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Acting the Author: observations on authority in collective performance

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The actor is aesthetically creative only when he is an author – or to be exact: a co-author, a stage director, and an active spectator of the portrayed hero and of the whole play. (McCaw 32)  
— Mikhail Bakhtin

## Introduction

Earlier this year Broadway theatre director Joe Mantello and abstract painter Stanley Whitney sat down with the *New York Times Style Magazine* in a joint discussion of their careers. Whitney and Mantello are both extremely successful artists by any measure, commercially profitable and critically lauded, but they differ in their methods of artistic production. As a painter Whitney works alone in a studio. Mantello, the theatre director, operates in a rehearsal room surrounded by many people. Throughout the interview this difference is palpable. On more than one occasion, Mantello admits he is envious of Whitney's ability to work alone, first at the beginning of the interview,

**Mantello:** What I envy about your work is that you always know when you're looking at a Stanley Whitney painting. My work is based on underlying material that I am — with a group of people — interpreting, and so it takes on the personality and rhythm of the group.

And then again later,

**Mantello:** Are you alone when you paint?

**Whitney:** No one else.

**Mantello:** See, that's what I envy.

And finally once more near the end,

**Mantello:** I do envy the idea of going into a studio, closing the door, being by yourself and just making stuff (Kachka).

Reading these comments, one begins to think Mantello should explore another line of work, one that would allow him the seclusion for which he appears to yearn. Mantello's return to the concept of working in isolation suggests a "blessing and curse" of theatrical creation, that is, theatre's fundamental element of collaboration. Mantello's comments are especially striking

when contextualized with his success as a director: he has earned multiple Tony awards and millions of dollars in revenue from shows like *Wicked*. Despite this success, Mantello seems to betray a twinge of dissatisfaction (regret, even?) when considering artistic creation in collaborative spaces. Mantello's anxiety that an audience member attending a performance of *Wicked* won't view the show as a "work by Mantello" raises questions. If someone with as much authority and success as Mantello is concerned with the preservation of his authorial voice, how fare the legions of the designers, dramaturgs, and – primarily – actors? If Mantello's artistic voice threatens to fall silent, does an actor's voice ever sound at all?

Authorship in theatre is divided – and divisive. The focus of this essay is on actors, and how actors engage with authorship in the theatre. In contemporary Western theatre, the division of authorship is composed of three primary fields: playwrights, directors, and actors. The system invests the greatest amount of power to playwrights: they are the author of the play as a literary product. After playwrights follow directors, as the authors of the play as a theatrical product. Actor's flames burn brightest and quickest. Their authorship resides in the fact that they constitute the act of performance. Among theatre artists, this status is unique to the actor. Once that performance has ended, however, it is difficult to discern what happens to the actor's claim to authorship. Unlike writers, authorship status for actors has been suspect from the outset. Aristotle, for instance, did not think highly of actors, and until the advent of film, the transient nature of performance has meant that the achievement of the actor could live only in the memory of the beholder. In *The Paradox of Acting*, Denis Diderot calls the great actor "both everything and nothing," and a great deal of discourse seems to follow this sentiment. Arguing the case that the great actor is "everything," directors Peter Brooks and Jerzy Grotowski both assert that theatre at its most fundamental level is an actor driven art; that without actors there is no theatre.

In contrast, the qualifications to be an actor are effectively non-existent, as Martin Buzacott points out, “The greatest Shakespearean actors have to escape the awareness that in less congenial times in history, their position of aesthetic credibility has been successfully filled by juveniles and animals” (131). Furthermore, authorship and acting in theatre appear to be two contradictory creative acts: authorship is structured on a notion of permanence, while acting is governed by its transient nature. Considering the breadth of this divide – the difference of everything and nothing, as Diderot would have it – a point of clarity emerges: that the nature of actors’ authorship in the theatre is muddled, and that an examination of authorship and its relationship to acting is desperately needed. The question, then, is not what makes a great actor, but how theatrical practices can offer actors agency in the playmaking process, begging theatre makers to ask: can actors be authors, too?

The answer, I propose, is an astounding yes. Actors can and should consider themselves to be authorial players in the playmaking process, on equal footing with playwrights and directors. This essay challenges the hierarchy inherent to commercial theatres and advocates for actors who think like authors, not as the creators of solely characters, but as the co-authors of the theatrical event as a whole. In result, theatres and theatre-makers might be fortified by a shared sense of authorship, enriched by a steadfast sense of collaboration and a conviction that the performance is a shared entity in every moment, from genesis to expiration.

### **The Author and the Actor**

Before determining how actors begin to think like authors, we must decide on a working meaning of both “authorship” and “acting.” I’ll begin by positing a notion of authorship before transitioning into a functional definition of acting. Setting aside, for the moment, the word

*author*'s strictly literary connotations, our definition of authorship will toggle variations on a single idea, that an author is "an inventor, founder, or constructor (*of* something); a creator (cf. sense 4c)" pertaining to a work of art, or in our case, a play ('author'). This definition, of course, is limited. A pivotal nuance in the modern notion of authorship is that it is predicated on the individual. In "The Death of the Author" Roland Barthes observes that since the rise of Imperialism and Enlightenment-era thinking, the author "has discovered the prestige of the individual, or, to put it more nobly, of the 'human person'" (1). Obtaining the prestige of the individual is just one half of authorship's principal effect. The other is monetary, as Michel Foucault points out in "What is an Author?" that, "It was at the moment when a system of ownership and strict copyright rules were established (toward the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century) that the transgressive properties always intrinsic to the act of writing became the forceful imperative of literature" (305-306). From Barthes and Foucault we can determine that a popular notion of authorship is tied to the prestige of the individual, presented as social and artistic perceived authority and fortified by monetary wealth. Authorship will then almost always signify the individual. This essay, however, because it concerns authorship in the theatre, must address a notion of collaborative authorship. Harold Love offers such insights. He reminds us that, for much of history authorship has been an intrinsically collaborative process is worth noting. "Writers from the ancient world were prone to claim all authorship as collaborative," writes Love.

The fourth-century Latin poet Ausonius, in a poem recounting the events of a typical day, records a session of composition in which his words were taken down by a shorthand writer who would often anticipate what he was about to say. In the case of the third-century Biblical interpreter, Origen, we have a contemporary account of the elaborate

means used to perform the act of authorship through dictation. His staff, provided by a wealthy patron, consisted of ‘more than seven’ shorthand writers. (34)

This conception of authorship resembles authorship in the theatre, especially in the development of new plays in which a playwright is writing and rewriting scripts throughout rehearsals and workshops. The theatre, however, inverts antiquity’s model of collaborative authorship. Instead of a chorus of transcribers jotting down the thoughts and words of an individual, an individual playwright records the discoveries of an ensemble of actors. There are numerous examples of playwrights authoring in a collaborative mode, from the interview-based work of Anna Deveare Smith to the ensemble-devised playscripts of Mike Leigh. Recently, the original Broadway cast of *Hamilton* made this point clear. During rehearsals, performers were frequently used as inspiration for designers and directors, occupying a midway point between artist and muse. In negotiating for a larger percentage of the royalties, the cast noted that the show’s second act was created in the rehearsal process for the off-Broadway production.

“Sydney James Harcourt, an understudy, said rehearsals had also involved “huge blocks of time” in which the choreographer called in actors with “no structure, not setting the show, just mining our brains” (Morgan). According to a letter written to the show’s producer, Jeffery Seller, the general sentiment among the cast was: “We CREATED this show” (Morgan). While the cast undoubtedly played a significant part in the creation of *Hamilton*, ultimately the actors were authoring into a void, or rather, the giant maw of the *Hamilton* apparatus. The cast of *Hamilton*’s situation is indicative of the Nietzschean “artist-tyrant,” invoked by Liz Tomlin in her book *Apparitions of the Real*. The artist-tyrant constitutes the potential of a dangerous authority present in creative processes, in which artists “work first and foremost on shaping themselves; yet also, inevitably [become] tyrants who will coerce others to bend to the shape of

their created world” (Tomlin 110). *Hamilton* is one of many examples of a collaborative, artistic creation, in which the collection of many voices alternated now and again from discord to harmony.

The process of writing for the theatre and antiquity’s system of dictation and transcription are modes of collaborative authorship. This leads to a working definition of authorship in the theatre, in which the term author does not, “denote the condition of being an originator of works, but a set of linked activities (*authemes*) which are sometimes performed by a single person but will often be performed collaboratively or by several persons in succession” (Love 39). Love’s definition of authorship seeks to distance itself from the romanticized notion of the author as analyzed by Barthes and Foucault. We will bear both conceptions of authorship in mind throughout our discussion on acting authorship, acknowledging Love’s portrayal of authorship as a “series of linked activities” to be the more accurate understanding of authorship as it is manifested in a rehearsal space or writers’ room, while still maintaining the idea of the author as the “prestige of the individual.” Given our society’s fixation on individualism, as well as the nature of current copyright laws, a discussion of authorship will always bear with it associations of ownership and the individual genius. With this understanding of collaborative authorship, let us now venture to a working definition of acting.

Philosopher Tzachi Zamir gives a working definition of acting as, “[an] aesthetically-controlled embodied imaginative transformation” (12). This definition can be broken into three constituent parts: aesthetic control, embodiment, and transformation as a product of the imagination. “The term *aesthetic*,” Zamir writes, “refers to attempted effects that result from particular prized powers or merits (capabilities, sensitivities, choices, insights) of the actor as creator.” Conceptualizing the actor as an aesthetic agent reifies an actors’ position as an author of

a theatrical work. Meanwhile, agreement over the nature of embodiment in acting is split into two camps: “The first is mechanistic: the body is a tool – a more or less obedient vehicle for realizing the mind’s will. The second is more holistic: the body significantly shapes the mind” (13). Zamir notes that while there is a vocal debate over external and internal approaches in acting, hard-and-fast distinctions between the two are largely absent, and many actors and acting schools embrace both styles. Finally, “imaginative transformation” is the result of an actor’s change, or perceived alteration as observed by the audience, while portraying a character. This is sometimes termed “becoming” the character, and, “amounts to exploring a newly discovered experiential space, a visit into a previously inaccessible region; the actor becomes both a tourist and eavesdropper in the process” (15). Zamir’s functional definition of acting is decidedly neutral when confronted with the issue of an actor’s authorship. Actors are “aesthetically-controlled” agents, but the aesthetic offering is mutable and impermanent, and an absence of authorship ensues. The remainder of this essay will endeavor to fill that void.

### **The Actor as Author**

In the second section of Zamir’s book, *Acts: Theater, Philosophy, and the Performing Self*, the author breaks the making of a play into a threefold process: the “play,” (i.e. text) its “interpretation” (i.e. rehearsals and dramaturgy) and the “performance” (71). This three-part distinction corresponds to the three-fields of theatrical authorship: the text being the domain of the playwright, the interpretation of the director, and the performance of the actor. According to Zamir, “interpretation” accounts for one third of the creative process, a significant amount of the theatre making equation. Depending on the nature of the rehearsal process, an actor’s contribution to the interpretation of a production varies depending on the type of character or

figure the actor is portraying, as well as the style and work ethic of that actor. If the production is using a script, interpretation can deviate from the authorship – text – of the playwright. An actor interpreting a script may be viewed as “authoring” when engaging in creative acts extraneous to the playscript.

W. B. Worthen offers an example of interpretation conceived as authoring. He reports an anecdote by Antony Sher, who upon visiting a zoo, observes the movements of chimpanzees in his preparation for playing the fool in *King Lear*. Michael Gambon, playing Lear, is also present, and Sher encounters him in search of his character, “leaning against a glass plate of [a] gorilla, man and beast locked in solemn contemplation of one another” (148). Worthen emphasizes the importance of this scene, and I find it fascinating in its elucidation of an actor’s authorship during the interpretive stage of playmaking, sans director or playwright. As Worthen puts it, still speaking of Gambon observing the gorilla, “Contemplating himself in the other, and the other in himself, the actor’s economy of production finally excludes “Shakespeare” altogether” (148). In theory the actor, in this case Gambon, is authoring without director or playwright. Following Worthen’s logic, through interpretation actor-authorship can be an individual undertaking, contrary to the collaborative nature of the rehearsal space. Sher’s anecdote is a nice example of the “invisible” work an actor puts into their performance, and Worthen suggests the actor’s “economy of production” has achieved a newfound level of independence. His reading elevates invisible interpreting to aesthetically creative authoring.

What Sher’s aesthetically active interpreting lacks is permanence: it is in this capacity that actors are most disadvantaged. If actor-authorship is extinct by the end of a production’s run, then it is endangered throughout the duration of a performance. In another actor analysis, Worthen discusses an essay by Michael Pennington, concerning the actor’s approach to *Hamlet*.

Worthen ultimately concludes that,

The journey of performance seems to require . . . a mutual act of writing in which both “actor” and “character” become each other’s author. The text inscribes itself in the person of the actor, textualizing his or her experience and identity; the actor represents the text, rewrites it in the dynamics of “theatrical self.” In this sense, the Death of the Author is, in modern stage practice, accompanied by the Death of the Actor and the Death of the Character: neither actor nor character remains a self-present authority prior to their production in performance; both emerge as effects of representation. (144)

Worthen sees the act of performance as a battle for authority in which neither author, actor, nor character emerge victorious. By placing the author’s death alongside the death of the actor and character, Worthen positions acting as a kind of self-demolition, for which the theatre is the primary site. Worthen’s syntax evokes the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski’s conception of acting, in which the theatre “annihilates” and “burns” the actor’s body, freeing it “from every psychic impulse” so that the actor does not “sell” their body but “sacrifices it” (34). Whether it be the annihilation of the actor’s body, as is Grotowski’s ideal, or in Worthen’s case, the plurality of artistic deaths – that of the author and actor, and their would-be collaboration, character – images acting as a kind of negation, an understanding that the building of a performance or character is a revealing of the self rather than the character or self’s creation. Acting and its transient quality (the negation of character/self) is difficult to reconcile with authorship. Acting and authorship can seem habitually incompatible – but this is precisely why the two concepts must be constantly juxtaposed. It is the aesthetically-creative actor, as author, who must pursue that juxtaposition.

If an actor’s achievement is predicated on their own “self-destruction” in order for the

spirit of their artistic endeavors to flourish, then there is precious little maintaining the authorship of an actor's performance. Laurence Wright suggests otherwise, offering the concept of *irreplaceable acting*, which serves to extend the afterlife of an actor's authorship through an audience's reading of a performance. Wright is quick to distinguish irreplaceable acting from what he calls "bravura acting" or technically impressive acting. Irreplaceable acting, Wright says, "Is acting which will forever be that moment in the play."

No longer just one possible reading of the text among many others; instead, it becomes the text. Others may do the scene differently, acceptably, even more proficiently from some abstract, technical point of view, but they don't achieve that absolute rightness which makes that performance meld inseparably with the text. (53)

Wright's concept of irreplaceable acting is best suited for performances derived from a written text. His thinking is oriented around canonical works – Shakespeare specifically – in which a performance becomes fused with the text, destroying or diminishing all past and future enactments of that moment. As an example of irreplaceable acting, Wright recalls attending a production of *Coriolanus* decades ago, with actor Nicol Williamson in the title role.

Williamson's "irreplaceability" as an actor is made permanent for Wright at the end of play in which Coriolanus turns to Volumnia, "and says: 'O mother, mother!/ What have you done?' . . .

Whether it was his extraordinary intensity, that distinctive Scottish enunciation, with the narrowed, almost aspirated 'u' sound, the lighting, the absolute stillness in the theatre, whatever it was, suddenly the whole play came together, concentrated in that moment" (53). In Wright's words, such an experience amounts to a "living tautology," in which an actor's intellectual understanding of a textual moment is rendered into "emotional currency," which the willing audience members observe, ratifying the actor's intellectual apprehension of the moment. "This

circular transaction has the appearance of 'truth', and so the audience believes the situation and itself feels the emotion, albeit at second hand" (54). Although Wright's irreplaceable acting permits the actor to be co-author with the playwright, his assessment of Williamson is subjective. Wright positions the locus of irreplaceable Shakespearean acting in its most traditional setting: London. This only serves to highlight the fact that irreplaceable acting is inherently subjective, and in order for it to be elevated to authorship requires a third party co-author: the audience or more specifically the critic. Williamson's "authoring" of *Coriolanus* is shared with Wright's observation as an audience member; in this sense Williamson has co-authored, not exactly his performance, but the irreplaceability of his performance by courtesy of Wright's active engagement in the audience. In short, Williamson-the-actor becomes Williamson-the-author because Wright has written so, a reminder that all theatrical authorship is inherently collaborative. This does not necessarily diminish the power of Williamson's authorship because it is collaborative. He is still deemed irreplaceable, aesthetically creative, an author.

### **Historical Observations**

Barthes tells us the solidity of the individual author is a relatively modern phenomenon; and so too is the relative negation of an actor's authority. A brief examination of Western theatre history feels like a glimpse into a long-lost past in which the actor reigned supreme. Historical evidence can serve as a model of how the actor-author might be reconstructed today. Nora Johnson offers a point of departure. In *The Actor as Playwright in Early Modern Drama*, Johnson presents an analysis of a number of comic actors who were also playwrights, including Robert Armin, Nathan Field, and Thomas Heywood, all contemporaries of Shakespeare. Johnson's study provides a number of insights on the notion of authorship in the theatre, a critical one being

that actors played a strong role in constructing modern notions of authorship. Johnson dutifully reminds us that, “the modern institution of authorship is, it seems, inseparable from notions of ownership,” and all the subjects of her study follow the connection of authorship and ownership (16). But while authorship frequently stems from ownership, ownership is not strictly bound to authorship. Johnson demonstrates how, for comic actors Armin and his peers, their written pursuits were endeavored to bolster the popularity of their performances. According to Johnson, Armin’s work on stage and print makes him paradigmatic of a different kind of authorship, one that “exposes textual ownership as a fantasy and renders vivid the series of performances required to establish that ownership” (53). In this instance, ownership is the economic activity in which the more abstract notions of authorship and performance interact and become concretized. Authorship and performance are then invariably linked.

Johnson also illustrates the extent to which the contest for authority between Elizabethan actors and playwrights anticipates the notion of the modern author. Through invoking Ben Jonson, she situates the Elizabethan theatre as site of the birth of the author:

Jonson [is] the great exception of the relative authorlessness of the early modern drama. By virtue of what Jonas Barish describes as his antitheatricalism, what Richard Helgerson sees as his laureate ambition, what George Rowe thinks of as his efforts of self-distinguishing, and what Joseph Loewenstein labels “the investment of the proprietary rhetoric in the author of a printed play,” Jonson is felt to have instantiated the notion of the author on the English stage, if not in English literature itself (54).

Johnson’s placement of Jonson in her study of “less self-consciously exalted dramatists” is noteworthy (55). Ben Jonson’s own self-elevation came as a reaction to the contested authority in the theatre and chaotically split between actors and writers – creative roles less separate in

Elizabethan England than today. It is interesting to consider Armin and other comic actors' motivations for authorship in theatre alongside the context of Jonson's high-art ambitions. Just as Armin and his contemporaries pursued the project of authorship, so should actors today. Armin's authority was certainly the product of performance, but his status as "author" was a result of his text-based creations. Actors as playwrights are integral to the notion of a theatrical, collaborative authorship, but what of actors whose authorship is produced exclusively through performance? A strong example of a performance-based authorship resides, once more, in the past; specifically, in the Romantic theatre.

Jeffery Richards argues that the nineteenth century actor-managers functioned as precursors to the auteur directors of Hollywood and avant-garde theatres in the following century. "Unlike the theatre of ideas, which was pre-eminently a writer's theatre," Richards writes "the Romantic theatre was an actor's theatre or more properly an actor-manager's theatre" (21). The quintessence of this model, according to Richards, is English actor Henry Irving (1838-1905). Richards' description of Irving's creative process is illustrative of a kind of acting-authority that is almost impossible to conceive today. Deviation from a playwright's intentions was Irving's *modus operandi*. As Richards writes, "[Irving] rarely played the texts as they stood, whether they were Shakespeare or melodramas. Even when the texts had been thoroughly revised, they continued to evolve during performances, with bits of text added or taken away" (26). Writers for theatre generally accepted Irving's approach without question, and playwrights would strive to mold their plays to Irving's aesthetic. When other authorities of the English stage and letters collaborated with Irving, it was the actor-manager's vision that prevailed. In a description of a collaboration between Irving and Alfred, Lord Tennyson on the play *Becket*, for which Tennyson wrote the script, Richards reports that Tennyson willingly relinquished dramatic

control over the play, allowing Irving to cut and rearrange scenes as he pleased. Richards quotes Geneviève Ward, the actor who played Queen Eleanor, saying of *Becket*, ““The words were all the poet's, but the sequence and disposition were wholly the actor's.”” Richards ultimately concludes that, “It was not just the text that was the actor's, the whole conception of the play was. Irving selected and rehearsed the cast, selected and supervised the scene-painters and composers, devised the lighting. . . In other words he was the play's auteur” (33). While Irving's authorship of *Becket* is undoubtedly centered on performance and his talents as an actor it is not exclusively predicated on these practices. As in the case of the Renaissance actor-playwrights, Richards suggests through Irving that the credibility of authorship requires an actor to step outside the role of performer and function as a designer and dramaturg as well: an actor cannot be an auteur – and by extension, an author – unless they exit the confinements of their craft and try on the various hats of a theatre practitioner.

Mark Rylance is a contemporary actor whose practice most closely resembles the model of actor-manager and whose acting achieves a kind of authorship. There is plentiful commentary on Rylance's controversial tenure as artistic director at Shakespeare's Globe. Rylance's philosophy of playmaking is centered, if not exactly on actors, then the live theatre experience which is the exchange between actor and audience. When he accepted the position of Artistic Director at the Globe, Rylance was in a period of experimental theatre making with his company *Phoebus's Cart*, which was distinct for working without directors. Rylance was a vocal proponent for the elevation of the actor as an aesthetic agent:

Actors have abdicated responsibility for the planning stage that takes place before rehearsal. They must take more responsibility for the whole, working *with* not merely *for* the director. Unless they do so, unless they take on board that they're part of a live event,

and that you can't present the same thing time after time, they'll end up not talking to anyone but to an *image* of someone. (Purcell 60)

This outlook transitioned over to Shakespeare's Globe, where Rylance implemented a "Master's System," in which an ensemble of authorities collaborated as a creative team, assuming the various responsibilities of a director. "Directors became known as 'Masters of Play', musical directors 'Masters of Music', and designers 'Masters of Costume and Properties'. Voice, movement and verse coaches were titled each of those disciplines, and other Masters were appointed as necessary by productions" (Purcell 78). As Purcell notes, the Globe theatre contracted practitioners who might otherwise call themselves directors, and yet at the Globe they were "Masters of Play," with the same authority, in theory, as every other "Master" of a craft.

Rylance's aesthetic at the Globe was also deeply informed by the director Mike Alfreds. Like Rylance, Alfreds emphasizes the live, transient nature of theatre. Purcell describes Alfreds' style as "a 'disciplined improvisation' in which actors play their actions and objectives with relative consistency, but attempt to achieve them by employing different tactics each time. . . for the sake of being alive and true to each moment as it occurs" (84). As Purcell notes, this approach to playmaking is especially conducive to the Globe's space, with its shared lighting and proximity between actors and audience members allowing for diverse performances and various "true moments" to proliferate in a unique way each night. By extension an actor's authorial meaning is maximized, given the infinite possibility such "disciplined improvisations" might allow. Unlike the Renaissance comic actors, whose authorship resided in text, and the actor-manager Henry Irving, whose authorship resided in his auteur-status, the actors at Rylance's Globe are authors simply because they are actors.

The disciplined improvisation and audience interaction for which the Globe became

famous has drawn comparisons to sporting events or jazz concerts. Brecht's *distancing effect* is also frequently mentioned. Both concepts aide in positioning the actor as an author. Purcell relates the conflict between the actor's phenomenological presence, their bodies and voices, against the conceit of "character" as an example of *bisociation*, "a term coined by Arthur Koestler to describe 'the perceiving of a situation or idea. . . in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference'" (125). The audience reads the actor onstage as Hamlet and is invested in Hamlet's precarious family life onstage, yet the audience understands equally that when the play is finished Hamlet will become Rylance, the actor. Knowing that the inevitability of the performance is the relinquishing of that character entirely, the audience never forfeits the knowledge that Hamlet is always Rylance on stage. Hamlet is read invariably as Rylance, and Rylance as Hamlet. Rylance/Hamlet is the process of bisociation, the "self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference" in direct confrontation for the length of a performance. Bisociation is the through-line upon which the audience oscillates its attention, observing the actor as being more Hamlet in some situations, and being more Rylance in others.

To offer an example of bisociation at the Globe, director Tim Carroll recalls a performance of *Macbeth* in which a seagull landed onstage during the famous "Tomorrow" soliloquy. The actor playing Macbeth turned to the seagull and played the entire speech to it, endowing the bird as the poor player on the stage. Purcell states that "audience laughter was not dismissive but a 'moment of beautiful revelation' according to Tim Carroll" (129). As the seagull landed, the audience's reading of the man onstage would have been weighed more heavily to that of "actor," the artifice of stagecraft would have been suspended. Regardless, if we are to take Carroll by his word, this had no negative effect on the quality of the production, but resulted in a "moment of beautiful revelation."

Ultimately, this notion of bisociation permits the actor to be an author observing their aesthetic product with a degree of objectivity – being an “active spectator” in Bakhtin’s words – to which directors and playwrights are privileged. Given the transient nature of performance, for an actor to construct the authority of authorship, they must overstep the confines of their craft, or in Bakhtin’s words, “The actor is aesthetically creative only when he is an author – or to be exact: a co-author, a stage director, and an active spectator of the portrayed hero and of the whole play.” This is not to say Rylance created a theatre where all actors were authors. The title of Purcell’s study *Shakespeare at the Theatre: Mark Rylance at the Globe* is telling – the status of authorship is one with limited capacity. Even in the collaborative authorship space of the Globe theatre, it is Rylance’s name that is being written into the history of Shakespearean performance practice. Acting-authorship, then, is neither subversive nor entirely authoritative, but a lens to locate the genesis of a work of art that underscores the achievements of actors.

### **Putting it to Practice**

This essay has been written in conjunction with rehearsals for a production of *Romeo and Juliet*. I would now like to take a step back from a thesis and reflect on moments from the rehearsal process and how they correspond to authorship, actor-authorship, and even speculate as to who was the author of this particular production. Rehearsing a show while writing about authorship has been a risky undertaking. It is easy to get distracted during rehearsal, to observe an interaction between director and actor and wonder in what way that interaction is indicative of a show’s genesis. Leaving those thoughts outside the rehearsal space is preferable: they are better served in moments of individual reflection. Nonetheless, such curiosities will attempt to infiltrate the rehearsal room, bringing with them a sliding scale of productivity. Monitoring the extent to

which a notion of authorship informs actions in a rehearsal space determines what kind of theatre-maker, and collaborator, emerges.

Our production of *Romeo and Juliet* cast actors in multiple roles. I played a number of characters, notably Mercutio and Lord Capulet, two of the most dramatically *proactive* characters in the play. The plot is driven by their actions. Romeo and Juliet react to Mercutio and Lord Capulet, respectively, and their reactions result in the play's tragic rhythm. Mercutio initiates the fight which results in his and Tybalt's death, and Romeo's banishment. Capulet arranges the marriage that drives Juliet to fake her death, leading to the double-suicide at the end of the play. If the deaths of Romeo and Juliet are the product of a corrosive Veronese society, then Mercutio and Capulet are the most significant actors in that society. Alternating between Mercutio and Capulet is like interrogating the fourth and fifth "acts" of Jacques "All the world's a stage" speech.

Mercutio is obviously Jacques' soldier, "Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard, / Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel, / Seeking the bubble reputation / Even in the cannon's mouth." Mercutio fits this description to a tee. His hotheadedness is his undoing. As Romeo describes Mercutio, he is "a man God hath made himself to mar." Jealousy also permeates the words and actions of Mercutio, who is jealous of Rosaline, the object of Romeo's love. Mercutio observes his place in Romeo's life lose value and finds this diminished state to be torturous. He acts out to attract Romeo's attention and dies because of it.

Following Jacques' description, Capulet is clearly the justice, "In fair round belly with good capon lin'd, / With eyes severe and beard of formal cut, / Full of wise saws and modern instances." Affluent and severe, Capulet occasionally espouses wise saws (sayings) in terrifying scenarios, as when he commands Juliet to "Proud me no prouds, nor thank me no thankings," but

to marry Paris by the end of the week if she wants to remain a member of the Capulet family. Unexpectedly, Capulet and Mercutio make a neat pairing for an actor. For one, both characters are linked in that they represent different manifestations of male chauvinism. The latter is openly sexist in his descriptions of Rosaline and in his encounter with the Nurse, while the former has a more subdued temper, although it reveals itself in terrifying bursts. Ultimately, both are fantastic characters to play. Mercutio is recognized as one of Shakespeare's more brilliant minor parts, and Capulet can be read as the play's villain, the manifestation of everything wrong in Veronese society.

What evidence of authorship, if any at all, can be exhumed by reflecting on this particular rehearsal process? For one, the previous paragraphs demonstrate an active engagement with the characters and their position in the world of the play. They illustrate an analytical viewpoint of the play's dramaturgy. Actors create characters, but putting that point aside, nothing suggests I am the author or co-author of this production, and a reader who did not attend the show would readily agree with this. Readers who witnessed the show might disagree. Mercutio and Capulet are two substantial parts, the former occupying much of the first half of the play and the latter most of the second. Like all the actors in the show – all of whom played multiple roles, except for the leads – I was onstage a great deal. Actors' voices and bodies all signify to an audience that they are authors of the evening's show; by virtue of this fact the actors of *Romeo and Juliet* appear to be its authors.

Nonetheless, I never felt like a co-author of this production. The director possessed what was an almost clairvoyant vision for the show, and it became clear from the early rehearsal period that the actors' contribution would be limited to character. Actors were certainly encouraged to explore the motivations of their characters and speculate their backstories. But

with a few exceptions, this crucial work was only discussed during one-on-one dialogues between the director and individual actors. Almost no time was given in rehearsals for actors to discuss character and motivation with other actors, even when two actors shared a scene. Ultimately, the rehearsal process became a conversation between two collaborators – the director and Shakespeare – while the actors served merely as a conduit to fill the divide of silence and time.

### **Moving Forward**

*Romeo and Juliet* was not a satisfying experience because its environment limited the creativity of many collaborators. Historically, actors' authorship begins and ends with character. But I believe actors should have greater aspirations than to simply be the author of a character; they should be co-authors of the play in its whole. Until then, actors must be content with being semi-autonomous artistic creations. As actors begin to think like authors, directors should endeavor to think more like editors. Editors offer writers suggestions that writers do not need accept, but writers depend on editors as crucial collaborators. The aim here is not to level the authority of the director entirely – no one wants indignant actors running amok in rehearsals – but to redistribute the director's authority across the entire rehearsal apparatus. Actors would not be the only beneficiary of this democratization; designers, dramaturgs, and technicians would prosper too. As to how this change is made in practice, it is not the work of actors alone, but of theatre-makers of every variety. In "Dramaturgy and Silence" Geoffrey Proehl tells us, "[That] it takes a degree of humility to acknowledge that someone else is a project's author, to come to terms with one's authorial silence in a world that worships authors" (Proehl). Theatre-makers, especially those already invested with authority, would do well to take Proehl's words to heart.

The work of the actor-author, director-author, or designer-author begins with an admission of authorial silence, which is different than the absence of authorship. In a medium that may have many voices speaking at any given time, silence can be just as powerful as speech, and the possibility of co-authorship and collaboration seems predicated on the assumption that the two are equal.

Our language and society have a need to locate a singular author. Frequently that author is not an individual, but an amalgamation of many people; in theatre-making, this is always the case. While I believe that actors deserve more authority in the rehearsal spaces, I do not think it is a good idea to apply the same authoritative power and recognition to actors as has been allotted to some playwrights and directors. But since it seems unlikely that critics and historians of theatre will jettison all notions of authorship from their vocabulary, actors should be proactive in their engagement with authorship. In short, actors should think more like directors, designers, and dramaturgs, that is: artistic authors. They should be aware of how their character's actions exist within the totality of the play's action, that the lines their character speaks are fragments of a greater utterance. When actors start thinking like authors, we might be able to move past the trappings of Diderot's paradox, no longer viewing actors as both everything and nothing, but as something altogether whole: aesthetically-active authors and originators of the world of the play.

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