who brought Grotowski's theories into practice.

[69] Artaud explains to us his idea of theatre: "The theater will never find itself again - i.e., constitute a means of true illusion – except by furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pour out, on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior" (*The Theater and its Double*).

Grotowski tells us that this "quotation contains in an oracular style, the whole problem of spontaneity and discipline, this conjunction of opposites which gives birth to the total act" (125). He points towards the total act as the most important point of the actor's work: "I mean the very crux of the actor's art: that what the actor achieves should be (let's not be afraid of the name) a total act" (123). Then, he explains that in a total act, the actor "does whatever he does with his entire being, and not just one mechanical (and therefore rigid) gesture of arm or leg, not any grimace, helped by a logical inflection and a thought" (123). Finally, Grotowski concludes:

> Between a total reaction and a reaction guided by a thought there is the same difference as between a tree and a plant. In the final result we are speaking of the impossibility of separating spiritual and physical. The actor should not use his organism to illustrate a "movement of the soul," he should accomplish this movement with his organism. (123)

What we might see here is that Grotowski articulated Artaud's idea of the actor as a martyr, in which the holy actor sacrifices his everyday self while presenting, or (perhaps) revealing his total self.

According to Grotowski, through this process of revealing his total self to the audience, what the actor reveals is not exclusively personal and individual ("Holiday" 224). Instead, it is something common, that connects us as human beings. Grotowski goes on to explain:

> If one carries one's sincerity to the limit, crossing the barriers of the possible, or admissible, and if that sincerity does not confine itself to words, but reveals the human being totally, it – paradoxically – becomes the incarnation of the total man (*czlowiek zupelny*) with all his past and future history. ("Holiday" 224)

This total man is, perhaps, what those in the audience recognise as themselves, not as an archetype, but as the true core of a human being. As such, the total man might be seen to be what I suggest a hierophant is – a locus for the sacred truths of our human existence.

Therefore, we might say that instead of breaking with Stanislavski, as is often

assumed,[70] in conceptualising a holy actor, Grotowski can be seen to build on his predecessor's idealisation of the actor's spiritual and personal development. Grotowski's holy actor performs a total act – the act "of the total unveiling of one's being [that] becomes a gift of the Self which borders on the transgression of barriers and love" (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 131). The actor in Grotowski's theatre, through the process of *via negativa* the "process of elimination" of the obstacles in the actor (133), he becomes not an archetypal figure, that often might be assumed, but a total man. As such, "he becomes a kind of provocation for the spectator" (131). He describes the core of this idea by saying that "we are trying to go back before the Tower of Babel, and discover what was before. First to discover differences, and then to discover what was before the differences" (qtd. in "Grotowski Blazes the Trails" 387). Grotowski tells us: "One access to the creative way consists of discovering in yourself an ancient corporality to which you are bound by a strong ancestral relation" ("Performer" 378). He goes on:

> Starting from details you can discover in you somebody other – your grandfather, your mother. […] You can arrive very far back, as if your memory awakes. This is a phenomenon of reminiscence, as if you recall *Performer* of the primal ritual. (378, my ellipsis)

Grotowski's holy actor, we might say, needs to go beyond his social (already known) self, trying to reconnect with, what Grotowski calls "the inner man" in himself ("Performer" 379).

In an interview with Grotowski by Eugenio Barba, titled "The Theatre's New Testament," and published in *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Grotowski writes: "As I said, one must not take the word 'holy' in the religious sense. It is rather a metaphor defining a person who, through his art, climbs upon the stake and performs an act of self-sacrifice" (43). The actor, in this sense, is poised at the point between the secular and the sacred. Like a saint – Joan of Arc, perhaps, or in the case of *The Constant Prince*, Saint Fernando – the actor

[70] As Virginie Magnat suggests in "The Stanislavsky-Grotowski lineage: part I": "The connection between Konstantin Stanislavsky and Jerzy Grotowski is often overlooked or underplayed because there are substantial distinctions between them in terms of practices and approaches" (45).

remains human, but having been stripped of the protective veneer of everyday life, performs an act of faith in the power of the unseen to move himself beyond the human, and in so doing, provides a locus for the audience to experience something like that, and be so moved as well.

Grotowski's actor as *Performer*

Late in his career, Grotowski reframes his view of the role of the actor. The actor, he says, is not acting in the conventional sense. Instead, for Grotowski, the actor must be seen as a "Performer." He explains: "*Performer*, with the capital letter, is a man of action. He is not somebody who plays another. He is a doer, a priest, a warrior: he is outside aesthetic genres ("Performer" 376, italics in original). In "Ritual and Performance" (1994), Schechner tells us that Grotowski's actor:

> … redefined and expanded as "performer" […] was no longer seen as the mouthpiece of the author working under the guidance (if not complete control) of the director, but as a quasi-shaman […] and serve[s] as a conduit for energies liberated by the theatrical event. (623, my ellipsis)

Schechner goes on to explain that these "energies do not emanate from written texts but are what Robert Plant Armstrong (writing about Africa) called the 'powers of presence' (1981): alive only in the immediacy of performance" (623, brackets in original).

According to Schechner, reflecting on his own work as well as that of Grotowski, the idea of the sacred in the actor's work is rooted in the idea of the theatre's origins in ritual. It also recognises that theatrical performance, like ritual, is something repeated and repeatable using actions and words in order to invoke the presence of something otherwise unseen: characters, situations, worlds, ideas, etc. This is what Richard Schechner identifies as "restored behavior." As he explains:

> … restored behavior is "me behaving as if I am someone else" or "as if I am 'beside myself,' or 'not myself,'" as when in trance. But this "someone else" may also be "me in another state of feeling/being," as if there were multiple "me's" in each person. The

> difference between performing myself – acting out a dream, reexperiencing a childhood trauma, showing you what I did yesterday – and more formal "presentations of self" (see Goffman 1959) – is a difference of degree, not kind. There is also a continuum linking the ways of presenting the self to the ways of presenting others: acting in dramas, dances, and rituals. (*Between Theatre and Anthropology* 37, brackets in original)

Schechner's description of the actor's process in the transformation of the self, builds on the idea of the ritual underpinnings of the theatre, and the actor's shamanistic role, being a conduit for energies beyond the actor's own self.

It is this ritualistic aspect of an act that is crucial for the actor's work. Grotowski proposes that "Ritual is performance, an accomplished action, an act" ("Performer" 376). Then, he continues: "I don't look to discover something new but something forgotten. Something so old that all the distinctions between aesthetic genres are no longer of use" (376). In Grotowski's theatre, the performance of ritual is paramount, both as foundational to human experience since the very beginning of time, and as a way of communication between actors and their audiences:

> Ritual is a time of great intensity; provoked intensity; life then becomes rhythm. *Performer* knows to link body impulses to the song. (The stream of life should be articulated in forms.) The witnesses then enter into states of intensity because, so to say, they feel presence. And this is thanks to *Performer*, who is a bridge between the witness and this something. ("Performer" 377, italics in original)

In this, Grotowski's Performer, that is, the actor, might be seen to still carry his priestly role on to the secular mid-20th century stages. The actor, in performing his act, stands in as a vehicle for "this something" to be seen for his audiences (377).

Again, this evocation of the actor as performer/doer can be seen in relation to Stanislavski's theories and practices. In "Stanislavsky to Grotowski: Actor to Performer/Doer," Maria Shevtsova informs us that for Stanislavski, the actor goes beyond being a simple "court jester-entertainer," to "being worthy of attention over and above immediately tangible accomplishments, starting with the actor's consciousness of himself/herself" (334). Furthermore, she says, the self-consciousness that transcends beyond

the ego was a "prediction for the transformation of the actor first into the performer and then into the doer" (334). The play text recedes, and the actor's work becomes the point of the performance. In this, we might say that the theatre of Grotowski's performer (as a doer) is a kind of a theatre of presence, in which the performer surpasses his own ego affected by the everyday and goes into the essence of himself as a human being. Shevtsova helps us understand Grotowski's idea of the theatre of presence, pointing out that the theatre of presence focuses "not on the *interaction* between the performer and the spectator, but on the performer's *action* as the bringing into being of energies that suffice as such" (338, italics in original). We might say that the actor's doing is where the focus is, in looking at the actor's work. In performing his act, the actor leaves the limits of the script so as to create a state of intensity, in which the spectator can witness his presence.

Echoes of the Gurdjieff philosophy

In *Performance Theory,* Schechner points towards the actor's process as engaged beyond the words of a script and the polished surface that the audience sees. He tells us:

> [W]hat happens is that a person enters training or workshop as a "fixed" or "finished" or "already-made" being. The training consists of specific methods of "beaking (sic) down" the neophyte, of rendering her/him psychophysically malleable. Quite literally the performer in training (or workshop) is taken apart, deconstructed into bits. […] Once bits are freed from their attachment to larger schemes of action, they can be rearranged – almost as the frames of a film being edited are rearranged – to make new actions. This rearranging is not mechanical, for it is accompanied by varying degrees of self-conscious. (321-322, my ellipsis)

This idea of the actor's training and his work throughout the rehearsal process as a self-conscious reconstruction, can be seen to reflect Grotowski's ideas of "self-penetration" and "self-sacrifice" (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 35). In turn, Grotowski's ideas might also be seen to echo the earlier writings of the philosophers George Gurdjieff and his disciple, Peter Ouspensky.

According to Gurdjieff (and later on to Ouspensky), there is no "unified I" in a man (Gurdjieff 20). We "do not know that we have not one 'I,' but many different 'I's'" (Ouspensky 7). They observe that the majority of people live their lives with no self-consciousness at all; people usually live only in the first two states of consciousness, with no actual chance of reaching the other two states of consciousness. The first is the one in which we are actually asleep – a state in which we spend between a third or even half of our lives (Gurdjieff 35; Ouspensky 5). The second state is called a "waking state of consciousness," in which we think we are "awake," in which we "walk, write and talk", but are still not conscious of our Selves (Gurdjieff 35). Gurdjieff reminds us that calling this state "clear-consciousness" or a "waking state of consciousness" is a "joke to anyone who understands what *clear consciousness* ought in reality to be" (Gurdjieff 35, italics in original). The third state of consciousness is "self-consciousness" or "self-remembering" – the consciousness of one's being in which we practise self-observing. Gurdjieff suggests that "*we do not possess* this state of consciousness and cannot create it in ourselves simply by deciding that we want it" (35, italics in original). Instead, in order to reach that state of consciousness, one needs to work on it by using their methods for self-studying and self-penetration. The final and highest state of consciousness is "objective state of consciousness," in which a person is able to distinguish and understand things as they really are (35). Gurdjieff continues to explain that "all the greatest religions hint at the possibility of attaining this state, which they call 'enlightenment' or some other ineffable name but which cannot be described in words" (35).

Both Gurdjieff and Ouspensky had an often un-recognised influence on the development of mid-20th century theatre theory and practice, in particular, the work of experimental theatre directors Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski.[71] It is in part due to their

[71] For Brook-Gurdjieff see Peter Brook's *Empty Space* and his film, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* based on Gurdjieff's book (available on YouTube). For Grotowski-Gurdjieff see Catharine Christof's *Rethinking Religion in the Theatre of Grotowski* and Jerzy Grotowski's "A Kind of Volcano: An Interview with Jerzy Grotowski."

philosophy of the self and the sacred that we take for granted that the actor in training is required to study his own body, mind, and soul, while working on his character, and the view that the character is to be performed as a tool for self-penetration, an instrument that will help him discover his own depths. The actor needs to be capable of "confessing" to the audience his true Self, his deepest secrets that he has discovered in the process of self-search, as Grotowski concludes:

> The actor who, in this special process of discipline and self-sacrifice, self-penetration and moulding, is not afraid to go beyond all normally acceptable limits, attains a kind of inner harmony and peace of mind. He literally becomes much sounder in mind and body. (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 45)

With this approach, the actor reveals, one by one, all the different layers of his being, unveiling "his soul," in Grotowski's words (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 80). To be able to reveal "his soul," the actor needs to work on self-searching, which is not just "the right of our profession, [but] our first duty" (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 244). Grotowski's idea of the self-search might be seen as significantly influenced by Gurdjieff's proposition of self-remembering, self-observation and self-study, as can be seen in the rehearsal process and production of *The Constant Prince*.

The staging of The Constant Prince

The set for *The Constant Prince* was done by Jerzy Gurawski, Grotowski's architect. In "A tribute to Jerzy Gurawski (1936–2022)," Christopher Baugh reminds us that in Gurawski's set for *The Constant Prince*, the "entire architecture of the space was a place of performance and realized the immediacy of the performer's act of public sacrifice that aimed to transcend the conventional paradigm of the audience within 'traditional' theatre" (250). Grotowski tells us that in *The Constant Prince*, "[t]he spectators are removed from the actors and placed behind a high fence, behind which one can only see their heads" (qtd. in *Grotowski and His Laboratory* 84). He then adds:

> In *The Constant Prince*, the spectators are relegated to the role of students carefully observing an operation, a mob watching a bloody spectacle, […] eavesdroppers on some secret ritual which they watch from a safe corner and to which no intruder is allowed access. (qtd. in *Grotowski and His Laboratory* 85, my ellipsis)

The result of this might be best seen in Raymonde Temkine's observation of the audience at the 1966 performance in Paris. Temkine tells us that the audience felt as "voyeurs, shameful accomplices, looking at one another mutually looking at something they shouldn't be seeing" (*Grotowski* 30). Grotowski's staging (both of the audience and the actors on stage) was intentional, to allow us to perceive Cieślak's performance as an act of self-penetration that was exposed to the gaze of the audience, who, while safely placed behind the wooden walls, might recognise the actor's performance as an invitation to join the process of self-search.

About the work with his actor, Grotowski informs us that there is "something incomparably intimate and productive in the work with the actor entrusted to me" (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 25). He explains the process:

> [The actor] must be attentive and confident and free, for our labour is to explore his possibilities to the utmost. His growth is attended by observation, astonishment, and desire to help; my growth is projected onto him, or, rather, is **found in him** - and our common growth becomes revelation. This is not instruction of a pupil but utter opening to another person, in which the phenomenon of "shared or double birth" becomes possible. The actor is reborn - not only as an actor but as a man – and with him, I am reborn. It is a clumsy way of expressing it, but what is achieved is a total acceptance of one human being by another. (25, emphasis in original).

In order to secure this safe space for Cieślak and him, the rehearsal process was exceptionally intimate: Grotowski and Cieślak were often the only two people present in the room (Blige n.p.). Grotowski also recalls that they worked slowly: "He needed five months more? Okay. Ten months more? Okay. Fifteen months more? Okay" (qtd. in Richards *At Work with Grotowski* 16). Grotowski decided to give Cieślak all the time he needed, as he "demanded from him everything, a courage in a certain way inhuman" (16). The result was a "symbiosis" in which Cieślak "had a kind of total security in the work, he had no fear, and we saw that everything was possible because there was no fear" (16). We can see that Grotowski secured

a safe place for the actor on stage, but for the audience as well, as only within the safe place can a person start a self-search.

In his interview available on YouTube,[72] Cieślak tells us about this process: in order to "be ready for creation, as almost without skin, as pure nerves, for […] personal confession […] then your preparation should be also very hard and not easy" (16:16-16:49, my ellipsis). He starts by pointing out that in acting, his body is his main instrument. He adds that we need to start from the body, as "the details are inscribed in your body, you can forget about them, [but] they exist anyway" (16:58-17:06). In working alone in the space, with only Grotowski observing his work (and directing him in his self-search), Cieślak tells us how he used his imagination to "evoke […] partners who do not exist in the room, the partners from [his] past, from [his] dream" (17:30-17:41, my ellipsis). Throughout this process Cieślak might be seen to start the communication with his past, reaching, in Grotowski's words, "back before the Tower of Babel" to discover what was "before the differences" (*Towards a Poor Theatre*). Then Cieślak lights a cigarette and smiles. He looks at the interviewer. He refuses to explain his work further. Instead, he tells her: "I can use a lot of words and then it would be a formule (sic.) […] The people will use the formule (sic), and I don't want it. […] It exists, you can see it." (1:54-2:11, my ellipsis).

Cieślak wants actors to find their own way to the process of self-search, and not to have a prepared formula. However, he adds the crucial point: "But the important thing is to go beyond […] to the next step, the step beyond comfort, even towards the moment of pain" (2:43-2:59). This reach towards the painful zone beyond himself, is what we can see in his performance in *The Constant Prince*. To be possible to achieve this, the individual rehearsals

[72] The interview can be found under the title: "Ryszard Cieslak interview. Jerzy Grotowski's Actor. Theatre Training," The interview is a part of the documentary "The body speaks: exercises of the Theater Laboratory of Wroclaw," produced by CBS Television Network, directed by John Musilli. The interview was conveyed by the host and screenwriter Margaret Croyden (Cieślak and Croyden n.p.).

between Grotowski and Cieślak at the beginning were essential. Cieślak needed to feel completely safe to explore these depths beyond his place of comfort.

In *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Grotowski tells us that the "actor must learn to use his role as if it were a surgeon's scalpel, to dissect himself" (37). This is what Cieślak did throughout his individual rehearsal process. While the production expanded to include other actors and artists, the experimental structure of the presentation meant that audience numbers were also limited, and we are fortunate to have a filmic record to turn to at this point.

As we can see in the film, the stage for Grotowski's *The Constant Prince* is empty except for a wooden box at centre. The design was inspired by Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). In the painting, we see the body of a man on a table. He is stripped bare except for a white cloth covering his genitals. He is quite pale, apparently dead, with one arm stripped to the bone, presumably by the doctor who stands over him with a steel instrument, pulling at his muscles. A crowd of students, their faces slightly flushed, is clustered around the table, peering intently at the open wound. So too is it in Grotowski's *Constant Prince*. On the wooden box, for most of the performance, Cieślak appears to be exposed and eviscerated not for our spectatorial pleasure per se but for some profound purpose, for instruction and for a deeper understanding of our human and spiritual anatomy. Through his acutely physical performance, Cieślak opens himself metaphysically as an object of study to the spectators' gaze. He appears beyond empathy or compassion, like a corpse or animal on an autopsy table, his subjectivity surrendered so those who are watching might find out something about themselves that they could not see any other way. This is what we see in *The Constant Prince*: Cieślak's performance is a kind of vivisection, with the other performers surrounding him as the doctor does in the painting, and the audience perched above observing the scene as students do. In activating the body at the centre of the painting and positioning it within the play of the Saint Fernando, Cieślak enacts a kind of liminality –

between the living and the dead, between the human and the not-so, and between the secular and the sacred: a hierophant.

Grotowski's *The Constant Prince*

The performance starts with an actor (Stanisław Scierski) running on to the stage; he quickly lies down on the wooden box, placed centre stage, a kind of an altar. He is dressed only in a white shirt, with white cloth around his hips. This is Don Enrique, a prisoner. Then, a choir of four actors comes on stage and performs a kind of a ritual around the prisoner on the box. Here we can see the remnants of the ancient Greek chorus (with an altar in its centre), or a group of Christian priests (gathered around the altar in their church), performing a ritual. Throughout the ritual, the prisoner is dressed in black clothes, identical to those of the members of the choir. It seems that the aim of the ritual is to transform the prisoner from an outsider to a member of the choir.

Enter Cieślak in the role of Don Fernando, the Holy Prince of Portugal. He is dressed in the same white shirt and with white cloth around his hips. The choir repeats the identical ritual that should result in the prisoner being converted into a member of the choir. However, the ritual is broken by Don Fernando/Cieślak when he embraces the leading member of the choir and caresses her face. In doing so, he refuses to become a member of the choir, and instead offers himself for sacrifice. As he speaks, he takes a position that mirrors the iconography of the Passion: humility and acceptance of the cross (Don Fernando/Cieślak lies down on the wooden box in the position of the crucified Christ), crowning with thorns (in which the choir whip and mock Don Fernando/Cieślak, just as the Christ was, by Pontius Pilate and the crowd), and finally, taken down from the cross as in the famous La Pietà by Michelangelo. The entire performance significantly mirrors the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, as seen also in the Catholic ritual of Mass. Viewed this way, Cieślak might be seen to be

performing in much the same ways as a priest does, and as such, acting as a hierophant – a performative locus for the sacred.

The starting point for my analysis is in two segments of the performance: a five-minute fragment midway through the performance (23:30-28:50) and a five-minute section around his last monologue (41:00-46:34). When I look at the first five-minute section, I can see Cieślak, dressed only in a white cloth around his hips (his white shirt is on the floor). He is facing down the box. His hips lean on the verge of the wooden box. His legs are next to each other, in a straight line, touching the ground with his toes. His arms stretch across the wooden box on each side. With his body he forms an image of a cross, resembling the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Cieślak is motionless at this moment. The other actors are dressed in black, and move as a chorus around Cieślak. In front of the chorus is one member holding a sheet wide open (the sheet was placed underneath Cieślak at the beginning of the performance). The chorus chants while circling three times around Cieślak's body. After the first circle of the chorus, Cieślak's upper body contracts in subtle movements, resembling a heartbeat. After the third circle, the chorus stops, with their heads down, looking at the floor. They utter lines, quickly, in a single tone, like a priest's prayer in the Mass. Throughout the "prayer" the member of the chorus that was holding the sheet is folding the sheet in vertical folds, holding it in front of her face, the sheet touching her forehead, and with her hands, one presses the sheet on her forehead, while the other holds the middle of the sheet, so it does not touch the ground; she finally folds it in half.

The chanting of the chorus continues, while the member of the chorus with the sheet approaches Cieślak's still motionless, "crucified" body. She whips motionless Cieślak on his back seven times. After the seventh whip, Cieślak collapses to the ground, lying down on his side with his legs slightly bent, in a foetal position, now holding his white shirt rolled up in his right hand. His right arm (and the shirt) is behind his back, and his left arm is on his head.

He howls and weeps continuously, crawling on the floor. He wipes the floor with his face, tongue, and white shirt. He contracts, opening his body fully, and then quickly closing his body back to the foetal position. While he howls and weeps continuously, wiping the floor (mostly) with his tongue, the member of the chorus with the sheet approaches him and places the sheet in his hand. She also helps Cieślak stand up on the wooden box. He is holding the sheet now, hanging down in front of his body (It is at this point of the archived video recording, a short section of the performance was lost in the process of changing the tape). The recording continues with Cieślak's howling and weeping on the floor. At this point he starts to whip himself with his white shirt, while continually howling and weeping. This ends when one of the chorus members takes Cieślak's body from the floor into her arms and positions themselves as in the famous La Pietà sculpture.

Cieślak as a hierophant

In this five-minute section of the recording, Cieślak's body and voice seem to lose the qualities of a human shape and sound, and the body seems so transparent that I feel I can see inside. A well-known Polish critic Ludwik Flaszen writes of witnessing Cieślak's "pure emotion," viewing his performance as passive (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 97). What I see when I look at the video is more what Josef Kelera describes as "the force of *The Constant Prince*" ("Monologues of Ryszard Cieslak as the Constant Prince: steps towards his summit" 109). Whereas Flaszen saw him as a kind of receptacle, a vessel for feeling without agency, I see a man transformed into a luminous, liminal presence, that nonetheless suffers, aches, and grieves. What I see is somehow more active, desiring, embracing of suffering, and conscious of its state. I can perceive an emotion (a noun: pain, suffering, or sorrow), but more importantly, what I see is an actor's action, consciously delivered, is active (a verb: to suffer, to ache, and to grieve). That is, Cieślak does not represent the emotion; he performs an

action, not with his body in motion as actors usually perform, but somehow pulling from his body an extraordinary interior form of action that no matter how many times I look, I still cannot see how he does it.

This is what I can see, or I think I see: in order to make his inner life visible, Cieślak sacrifices the shape of his body, the "crust" that was covering the inner substance, becoming an amorphous mass that is then dragged by the other actors across the ritual space, to finally be thrown on to the wooden box (Cieślak is face-down) creating the image of a cross. The box might be seen to become an altar. Cieślak is then scourged by one of the protagonists until he falls from the altar to the floor with an enormous groan. While he groans, the other actors dance around him. Cieślak's vocalisations range from the quietest to the loudest spheres of a primal scream that goes beyond natural sounds. With its rhythmic repetition, this scream moves to the realms of music, reminding me of the funeral laments that grieving women in black would "cry" around the deceased in rural Serbia, representing their communication with the deceased, who does not belong to our world anymore. It is this primal scream of the grieving women in rural Serbia that, for me, resonates with what Cieślak does in this scene of *The Constant Prince*. In doing so, Cieślak serves as a vehicle for his audience to enchant the total man in him, an other from the beyond.

In analysing this scene, we can see that Cieślak's body is often in a very difficult posture, and the centre of his body is moved to very uncomfortable positions, with contortions that produce his vocal expressions. We see how he leaves a space of peace to go beyond his place of comfort, towards moments of real pain. In this performance, one sees how Cieślak pushes his body and voice to extremes, and in doing so, reaches that "state of grace" that Kelera observes, in which he, with his actions, invokes the presence of a power beyond the rational, and as such, he might be seen to serve as a locus for the sacred to his audiences ("Monologues of Ryszard Cieslak as the Constant Prince: steps towards his

summit" 109). Cieślak, then, as a "holy" actor, for us in the audience, could be perceived as a hierophant, in its original meaning – the one who shows the rites of sacrifice, a revealer of holy things.

When I look at the second five-minute recording of *The Constant Prince* (41:00-46:34), I see Cieślak on the floor on a side of the wooden box, holding himself on to the box with his right arm stretched over it. Throughout the beginning of his monologue, Cieślak slides his body slowly, on the box, facing up. Then he rolls over to his right side, then fully facing the box. He laughs, loudly, and looks up with his mouth wide open. Throughout his monologue, Cieślak laughs and rolls, slowly bringing his body up, first into a sitting position, with his back to us. Then while laughing, he slowly turns his body towards us. He is kneeling now, with his upper body straight up, his face slightly tilted to his left shoulder. He has a smile on his face. The chorus applauds. Through the final stages of his last monologue, he is in this position, smiling all the time, with his voice rhythmical and melodical, like the prayer of a monk in a trance state. He breaks this state of trance with loud laughter, always coming back to the still position, with his voice back to a prayer-like sound.

Whenever Cieślak comes back to his stillness, his body is not in a comfortable position. The shape of his body seems out of this world – that is, the shape Cieślak makes of his body, surpasses the body of a human's common everyday positions. Cieślak, finally, stands up, through his final laughter. From here, through the last part of his monologue, Cieślak slowly comes back to his knees, still facing us, with both tears and smiles visible on his face at the same time. He utters his last words looking at us. His eyes close. He faints back, lying down on the wooden box with his arms stretched on their sides, and his legs slightly bent in their knees. His whole body is trembling, as if in a seizure. The chorus applauds. In silence we watch the final contractions of Cieślak's body, while the members of the chorus gather around it, touching it with their hands. One member of the chorus covers

Cieślak's face with the sheet. The chorus starts its final chant, and then exit. What we see in the end, is Cieślak's body lying still under the sheet on the wooden box, appearing like a medieval image of the body of a saint on a catafalque. There is no curtain call, no actors in a line restored to themselves facing the spectators in the bright lights before everyone returns to the real world. The audience must make its own way out in the silence that remains.

Taking into account Grotowski's early experiences of Catholicism, it is easy to read into *The Constant Prince* multiple allusions to the Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ. So much of the performance is centred on Cieślak's performance of suffering, culminating in his ecstatic laughter as he appears to transcend the limits of his own body. But the performance does not end there. Instead, what we are left with, is a body that is as close to death as it can be while still living; it has become an object, what remains when the spirit has flown. Even more than in Aristotelian tragedy, this actor-become-body offers the audience a point on which to focus its pity and fear: a hierophant. Brecht said of this: "There were no gestures *of* a body, only gestures *by* a body: a corporeal monologue of spirit itself. An incarnation." ("On Grotowski: A Series of Critiques" 185, italics in original), I see the same. In the end, when his body is covered with the sheet at the end of the performance, what echoes in my mind is his extraordinary laughter, while at the same time that I am stricken by his silence.

In this performance, Ryszard Cieślak can be seen to embody Grotowski's ideal of a total act – "a conjunction of opposites which gives birth to the total act" (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 125). What I mean by this, is that when we look at Cieślak throughout this last scene, we can see a dying human being, who is not dead yet, but not alive any more. In watching Cieślak in this five-minute recording, I do not witness a human being dying; instead, I see a saint being re-born through the laughter. The death seems defeated by what Brecht, who was in the audience at the time, saw as an "unearthly smile [that] lights up Cieślak's face" (203).

Cieślak faces his death with a smile on his face, and he laughs parting with his life and welcoming his death. Cieślak's performance in *The Constant Prince* appears, it seems to me, at the far end of the actorly spectrum, well beyond the Stanislavskian idea of giving oneself over to a character. Cieślak performs a character – Don Fernando – in the extreme, pushing past the point of human endurance so that he becomes auratic, shimmering with the sacred until his spirit seems to have finally vacated his body.

What we witness here is what Grotowski calls "the total unveiling of one's being" (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 131). Cieślak's body, here, becomes luminous and transparent, allowing us to see his soul – in his words, "the flame […] that is alive" (qtd. in "Performers and Spectators Transported and Transformed" 90). This flame, Cieślak continues, "moves, flutters, rises, almost goes out, suddenly glows brightly, responds to each breath of wind" (90). This is his inner life, his total self, that he exposes and offers to his audience as a gift, as a kind of provocation to his audience. What we can see in this closing scene is Cieślak going beyond himself. That is, through the sacrifice of his personal and individual self, he reaches towards universal truths of our existence. In doing so, he becomes a locus for the spiritual core of human beings. Grotowski calls this a "total man" ("Holiday" 224). I see it as a hierophant.

Conclusion to the chapter

Ryszard Cieślak's last performance was his portrayal of Dhritharashtra, the Kuru king, in Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*, in 1989. On 15th of June 1990, Ryszard Cieślak died in Houston, USA. Five year later, on 1st of October 1995, I started my studies as an actor at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade, Serbia. Grotowski's theories of acting had a substantial impact on my work as a student actor throughout my studies, not just in my acting classes, but also through my "Stage Movement" classes under Professor Ferid Karajica, and "Voice

Technique" classes under Professor Marina Marković. Jerzy Grotowski died in 1999 in Pontedera, Italy. Only a year later, in 2000, I started my rehearsals for Chekhov's *The Seagull*, portraying the character of Treplev. Simultaneously with Cieślak's and Grotowski's departure from this world, my acting career had started. Their work had a significant impact on me both as an actor and a human being, and as such, it is interwoven in my work on stage.

For me, Grotowski represents a hinge point in the history of European drama, a return to the ritual and spiritual roots of the theatre. He was certainly not the only one to do so. Directors such as Richard Schechner and Peter Brook, and those similarly influenced, can be seen to have taken up where Grotowski left off. Further, and importantly, in the political and social movements of the mid-20th century, other theatres emerged that run counter to the dominant culture and its repertoire: feminist and queer theatres, Native American, Māori, and other indigenous theatres, Black, Hispanic, Asian-American, Deaf and culturally oriented theatres, and so on. From what I can see when I watch them, these theatre communities, their actors and creators, have sought to restore the sacred to the stage, drawing on ritual and other spiritual practices that extend well beyond what happens on the stages of the dominant culture, which continues to be dominated by White men, including myself. My primary focus in this thesis, however, has been on the presumptively white, presumptively male actor of the European repertoire that I inherited in Serbia, and that continues to dominate the main stages of Europe, the USA, and indeed, Aotearoa New Zealand. In the conclusion to this thesis, I return to the present to consider how, in the theatres where the dominant cultural repertoire continues to be performed, even so, we can see the actor reaching for something of the sacred in the midst of the mundane.

Conclusion

For me, when I was starting my career, to be on stage was to become a liturgy, a prayer – this is what a colleague actor told me, before he became a monk. The actor, he explained, could be seen to be a creature that prowls between Heaven and Earth. Becoming an actor, I would become (I believed) a kind of a priest who sacrifices himself and gives it to all who trust him while on stage, as an atonement. Even now, as an actor, I want to see myself as a hierophant, a conduit for a spiritual dimension beyond this profane world we are living in. When I see the films of Grotowski's productions, I recall these desires. I know there are many theatres post-Grotowski, mostly working outside the mainstream in experimental, political, and cultural contexts, that reach for the spiritual in the way I still idealise. It is not all disillusionment. Occasionally, performing early on in my career in Serbia, and more recently through my work with Equal Voices Arts, a Deaf-led theatre company based in Aotearoa, I have experienced a kind of transcendence that, at least momentarily, might have given me what I have been looking for: myself on stage as a hierophant. However, for the most part, this is not how I felt as a fulltime member of the National Theatre in Belgrade, nor as an actor in many mainstream theatres in the region.

Done well, acting, for many, often looks like "just acting." But for me, as a student and early on in my career, the act of acting, whether I have just a line or the whole monologue, whether it is a classical or contemporary performance, whether it is comedy or tragedy, is much more meaningful than this. It is not just acting. Starting my research with some of these thoughts, I believed that to be on stage was to become a hierophant, to provide a conduit for a spiritual dimension, beyond this profane world we live in. However, in looking historically I could see that it is the theatres that position the actor and the script – aside from Grotowski's theatre and even so – that puts the actor into action. This thesis has as a result, been more text-centred in its analysis than I anticipated, but in looking at these texts

as remnants of the theatres in which they were first performed, I have been able to see how the actor's work has been historically imagined. The actor, it seems to me now, is positioned throughout theatre history, since ancient Greece to the most contemporary (mainstream Western) theatre, to direct the audience's imagination, often not to the sacred per se, but surely to something beyond himself.

I began writing my thesis with a desire to find in myself as an actor some remnants of the spiritual transcendence that I had experienced in the early years of my training and career. I thought at the beginning, that the "we" of the theatres with which I have spent most of my life, have lost the sense of the sacred. So, I started my study with the aim of *restoring* the sacred in the actor's work. However, early on in my research, I came to believe that we have not lost it, and that it has been present (in restoration) ever since the beginning of the theatre in ancient Greece. I came to understand then, that what I needed to do was not to *restore* but to *locate* the sacred in the work of the actor. What I found, however, in my search, is far more complicated and yet, much simpler. The sacred has been explored in the context of the theatre throughout the history. What my thesis investigated, is the sacred in relation to the actor, and it aimed to locate it in the actor's work today. This has been the challenge for me, both in writing this thesis, and in my ongoing experiences as both an actor and a spectator.

Last year, as I was pushing myself through the intensive work of drafting this thesis, I took time out to see a play in Q Theatre in Auckland, New Zealand: *Waiting for Waiting for Godot*, a play by American Dave Hanson, directed by a prominent New Zealand actor/director Michael Hurst, and performed by Callum Brodie (Ester), George Maunsell (Val) and Acushla-Tara Kupe (Laura, the Assistant Stage Manager).[73] The play is set in a makeshift dressing room, well away from the stage, where (we are to imagine) Beckett's

[73] I saw A Boyd and Brodie Production's version of Dave Hanson's *Waiting for Waiting for Godot*, on 31st March 2023 at the Q Theatre, in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand.

Waiting for Godot is being performed. We see two understudies, Ester and Val, in costume to perform as Estragon and Vladimir, waiting for the call to act, but like Godot, that call never comes. While they wait, like the characters they yearn to enact, they find ways to keep themselves occupied. They perform the actor's rituals, warm up their voices and bodies, rehearse parts of the play, try on variations of their costumes, recall and fantasise themselves in the spotlight when they could have and should have been stars, and they bicker.

Occasionally their isolation is broken by the arrival of the Assistant Stage Manager. Each time she enters, their hopes of being called to act are raised – maybe someone has been caught in traffic, or fallen ill, or anything really, that would give the understudies a chance. Their hopes are raised and then dashed. Their time in their dressing room runs parallel to the play being performed out of our sight, so that Hanson's play ends as Beckett's does, with a vow to carry on waiting again tomorrow. Performed in the shadows of Beckett's play, *Waiting for Waiting for Godot* might be seen to have tapped into the original to offer the most mundane answer to the question: what are they waiting for? The audience is invited to identify with the plight of these understudies, their heartfelt imaginings of themselves as actors and the ways they are doomed to disappointment without ever fully giving way to disillusionment. What the characters desire more than anything, is that experience of acting at its most transcendent. Rare and fleeting. Spiritual. This has been the call for me, as an actor, too.

This thesis, thus, comes the full circle. Driven by my own experiences as an actor, I asked how we can come to understand the way the remnants of the sacred ritual remain to us in performance on secular Western stages today. More directly, I asked how, in performance, the contemporary Western actor, who is far removed from the priest of ancient religious rituals, might still be seen to serve as a locus for a spiritual force beyond the human. Like Ester and Val in *Waiting for Waiting for Godot*, I assumed the answer would be obvious.

Stepping on to the stage, no matter how big or small, no matter how good (or often not) the play and the other artists are, we enter a space of ritual grace. To act is to enter a state of flow that takes us beyond the everyday into the realm of the sacred, for which we serve as a locus – a hierophant. This was my article of faith as I began to research and to write. I cling to it, even now, as I write this conclusion. However, in writing this thesis, I have found that it is not quite so – or at least, it has not been so since the time of the great Greek tragedies, and perhaps even then we were already at a loss.

I take as read that the theatre of ancient Greece was in transition from its roots in religious ritual, that the idea of the actor was still emerging from the role of priest, and that the chorus retained some of its origins as celebrants or worshippers. When we look at Euripides' *The Bakkhai* in its original theatrical and social context, we can imagine that Dionysus, the god of theatre, was made manifest in the body of the actor. That is, the actor-in-character's announcement at the very beginning of the play that he is "a god standing on the ground" presented the audiences with a locus for the divine (Euripides *The Bakkhai* 19). At the same time, taking the script and what we know of the conventions of Greek tragedy, we can imagine the other actors-as-characters on stage performing a series of related actions: pointing towards the sacred by showing us their recognition of the god-as-god or, failing that, inviting us to recognise their failure to do so. That is, the way we imagine the performance to have unfolded would have reinforced the text of Euripides' play: its ferocious critique of a society in which the gods have become remote, and perhaps its lament for the loss of the sacred world they brought close to us, from the theatre, as well as from everyday life.

This ambivalence can be seen also in the Elizabethan theatre, which only recently shifted from the sacred to the secular, and yet found ways to make the unseen felt on the stage – perhaps most vividly, in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, in which the absence of a benevolent god is dramatised by the presence of those who are not "that." The

actors in *Doctor Faustus*, I imagine, worked in much the same way as those did in *The Bakkhai,* to demonstrate the relationship between the human and the not-so-human, and in so doing, to direct the audience's attention toward the powerful, yet unseen forces, that drive us to our inevitable end. In enacting supernatural and allegorical characters, these Elizabethan actors would have presented a figuration of something beyond the human. So too, in their own way, the actors in human-identified roles would have served to draw the audience's attention towards what cannot be seen, by performing the effects of the malevolent forces of the Devil and his minions. Above all, the work of the actor playing Faustus can be seen to be not unlike that of the actor in the role of Pentheus: showing the audience the desire for the more than human, rejecting the god who might have saved him, and suffering the deadly consequences of overreaching. The difference is, that in the Elizabethan play, there is no god on the ground; he stays offstage, invisible for the audience.

The Seagull is perhaps closest to expressing my own desire to experience the sacred in my art, especially in the character of Nina. Every time when I am on stage (and even now while writing this) I think I am a seagull.[74] Like Nina, I began by yearning to become something more than human on stage, to be suffused with something spiritual that could be communicated to audiences, regardless of the role. I still want that, but too often, like Nina, I feel myself falling short, let down by those around me who are not seeing what I see, not feeling what I feel. Chekhov's actress may appear pitiful in the eyes of the other characters, but the actor who plays her must show how powerful the desire for creative transcendence can be, and she must do so while surrounded by the unseeing. In the image of the production, we see her on the stage looking to the heavens while everyone else is looking elsewhere. They go on, the actors-as-characters chattering about their mundane preoccupations, as she – the actor-as-character-as-actor – points us towards something beyond the confines of the

[74] Luckily, throughout my research process, my supervisor was there to remind me: "No, Mihailo, you are not!"

platform. In looking at this image, we might say that *The Seagull* is a kind of a desecrated play. That is, it might be seen portray both Nina's and Treplev's desires as in vain. The only two characters that want something spiritual that is more than the everyday, end up either in despair or dead. Meanwhile, others continue with their mundane lives. Is it possibly this that is a comic aspect of the play – some die, the others just go on? The play in this way could be seen as poised on the edge between comedy and tragedy, between the human and the more-than, between the realist play and the symbolist drama it contains. That is, we could say at the heart of the play, is that tension trembling between the secular and (at least the desire for) the sacred.

In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot,* we could see some of the same tension between the sacred and the profane. The play text continuously echoes the religious connotation and quotations from the Bible, while at the same time it refuses to make any sense of it. The characters repeatedly give voice to the conventional Christian ideas of the God, Christ, and salvation as expressions of desire for what is entirely absent from the stage: any possibility that their faith will be rewarded. As such, the tramps and the audience are ultimately aligned. The Boy might be seen, like a priest, to provide a conduit for the audience, like a congregation, to believe – as the tramps are told they must. The audience must have faith that the second act will end differently than the first, with the coming of Godot to reward their faithful waiting. What the actors' work in *Waiting for Godot* becomes, it seems, is to provide a locus for the audience's desire to see what cannot be seen, a figure of something beyond the human that is ultimately unknowable – perhaps sacred – or it may be just someone who is running late. The question of what they (the actors-as-characters) and we (the audience) are waiting for, nevertheless, remains unanswered.

For me, the performance of Cieślak in *The Constant Prince* comes closest to what I have been looking for. His body appears luminous and transparent. Cieślak allows us to see

something more than what Stanislavski called “the inner life of a character” (*An Actor Prepares*). Somehow what I see, or what I believe I see, is Cieślak’s own inner life, exposed and offered to the spectator as a sacrifice, that is, a gift. Grotowski talks about this performance as a sacrifice, which might demand of the spectators a reciprocity, a stripping away of the watching self in communion with the actor. It is almost unbearable, even though what we now see is a recording that is far removed from the original experience of watching the actor at his most primal. Even so, in the end, Cieślak’s performance leaves us to imagine the sacred force that has possessed him for a time in front of us.

Grotowski was right when he said: “Acting is a particularly thankless art. It dies with the actor. Nothing survives him but the reviews which do not usually do him justice anyway, whether he is good or bad” (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 44). I want to keep this in mind even as I am critical of what I saw in *Waiting for Waiting for Godot*. What impressed me most was how polished the performers were. My companions and I were in equal parts astonished and amused, but also somehow appalled by how proficiently they rattled off their lines with great variations of expression, to the extent where at one point, it even seemed that their faces were ahead of their words. They were showing us struggling without struggling. They were showing us the desire to perform while showing us how wonderfully they were performing. It was good theatre without being very good at all. And yet, I know from reading their biographies and other supporting materials, how keenly they worked to be actors, and how much they sacrificed to make it happen.

When I look at his website, the lead actor and producer of *Waiting for Waiting for Godot*, Callum Brodie, informs us that a sound piece of advice from his parents was: “If you can do anything else that isn’t acting, do it” (“Callum Brodie” n.p.). Nevertheless, this is exactly what he chose to do for living – to be an actor. This is somewhat of a cliché. It is my story, too, and possibly the story of everyone who ended up being an actor. What we actors

often do, is to go against every sense, led by our desire to be on stage whatever the consequences are. I recall one of many examples from my career. In the National Theatre in Belgrade's production of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet,* I performed the character of Mercutio. One night, when putting on costume in my dressing room, preparing to go on stage, I felt excruciating pain in my abdomen. Urgently, the theatre doctor arrived at my dressing room to check on me and diagnose me with appendicitis. This did not stop me from performing that night. As soon as I finished my "dying monologue," my colleague who performed Romeo, took me into his arms and, while uttering the final words of the scene, took me off stage where the emergency officers took me to the hospital. As the company took a curtain call on the National Theatre's stage, I was in an operating theatre, where a doctor surgically removed my appendix. The decision to perform in difficult (almost impossible) situations seems silly, but it is also a kind of an actors' life cliché. Like the advice given to Callum Brodie by his parents, my story is also, not so far from many other similar stories told by famous and less known actors around the world. The actor's desire to perform no matter what, and provide a locus on stage for their audiences, is not just strong, but common, too.

What I prefer these days is less polished and more naïve perhaps, more encountered in the moment. Working with actors who are not professionally trained, I can access their desire to act as something akin to what I recall of myself at my most innocent, when I was performing monologues at the 1995 audition for The Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade. Out of just under a thousand applicants, I was one of the lucky nine who were selected to study acting that year. In those purest and most modest days of my study, when all we knew of our acting was our desire to act, we were devoted to finding what we were told would be our "true Selves." In the first year when we were working on classical literature, we were told that in bringing ourselves to the characters in the great literature, we would be confronting the question: Who am I? We were told that when we could tell the truth of ourselves as

human beings, we would begin to be able to perform such truths as the characters we were assigned. These early experiences in my training I continue to tap into, when I approach a new role and what I model or teach when working with untrained actors. I still believe that I can give away the training and professional smooth edges and in doing so, let myself discover in this interaction, something beyond myself that – if not sacred, or perhaps not even so much spiritual – might nevertheless be experienced by myself as transcendent and received in this way by the other actors and the audience.

This is what I recall now of my work with Equal Voices Arts, in particular, the work with Shaun Fahey[75] on our performance of *Salonica* (2017). There were times when I reached some of those extraordinary moments that were leading me believe that act of acting is more than simple entertainment. *Salonica* was a performance co-devised by Laura Haughey (a hearing director), Shaun Fahey (a Deaf actor), Bill Hopkinson (hearing dramaturg), Denise Armstrong (a Deaf Sign Theatre specialist) and me (a hearing actor).[76] *Salonica*, in the words of Haughey and Armstrong, "was the first performance featuring a Deaf actor (Fahey) performing in New Zealand Sign Language to come from Aotearoa New Zealand and tour internationally" (76-77). *Salonica* toured both nationally (around Aotearoa New Zealand) and internationally, performing in theatres around the UK, Serbia, and Montenegro. *Salonica* is a story about friendship between a New Zealand Deaf and Serbian hearing soldiers at the backdrop of World War I, in an army camp in Greece. The performance was devised using NZSL, English and Serbian. The idea was to create a performance for both D/deaf and hearing audiences without formal interpretation.

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[75] Shaun Fahey was a multi-talented artist. Work on *Salonica* with Shaun left a substantial impact on my thinking about the actor's work on stage. More about Shaun and his work as an artist can be found on "Equal Voices Arts" website https://equalvoicesarts.com/people/shaun-fahey/

[76] More about the devised process of *Salonica* might be found in Laura Haughey's and Denise Armstrong's "On the Theatricality of Sign Languages on Stage."

In performing *Salonica*, Fahey used NZSL, I used English and Serbian to communicate between each other and with our audiences. However, an additional stage technique that both Fahey and I used on stage while performing in *Salonica* was "the concept of "Visual Vernacular" (VV), a term coined by American Deaf actor Bernard Bragg" (Haughey and Armstrong 78). A prominent UK-based playwright Kaite O'Reilly explains that VV is "not sign language nor mime, but something in between" (qtd. in Haughey and Armstrong 78). In incorporating this technique in our performance, Fahey and I used our bodies in such a way that our bodies were perceived by our audiences as something more than our characters on stage. For example, when we-as-our-characters were stuck in a bombed church caught in fire, Fahey and I would perform our characters as well as the flickers and flames of the fire; in a war combat, we would be the soldiers (our main characters), but also the bombs, bullets, and explosions. In role shifting between the human and not-so-human, our bodies might be perceived as objects, and as such, a locus for the audiences to see something extra- or post-human: signs and symbols, or perhaps icons like those found in churches. As such, we reached towards, without necessarily becoming, hierophantic. At least I would like to think so, especially in retrospect, as I near the end of this thesis. This hierophantic aspect of my work on stage, I can see now, is my *desire* for the transcendent in action, *desire* to become, at my best on the stage, a locus for the sacred. Whether or not I am successful in such becoming is less important than my desire. Because it is this desire – call it my act(ing) of faith – at its purest, that I believe, the audience ultimately perceives.

When answering the question of this research of how the actor provides a locus for the sacred on stage, it might be said that the actor actually cannot fully do this, unless he is prepared to go to such Grotowskian extremities as did Cieślak. It is rare to find such actors who are ready to go that far in providing the locus for the sacred, as that process is, I think,

psychologically and spiritually (almost) impossible. It simply costs too much and ceases to be "a play" per se. What the actor does and can do, is to open himself to the desire to transcend the limits of our everyday selves, and in doing so, the actor creates an experience of liminality, or at least a chance for communality, first on the stage with other actors, and then, in the ideal, with the audience. Most of us who act, come to acting with this desire, and in the struggle to find opportunities to act we still look for those same experiences.

In acting classes, we are taught over and over again to use our bodies to direct the spectator towards something (maybe not often sacred, but surely) important on stage. When working in theatre, every time the actor points to another actor, or to the sky, or to the absence, the actor is there to direct the audiences' attention. In doing so, the actor's pointing might be seen to be aiming towards an invocation of either presence or absence from the realms of imagination. This is something a hierophant would do for his congregation too. Following simple logic, I hoped I would find the same sacred point in the actor's work on stage too. What I found in this research is not what I expected. The actor rarely serves as a locus for the sacred, whether in ancient Greek, or Elizabethan, or Modern Drama. Instead, what I have come to understand is that what we can see in the actor's work is a *desire* for the sacred, which is often located just out of reach. It is to this unseen force – which might be termed the sacred, or might be the art that Stanislavski once idealised, or in any case something beyond the limits of our daily human experience – that the actor's work, and the audience's attention, is directed.

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