

CHAPTER 4



THE RIGOURS OF THE LIMINAL

Effecting the Real in Theatrical Labour

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Introduction

The notion of liminality is mainstay to the ever-growing interdisciplinary literature seeking to articulate the particular characteristics of theatrical creation. From its original formulation by Victor Turner in his studies of the intersection of ritual and theatre under the sign of ‘social drama’ (Turner 1982, 1990), and through to the academic literature in the broader field of performance studies that grew (partly) out of it (e.g. Schechner and Appel 1990; St John 2008), the idea that theatre is liminal has acted as an example of itself, fertilizing reflection at the interstices of academic and artistic production. That this should be so is hardly surprising. A ‘hippy’ notion, as anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano remarked (1984: 475), the idea of a socially realizable realm of ‘a fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities ... striving after new forms and structure’ (Turner 1990: 12) chimes beautifully with what one might think makes the theatre itself beautiful. In particular, the notion of liminality speaks to the two features of theatre that most seem to make it special: firstly, that its form is to be, precisely, *special* – which is to say, different from the run of everyday life, set apart from its mundane rhythms, beyond the ‘threshold’ (indeed, *limen*) of ordinary reality; and secondly, that the formal separation between the ordinary and the special is a function of a basic difference in the *content* of life on stage and life off it. *Qua* liminal the special character of the theatre turns on its worlds being populated by the luminosity of the betwixt and between – ‘ambiguous ideas, monstrous images, sacred symbols, ordeals, humiliations,

esoteric and paradoxical instructions, the emergence of “symbolic types” represented by maskers and clowns, gender reversals, anonymity, and many other phenomena and processes’ (Turner 1990: 11).

Our aim in this chapter is, in a sense, to intensify this insistence on the idea of the liminality of the theatre. Suitably located ethnographically as a key element in the process of theatrical creativity, and considerably sharpened analytically, the idea of liminality can indeed capture much of what is distinctive in the way the theatre, and its peculiar claim to reality, ‘works’. Indeed, the critical traction of our argument relates to our interest in what we call ‘the work’ of the theatre, by which we mean the intense, meticulous and highly precise activities in which participants in theatrical productions engage when preparing a show. In fact, the impetus of our argument stems largely from the rather blatant mismatch, as we perceived it ethnographically as anthropologists of the theatre, between commentators’ emphasis on liminality as a byword for ambiguity, betwixt and betweenness, freedom, endless possibility and so on, and the ethnographic impression that, when at work, what practitioners of the theatre are overwhelmingly concerned with, and insistently focused upon, is precision – or, in the word of our title, ‘rigour’. So, in effect, in this chapter we wish to articulate a more rigorous understanding of the work liminality, suitably understood, does in and for the theatre. Far from free and hippy, we wish to show that liminality ‘works’ precisely because of the rigours it imposes upon the work in which practitioners of the theatre engage.

As we will seek to show, the rigour of the liminal is key to understanding the peculiar character that theatrical reality acquires – namely, what we call the ‘hyper-real’¹ quality of theatrical artefacts. While the notion of liminality typically connotes a realm that is somehow ‘less’ real than the mundane world of everyday life – ‘the ‘subjunctive mood of culture’, as Turner called it (1990: 11) – what the ‘as if’ of liminality engenders in theatrical work are what we are terming theatrical artefacts or objects (characters, scenes, beats, plots, emotions, etc.) whose ‘special’ nature can be said to reside in the fact that they are *more* real than ‘real life’.² The excess of reality, as it were, in the theatrical product is, we suggest, a function of the role of liminality in the process of its production.

Our argument is built upon our ongoing ethnographic engagement with processes of theatrical production. Having worked for over a decade in the anthropology of ritual and indigenous cosmology (e.g. Holbraad 2012), Martin Holbraad has in recent years been conducting ethnographic research on theatrical productions in the United Kingdom, first with the London-based physical theatre group Frantic Assembly, charting ethnographically the production of the devised play *Stockholm* (written by Bryony Lavery and premiered in the UK in 2008), and more recently with Dan Sherer’s own

company, whose work provides the main ethnographic foundation for the present chapter. Sherer, on his part, has been working as a director and playwright for the past seventeen years, and is now conducting doctoral research as an anthropologist, focusing ethnographically on the processes of theatrical creativity as manifest in the work of theatre groups in the US as well as the UK. The research presented here, however, draws primarily on Sherer's collaborative auto-ethnographic foray with Holbraad, documenting the production of his own company, the work of which will be described in more detail in what follows.

Before embarking on our argument about the rigours of liminality and its effects in theatrical labour, we comment on our choice to focus ethnographically on Sherer's company – here called simply The Company³ – a group whose work is specifically oriented towards processes of devising to generate its plays. While 'devising' is but one approach to producing theatre, focusing on the specific way in which The Company approach devising is particularly appropriate for exploring liminality ethnographically. This is because the objective of Sherer's theatrical methodology is to render the workings of liminality as open and transparent as possible within the creative process. For this reason, it provides an optimal ethnographic setting for our study, the argument of which relies precisely on rendering ethnographically explicit the inner workings of theatrical liminality. Sherer's theatrical work, therefore, serves as something of an ethnographic laboratory for exploring our anthropological concerns. Indeed, as we will show, the conclusions we draw from our study of what is a devised theatrical practice provides insight into forms of theatrical creativity more broadly (i.e. not only devised work), including, say, an RSC production of *Hamlet* at Stratford, or indeed the production of a hit musical on Broadway.

The way in which The Company renders the inner workings of liminality explicit serves as such a test case because it is directed towards solving what is perhaps the abiding problem for Western traditions of theatre: namely, the question of how to generate theatrical artefacts that are believable, compelling enough to be experienced as 'real' – or, in Sherer's terminology, 'real enough'. We begin our ethnographic account by positioning The Company's theatrical methodology in relation to this problem.

The Problem of Effecting the Real

The problem of how to generate theatrical artefacts that can be experienced as real – the problem of, as it were, suspended disbelief in the theatrical product or, as we may call it, the problem of 'effecting the real' – is central to articulating the power of drama, and the practices through which it is engen-

dered. While it is beyond the scope of the present chapter to review the full range of responses that theatrical practitioners and theoreticians alike have given to this problem (from Aristotle on tragedy onwards), it is indicative that the problem lies at the heart of Stanislavski's famous 'System' – arguably the prime reference point of Western theatrical modernity; indeed that which Richard Schechner describes as 'still the most influential school of modern acting and directing' (Schechner and Appel 1990: 41). In essence, Stanislavski's system is based on the idea that the power of drama depends on actors' ability to behave 'as if' the on-stage circumstances – Stanislavski's term for all the narrative events and details that make up the conditions of the play – were real; or, to make Sherer's procedural leap, 'real enough' that they engender the actor to behave in a continual conjunctive phase of the 'as if'. Despite the inherently repetitive process of rehearsal and performance (so conducive to unreality), and despite even the basic fact that everything that happens on stage is, by and large, predetermined by the script, and in a particular sense, is always constructed, actors nevertheless must experience the events that they enact on stage as if taking place now, for the first time, night after night.

So, for Stanislavski, the task of making theatre that is real is translated as a challenge for the actor: 'How am I supposed to pretend not to know what happens next, when actually I do?' The System casts the solution to this challenge as a matter for the actors' imaginative capacities: live the circumstances demanded of you by the play 'as if' they were real. Provided these circumstances are fully articulated within the parameters of the imaginary mode of the 'as if' – embodied simulations of the real – they gain a reality of their own, which is experienced as 'real enough' by the actor such that they instigate the actors *real acted* (so performed) behaviour, and is similarly mimetically experienced by the audience. Stanislavski's System, then, consists of an integrated practice of techniques that allow the actor to achieve this.

The Company's approach is rooted in Stanislavski, insofar as their method also translates the general theatrical problem of effecting the real into the actor's technical problem of foreknowledge – that is, of having not to know what one already knows. However, rather than essentially placating foreknowledge through only the imaginative apparatus of the 'as if', The Company effectively seeks to minimize the effects of foreknowledge, as their methodology for generating theatrical artefacts is concertedly oriented towards minimizing the need for actors to orient towards the future, and so, in a sense, to 'pretend' at all.⁴ This is achieved by orchestrating the process of rehearsal (and indeed, ultimately, performance too, although this chapter does not finally engage with The Company's work in performance) in ways that place the actors amidst 'circumstances' that are continually new, and thus are experienced for the first time, each time. In other words, The Company's methodology reframes the actor's challenge: 'How do I pretend not

to know what is going to happen next, when I do?’ becomes ‘What if I *don’t* know exactly what is going to happen next?’

The group’s core task, then, is to create the conditions under which the actors, quite literally, do not know what will happen next. This involves, for them, putting in place two crucial conditions for the actors. First, to shift actors’ attention away from what will happen (e.g. as dictated by a script), in order to focus their activities only on responding to circumstances as they emerge at any given moment. Adopting an essentially improvisatory stance, the actor is not required to play out a predetermined sequence of events (even if there is one, as given in a script), but rather to respond only to the immediate and preceding circumstances as found – and above all to the similarly improvised behaviour of the other actors participating in the scene at that time. So, what will happen next is no longer the relevant question. The actor only needs to be concerned with what *is* happening *now*, including the circumstances that led up to it, in order to be in a position to respond directly, and to offer their behaviour.

In order for this to be able to occur, however, a second condition needs to be put in place; namely, each actor has first to inhabit the character whose position their responses are meant to embody. The character, according to this approach, acts as the imaginative resource, or lens, that guides the actor’s improvisatory responses. The ‘truthfulness’ of an actor’s real-time responses on stage, therefore, turns most crucially on their detailed and intimate grasp of their character, through which they can channel their own behaviour. Again, the image of lensing is helpful: each actor passes their own behaviour through the imaginative constructed lens of their character’s circumstances. After all, the actor’s job according to this methodology is not merely to act out what, say, Hamlet is supposed to do in a given scene, but rather to respond to the circumstances of that scene *as* themselves in Hamlet’s circumstances. In order for this basic shift in the conception of the actor’s task to occur, The Company’s entire methodology is oriented towards building up sufficient imaginative resources for each actor to be able to inhabit an imaginary self (the character), essentially by generating a back story of circumstances for their life trajectory, and so creating that lens.

To ensure that this imaginary self is experienced sufficiently as to generate the ultimately necessary acted behaviour, a crucial element of The Company’s methodology is that that the actors *themselves* generate each detail of their characters’ lives through improvisation. The actor builds the lens up. The fact that the characters and their behaviours originate from decisions the actors themselves make in the construction of those characters, as well as through subsequent improvisation, is fundamental, as it is meant to establish actors’ agency and consent in the process, and hence the legitimacy, for the characters they come to embody. This process of imaginative construction,

then, is supposed to render the actors ‘owners’ of their behaviour, continually empowered and free to change it in response to changing circumstances, as these unfold in the improvisatory/responsive modality of the process of rehearsal, as well as performance.

The Company’s signature focus on actors’ capacity to generate their own vast imaginative resources in order to achieve acting that is immediate and responsive in the Stanislavskian sense also explains The Company’s predilection for devised work. While, as we will see, The Company’s improvisatory techniques can be used to produce an existent play, the process of devising a new play from scratch is very much suited to their creative methodology. For just as the vast imaginary worlds that the actors create allow them to generate characters that can respond truthfully in the ‘present’, so they also provide the raw materials from which a new play can be built. Indeed, the fact that The Company’s devised work is primarily built from materials generated by the actors through the process of character construction and improvisation (as explained in more detail below) only enhances actors’ ‘ownership’ of the characters from whose position they ‘respond’ during rehearsal and performance. In a sense, the ‘devised’ script that Sherer develops from these materials comes to act more as a *record* of the actors’ behaviour (scenes, beats, lines, gestures, thoughts, etc.) than as a guide for it, as conceived in more traditional processes of theatrical productions in which actors are expected ‘only’ to ‘deliver’ the lines of the script and enact a physical score.

Thus, in Sherer’s conception, when the actors are called upon to create in their on-stage work the circumstances, words and behaviours indicated in the script, the result is not so much one of repetition or representation, but rather of what we might term ‘re-presentation’. Having created the imaginative circumstances that instigated their behaviour in the first place, the actors effectively re-improvise it ‘for-the-first-time-again’ in front of the audience. To give a sense of how this complex methodology for generating theatrical reality is put into practice by The Company, we now provide a broad account of The Company’s approach in producing their plays, from initial concept to the finished, stage-ready play. This account provides the basic ethnographic coordinates for our subsequent discussion of the role of liminality in The Company’s creative process, in which we also present more fine-grained ethnographic accounts of The Company at work, based partly on our ethnography of key stages of the development of a production.

The Company as Method

The Company’s productions typically begin with an initial narrative idea, conceived by Sherer, The Company’s director, in collaboration with Anna

Bewick, The Company's creative producer (at the time of the fieldwork they were married). Once the initial concept of the play is sufficiently developed for Sherer and Bewick to have a clear idea of its shape, actors are cast. In light of The Company's approach, casting requires that the actors selected both match the characters as envisaged at this stage of the play's development, and also that they are suited to the improvisatory techniques integral to The Company's work. Casting, therefore, is treated as a particularly important element of the creative process.

Once the cast is in place, each actor begins a prolonged period of 'rehearsal', during which imaginary characters and their supporting imaginary worlds (i.e. the characters' entire backgrounds, families and life histories) are constructed. Typically at this stage each actor works individually with Sherer for a number of weeks in regular meetings of a few hours. Gradually each actor constructs a fully functioning character, which Sherer refers to as their 'imaginary self' or 'lens'. Each comprises a life-trajectory, starting with the character's first memories, through to the present, as understood within the imaginative frame of that life – all of these details are recorded by each actor in a notebook, which increasingly becomes a major point of reference as their character develops. Working with a number of actors at the same time during this period, part of Sherer's task is to act as a go-between, ensuring that the imagined worlds being made with each of them are consistent with each other.

Sherer then gradually incorporates the characters' lives into a single imaginary universe, bringing actors together by making them 'meet' through shared improvisation, unifying their individual characters' life trajectories into a shared chronology of a now singular imaginary world. This 'incorporating' phase of the process takes place in a larger rehearsal studio, over a number of consecutive days – usually between eight and fifteen, depending upon resources. Working now as a group, the actors are encouraged to interact through various techniques of improvisation. These improvisations typically draw upon circumstances that have already been established in the preceding independent periods of work, effectively weaving them together. Throughout this process each actor keeps their own relationship with their character private, recording in their individual notebooks elements pertaining to their character as they continue to emerge. 'You only know what you know' is the mutually agreed principle with which they work. This mutual opacity is particularly important, because it constitutes a prime condition for the responses between actors to emerge in the process of improvisation.

The objective of the group rehearsals, then, is to render improvisations self-generating, as choices are made that bring about new improvised events. Gradually, these improvisations are meant to constitute the shared imaginative world for the actors involved, and become the raw material of

the play-to-be. Sherer's role in this period is to compose the improvisations into a logical narrative structure. Indeed, much as with the requirement for mutual and agreed opacity between actors during improvisation, Sherer's capacity to shape the play's development throughout this process turns on a fine and ever-negotiated balance between his own foreknowledge of what might happen and a deliberate lack of foreknowledge of what might happen.

On the one hand, in order to gain a vantage on the emergent materials that improvisation generates, Sherer must keep a firm eye on the guiding narrative idea on which the still-evolving play turns. In particular, as Sherer sees it, this involves maintaining a handle on what he calls the 'inciting event' of the narrative – the event, as he explains, 'of which all other potential events are repercussions'. For example, in the case of *The Return*, The Company's at-the-time in-development production upon which this research is focused, the inciting event is a decision made by two of the characters, a married couple, 'Caitlyn' and 'Jimmy', to leave their imaginary newborn child behind when they flee to America from England. This is the event that Sherer hopes to engender, with the actors coming to that decision themselves, based upon the logic and pre-existent experiences of their imaginary lives, and from which the narrative should take off. On the other hand, allowing the improvisations to unfold as the generative source of the play's development means that Sherer must concertedly avoid pre-empting any of the repercussions of such inciting events, allowing instead the space for their consequences to emerge through the process of improvisation.

So, to return to the example, although Sherer knows what the inciting event of the play is supposed to be – that Caitlyn and Jimmy leave their child – he deliberately avoids planning either what the specific details of that event should be, or what the consequences of that event may be. Instead, following the methodology of The Company, Sherer abdicates final agency to the actors, trusting that their decisions will make both logical sense with regard to their characters' intentions, and will instigate further narrative events that can be improvised.

In this way, the narrative of the play effectively constructs itself, with each improvisation instigating further improvisation, and this process slowly comes to form the substance of the play being developed. The material thus generated is recorded on camera and documented in note form by Sherer, in order to be subsequently transcribed, written up, and refined into a script. This script is then taken into more formal rehearsal in the traditional sense, as The Company prepares for public performance – a phase of production that is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Having described in broad strokes the process through which The Company devise their plays, we now provide account of the process of 'warm down', which is what The Company call a series of preparatory exercises

and procedures with which each working day of their rehearsals and performances begins. In doing so, our main aim is to show how this work is abidingly focused on engendering what we identify as a state of liminality, which, as we will explain presently, constitutes a necessary condition for the creative operations that the subsequent work of rehearsal involves. Contrary to common associations of liminality with ambiguity, free and profligate creativity and a general atmosphere of mystique (as in some aspects of Turner's account noted above), our major claim here is that engendering states of liminality in theatrical rehearsal is a process that is deliberately and meticulously structured, and is characterized by rigor, precision and attention to (and control of) detail.

In particular, as we wish to show, this work turns on the use of deliberate forms of what might otherwise be described as 'ambiguity' (were it not for the precision this actually involves), in order to render participants open to a range of creative possibilities that are then actualized in the work of theatrical creation, as will be discussed in the next section.

In the context of The Company's work, the first move towards the liminal is the focus of 'warm-down': a prolonged process oriented towards achieving a state of 'concentrated relaxation', as they call it by way of contrast to the standard 'warm-up' which is sometimes assumed to be oriented towards a deliberate agitation. The warm-down is carried out before every session, and is conceived in the group's method as structuring, supporting, and making possible the subsequent work of the creative imagination. In what follows we present Sherer's own account, as director of the group, of what this involves.

The warm-down takes place at the beginning of each day of rehearsal, often also after lunch, and, equally importantly, before each performance once the finished play is actually running. It lasts for about fifteen minutes to half an hour. For The Company, the warm-down is a measured attempt to engender a safe creative state, both physically and imaginatively. In a sense it is also a process of 'letting go', in order that the actors' subsequent creative choices and theatrical inventions can be fully explored, without embarrassment, physical tension or over-intellectualization – all obstacles that might otherwise get in the way of effective imaginative work. It is an attempt to open up creative possibilities, rather than close them down.

As I lead the exercises that make up the warm-down, I also provide a commentary of the logic behind the exercises, thus establishing a regular language and soundtrack to the warm-down that becomes familiar and then intrinsic.

The warm-down begins with me asking each actor to position themselves in the rehearsal room in a space that can be their own – each temporarily apart from the others. I begin to walk between them, asking that the actors' attention first be

drawn to their experience of the current working space. I ask that stimuli, noise from outside, the hum of the air-conditioning, the sound of my voice, footsteps, not be blocked out, but rather, be consciously registered – that in this context everything is something to respond to, even if that response is virtually invisible; a tiny move here, a physical adjustment or thought there. I suggest that their task as actors is to become sensitive, physically, emotionally, to what is going on, so that they are able to respond to it – not to what they want to have been going on, nor to what should be going on; but to what is actually happening *now*.

By now the room is quiet. Each actor – very familiar with the warm-down – takes up their space, eyes closed, concentrating. I ask the actors to isolate specific muscles in their bodies, and to begin to articulate them, finding the limiting parameters of the movements they are able to make. This is a challenge of mental control and attention to a physical operation. I ask that the actors try to surprise themselves, by making movements that are not habitual, or surprising, and that ‘break the habit of the body’. I suggest to them that it is habitual tension that blocks their ability to always translate the impulse for behaviour into behaviour itself. I say that we want to be able to go straight from impulse *to* expressions so that something *happens*, however small, and the actors instinctively respond with physical action: ‘Your impulse finds physical manifestation; you don’t fail to respond because you are too tense’.

The actors then typically begin to make a series of irregular movements, each apparently in their own interior world. Time passes in this activity. I then ask that they draw particular attention to different parts of their musculature, starting at the top of the head and working systematically downwards; and in the process of that attention, allowing each muscle to relax and become responsive. I suggest, following a Stanislavskian principle, that it is only from a position of muscular physical relaxation that the body truly becomes sensitive and able to respond.

More time is spent doing this. As muscles are released, I ask that the actors begin ‘to change their tensions from their own to those of their imaginary lives’ – that they start to adjust their physicalities to adopt those of the characters that have been created for each actor up to this point (as per The Company’s creative method described in the previous section). The actors’ physicalities begin to shift slightly: shoulders lift or drop, fingers clench or start to twitch, weight is redistributed through legs and hips. At this time, I ask that the actors concurrently begin to incorporate their imaginative work, their characters’ back stories, into and through their physical adjustments. This is meant to instigate a conflation of physical adjustment and imaginative labour. I ask that they work through their chronologies until the chronological present (i.e. up until the most recent moment that had been created through improvisation in the previous session) in order that they are able to enter that moment directly once the warm-down has concluded. Once again time is spent doing this. When each actor has made it clear that they have reached that chronological present, and that they are comfortable, I ask that, from what we call a ‘monitored position’ – namely, a position of simultaneously inhabiting the imaginary life and being able to observe it with third-person objectivity – each actor spends a period of time reviewing his or

her notebook. (As previously discussed, these notebooks are a prime tool in the process of character creation, containing all the details of each actor's imaginative work up until this point, the minutiae of the back stories, etc.)

The warm-down now complete, the actors are (hopefully) sufficiently relaxed and open enough to inhabit their characters – or lens themselves through them, if you prefer – and are thus more able to create new theatrical artefacts effectively and comfortably.

A first point to note in relation to this description of how liminality is engendered in the warm-down is that this process is deliberately given the form of intense and focused *labour*. In stark and obvious contrast to the connotations of chaos, looseness, or 'play', which the notion of liminality so often carries, The Company has to *work at* achieving the liminal state of 'warmed-down' readiness, wholly focused on the task over a determinate period of time. Note, for example, how often in the description above it is considered relevant that time is passing, or even being *spent*, during each 'exercise' (a synonym of labour, note also). So the liminal state that the warm-down is intended to induce is not achieved automatically or arbitrarily, nor is it imagined as taking the form of merely stepping over some notional threshold or 'limen'. Rather it is dependent upon a concentrated and precise methodological procedure, namely the sequence of events and operations that the director instigates for the actors: designed articulations of the body; verbal messages and orientations; requests for imaginative undertakings; and practical operations, such as reviewing and writing in the notebook (see also McAuley 2012).

Indeed, observing the warm-down as a spectator, as Holbraad did repeatedly during rehearsals of *The Return*,⁵ the sense of labour involved in the group's concerted collective focus, with each actor being 'alone together' (*sensu* Turkle 2011 – alone, that is, with their imaginary lives), is overwhelming. Communicated to the actors through a series of normative injunctions delivered in the imperative voice during the warm-down itself ('now try to. . .', 'imagine that. . .', 'write down. . .' etc.), Sherer's normative offers for exertion set the tone of the whole procedure. One might even say that, apart from (though of course also in the service of) its overt function as a manner of transposing actors from 'real' to 'imaginary' selves, the warm-down constitutes an enactment of a work ethic that brings the whole group to the task of rehearsal for the day. The actors confirm this sense of exertion, being not only involved in the exercise but also part of its *point*. As Jot Davies, one of the group's long-standing actors (also assistant director in *The Return*), put it pithily, commenting more generally on his collaboration with Sherer, 'Dan's work is labour, and to work with Dan is necessarily to be caught up in this labour'.

Moreover, amplifying the contrast with anthropological stereotypes about liminality, it is also significant to note that the manner in which warm-down is meant to coach actors into activating their selves *qua* characters is decidedly *not* to counterpose these imaginary selves to ‘reality’, the ‘mundane’, ‘everyday life’, and so forth. Far from a rupture with the real, the desired state of liminal readiness for the imaginative work of rehearsal is gradually and meticulously crafted, element by element, through a systematic – indeed rather forensic and analytical – attention to emblematically *real* objects: the physical body and the phenomenological environment in which the actors actually find themselves. The entire focus of the warm-down, in fact, is on ‘what is really going on’ – its labour residing largely in the work of bringing ‘the real’ into intense focus for the actors. The liminal, one might say, is confectioned not despite – and much less against – the real, but *through* it.

That the process of warm-down focuses so overwhelmingly on the body and actors’ directed experiments with it is particularly telling in this connection. Indeed, we would suggest that the concerted attentiveness to particular muscles’ states of tension and relaxation is not only basic to, but also metonymic of, the particular way in which liminality is imagined and given form in the group’s methodology, namely what they call ‘concentrated relaxation’. In a very literal sense, after all, a tense muscle is an *unready* one: it is already committed to – indeed *actualized as* – a particular state, and in order to perform any action that may be required of it, it must first relax. A relaxed muscle, on the other hand, is one of maximal potential: in response to a given stimulus it is ready potentially to *contract* in any required way.

So the idea of liminality as a manner of engendering actualizable potentials is instantiated in the process of warm-down in the most literal way: in its play with the functionality of bodily musculature. Quite literally, in order for an actor to be able to respond *actively* to circumstances in ways that will generate the behaviour necessary for the creation of theatrical work, the muscles of the body have to be physically relaxed, or ‘open’. Muscles have to move from impulse (the acknowledgement of stimuli) to expression (the manifested response to stimuli) without hindrance. The emphasis on disrupting the habits of the body during the latter stages of the warm-down is therefore precisely the work of relaxing muscles, and breaking habitual tensions that the actor ordinarily holds in ‘the everyday’, in order that the body becomes literally able to respond to stimuli.

So, the labour of articulating the body that the warm-down involves is meant to cast the actor in a liminal state of heightened responsiveness *and so inventiveness*, ‘opening up the actor’, as Sherer put it when asked to explain the purpose of the exercise, so that they are ready to respond creatively to the creative stimuli of rehearsal, be these imaginative or physical. It makes

sense, therefore, that during the warm-down the incitement to imaginative labour with which the process ends (e.g. ‘start to build your imaginative lives’), and the adjustment of physical tensions that goes along with it, only occurs *after* the body is suitably relaxed. In the logic of The Company’s methodology, prior to that point the imaginative work would be ineffectual inasmuch as the actor is not at that point fully open – not yet in the liminal state of responsiveness – and so is not fully disposed to undertake creative operations. Indeed, this also explains the group’s emphasis on ‘concentrated relaxation’. The idea that concentration might be achieved through relaxation turns on the notion that relaxation (including most basically bodily relaxation) engenders the capacity to respond to, to be open to, disparate forms of stimuli that may demand the actors’ focused attention as the day’s rehearsal unfolds. In this respect, concentrated relaxation is both a mark and a metonym of the actor’s liminal state of readiness, as achieved through the warm-down, which serves also to lend the day’s work its tenor from its outset.

The Work of Abduction

If the role of liminality in the process of theatrical production is to render participants ‘open’ to the range of creative possibilities, then how do these possibilities get deployed in the acts of imaginative creation that take place during the work of rehearsal? In this section we draw on our ethnographic research with The Company in order to show in detail how the openness towards imaginative possibilities that the liminal work of the warm-down instantiates, subsequently enables the actors to create ‘real’ theatrical artefacts through a particular form of creative work.

For reasons that we will explain, we will call this form of work ‘abductive actualization’. Our suggestion is that, in its essential formal features, abductive actualization is operative at all scales of theatrical creation, from the minuscule decisions actors themselves might make in how to pursue a particular intention of their character in a given theatrical ‘beat’ somewhere deep inside the play, or the choices the lighting director might make as to the mood of a particular scene, to the broad topic and arc of a play’s evolving script in the kind of work The Company does. Indeed, we would go as far as to speculate as to whether abductive actualization might not capture the core formal structure of *all* creative work, beyond the theatre, including also that involved in producing the kind of anthropological argument our notion of ‘abductive actualization’ itself instantiates.

In order to articulate this notion through all of its formal detail, however, we focus on a brief but ethnographically revealing extract from The

Company's rehearsal of *The Return*, in which the formal properties of abductive actualization, and their operative relationship with the pool of creative possibilities that the work of the liminal engenders, can be rendered transparent. The moment involves Sherer and Ben Caplan, an experienced actor with whom Sherer, at this point of rehearsal, has already spent four months developing the character 'Jimmy', whose journey from England to the United States together with his wife Caitlyn constitutes a key point of departure for the play's narrative. Sherer and Ben Caplan are sitting opposite each other at a low table at the centre of the rehearsal space. They are imaginatively working out what Jimmy's emotional reaction to Caitlyn's recent pregnancy might be:

SHERER:

Would it be impossible that, and from a purely hypothetical point of view because nothing is fixed down, genuinely, if it came down to a choice between a child and Caitlyn, you would always choose Caitlyn?

CAPLAN:

(Caplan laughs) Would it be impossible? No.

SHERER:

Ok. Imaginatively what would have to happen in order that that would be the case (imaginatively and within you)?

CAPLAN:

Let me think about it for a moment. No, it's not at all impossible. I mean, all these things are possible. (*Pause*) It is already there. Caitlyn is everything to Jimmy.

SHERER:

Is that clear?

CAPLAN:

Yes.

SHERER:

Are you sure?

CAPLAN:

Yes.

Now, the first point to note here is that this kind of detailed imaginative work is trademark to Sherer's specific creative methodology as developed with The Company. As described above, key to its rationale is the idea that, by engaging in this kind of imaginative improvisation, actors (in this case Ben) come to 'own' the characters they play (in this case Jimmy), as the lives that form the characters' imaginative substance are genuinely created by the actors themselves. The basic tenet of Sherer's method is precisely that if Ben

is to be able to 'act' Jimmy truthfully, his actions have to be informed by a series of events, thoughts, desires, intentions and so on that Ben has already imaginatively configured, as Jimmy, during the long process of the play's development in rehearsal. According to this approach, then, it would be no good for Sherer simply to dictate that Ben play Jimmy as if the latter were more invested in his relationship to Caitlyn than to their unborn child. It is Ben who has to make that decision, for only if it is genuinely his, and only if he is able to incorporate it into the infrastructure of his character's imaginative life, can the decision act as a motivator for the character's subsequent development and behaviour, not only as the play unfolds during the work of rehearsal, but also, ultimately, in the play's performance as a finished theatrical artefact.

Our main interest here, however, is in the form that this manner of creative authorship takes – its social form, if you like, as a particular manner of action that takes place within the time and space of rehearsal. In particular, we may note the peculiarly back-to-front character of the imaginative (and creative) leap that Ben is invited to perform in our ethnographic snippet. For reasons that at this point in time remain apocryphal to Ben, Sherer puts to him Jimmy's preference for Caitlyn over the child as a possibility for him to consider. That is to say, he presents Ben with a particular way in which Jimmy *could be*, provided Ben is able to assent and consent – a possible 'actualization', as we might say, of Jimmy's character in relation to his pregnant wife. From Ben's point of view, such an actualization effectively comes from nowhere: while he, as actor, is charged with personifying and embodying Jimmy as a character, the prospect of Jimmy putting wife before child is one that had not, at this point, formed part of who Jimmy is – nor, up to now, had this even been entertained by Ben as a prospect of who his character might be. Hence, in fact, Ben's laughter when Sherer enquires, suggestively, whether Jimmy's being thus might 'not be impossible'. 'Would it be impossible?', Ben wonders, 'No' – effectively creating time for this novel emergent possibility to be aligned in his imagination with what he already takes Jimmy to be like. The work being done here between the two of them begins, in other words, as what one might call an (as yet) 'unmotivated actualization' of what Jimmy might be – an image of Jimmy in search, if you like, of a justifying rationale.

It is this priority of the creative result over the reasons that might justify it – or, more broadly speaking, of the effect over its causes – that makes us call the form of such acts of creation 'abductive'. Borrowing the term from anthropologist Alfred Gell, who in turn draws it from its technical usage in formal logic, semiotics and cognitive science (Gell 1998: 14–16; cf. Boyer 1994: 147), we take abduction to refer to forms of thinking that turn on the apparently back-to-front operation of positing antecedents (causes, reasons,

justifications, etc.) on the basis of their putative consequents (effects, results, consequences, etc.). The general form of such ‘abductive’ ways of thinking goes something like this: ‘What would need to be the case, or to have happened, for x to have come to be as it is?’ So by presenting Ben with an apocryphally derived actualization of what Jimmy might be, we suggest, Sherer is effectively setting up the first step of an abductive sequence. Namely, the consequent state of Jimmy, which Ben is then called upon to *author* by abductively providing the requisite antecedents that would render such a state theatrically reasonable.

Indeed, the fact that the work of creation is supposed to take the form of abduction is entirely transparent in Sherer’s work, and is illustrated explicitly in our ethnographic extract: ‘Imaginatively what would have to happen in order that [your choosing Caitlyn over the child] would be the case (imaginatively and within you)?’, asks Sherer, effectively inviting the abductive process. And this is just what Ben provides: ‘Let me think about it for a moment’, he says, before declaring, first tentatively (‘No it’s not at all impossible. I mean, all these things are possible’) and then, following a pensive pause, more conclusively, ‘It is already there. Caitlyn is everything to Jimmy’. In fact, at a later point we had the opportunity to quiz Ben about what he actually had to do in his mind during that crucial – indeed, abductively pregnant – pause of his. What, we asked him, made him ask for some ‘time to think’ when confronted with the possibility of Jimmy choosing Caitlyn over the child.

First of all I need time to compute the enormity of the ask – this was a major realization, and this on two fronts. First of all, I had to think myself to into a position from which thinking in this way might make sense to *me*. What would I need to get myself to become for me to even think of turning my back on my child? What kind of person would that make me? And what would my wife have to be? [Note that, in his own life, Ben has only recently become a father.] And then there’s Jimmy and his own logic. We’d been building him up for months but not until that point did I realize that all the facts and events he had experienced would lead up to him making such a choice. [Q: Are these things you were specifically thinking about at that moment?] Yes, I was scanning the Jimmy I knew from the work before, and making it fit with this realization [viz. that he would choose Caitlyn]. You know, all the things that make Jimmy just that kind of person [e.g. his unreliability, the fact that he was previously in love with another woman whom he’d abandoned to his cost, that he was gambler and saw himself as rootless and unreliable]. But what’s interesting is that once you realize that him being this way makes sense, then he just *is* that way – you can no longer imagine why there might even be any doubt about that.

Here it is worth highlighting three points that allow us to flesh out the notion of abductive actualization in the direction of our broader argument

about the rigours of liminality in the work of the theatre. The first has to do with the *generative* role of liminality in this process. As we saw in the previous section, a necessary condition for the kind of work in which Sherer and Ben engage in our ethnographic extract is that participants are concertedly rendered ‘open’ to the imaginative possibilities that are subsequently explored in the creative work of rehearsal. Induced through a state of concentrated relaxation, as we saw, this openness can be characterized as liminal partly because it involves a meticulous attempt to overcome the limiting barriers that participants’ ordinary life habits and predispositions impose on their capacity to participate in the creative process of rehearsal. The liminality of theatrical work, in this sense, consists of its orchestrated openness to a broader range of potential behaviours than everyday life would allow for.

We may note, then, that it is just such an openness that is at stake in Ben’s abductive work in our ethnographic extract. After all, one of the more obvious ways in which Sherer’s suggestion constitutes an abductive challenge is that it blatantly contravenes the kinds of normative expectations that ordinary moral intuitions would set up. If not quite ‘impossible’, the idea that someone might choose their spouse over their future child is certainly morally uncomfortable – potentially abominable even. So for Ben to arrive at a position in which just such a conclusion might make sense he needs to be able to draw on an expanded range of possible ways of conceiving Jimmy’s character. Indeed, Ben’s own account of the abductive adjustments Sherer’s suggestion prompted in his imagination bear out the idea that liminality, understood as a concerted expansion of imaginative possibilities, is crucial in the operation of his creative imagination. The abductive actualization of Jimmy as someone who would choose Caitlyn over the child is a function of Ben’s meticulous ‘testing’ of a variety of possible alternatives, such that the actualization suggested by Sherer finally might emerge as nothing short of *obvious* to him (‘It is already there’, as Ben himself eventually puts it).

The second significant point in this connection has to do with the precision of this imaginative work. While, as Turner also points out in his aforementioned definition of liminality, there is ‘nothing random’ about the assemblages to which the work of the liminal gives rise, it is also somewhat misleading to talk of the liminal as ‘a fructal chaos, a fertile nothingness’, or indeed as merely ‘a storehouse of possibilities’. Rather, as Ben’s reflections on what he had to do in order to author Jimmy in the way that he did, what is at stake when the liminal comes into play is a meticulous – in a sense ruthless – attention to detail. Indeed, one might say that the work to which the liminal realm of possibility becomes subjected in the process of abductive actualization is overwhelmingly focused on *eliminating* possibilities through the meticulous ‘testing’ of each of the possibilities entertained, in order to be left with an actualization that is as clear in its rationale as possible. And

again, it is worth noting that this emphasis on clarity (as opposed to ambiguity, as so often associated with the ideal of the liminal) is made explicit in Sherer and Ben's exchange. Having settled on Ben's actualization of Jimmy, Sherer enquires of the actor: 'Is that clear?' and then again, 'Are you sure?' Furthermore, the fact that providing the leanest possible rationale for the actualization is what is at issue in this process is quite clear in Ben's own commentary on how he arrived at it in this instance. As he explains, abduction is a matter of 'scanning' possibilities and 'making them fit' into a character that can then make sense internally. At issue, if you like, is a process of stress testing – given what I know about Jimmy, how far can I incorporate the suggested actualization? What would Jimmy now have to be for this to make sense?

This brings us to the final point regarding the relationship between abduction and liminality in this context, which has to do with the correlation between the creative work of abduction and the nature of the 'everyday reality' to which it is often counterposed. True, as we have already seen, the operative role that liminality plays in these creative procedures comes down to a controlled transgression of ordinary normative habits and expectations, expanding the pool of possibilities from which creative practice can draw.

What we also saw in the previous section, however, is that 'real life' itself acts as a very important resource for this process of expansion. Here we may also note a second way in which reality informs the creative process liminality enables. For the logic of real life also provides a kind of compass, one might say, which serves to orient the meticulous deliberations that abduction involves, judging one possibility after (and over) another, in order to arrive at a theatrical rationale that might render any given actualization theatrically robust. Note, for example, Ben's reconstruction: while the specific imaginative life that Jimmy has had created for him up to now provides one frame of reference for Ben's abduction, equally crucial, as he explains, is his own sense of *himself* as a father and husband. To imagine himself into Jimmy's shoes involves interrogating himself, as *Ben*, what kind of person he would need to be to make a similar choice. Only once this begins to become conceivable to him personally can it also begin to become imaginatively incorporated into Jimmy's theatrical personality and, most crucially, be subsequently used by Ben as an imaginative resource for improvisations from this point forward – it being, now, a fact of Jimmy's life.

Effecting Hyperreality

This point about the generative role that 'real life' comes to play in the abductive procedures of theatrical creativity speaks directly to our overall

contention in this chapter about the rigorous character that liminality acquires in the theatre. As we noted in the introduction, the tendency in the Turnerian tradition has been to emphasize the potentials of liminal times and spaces to be less constrained, and in that sense less serious perhaps, than the ordinary life from which they are structurally distinguished – the liminal (in this case the theatre itself) as somehow ‘less than real’ life. By contrast, our attempt to unpack the rigorous manner in which liminality operates in theatrical creation shows that in a crucial sense the artefacts that are engendered through this operation, and that make up the theatrical production, are best conceived as *more* real than the real-life counterparts to which they refer. In inverting Turner’s characteristic of liminality, therefore, such theatrical artefacts constitute a reality that might be considered, in a sense, hyperreal.

This hyperreal quality, we argue, is a function of the liminally conditioned process of abductive actualization itself – in fact, it is *effected* by it. For, as we have illustrated, the process of abductive actualization turns on what is effectively a testing of possible ‘back-to-front’ causal sequences that might motivate particular artefacts (e.g. in the instance above, Jimmy’s newly adjusted character). But, as we saw, what is being tested in this process is not simply the plausibility of a suggested actualization (Jimmy’s choosing wife over child), but what we might call its consequentiality; that is, the test meticulously ‘selects for’ theatrical artefacts that are most replete with meaning and are therefore as ‘consequent’ as possible in instigating (as well as being instigated by) the action of the play. Each abductive actualization must answer the question: ‘What is the most effective, and most motivating, actualization?’ All redundancy – anything that has no apparent point in relation to the action of the play – is discarded. In this way these artefacts become more robust than their real-life counterparts – because, in effect, they *are*. They are imbued with *only* the most meaning, with the most capacity to further motivate subsequent robust artefacts; there is, as it were, only the consequent – perhaps even an excess of the consequent. Indeed, seen in this light, the entire theatrical production (the summation of all the artefacts that make it up) is itself deliberately orientated towards the ‘consequent’.

The net effect of this process, we suggest, is a kind of ‘up-scaling’ of the theatrical product, such that what goes on stage appears to contain only consequential elements, which are in that sense ‘richer’ and more ‘meaningful’ than everyday life. The everydayness of life, after all, consists precisely of its free admixture of things that are significant with all sorts of things that do not matter at all. In generating a spatial and temporal frame that is filled *only* with artefacts that are consequential – made to brim with meaning due to the careful sifting out of redundancy – the process of abductive actualization yields theatrical performances as forms of life that appear to contain more

reality, more of that life itself, than what goes on outside the frame of the theatre, in the everyday world.

Conclusion

We suggested at the outset of this chapter that the particular *modus operandi* of The Company can serve as an ethnographic laboratory of sorts, inasmuch as the group's particularity lies in the fact that it renders explicit core characteristics that are integral to processes of theatrical creativity more generally. Abstracting away from the particular manner in which these processes are enacted and rendered explicit in The Company's manner of working, we would like to conclude by indicating how our central claims regarding the rigours of liminality and the creative operations of abductive actualization may have a wider purchase, giving rise to a more general understanding of how much of theatrical creativity operates.

Take an imaginary production of *Hamlet*, involving a hypothetical actor – call him Imaginary David Tennant (IDT). Given the role of Hamlet, IDT must, in the most basic sense, behave as Hamlet behaves by imagining himself into Hamlet's circumstances. We suggest that, just as occurred in our ethnography, IDT will do this through a whole series of abductive actualizations, at different orders, all generated through confrontation with the 'problems' laid out in the script. As was the case in our earlier ethnographic example, all of these problems are ultimately best conceived as iterations of the basic problem that IDT is precisely *not* Hamlet in Hamlet's imaginary circumstances, and that therefore he is required to behave in ways, and say words, that are not his own. In this sense, *every* element of the script (be that back story, time, place, etc. through to each spoken word) constitutes a problem – a required but as yet unachieved actualization – to be confronted, and so each instigates the back-to-front logic equivalent to Sherer's 'would it be impossible. . .' Indeed, the chief difference from our original ethnographic example is that in this case the script itself takes the place of Sherer, presenting the actors (along with everyone else involved in the production, including the director) with a series of artefacts that have already been 'selected for' by the playwright, providing the pre-given starting point for the process of abductive actualization through which they will come to life on the stage.

So, in each confrontation with the text, IDT must 'select for' effective actualizations (essentially potential solutions to each problem) out of myriad possible actualizations, and then test them, both against their plausibility in the real world, the logic of the rest of the play, and also against his own experience. Should those actualizations be deemed rigorous enough – that is, they most effectively motivate what the script requires Hamlet to do – IDT

incorporates them into his Hamlet's theatrical personality, and utilizes them to inform the behaviour of his character; the particular consequentiality of each artefact thus rendered effecting the performance's hyperreal character on the stage.

To take a specific example from the script, we know that Hamlet has romantic feelings towards his mother Gertrude. Hence the script sets up the potential actualization, or problem, that IDT has to confront and realize. Therefore, from a position of engendered liminality where multiple actualizations are *in potentia* – IDT effectively *asks himself* 'would it be impossible that Hamlet has romantic feelings for Gertrude?', to which his answer must be 'no': it is, after all, in the script. At this point the abductive operation is effectively initiated – the necessary outcome has been determined – and so IDT must subsequently ask himself, 'what do I have to do to make that possibility true for me, as the actor?' So just as in our ethnographic example with Ben, IDT must test the potential actualization for its robustness, against both the benchmark of 'real life' from which the possibility of the actualization is drawn in the first place, and also against his own experience – just as did Ben, in relation to his position as a husband and father with regard to Jimmy's choice: wife vs. child. IDT will then either successfully complete the Copernican move around the problem in order that the necessary possibility *is* actualized (just as Ben managed to do in our ethnography), or he will not. If he is successful, IDT will be able to utilize that 'new' artefact in his formulation of Hamlet, and so act effectively 'as if' Hamlet had romantic feelings for Gertrude, thereby justifying the action of the play, and in a sense, making that artefact really 'real'.

The logical end-point of this argument is to suggest that abductive actualization may operate at every scale of theatrical creativity, from the writing or creating of a script, through the actor 'effecting the real' with regard to their on-stage behaviour, through to the (apparently) simplest of tasks of speaking a line. In each instance, it is the confrontation with the not-yet-actualized (so, the 'not impossible') that instigates the peculiar, liminally conditioned, back-to-front operation that we take to be fundamental. One might even wonder whether this form of creativity – for what we have sought to elaborate here is indeed just a matter of a particular *form* of creative operation – might not, in fact, be limited to the theatre at all. That is, perhaps it is precisely the confrontation with the 'not impossible' – whatever its source, so in its widest definition confrontation with the problem of alterity itself (cf. Holbraad 2012) – that constitutes creativity in the first place, with creativity thereby taking the form of the Copernican back-to-front logic of abduction towards possibilities not-yet-actualized. If that were so, we might entertainingly (but boldly nevertheless!) be able to characterize any creative activity, as inherently theatrical.

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NOTES

1. Note our use of the term ‘hyper-real’ is in no way meant to allude to the condition of post-capitalist modernity as described by Jean Baudrillard, but rather refers to the particular character of theatrical artefacts as laid out in this chapter.
2. In a sense the theatre has always been concerned with instigating itself as ‘more real’ than real life: from Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy (and implicitly therefore the playing out of those tragedies on stage) as exposition of the human condition in its most extreme and heightened form; through Artaud’s ‘Theatre Of Cruelty’, challenging theatre-makers to deliberately heighten the audience’s sensory experience far beyond that of the everyday; to Brecht’s call that audiences see through the theatrical artifice of the stage to the ‘true reality’, a structural reality if you will, of socio-economics, which underpins the behaviour of his characters.
3. The Company is a pseudonym for the theatre company that Sherer ran from 2006 until 2014. The Company was paused and formally disbanded in 2019 following changes in Sherer’s personal life. This chapter is based upon fieldwork conducted during a ten-day period of formal improvisation in January 2012 at the Mercury Theatre Colchester, and at the Lakeside Theatre Essex, for The Company’s then-in-development play, here entitled *The Return*. For ease of reading, this chapter assumes a present tense in its description of The Company.
4. Note here, ‘pretend’ ascertains particularly to the sense already discussed of pre-determining what you are going to do, as an actor, moment to moment – as opposed to denying the theatrical frame itself. At all points the actors in The Company are working within a theatrical and thus a fictive frame – a frame that is clearly acknowledged and established by The Company.
5. At the time of the fieldwork, Sherer had been working with the actors for a number of weeks in his capacity as director/playwright, with Holbraad joining The Com-

pany for the first three days of formal improvisation. By that stage, actors had already created their characters, and were now beginning to interact with a view to generating material for the narrative. As well as Sherer and Holbraad, The Company of actors (four of them – Ben Caplan, and three others) the room also included Sherer’s long-term collaborator, Jot Davies, who was assisting him, and Anna Bewick, The Company’s producer.

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