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This is Not a Chair: *Complicite's Master and Margarita*

In this article Liliane Campos links *Complicite's Master and Margarita* (2011) to the company's previous productions, from *The Street of Crocodiles* (1992) to *Shun-Kin* (2008). She develops a close analysis of *The Master and Margarita* as it was staged at the Avignon Festival in July 2012, arguing that the company's aesthetic is characterized by a tension between narrative fragmentation and visual connections. While *Complicite's* shows overflow with postmodernist multiplicity and division, the urge to connect these 'shards of stories' is a driving force in Simon McBurney's artistic direction. This dynamic is explored here both on a semantic level, as a consequence of *Complicite's* physical language, and on a narrative level, through the use of framing and frame-breaking devices. The article highlights the company's recurrent themes and the defining traits of its performance style. Liliane Campos is a Lecturer in English and Theatre studies at the Sorbonne Nouvelle University in Paris. She has published various articles on British drama and performance, and two books about the role of science in contemporary writing and devising for the theatre.

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'HOW DID THEY DO THE FLYING?' In conversations about *Complicite's* stage adaptation of *The Master and Margarita* (2011), this question returns again and again. About half-way through the novel, Bulgakov's heroine Margarita does indeed fly away from her cosseted but joyless life in Moscow. Transformed by a magical ointment, she jumps out of the window and joins Satan for his yearly ball, thereby earning the deliverance of her lover, the Master, from a psychiatric clinic and the ruined life of a writer who has failed to please the authorities. The lovers escape the madness and unhappiness of 1930s Moscow on horseback, following the Devil and his retinue through the airs to a place where they will find peace at last.

In the version of *The Master and Margarita* presented at the Avignon Festival in July 2012, Simon McBurney answered the first of these two challenges with a relatively simple stage 'trick': as the wall of her building was projected on to the stage around Margarita, she teetered on her window sill and then plunged downwards without ever leaving the boards, her acceleration being provided

by the moving image. The second flight, however, was a breathtaking moment which formed the climax of the final scenes: lying on their sides with their knees bent, the couple flew away with the help of another projected image, this time of a gigantic horse. Yet this was no flesh and blood animal, but the shape of a galloping horse composed of dozens of chairs. At the end of a technologically rich production, in which projections of Jerusalem or Moscow covered the gigantic walls of Avignon's Palais des Papes, the fiery horse of Bulgakov's imagination was created by combining computer animation with the theatre's simplest prop, the chair.

For any spectator familiar with *Complicite's* work, this striking image brings back memories of a whole chain of previous shows, above all *Mnemonic* (1999), in which a chair was used, Bunraku-style, as a puppet representing the body of a Neolithic man. McBurney confesses to being '*amoureux des chaises*' ('in love with chairs') and their capacity to represent the space of the human body.¹ It is not surprising, then, that the horse of *Complicite's* imagination should be

made of chairs: the chair is to the company what the flying horse was to Bulgakov, the embodiment of art's freedom and its ability to escape from naturalistic constraints. It is typical of Complicite's creative style: both technologically inventive and yet continuing to speak in the ingenious language of bodies and props that first distinguished the company in the early 1980s and led to their work being labelled 'physical theatre'.

The material Complicite has adapted for the stage over the past two decades is extremely diverse. Many of their pieces have been derived from twentieth-century fiction: *The Street of Crocodiles* (1992) was inspired by the life and writings of Bruno Schulz, *The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol* (1994) by John Berger's novel *Pig Earth*, *The Elephant Vanishes* (2003) was a stage adaptation of three short stories by Haruki Murakami, and *Shun-Kin* (2008) wove together a tale by Junichiro Tanizaki and his book *In Praise of Shadows*. Poetry, philosophical essays, and scientific texts are also fed into the company's devising process, and experts in related areas are invited to their workshops. Sometimes the devising work does not focus on a fictional text but on a historical enquiry or a scientific idea, such as the neurology of memory in *Mnemonic* or the mathematics of infinity in *A Disappearing Number* (2007). Yet the thematic and stylistic continuities between all these pieces are striking, and stand out once again in *The Master and Margarita*.

Diffraction Narratives

This article links *The Master and Margarita* to Complicite's past body of work, arguing that the tension between fragmentation and connection that structures this show is characteristic of their aesthetic. While the company's use of narrative overflows with postmodernist multiplicity and division, the urge to connect these 'shards of stories' is a driving force in McBurney's artistic direction.² These connections are explored here both on a semantic level, as a consequence of Complicite's physical language, and on a narrative level, in the company's use of framing and frame-breaking devices.

Although Hans-Thies Lehmann included Complicite in the list of 'postdramatic' artists outlined in the introductory chapter of his *Postdramatic Theatre*, most of their work is difficult to categorize in this way, since it remains structured around clear story lines and characters.³ They do, however, favour fragmented narrative pluralities that resonate with postmodern concepts such as the loss of a unified idea of history and the weakening of structuring meta-narratives.⁴

Among the themes that *The Master and Margarita* shares with the company's previous shows, the most remarkable is that of narrative itself, since the action is triggered by the narrative account of the death of Jesus, or rather the 'vagrant philosopher Yeshua', by Satan and the Master. This narrative, which focuses on Pontius Pilate and his fascination for Yeshua, provides a counterpoint for the Master and Margarita's tale of separation, persecution, and eventual reunion. Despite their final escape, which is only possible after their death, both the lovers' tale and the embedded story of Pontius Pilate are stories of irretrievable loss, in which the past is bitterly regretted and the clock cannot be turned back.

These characters' estrangement from their former lives echoes the themes of displacement and disorientation developed by most of Complicite's shows, which explore the loss of traditional ways of life (*The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol*), the alienation of urban life (*The Elephant Vanishes*), and individual stories of migration and lost identities which intertwine with collective historical trauma, such as the two world wars in *The Street of Crocodiles*, *Mnemonic*, and *A Disappearing Number*.

These plays all contain characters who no longer belong to the world they inhabit, and one of the characters who stands out in the Bulgakov adaptation is the poet Bezdomny ('the homeless'), who meets the Master in the psychiatric clinic and takes up the task of 'continuing the story' after he leaves. Whereas in the novel Bezdomny simply becomes a professor of history who vaguely remembers his wild adventure once a month, McBurney turns him into the final storyteller of the show, typing out and narrating its ending.

In order to explore the 'sense of displacement' and 'loss of continuity' that pervade Complicite's work, McBurney favours fragmented dramatic forms.⁵ His *Master and Margarita* begins with a chaotic series of textual and visual fragments taken from the whole show: standing on one side of the stage the Master describes his separation from Margarita, who stands on the other side in a separate rectangle of light. Agitation grows around them as the whole cast criss-crosses the stage and acts out snippets of their interaction to come. The effect recalls similar introductory scenes in *Shun-Kin* and *A Disappearing Number*, and creates a sense of confusion that announces the mayhem that Satan's visit to Moscow will cause.

Bulgakov's readers may find the structure of the novel somewhat disconcerting in its constant shifts from one set of characters to another, and this fragmentation is greatly amplified in Complicite's adaptation. Whereas Bulgakov inserts the Master's account of Pilate's encounter with Jesus into the Moscow story line through isolated chapters, which occasionally take us away from the main narrative, McBurney cuts them up and splices them with the Moscow chapters, rapidly shifting from one story to the other and relocating the action through simple visual indications – a bright white light and beds for the psychiatric clinic, or a square of carpet and a chair for Margarita's flat.

The result is a whirlwind of rapid scenes which emphasize the ironic parallels between the different narratives, as for example when the literary critics who will cause the Master's downfall condemn his work, and then remain on stage in a stern circle while Pilate argues with the High Priest of Judaea about Yeshua's sentence and announces it to the crowd.

Manipulating the Narrative Voice

Bulgakov's two plots are thus further divided and intertwined, and this adaptation foregrounds the novel's narrative voice by distributing it between different characters. By starting the evening with the Master's narration of his downfall instead of the

novel's anonymous narration and dialogue between two writers, the company emphasizes his voice, whereas Bulgakov delays his entrance till the thirteenth chapter – somewhat ironically entitled 'Enter the Hero'.

Complicite's *Master and Margarita*, like *Shun-Kin* before it, relies heavily on narration and highlights the storyteller's role. In *Shun-Kin*, the cruel love story of Sasuke and his blind mistress Shun-Kin, set in the nineteenth century, was read out by a twenty-first-century narrator recording it for the radio. The nineteenth-century action was framed by scenes which isolated the narrator in the middle of a vast darkened stage, emphasizing the themes of light and shadows that ran through the show (partly inspired by Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows*). When, at the end of *The Master and Margarita*, Satan asks, 'What would the world look like without shadow?', the line sounds as if it were borrowed from *Shun-Kin*.

But the company's manipulation of the narrative voice is more complex in this case: throughout the evening Bulgakov's ironic, anonymous narrator, who only hints that he is himself a Muscovite, is replaced by the characters themselves. Whereas only a few episodes of the novel are narrated by characters (mostly Satan and the Master), Complicite distribute the whole narrative between the Master, Satan (or rather Professor Woland, his incarnation in Moscow), his assistant Koroviev, Bezdomy, and Margarita.

As the story shifts from one narrator to another, the ambiguity of its status increases. Bulgakov already introduced ambivalence by having Woland and the Master give the same account of Yeshua's trial. Complicite split this ambivalent enunciation into yet more speakers, making sure that the different phases of the plot are mediated by different voices. As a result, the telling itself stands out as a situated act that cannot be neutral, and which frames the action.

As Bulgakov suggests, the question of who writes, or rather who is permitted to write the official (hi)story is brought to the fore by Stalin's iron rule. His Master is cast out for his writings about Jesus, which will be continued by his 'disciple' Bezdomy, and

his Satan describes himself as 'a historian'. The question of who controls the story is paramount, and emphasized in McBurney's production by the circulating narrative. In the face of totalitarian monologism, *Complicite's* splintering of the narrative voice and the narrative structure acts both as a counterpoint to the single tale of the regime and a reminder of the inescapability of narrative frames.

When asked about his choice of narrators, McBurney points out that Bulgakov invites us to ask ourselves what story *we* are living in, and to question the narratives we take for granted, such as that of capitalism.⁶ This remark suggests an interesting paradox: the use of a satire on Communist Russia to question our own capitalistic context – and indeed this context may resonate with the materialist greed characterizing Bulgakov's Muscovites.

Visual Connections and Motifs

These multiple narrators reorganize the novel's ambivalent enunciation into a post-modernist paradigm of proliferating narratives, whose juxtaposition highlights the parallels between these stories of sacrifice and absolution. Despite their thematic and structural assertion of fragmentation, *Complicite's* dramatic forms always cohere through repeated motifs and metaphorical connections.

Most of their shows begin with a prologue which suggests a structuring image. In *The Street of Crocodiles*, which was devised from the essays and short stories of Bruno Schulz, the actor playing Schulz opened a book and a feather fell out of it, triggering the memories that formed the body of the show and a temporary flight from the reality of his situation as a Polish Jew in 1942. In his introductory note to *Mnemonic*, McBurney remarks that the devising process at the root of this creation was a search for 'another form to tell our stories', and in several subsequent pieces this 'form' was drawn from science: a scientific idea was outlined in the prologue and became a structuring image for the plot – the biochemistry of memory in *Mnemonic*,

the increasing disorder and irreversibility of the second law of thermodynamics in *The Elephant Vanishes*, and the symmetries and regularities of mathematical series in *A Disappearing Number*.⁷

Each of these images suggests an overarching dynamic of connective fragmentation. In his introductory lecture to *Mnemonic*, for example, McBurney described the biochemical processes of memory, in which the act of remembering does not activate a fixed store of memories but depends on the constant sprouting and recreation of synaptic connections in the human brain. In self-consciously postmodern terms, McBurney thus appropriated this physical process as a metaphor for the form of *Mnemonic*, noting that:

We no longer live in a world of the single tale. So the shards of stories we have put together, some longer, some shorter, collide here in the theatre, reflecting, repeating, and revolving like the act of memory itself.⁸

One of the structuring images put forth by *The Master and Margarita's* 'prologue', before the frenzied criss-crossing and the first scene of the novel, is a nightmare the Master describes, as he sinks into depression and irrational fear: a 'cold, supple octopus' that strangles his heart. This opening nightmare, which expresses the fears of the censored author and points to Bulgakov's own situation, suggests a possible reading of the ensuing performance along the textual structure of dreams, in which we can expect substitutions and condensations of meaning. Accordingly Moscow and Jerusalem are interchangeable, the actor playing the Master also plays Woland in most of his scenes, and the martyrdom of Yeshua offers a metaphorical parallel to the persecution of the Russian author and the suffering of his lover.

This dream logic reaches its climax in the final sequence, which contains a series of striking condensations and substitutions. At the end of Satan's ball, the image of Margarita's exhausted body is projected and magnified on the wall, superimposed over Yeshua's crucifixion. When Bezdomny takes over the story of Pontius Pilate from the



The death of Judas in Complicite's *Master and Margarita*. Cour d' 'Honneur du Palais des Papes, Avignon, 2012. Photo: copyright Christophe Raynaud de Lage

Master, he narrates and enacts it in turns, becoming Yeshua's follower, Matthew the Levite. And as the performance draws to its end, when the Master is allowed to conclude Pilate's story and grant him his reunion with Yeshua, the actor playing Woland (at this stage) steps out of his long dark cloak, takes off his dark glasses, and walks towards Pilate as the bruised Yeshua of the beginning. Like many of the other transformations of the evening, this final substitution makes Bulgakov's verbal suggestions visually explicit: in this case the interdependence of good and evil, light and shadows.

The Search for Continuities

The search for paradigmatic continuities within a fragmented syntagm is characteristic of Complicite's aesthetic and correlates to their particular brand of physical theatre. Up until the late 1990s the visual ingenuity of

their work lay mostly in a simple yet effective use of the semantic versatility of bodies and stage props. This produced memorable images, such as the chair/man in *Mnemonic*, the fluttering pages/birds in *The Street of Crocodiles* and *Shun-Kin*, or Simon McBurney and his acolytes energetically climbing a table/mountain with their chairs/rucksacks on their backs in *The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol*.

Such visual language enhances the 'generative capacity' of the theatrical sign, shifting rapidly through different denotations.⁹ But it also allows the actors to activate visual metaphors: when the company manipulates the chair like a puppet in *Mnemonic*, they enact the manipulation of the past by the present, and the appropriation and reification of the Iceman as a 'national monument'. And when, in one of the first scenes of *The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol*, the actors lay across the stage to form the furrows of earth that Lucie's father

was ploughing, the image conveyed the organic ties binding this isolated peasant community to the earth.

This semiotic versatility is also to be found in *The Master and Margarita*: on a bare stage, a desk, two beds, a dozen chairs, an opaque screen, and a glass booth are used to recreate the many different locations of the novel. The company use the same simple set of sticks to form Margarita's windowsill or Christ's cross, and chairs held over their heads to figure the olive grove where Judas will be murdered.

The minimalistic use of props contrasts with the wealth of images framing the stage: projected directly on to the walls of the Palais des Papes, a satellite map of Moscow allows us to situate each successive episode of the novel; the hills of Jerusalem frame the encounter between Pontius Pilate and Yeshua; a gigantic portrait of Stalin hangs behind the management committee meeting of the writers' club Massolit; and when Woland shows Margarita his terrifyingly accurate globe, images of the Iraq war appear on the wall. Onstage cameras produce magnified images of the actors, and clever tricks are played with projections on to the windows of the main wall behind the stage, in which Margarita and Satan occasionally appear watching the action from above.

Amid this profusion of ingenious effects, moments of pure physical creativity stand out as traces of the company's former economy of means. One of the most striking images is produced when the Master succumbs to paranoia and depression and burns his manuscript: the other actors first become black shadows closing in on him, and then enact the flames devouring the pages. This visual metaphor embodies his fears, but also suggests the political origins of his torment, inflicted upon him by the repressive context of Soviet Moscow.

The energy of these isolated moments leads us to wonder to what extent technological sophistication risks crowding out the company's original physical inventiveness. Yet the show's most memorable projections are not those of other spaces or times but amplifications and distortions of the space before our eyes (through the combined efforts

of Es Devlin's design, Paul Anderson's lighting, Finn Ross's videos, and Luke Halls's 3D animations).

The bare, austere walls of the Palace first of all serve as the walls of Moscow's buildings during Margarita's flight. They are later projected on to themselves, creating a dizzying *trompe-l'oeil* effect of depth for Satan's ball, and finally acquire huge, growing cracks throughout the last scenes, ending with their collapse when the Master speaks to Pontius Pilate and frees him from his eternal suffering. Or the sweating face of Pilate, crippled by a migraine during his encounter with Jesus, and Margarita's legs as her lover watches for her arrival from his basement flat. And of course the equine chairs which carry them to freedom. The most striking effects are those which recreate the fantastical visions of Bulgakov's novel from the materiality of the theatrical space: its walls, props, actors – and briefly, when Woland addresses the audience of Moscow's Variety theatre, Complicite's own audience.

The company's fluid scenic language thus continues to transmogrify the basic ingredients of theatre – albeit with a little more technological help than formerly – and to emphasize parallels and equivalences, both between its different narratives and between these narratives and their theatrical frame.

Stepping through the Frame

The other recurring source of connections in the fragmented syntagm of the show is the use of metalepsis: 'frame-breaking' moments which transgress the boundaries between different levels of the diegesis (for instance the story and a story within the story) or between the diegesis and its extra-diegetic frame.¹⁰ These moments are characteristic of Complicite's prologues, which typically set up a frame for the main narrative and immediately transgress its boundaries.

In the version of *Shun-Kin* presented in Paris, the main actor Yoshi Oida began by describing, in French, the Japan of his childhood and his ritual visits to his father's tomb, before the rest of the company dressed him in nineteenth-century clothing and turned

him into the Japanese-speaking character Sasuke. In the first few minutes of *A Disappearing Number*, a mathematical lecture given by the character Ruth was interrupted by another character, Aninda, who addressed the audience and joked about the difficulties of mathematics and its reality effect in the fictional setting of a play.

Similarly, *Mnemonic* began with a lecture addressed to the audience, in the middle of which the speaker, Simon McBurney, became Virgil, a character listening to McBurney's lecture.

However, *The Master and Margarita* uses metalepsis throughout the show as a way of weaving together its different threads. These occurrences can be divided into four categories, the first of which results from the co-existence of different narrative levels on stage: the narrators or readers of the embedded stories thus share the stage with their characters, as for example when Pontius Pilate is seated *on* the desk Margarita is seated *at*, reading about him. These transgressions *in corpore* draw on the semantic versatility conferred on the props.

Whereas these moments can be seen as frame-enhancing rather than truly frame-breaking devices, a second type of metalepsis occurs when the narrators interact with their characters: when Bezdomny takes over the story from the Master, he both types out the account of the night of the execution and gets up from his desk to take Yeshua off his cross. This type of transgression is present in one of the final chapters of the novel, when the Master is allowed to see Pontius Pilate and grant him absolution, but Complicite make it systematic whenever Bezdomny is narrating the story.

In contrast to these intra-diegetic transgressions, a third type of metalepsis crosses the threshold between Bulgakov's narrative and his existence, when Bezdomny tells the audience about the censorship the author endured and his private readings of his manuscript. And a final type of boundary-crossing occurs when the production refers to the contemporary world, as for instance when Woland, addressing the audience directly, refers sarcastically to iPhones and

other wonders of modern technology, or indeed when Complicite's take on Bulgakov's diabolical cat enters the scene, as a Bunraku-style puppet spouting obscene jokes.

A monumental visual equivalent to these transgressions appears after Satan's ball, when Margarita's first plea for compassion causes a huge crack to appear in the (projected) wall behind the stage. The crack gradually widens in the final scenes, until Pontius Pilate and Yeshua walk away through the gap and the image of the whole wall finally collapses, leaving the company surrounded by constellations of dust.

This spectacular effect literalizes the idea of frame-breaking, and recalls a similar moment in *Mnemonic*, throughout which the body of the Neolithic man discovered in the Alps was represented by not one but two signifiers: on the one hand the puppet-chair, on the other the body of the character Virgil, whose fascination and growing empathy for this man was expressed by his taking his place on stage. Thus, in the final scene, the assembled cast watch the body of Virgil/the Iceman through the frame of his refrigeration unit in the museum in Bolzano. One by one, they slip under the frame and take his place, replacing each other in an accelerating, fluid movement just as, according to the stage directions, '*generation succeeds generation in a never-ending cycle*'.¹¹ The concluding moments of both shows thus draw our attention to their frames by negating them.

In *The Master and Margarita*, one of the effects of the resulting de-hierarchizing of narrative levels is to question the distinctions between reality and fiction. As Borges once pointed out, the idea of Hamlet watching *Hamlet* disturbs us because if characters may be spectators then we, readers, may in fact be the characters of someone else's fiction.¹² Stalin's Moscow is as much a narrative construction as Bulgakov's novel, and McBurney highlights the postmodernist potential of this 'pan-fictionality' by extending it to our contemporary world. However, the suggested parallels are not only paradoxical equivalences between the real and the fictional, but also metaphorical bridges between the narratives and their frames, highlighting the

similarities and allegorical potential of different sufferings and persecutions, including that of Bulgakov himself.

Such systematic bridging is not without its dangers, since its metaphorical flexibility can flatten its subject matter through too many equivalences and correspondences. This may be a somewhat self-defeating potential of Complicite's semiotic and narrative fluidity, which sometimes suggests so much interchangeability that it veils the specificity of our contemporary position towards the past.¹³

This is one extreme of their aesthetics, at which equivalences and connections erase the fractures and displacements they explore. But this extreme is only approached by the ending of *Mnemonic* and by *The Master and Margarita*. Most of their work has moved along a shifting scale, constantly redefining the balance between the framing and frame-breaking elements of their devising – a balance which determines whether metalepsis emphasizes temporal disjointedness, or a sense of continuity in which distinctions between frame and content no longer hold.

In his review of the version presented at the Barbican (four months before it came to Avignon), Michael Billington described Complicite's *Master and Margarita* as 'a production which suggests Bulgakov's novel is a metaphor for a universe made up of unreliable narrators'.¹⁴ Perhaps it would be more accurate to call it a universe in which the distinction between reliable and unreliable narration no longer holds, since there is nothing beyond narrative, no lasting distinction between stories and their frames. Complicite's work continues to be unashamedly dramatic and absorbed by the act of storytelling. Increasingly, however, it focuses on

the weaving together of narrative threads through verbal and visual parallelisms, supported by an inventive use of film, animation, and projection, rather than the physical metaphors of their early days.

Notes and References

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7. For a more detailed study of Complicite's use of science, see Liliane Campos, 'Searching for Resonance: Scientific Patterns in Complicite's *Mnemonic* and *A Disappearing Number*', *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, XXX, No. 4 (2007), p. 326–34; *Sciences en scène dans le théâtre britannique contemporain* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012), p. 219–44.
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10. See Gérard Genette, *Métalepse, de la figure à la fiction* (Paris: Seuil, 2004); Werner Wolf, 'Metalepsis as a Transgeneric and Transmedial Phenomenon: a Case Study of the Possibilities of "Exporting" Narratological Concepts', in J.-C. Meister, T. Kindt and W. Schernus, ed., *Narratology beyond Literary Criticism: Mediality, Disciplinarity* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), p. 83–108.
11. Complicite, *Mnemonic* (London: Methuen, 1999), p. 72.
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13. Janelle Reinelt makes a similar point about *Mnemonic*'s 'return to universalism' in 'Performing Europe: Identity Formation for a "New" Europe', *Theatre Journal*, LIII (2001), p. 365–87.
14. Michael Billington, 'The Master and Margarita', *The Guardian*, 22 March 2012.