Lida Krüger

'Stop Putting Words in my Mouth!': Undermining the Binary between the Actual and the Fictional

The distinction between fictionality and actuality takes on a special significance in the theatre, which contains two frames simultaneously: a fictional and an actual. Although the presence of these frames is integral to performance, the demarcation between them often becomes blurred. Both Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing* (1982) and Sam Holcroft's *Edgar and Annabel* (2011) problematize the relationship between an actor and the character that he or she portrays. While Stoppard's characters sometimes indulge in fictional portrayals, Holcroft's embody additional characters out of a sense of duty and commitment to a political cause. Although the stakes of keeping the illusion in place are seemingly much higher in Holcroft's play, both suggest that the blurring of the line between the actual and the fictional is not only inevitable, but also potentially dangerous. Lida Krüger is a senior lecturer in English Studies at the University of South Africa, Pretoria. Her current research interests include fictionality in theatre, the position of the audience in performance, and theatre archiving.

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THE CONCEPT of fictionality is a popular theme in postmodern literature and especially theatre, mainly due to theatre's unique paradox of being simultaneously 'real', or actual, and 'not real', or fictional.[1] Not surprisingly, various playwrights from Harold Pinter to Patrick Marber have investigated the question of 'How can we know what is real?', not only within the realm of everyday life, but also with regard to the interaction of the actual and the fictional on stage. Due to this paradox in the theatre, any thematic allusions to fictionality are automatically complicated when staged. Theatre entails a situation where live actors (actual people) pretend to be characters (fictional people) in front of a present audience. The significance of plays in which the characters need to distinguish what is real from what is fake therefore extends beyond the confines of the stage, as members of the audience are forced to make this distinction for themselves.

Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing* (1982) and Sam Holcroft's *Edgar and Annabel* (2011) present the boundary between that which is actual and that which is fictional as fluid.[2] The frames of the actual and the fictional encroach on each other, as the plays suggest that they cannot be mutually exclusive.[3] This is achieved by the inclusion of more than one fictional frame in each play, encouraging the audience to scrutinize the interplay between these different frames while implying that this scrutiny could, and perhaps should, be applied to the interplay between the fictional and the actual in everyday life.

Ostension, Duplexity, and Metatheatre

Theatre communicates through ostension, that is, the act of directly demonstrating rather than describing a fictional world. This means that its process of signification is complex, or what Petr Bogatyrev calls the 'plurisignation' of theatre.[4] While meaning is created linearly in prose narrative, in theatre it is created through mime, gesture, costume, scenery, and dialogue. An audience member must take into account all of these signs when interpreting a play, in much the same

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way as when interpreting the actual world. Thus, as in the actual world, meaning in theatre is noticeably unstable, as argued by Christopher Bigsby, John McGrath, and Marvin Carlson.[5]

However, unlike the actual world, which is spontaneous and unpredictable, theatre is carefully rehearsed and controlled by the playwright, cast, and production team. Theatre thus contains two contradictory forces: a centripetal force, in which theatre makers assert control over a production, and a centrifugal force, where the very fact that theatre is live and communicates via multiple signifiers wrests control from the theatre makers.

Ostension, then, leads to what James Calderwood and Peter Eversmann refer to as the duplexity of theatre.[6] Because theatre is simultaneously produced and received, it contains two frames: that of the fictional and that of the actual. The actual frame contains actors, decor, and props, while the fictional frame contains characters in their environment. For Keir Elam, the demarcation between these two frames is also evident in the architecture of the performance space, since it is divided into the stage, which represents the fictional frame, and the auditorium, which represents the actual frame.[7] To this, Andrew Filmer adds the backstage space and the wings, which he describes as a liminal space, one where the actors transition between the actual and the fictional.[8] It is not only the audience members who need to make this distinction in their suspension of disbelief, but also the actors.[9]

This demarcation can, however, become blurred, and metalepsis-like confusion can happen easily on the stage. Sonja Klimek, for instance, notes that actors often make mistakes that they then need to cover up with improvisation, resulting in an audience unsure as to whether what they are seeing is intentional.[10] Whether or not a mistake in performance is hidden successfully depends on the nature of that mistake, since the way in which something is represented on stage can either confirm or contradict the representation. In other words, the actual frame can either aid or hinder the fictional frame.

Bert O. States argues that certain items retain a high degree of self-givenness on stage and cannot be imitated, including clocks, fire, animals, and children.[11] One could add the acts of kissing and eating to this list. Furthermore, such acts can elicit an actual bodily response from the audience, as Karen Finley's play *The Theory of Total Blame* demonstrates.[12] This play, a wry parody on the conventional homecoming narrative, shows a mother, Irene, preparing a meal for her family. However, the ritual becomes a source of disgust as Irene mixes random items she 'grabs from the refrigerator' into unappetising messes; she uses her hands to prepare these mixtures, and her body – as well as the stage area – becomes increasingly soiled.[13] Finley here makes use of the 'mechanisms of disgust' that her performance arouses in the audience to subvert ideas about the female body as 'sexually evocative signifier'.[14]

Relationship between Theatre and Life

Theatre thus provides the means for an audience – and actors – to experience actual reactions that coincide with the fictional frame. At the same time, the actors' physical reactions can contradict this fictional frame. Stage fright refers to the feeling of anxiety or nervousness typically experienced by performers immediately before and/or during a show, which often manifests as an increased heart rate, shaky and sweaty hands, blushing, nausea, a dry mouth, or a tingling feeling in the limbs. According to Stephen Aaron, stage fright is not merely an inconvenient side effect or occupational hazard, but an integral part of performance.[15] Performers have linked shows lacking in energy and tension to an absence of stage fright, and they often increase the sense of uncertainty by playing tricks on each other in order to test their degree of control and reassess their own creativity.[16]

Yet, this very real and bodily experience also demonstrates how theatre is removed from the actual world. While actual feelings of disgust often coincide with the fictional world, stage fright sets the actor apart from

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his or her character, since the character presumably does not experience these physical symptoms in any given play.[17] The corporeality of the theatre thus involves a confusion and blending of the actual and the fictional. However, on the basis of their resemblance to the actual world through ostension, events represented on stage are no more 'real' than, for example, events represented in prose fiction. James Hamilton argues that the ontological status of a signifier does not necessarily alter the ontological status of the performance.[18] A fictional room represented by brick and plaster is, after all, no more actual than one represented by plywood and paint. As a result, real objects and people behave as images on stage since they are necessarily fictional.[19] Theatre, therefore, simultaneously sustains and destroys the illusion of authenticity.

The precarious line between the actual and the fictional in the theatre means that it is, to a certain extent, always metatheatrical, which Daniel Jernigan defines simply as 'theatre that takes theatre as its subject'.[20] Thomas Adler adds to this that metatheatre forces the audience to recognize itself as an audience, while William B. Worthen defines metatheatre as 'plays that self-consciously comment on the process of theatre', and focus on 'the relationship between theatre and life'.[21]

A popular metatheatrical device is the play-within-a-play. Gerhard Fischer and Bernhard Greiner define this as 'a strategy for constructing play texts that contain a second or internal theatrical performance within the perimeter of their fictional reality, in which actors appear as actors who play an additional role'.[22] This second fictional world appears as one more ontological step removed from the actual world. The play-within-a-play grants the playwright the opportunity to explore the boundary between the fictional and the actual on the stage. As Caroline Schaeffer-Jones rightly notes, it highlights 'acts of watching and acting'.[23]

According to Austin Quigley, metatheatre can have different functions in different plays and is often used in postmodern drama deliberately to confuse the audience.[24] The self-referential nature of such work and the questioning of the audience's perception of the world makes it difficult to distinguish an outer play from a play-within-a-play – as is apparent in *The Real Thing*.[25]

Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing*

Tom Stoppard is known for his overt use of metatheatrical devices. Plays-within-plays often proliferate, confusing not only the characters in the play, but also the audience. Katherine Kelly states that intellectual doubt is a recurring theme in Stoppard's work, while Toby Zinman observes that there is often a problem-solving element to his plays.[26] Stoppard involves his audience in this process. As Kinereth Meyer explains, 'the interlacing of texts reaffirms for the audience the validity of literature within human experience'.[27] The combination of a conservative, conventional form and a variety of metatheatrical and intertextual devices simultaneously resists and suggests a postmodern concern with what is 'real', or actual.

The Real Thing is arguably the play of Stoppard's that illustrates this concern in the most overt manner.[28] It is a distinctly metatheatrical play about infidelity, which asks questions not only about the authenticity of romantic relationships, but also about politics, theatre, and art in general. The plot concerns a playwright–actress couple, Henry and Annie, and their experience of infidelity. The audience is introduced to the couple when Henry is still married to a different actress, Charlotte, who stars in his play *House of Cards* opposite Max, Annie's first husband. By the end of Act One, Henry and Annie have divorced their spouses and married each other.

In Act Two, Annie has an affair with Billy, her fellow actor in John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, which she eventually ends, to return to Henry. Meanwhile, she is involved in the cause of Brodie, a political prisoner who is serving a sentence for vandalism. He writes a very poor play about his demonstration and subsequent incarceration, which Annie persuades Henry to rewrite. This rewritten version is filmed with Annie and Billy in the

lead roles of Mary and Brodie. So *The Real Thing* presents a juxtaposition of 'several love relationships, some more real than others, both theatrically and emotionally'.[29]

Stoppard alerts the audience to the theme of 'real versus fake' from the very start of the play. The first scene is from Henry's play *House of Cards*, although this is not made clear until halfway through Scene Two. Max and Charlotte perform the roles of 'Max' and 'Charlotte', respectively.[30] In the scene, 'Max' debates the value of a digital watch as opposed to an analogue watch, which, allegedly, is more authentic, while he points out the difference between real Rembrandt paintings and their reproduction on place-mats: 'Rembrandt place mats! I wonder who's got the originals.'[31] In Scene Two, Max makes a dip that is meant to be served in a hollowed out pineapple, but subsitutes it cheekily for a pineapple tin. Later, Henry confesses that, despite his reputation as an intellectual playwright, he prefers pop music to classical music, explaining that 'it *moves* [him], the way people are supposed to be moved by *real* music'.[32]

A Sense of Shadowing

To Hersh Zeifman, these 'side acts' support the main theme of the play, which is 'the *ersatz*, the fake, the artificial, versus "the real thing"'.[33] Throughout the play, 'real' music is set against pop music, the 'real' self against masks, 'real' political commitment against opportunism, and 'real' writing against commercial writing. Yet, it is important to note that not only are these 'side acts' in some way fake or artificial. Stoppard also shows clearly that the outer play, which represents the actual world, or the 'real' within the context of the play, is also fictional through various metatheatrical jokes. When Charlotte, for example, complains in Scene Two that the characters in Henry's plays conveniently do not have children, Max explains that many 'real' couples do not have children, ironically using himself and Annie as an example.

While it is easy to draw the line between the real and fake when confronted with the 'side acts', it is more difficult to distinguish the characters' 'real' selves from the roles that they play, since they mimic – and act as doubles for – each other. Hence, 'Charlotte' is a version of Charlotte, and vice versa. She complains in Scene Two that people assume that *House of Cards* is based on the lives of her and Henry, which means that 'Max' is also a version of Henry.

In Scene Seven, Charlotte tells Henry that she has had to end a relationship with an architect because he was too jealous and searched through her belongings to prove her infidelity, thus mirroring 'Max's' behaviour in *House of Cards*. Despite clear differences between Max and 'Max', the former's initial nonchalant reaction to Annie's adultery in Scene Three similarly mirrors that of his character in Henry's play.[34] Being familiar with *House of Cards*, Max deliberately mimicks the character he portrays in order to stay in control of his emotions, although he eventually breaks down in tears.

In Scene Two, Annie is described as '*very much like the woman whom Charlotte has ceased to be*', while Henry later states: 'I keep marrying people who suddenly lose a wheel', referring to both Charlotte's and Annie's infidelities.[35] A shadow of Charlotte consequently clings to Annie. This sense of shadowing is emphasized in Scene Four, where the actions of the characters mimic closely those of Scene Two: Annie enters in Henry's robe, which is too big for her, just as Charlotte did earlier. Billy is also a version of Brodie – even sharing his first name – and is responsible for the image that the audience forms of the latter, until the 'real' Brodie shatters it in the final scene. Billy furthermore uses his shadows of 'Brodie' and 'Giovanni' deliberately to flirt with Annie in Scene Six, tempting Annie to respond as 'Mary' or 'Annabella' respectively.[36] The characters thus appear as versions of one another throughout the play, where life imitates art – and sometimes also life – within the fictional contexts presented in *The Real Thing*.

The blurring between the characters and the characters that they represent or mimic is especially evident in Scene Eight, where Stoppard focuses on the liminal space between the outer play and the play-within-

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the-play during a rehearsal of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*. The scene ends as follows:

ANNIE O, you're wanton!
Tell on't you're best; do.
BILLY Thou wilt chide me, then.
Kiss me: –
He kisses her lightly.
ANNIE (*quietly*) Billy . . .
She returns the kiss in earnest.[37]

By using Billy's real name instead of that of his character 'Giovanni' Annie indicates that their affair has evolved from a simulated, suggested, and fictional romance into a 'real' physical one, albeit offstage. Mimicry, in the Baudrillardian sense of the word, is thus so deeply ingrained in the lives of these characters that it forces the audience to play an active role in distinguishing the different versions.[38]

The structure of the play also problematizes the distinction between what is fictional and what is actual. By interspersing scenes from the characters' lives with scenes from plays they encounter in their work in the theatre, Stoppard ensures that *The Real Thing* functions on several fictional levels. Zinman notes that the structure of the play sets up a problem for the audience to solve, since they need to decide whether or not a scene is part of the outer narrative or a play-within-the-play. The set, he argues, is an integral part of the puzzle, since the designs of various scenes intentionally mimic each other.[39] The stage directions at the beginning of Scene Three, for example, state: '*The disposition of furniture and doors makes the scene immediately reminiscent of the beginning of Scene One.*'[40] This is also true of the following scene, which duplicates the staging of Scene Two. The similarity between the sets of the outer play and some of the plays-within-the-play thus contributes to the confusion between the different fictional levels in the play.

However, the line between the outer play and the plays-within-the-play is also blurred by the architecture of the larger performance space. The proscenium stage of the Strand Theatre in London, where *The Real Thing* opened in November 1982, offered audiences little physical demarcation between the different fictional levels or frames within the play.[41] Indeed, the only demarcation of this kind was the proscenium arch itself, which traditionally separates the audience, as representatives of the actual world, from the stage, as the site of the fictional world. However, in the case of *The Real Thing*, the audience represents both the actual audience of Stoppard's play and the fictional audience of Henry's *House of Cards*. It is left for the audience members to figure out for themselves whether the stage and the auditorium represent a fictional or an actual theatre. Hence, it is only halfway through the second scene that the audience begins to realize that Scene One was a play-within-the-play and not part of the outer narrative.

How 'Realistic' is Henry's 'House of Cards'?

Critics are divided as to whether or not the outer play is more 'convincing', and so more 'authentic', than *House of Cards*.[42] Susan Rusinko argues that Henry's play is a parody of English realism and reminiscent of confrontations of infidelity in such plays as Pinter's *Betrayal*.[43] For Zeifman, *House of Cards* is unmistakably Stoppard in its allusiveness and pattern, comic devices, witty puns, elegant jokes, and comic misunderstandings.[44] In other words, Henry, like Stoppard, is witty, intellectual, and clever. For these reasons, Erinç Özdemir regards *House of Cards* as more realistic than *The Real Thing*.[45] She argues that, although the second scene is supposedly more 'real' within the context of the play, it seems more artificial than the first, since the latter is 'artistically superior' on the grounds of its dialogue.[46] Through this juxtaposition of the play-within-the-play and the outer play, the audience is led into a 'Jamesian paradox' by preferring the false to the real.

Yet the opposing interpretation of *House of Cards* as unrealistic and very obviously artificial is more convincing. For Stephen Hu, as for Charlotte, 'Max's' reaction to his wife's perceived adultery is nonchalant and 'unrealistically devoid of emotion'.[47] Richard Andretta also agrees with Charlotte when

she critiques *House of Cards* for failing to capture the authenticity and spontaneity of the actual world, describing 'Max's' words and actions as 'hardly credible'.[48] P. A. Smith aptly observes that the 'sparklingly artificial fluency' of the play's dialogue in the face of emotional disturbance may alert the audience to the possibility that this is a parody or play-within-the-play even before its metatheatricality is exposed in Scene Two.[49]

Intertextual References

Furthermore, the interplay between the play-within-the-play and the outer play is 'often combined with a parodic appropriation of other works or genres'.[50] These intertextual references foreground the process of writing, or dramatize 'the principle of iteration inherent in *mimesis*', since the play 'repeats literary history in repeating itself'.[51] *The Real Thing*, in consequence, becomes 'the mask that signals itself as a mask generating other masks'.[52]

The references in *The Real Thing* are numerous and drawn mostly from texts ranking high in the western canon: Keats's 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'; Strindberg's *Miss Julie*; Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*; Shakespeare's *Othello*; Noël Coward's *Private Lives*; and Henry James's 'The Real Thing'. Meyer notes that each reference serves to emphasize the main theme of Stoppard's play, which is the way in which words can be tied to human action.[53] *Miss Julie*, for instance, investigates the 'levels of discourse in language of sexual attraction', while *Othello* explores the 'role of language in the attractions and blindness of power', and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* connects the erotic and the political 'in the convoluted language of palace intrigue'.

As is the case with the comparisons between *The Real Thing* and *House of Cards*, the intertextual references create additional fictional texts against which one may compare the other levels of fictionality in the play. Neil Sammells regards these references as flattering 'the audience's belief that it can distinguish between "good stuff and rubbish" '.[54] In addition, he asserts that Stoppard uses such references as a shield to hide behind: if his own art does not measure up to Ford, Strindberg, and Shakespeare, he can argue that it was intended as irony. Sammells consequently interprets the various plays-within-the-play as showing a lack of confidence by the author in his own work.[55]

However, the plays-within-the-play serve a different function. Although the structural similarities between the 'real' and 'fictional' in *The Real Thing* appear to emphasize ironically 'the disparity in emotional truth between theatre and life', they cloud the distinction between the real and artificial rather than clarify it, as is clear in the scene between Billy and Annie discussed above.[56] Anthony Jenkins similarly identifies a blurring of the lines between the fictional and the actual in *The Real Thing*. 'In mirroring scene against scene,' he argues, 'Stoppard not only aims to point up the odd falsity of "real" life when compared with art's convincing fable; he also surveys a no man's land between the two, where genuine and pictured feeling coalesce'.[57] The problem that the audience has to solve, therefore, becomes more complex as the play progresses.

It is, however, important to keep in mind that while *The Real Thing* represents a situation where the fictional world (the plays-within-the-play) imitates the actual world (or outer play), and vice versa, it remains a play. The fictional thus imitates the fictional. Stoppard makes sure to drive this point home through his overtly contrived ending. In the final scene, Annie tells Henry that her affair with Billy is now a thing of the past and the couple's bond is thereby renewed. Just at that moment, Max phones Henry to tell him that he has become engaged to an actress, whose eyes met his 'across a crowded room'.[58] As Annie switches off all the lights except that coming from the bedroom, Henry absentmindedly switches on the radio, which plays The Monkees' 'I'm a Believer', and the curtain falls. The romantic storylines in the play are thus tied up neatly in a rather clichéd manner.

Leslie Thomson considers this ending to be 'theatrically self-referential' to the point that it 'verges on parody'.[59] The play delivers

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on the promise that was made through the various metatheatrical jokes. Despite the outer play's appearance of being one step closer to actuality than the plays-within-the-play, it has the same ontological status as the inner plays. Alhough the audience is acutely aware of the fictionality of *The Real Thing* through its various metatheatrical devices, its members are pulled back into the fictional world(s) of the play as they share the characters' inability to navigate through its various frames.

Sam Holcroft's *Edgar and Annabel*

While *The Real Thing* portrays a world where characters play fictional roles as part of their occupation, *Edgar and Annabel* shows characters performing a scene of suburban domestic mediocrity as a cover for subversion.[60] Sam Holcroft has earned a reputation among critics as a playwright who is concerned with the truth. According to Natasha Tripney, she 'is a playwright with an interest in the lies that people tell each other and themselves'. *Edgar and Annabel* 'makes its audience think about the scripted nature of reality, about the roles people play and the ease in which life descends into routine and habit'.[61] However, as in *The Real Thing*, the line between the characters and the additional roles that they portray becomes unclear, pointing to a blurring between theatre and real life 'as characters struggle to maintain characters'.[62]

Edgar and Annabel also confuses the audience with its first scene. The play opens as Marianne is preparing dinner in a kitchen, described in the stage directions as showing '*clear signs of affluence*'.[63] When Nick enters with a clichéd 'Hi, honey, I'm home', Marianne stops short and the audience knows that something is wrong.[64] The characters then read their dialogue off scripts and cover any mistakes as if they are performing a play.

Scene Two, set in a meeting place, reveals that Nick and Marianne are pretending to be Edgar and Annabel, a complacent, average middle-class couple who are passionate about recycling. Edgar and Annabel's home is used by a rebel organization for underground activities in an Orwellian milieu, where the government has installed listening devices in all homes. Nick and Marianne communicate through set scripts provided by Miller, their line-manager in the organization; and it becomes clear that Edgar was previously played by Carl, explaining Marianne's surprise when Nick walks through the door at the beginning of the first scene. Marianne is unhappy about this replacement and Miller has to adapt their scripts from the dialogue of a happily married couple to that of a couple with marital problems to compensate for their lack of chemistry and rapport.

Over the course of the play, which includes a dinner party with entertainment from a karaoke machine and banal small talk covering up the building of a bomb, Nick and Marianne fall in love but are unable to express their feelings because they are now bound to the scripts of a bickering couple. They also have to hold up the pretence of complacency as they hear over the news that their comrades have been apprehended and killed in failed rebel operations. Nick cracks under this pressure and is replaced by Anthony. It is not long before Marianne is also replaced by Claire.

Although not directly inspired by the News International phone-hacking and police pay-off scandals, the revelations in early July 2011 made Holcroft's examination of a 'police state in crisis' all the more telling.[65] Tripney thus saw the play as a 'dystopian thriller', while Griselda Murray Brown described its celebration of 'the absurdity of surveillance culture'.[66]

However, the play is also 'about the extent to which our own lives, loves, and assumptions are scripted by our circumstances', presenting the 'comedic pitfalls of faking a relationship'.[67] *Edgar and Annabel* investigates the extent to which artifice and fictionality permeate human existence on an institutionalized level (dictated by government), as well as an inter-personal level (dictated by the characters themselves).

Unlike the characters in *The Real Thing*, Nick and Marianne have to perform their roles for reasons extending beyond the confines of the theatre. The conviction with which they portray their characters is a matter of life and

Nick (Trystan Gravelle) and Marianne (Kirsty Bushell) sing karaoke to divert attention from Marc (Tom Basden) and Tara (Karina Fernandez), who are assembllng a bomb. From the first production of *Edgar and Annabel* at the National Theatre, London, in July 2011. Photo: Johan Persson.

death. Yet, *Edgar and Annabel* has a similar structure to Stoppard's play, consisting of an outer narrative, where the characters meet with Miller, and a play-within-the-play, where they pretend to be Edgar and Annabel. Of course, this play-within-the-play is not meant to be theatrical within the fictional world of the play; the characters perform as undercover agents rather than as actors, as Marianne confirms when she tells Miller 'I'm not an actor, I do the best I can.'[68] However, the performance of these additional roles is still clearly metatheatrical. Matt Trueman describes the audience's experience of the opening scene as follows:

> It makes next to no sense, yet it's oddly captivating. It feels like a puzzle with answers. The scripts and the awkwardness, the consciousness with which the actors perform means that you're not entirely sure how to watch. What's fiction, what's staging?[69]

From the outset, the play makes the audience intensely aware of the processes of interpretation, that is, of watching a play and distinguishing the levels of fictionality in it.

Levels of Fictionality

Brian Logan defines the play accordingly as 'not just a drama of political resistance set in some parallel British dystopia, but also a cute send-up of theatre acting and writing' in that it 'explores the complex relationship undercover agents, and actors, have with their allotted roles'.[70] This relationship between performer and role is shown to be complex and potentially problematic, despite the attempts by characters to neatly separate the spheres of the actual and the fictional within the play.

While the stage design of *The Real Thing* deliberately blurred the line between the spaces of the outer play and the plays-within-the-play, these were clearly demarcated in *Edgar and Annabel*. For the play's first production at the National Theatre's

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Paint Frame, the audience was seated on a makeshift rostrum, while the performance space consisted of a raised box set (including a ceiling), containing Edgar and Annabel's pristine, brilliantly lit kitchen, and a dark alley represented by the dimly lit empty space between the box set and the audience.

There was thus a very definite distinction between the box set, where the play-within-the-play is staged, and the space where the outer play is staged. Soutra Gilmour's set and costume design for the production emphasized the artifice of Edgar and Annabel's house in an ironic, tongue-in-cheek manner. Within the fictional world of the outer play, it is of paramount importance that Edgar and Annabel, and their home, seem authentic and yet, in its attempt to seem as typical as possible, the artifice is glaringly obvious to the audience.

The artful way in which the kitchen was designed and decorated reminds one of a magazine display rather than a kitchen in a real home. The characters' costumes – a plain, A-line skirt and cardigan in pastel colours for her and a pair of chinos and a sweater for him – signify average, middle-class taste to the point of parody. This effect is intensified when Tara and Marc – Edgar and Annabel's guests for their dinner party – enter wearing exactly the same clothes only in a different (pastel) colour palette.

Yet, despite the fact that Edgar and Annabel's kitchen is clearly marked as constructed, the line between the actual and the fictional also blurs in this play, as the outer play permeates the play-within-the-play. Within the fictional world of *Edgar and Annabel*, the fictional contradicts the actual more often than not. In the opening scene, for example, Nick, as Edgar, 'talks about their salmon supper as [Marianne, as Annabel] produces a chicken from the oven'.[71] David Benedict notes that such discrepancies might elicit laughter from the audience and serve as comic relief, but the dislocation between the characters and their life of pretence becomes 'increasingly disturbing' as 'emotional complications' threaten to destroy the illusion that the organization has spent years to build.[72]

In this context, 'sticking to the script is a matter of life and death'.[73] When, for example, Marianne tells Nick that six of their close friends and comrades have been arrested and two of them shot and killed, the characters have to pretend to support the government, saying the opposite of what they supposedly feel. Here, Nick reaches a point where the incongruity between himself and his role of Edgar becomes unbearable:

NICK I hope they lock them up and throw away the key.

Nick lowers his script in disgust; Marianne implores him to continue.

The man who shot those terrorists; I'd like to shake his hand.

MARIANNE I'd like to shake it too.

NICK I'd like to thank him. All of them. I'd like to thank them all for the great job they are doing in protecting our country. If anything, this is a timely reminder that we are at war with the kinds of people who will use any means to destroy our nation's love of . . . (*Cannot bring himself to say the words.*) Our nation's love of . . . No.

Nick throws down his script in disgust.

MARIANNE Edgar?

NICK No.

MARIANNE Edgar, finish what you were saying?

NICK No.

MARIANNE (*pressing the script on him*) Finish what you were saying: 'Our nation's love –

NICK Stop it.

MARIANNE – of freedom and democracy.'

NICK Stop it. STOP PUTTING WORDS IN MY MOUTH!

Nick storms from the room.[74]

'The Game is Dangerous'

This scene shows the consequence of the discrepancy between Nick and the character that he has to perform. Although he does not endorse the view that he is expressing, and is only portraying a character, Nick still cannot bring himself to say the words out loud. He is not seen again after this scene and is replaced by Anthony. Holcroft here points to a potentially disturbing aspect of performance and the perilous consequences of blurring the lines between the actual and the fictional. She thus echoes Solange's declar-

ation that 'the game is dangerous' in Jean Genet's *The Maids*.[75]

In the next scene Marianne also cracks under the pressure of performance. When Anthony walks through the door, Marianne is visibly distraught and, like Nick in the previous scene, refuses to say the words that have been scripted for her. While it has been established that Annabel is passionate about recycling – a convenient cause for the paradoxically 'concerned (but powerless)' middle class – Marianne now says: 'Recycling is bullshit.'[76] When she continues by saying, 'I think recycling is one of the most wasteful fucking – ' Anthony manages to restrain her and put a hand over her mouth to keep her from finishing her sentence and exposing them.[77] Marianne then *'reaches for a kitchen knife from the sink and, wrapping her fist around it, pulls it clean through her skin'*.[78] Anthony pretends that the gushing wound is a mere nick, and eventually calms Marianne down and persuades her to continue her performance as Annabel.

It is significant that Marianne cuts herself in an attempt to break with her character. Although blood and bleeding can be represented convincingly on stage, it poses a challenge to the production team. Often, fictional incidents happen off-stage, as is the case when Max cuts his finger in Scene Two of *The Real Thing*. At the same time, a performance could be abandoned if an actor accidentally cuts him or herself, since it would be difficult to hide or incorporate the bleeding, or it could incapacitate the actor altogether. As soon as skin is broken, even in performance, the fictional becomes actual. Therefore, Marianne's act of cutting herself marks a definite if temporary attempt to destroy her character.

In the next scene, Marianne voices her frustration to Miller, albeit in an attempt to defend her own competence in portraying her character:

> How can you question me? I've been doing this since the beginning. And what, just because I slip with a knife, suddenly I'm some deranged woman, some kind of mental patient? Suddenly I'm a crazy bitch? I don't think so. I know what I'm doing, thank you. I'm giving everything I've got, every day, every night of my life, until, until I don't know where she ends and I begin. And that's fine, fucking fine, because, because I'm a fucking professional![79]

Not surprisingly, this is the last time that the audience sees Marianne. Like Nick, she is visibly distressed by the character that she has to portray. As Trueman notes, Nick and Marianne discover that if you 'pretend for long enough . . . the pretence becomes real. But step out of that act, even for a second, and you puncture it irrevocably'.[80] So Marianne's speech shows not only how the actual encroaches on the fictional, but also how the fictional has infiltrated the actual, as she can no longer distinguish between herself and Annabel. Holcroft rejuvenates the theme of the actual versus the fictional in performance by showing that, no matter how distinct the spheres of actual and fictional seem to be, they still necessarily permeate each other. By raising the stakes of breaking the illusion to a matter of life and death, she intensifies the complex, and possibly problematic, relationship between actor and character.

Conclusion

The Real Thing and *Edgar and Annabel* form an important addition to postmodern debates about authenticity and the implications of performance. They encourage the audience to question reality through metatheatrical jokes, while the plays-within-the-play cast doubt over any certainty that the audience might have. The demarcation between the actual and the fictional is thus shown to be fluid.

While Stoppard's plays-within-the-play suggest so in a playful way by emphasizing the fictionality of the outer play, Holcroft exposes the dangers posed by the fluidity of this line. Yet, the significance of both plays goes beyond the confines of the theatre, and invites audiences to challenge the apparently fixed binary of fictionality and actuality in everyday life. After all, if the characters on the stage not only struggle in distinguishing the actual from the fictional, but also become trapped in the fictional worlds they represent, what guarantee does the audience have

that the two frames will remain safely demarcated in their own lives?

Notes and References

1. When distinguishing between fictional levels, worlds, or frames in film, the terms 'actual' and 'fictional' can be employed to distinguish between real-life and artistic creation. See André Crous, '*Who Framed Roger Rabbit* en die moontlikheid van outentieke wêrelde in fiksie', *Litnet Akademies*, VIII, No. 3 (2011), p. 283. These terms are also useful to distinguish between the different ontological levels in theatre, since they avoid the pitfalls surrounding the word 'real'.

2. Tom Stoppard, *The Real Thing* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983); Sam Holcroft, *Edgar and Annabel*, in *Double Feature*, Vol. I (London: Nick Hern, 2011), p. 1–59.

3. 'Frames' is used here in Goffman's sense of the word. See Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: an Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 10.

4. Petr Bogatyrev, 'Semiotics in the Folk Theatre', in Ladislav Matejka and Irvin R. Titunik, ed., *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1976), p. 42.

5. C. W. E. Bigsby, 'Metatheatre', *Revue Française D'etudes Américaines*, No. 10 (1980), p. 96 ; John McGrath, *A Good Night Out* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 5; Marvin Carlson, 'Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance', in Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. McConachie, ed., *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance* (University of Iowa Press, 1989), p. 86.

6. James L. Calderwood, *Shakespearean Metadrama: the Argument of Plays in 'Titus Andronicus', 'Love's Labour's Lost', 'Romeo and Juliet', 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', and 'Richard II'* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 12; Peter Eversmann, 'The Experience of the Theatrical Event', in Vicky Ann Cremona, Peter Eversmann, Hans Van Maanen, Willmar Sauter, and John Tulloch, ed., *Theatrical Events: Borders, Dynamics, Frames* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p. 141.

7. Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 50.

8. Andrew Filmer, 'Minding the Gap: the Performer in the Wings', *New Theatre Quarterly*, XXIV, No. 2 (May 2008), p. 160.

9. Without discussing theories of acting in superfluous detail, it would be relevant to mention that most actors find a balance between two extremes of complete identification with a character and complete distance from it, regardless of his or her approach. According to Paul Hernandi, 'The kind of balance he [or she] strikes will be appropriate to his [or her] individual talent and prevailing literary and theatrical tradition of his [or her] day.' Thus, not even the stage necessarily represents a purely fictional space. See Paul Hernandi, 'The Actor's Face as the Author's Mask: On the Paradox of Brechtian Staging', in Joseph P. Strelka, ed., *Literary Criticism and Psychology* (London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), p. 126.

10. Sonja Klimek, 'Metalepsis: And its (Anti-) Illusionist Effect in the Arts, Media, and Role-Playing Games', in Werner Wolf, ed., *Metareference across Media: Theory and Case Studies* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p. 177.

11. Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 377–8.

12. Karen Finley, *The Theory of Total Blame*, in Michael Feingold, ed., *Grove New American Theater* (New York: Grove, 1993), p. 217–57.

13. Lynda Hart, 'Motherhood According to Karen Finley, in *The Theory of Total Blame*', in Carol Martin, ed., *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance: On and Beyond the Stage* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 114.

14. Deborah R. Geis, 'Wordscapes of the Body: Performative Language as *Gestus* in Maria Irene Fornes's Play' in Helene Keyssar, ed., *Feminist Theatre and Theory* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996), p. 168.

15. Stephen Aaron, *Stage Fright: Its Role in Acting* (University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. ix.

16. Andrew Filmer, 'Minding the Gap: the Performer in the Wings', p. 164.

17. When returning home drunk from a party in the opening scene of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, for example, it is highly unlikely that the characters George and Martha suffer from the dry mouth, sweaty palms, or tingling in the limbs that may afflict the actors playing them.

18. James R. Hamilton, '"Illusion" and the Distrust of Theater', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XLI, No. 1 (Autumn 1982), p. 41.

19. Eli Rozik, 'The Corporeality of the Actor's Body: the Boundaries of Theatre and the Limitations of Semiotic Methodology', *Theatre Research International*, XXIV, No. 2 (Summer 1999), p. 198–211, at p. 202.

20. Daniel Jernigan, '*Serious Money* Becomes "Business by Other Means": Caryl Churchill's Metatheatrical Subject', *Comparative Drama*, XXXIX, Nos. 2–3 (Summer–Fall 2004), p. 310. See also Kerstin Schmidt, *The Theatre of Transformation: Postmodernism in American Drama* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), p. 31.

21. Thomas P. Adler, 'The Mirror as Stage Prop in Drama', *Comparative Drama*, XIV, No. 4 (Winter 1980–81), p. 355; William B. Worthen, *Modern Drama*, Vol. II (San Diego: Harcourt College, 1995), p. 1189.

22. Gerhard Fischer and Bernhard Greiner, 'The Play within the Play: Scholarly Perspectives', in Fischer and Greiner, ed., *The Play Within the Play: the Performance of Meta-theatre and Self-reflection* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), p. xi.

23. Caroline Sheaffer-Jones, 'Playing and Not Playing in Jean Genet's *The Balcony* and *The Blacks*', ibid., p. 47.

24. Austin Quigly, *The Modern Stage and Other Worlds* (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 268.

25. Richard Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1986), p. 47. See also Worthen, *Modern Drama*, p. 1189.

26. Katherine E. Kelly, 'Introduction: Tom Stoppard in Transformation', in Katherine E. Kelly, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 10; Toby Zinman, '*Travesties*, *Night and Day*, *The Real Thing*', ibid., p. 121.

27. Kinereth Meyer, '"It is Written": Tom Stoppard and the Drama of the Intertext', *Comparative Drama*, XXIII, No. 2 (Summer 1989), p. 106.

28. *The Real Thing* premiered at the Strand Theatre in London on 16 November 1982.

29. Leslie Thomson, 'The Subtext of *The Real Thing*: It's "All Right"', *Modern Drama*, XXX, No. 4 (Winter 1987), p. 535.

30. To distinguish between the characters in the outer play and the roles they play in the various plays-within-the play, the latter are put in inverted commas.

31. Stoppard, *The Real Thing*, p. 13.
32. Ibid., p. 25.
33. Hersh Zeifman, 'Comedy of Ambush: Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing*', *Modern Drama*, XXVI, No. 2 (Summer 1983), p. 141.
34. Max is described in the stage directions as '*nice, seldom assertive, conciliatory*', while 'Max' is described as not having '*to be physically impressive, but you wouldn't want him for an enemy*'. Stoppard, p. 15, 9.
35. Ibid., p. 15, 77.
36. Interestingly, the character of Mary is based on Annie, meaning that 'Mary' is a version of Annie, who is then represented by Annie, thus confusing the doubling of characters even further.
37. Stoppard, *The Real Thing*, p. 67–8.
38. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 2.
39. Zinman, '*Travesties* . . .', p. 121.
40. Stoppard, *The Real Thing*, p. 35.
41. The theatre was renamed the Novello Theatre in 2005. See Delfont Mackintosh Theatres, 'Novello Theatre', online at <www.novellotheatrelondon.info/#>.
42. Esslin discusses the levels of nuance needed in a performance to signal the difference between an actor portraying the role of an actor and an actor merely portraying a role. See Martin Esslin, 'Actors Acting Actors', *Modern Drama*, XXX, No. 1 (1987) p. 72–9.
43. Susan Rusinko, *Tom Stoppard* (Boston: Twayne, 1986), p. 136.
44. Zeifman, 'Comedy of Ambush: Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing*', p. 140.
45. Erinç Özdemir, 'Context and Perspective in Five Stoppard Plays: a Theatre of "Unreality"', *English Studies*, LXXXV, No. 5 (October 2004), p. 432.
46. Ibid., p. 433.
47. Stephen Hu, *Tom Stoppard's Stagecraft* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), p. 205.
48. Richard A. Andretta, *Tom Stoppard: an Analytical Study of his Plays* (New Delhi: Har-Anand, 1992), p. 323.
49. P. A. Smith, '"Oppositions Rather than Heroes": an Examination of Dialectical Principles in the Work of Tom Stoppard' (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Cape Town, 1987), p. 105.
50. Özdemir, 'Context and Perspective', p. 417.
51. Nicole Boireau, 'Tom Stoppard's Metadrama: the Haunting Repetition', in Nicole Boireau, ed., *Drama on Drama: Dimensions of Theatricality on the Contemporary British Stage* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 136.
52. Ibid., p. 142.
53. Meyer, '"It is Written": Tom Stoppard and the Drama of the Intertext', p. 114.
54. Neil Sammells, *Tom Stoppard: the Artist as Critic* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 139.
55. Ibid., p. 139–40.
56. Zeifman, 'Comedy of Ambush: Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing*', p. 147.
57. Anthony Jenkins, *The Theatre of Tom Stoppard* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 162.
58. Stoppard, *The Real Thing*, p. 83.
59. Thomson, 'The Subtext of *The Real Thing*: It's "All Right"', p. 547.
60. *Edgar and Annabel* premiered at the Paint Frame, a specially converted space at the National Theatre, on 18 July 2011. It was performed as part of the Double Feature season of plays commissioned from 'the most exciting voices in the UK theatre'. *Double Feature*, Vol. 1 (London: Nick Hern, 2011).
61. Natasha Tripney, 'Double Feature 1', *Exeunt Magazine*, 6 April 2011, online at <http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/double-feature-1/>.
62. 'Double Feature 1, National Theatre', *Everything Theatre*, 15 August 2011, online at <http://everything-theatre.co.uk/2011/08/double-feature-1-national-theatre.html>.
63. Holcroft, *Edgar and Annabel*, p. 3.
64. Ibid.
65. Katie Antoniou, 'Interview: the NT's Exciting New Double Feature Writers', *Run Riot*, 15 August 2011, online at <www.run-riot.com/articles/blogs/interview-nts-exciting-new-double-feature-writers>. Following a lengthy investigation by the *Guardian* newspaper, evidence emerged in June and July 2011 that journalists from the *News of the World* and other newspapers published by Rupert Murdoch's News International had hacked the mobile phones of various figures in the public eye, including members of the British royal family, the family of the murdered schoolgirl Millie Dowling, and victims of the 7/7 London bombings.
66. Tripney, 'Double Feature 1'; Griselda Murray Brown, 'Double Feature, National Theatre (Paintframe), London', *Financial Times*, 7 August 2011, online at <www.ft.com/cms/s/2/09105018-bf5a-11e0-898c-00144feabdco.html>.
67. Caroline McGinn, 'Edgar & Annabel/The Swan', *Timeout London*, 8 August 2011, online at <www.timeout.com/london/theatre/edgar-annabel-the-swan>; Maria Howard, '*Double Feature 1* in the Paintframe', online at <www.double-feature.co.uk/entrypassdoublefeature1>.
68. Holcroft, *Edgar and Annabel*, p. 13.
69. Matt Trueman, 'Ambition at the Double', *Culture Wars*, 15 August 2011, online at <www.culturewars.org.uk/index.php/site/article/ambition_at_the_double/>.
70. Brian Logan, *The Guardian*, 4 August 2011, online at <www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2011/aug/04/double-feature-1-review>.
71. Trueman, 'Ambition at the Double'.
72. David Benedict, 'Double Feature: Edgar & Annabel/The Swan, Nightwatchman/There is a War, National Theatre', *Arts Desk*, 5 August 2011, online at <www.theartsdesk.com/theatre/double-feature-edgar-annabelthe-swan-nightwatchmanthere-war-national-theatre>.
73. Trueman, 'Ambition at the Double'.
74. Holcroft, *Edgar and Annabel*, p. 50–1.
75. Jean Genet, *The Maids*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, (London: Faber, 1953).
76. The phrase is borrowed from Radiohead, 'Fitter Happier', *OK Computer* (London: Parlophone, 1997); Holcroft, *Edgar and Annabel*, p. 52.
77. Holcroft, *Edgar and Annabel*, p. 53.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid., p. 58.
80. Trueman, 'Ambition at the Double'.