Abstract and Keywords

Abstract In successive single-set productions of Coriolanus, Julius Caesar, and Antony and Cleopatra, Ivo van Hove’s Roman Tragedies transforms the stage into a high-tech version of Shakespeare’s Globe, mimicking how global media stage political debates and generate the simulacrum of war and social conflict. Mixing live actors with video projections displayed on monitors spaced on and above the stage, van Hove encourages spectators to move from one viewing space to another, to order drinks, check email, or tweet on desktop computers. Extending Shakespeare’s ‘all the world’s a stage’ conceit to a world connected by ‘clouds’ of information transported on viewless wings and deposited in airy drop boxes, van Hove’s stage is everywhere and nowhere at once. But in replicating the aesthetic design of global media, while suppressing the populist components of Coriolanus and Julius Caesar, van Hove arguably extends only the illusion of emancipation to spectators ‘immersed’ in competing demands on their attention.

Keywords: Key terms, Ivo van Hove, Roman Tragedies, ‘immersed’ spectators, audience emancipation, live actors, video projections, global media, populism
Mediatizing Shakespeare

Computer-generated and live-feed projections on both large screens and smaller video monitors have become ubiquitous in stage productions around the world; they have even begun to make their presence felt in otherwise standard-issue Shakespeare productions such as the recent touring Old Vic Richard III directed by Sam Mendes, featuring Kevin Spacey (2011/12). But Toneelgroep Amsterdam’s Roman Tragedies, which toured Avignon, London, Montreal, Quebec City, Vienna, and Zurich, among other venues, between 2007 and 2010 (and has since been revived and replayed at other sites, including the Brooklyn Academy of Music in November 2012, and Adelaide and Barcelona in 2014), probably constitutes the most thoroughly mediatized production of Shakespeare on record. Comprising performances of Coriolanus, Julius Caesar, and Antony and Cleopatra rescripted in Dutch, surtitled in the languages of their host theatres, and staged in succession over the course of nearly six hours by director Ivo van Hove, Roman Tragedies reproduces its stage actions in the form of multiple, variably sized and spaced screen projections. Liberally cutting the plays’ crowd and public street scenes while reducing scenes of military combat to deafening sonic and strobe-light displays, van Hove largely consigns dramatic content to the level of dialogue and debate of a reduced cast of actors and talking heads, leavened by the occasional violent confrontation, thereby mimicking the way our global media generate the simulacra of war and civil strife rather than faithfully reproducing the bloody thing itself.¹

At the same time, van Hove transforms the stage space into an upscale, high-tech conference hall or broadcast studio, fitted with sofas, coffee tables, chairs, computer stations, and snack bars, encouraging spectators to circulate from one space to another, order food and drinks, check their email, and watch the performance taking place around, in front of, or behind them on an assortment of flat-screen TVs. The set includes, for the benefit of the offstage audience, a large overhead screen often used for the enlarged close-up projections of live-feed relays of onstage actors, which also carries surtitled translations of Dutch-language dialogue; and a narrower banded screen primarily used to circulate editorial comments (selected audience commentary blogged from onstage computers, interpretative commentary conveyed by the director) and supplemental information on dramatic content (birth and death dates of Roman emperors, length of stage-life remaining for protagonists, e.g., ‘4 minutes until the death of Coriolanus’). Seventeen additional downstage and upstage monitors carry similar diegetic as well as non-diegetic content, ranging from (in the North American productions at least) clips of John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963 to recycled news-images of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and the philandering former US presidential candidate John Edwards, among others.

Van Hove’s decision to make the stage space itself replicate a CNN broadcast studio or upscale conference hall (where a meeting of the IMF or WTO might convene) effectively assumes that space’s standing as the microcosmic surrogate of the world at large,
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Shakespeare’s ‘all the world’s a stage’ conceit ceding to ‘all the world’s a studio’, with that studio’s placement in a specific geographic setting—London, Shanghai, Abu Dhabi, or New York—irrelevant to the global purview of its screened display (see Figure 16.1). Extrapolating Shakespeare’s globe conceit to a world connected by screens, cell phones, satellites and satellite dishes, ‘clouds’ of information transported on viewless wings and deposited in airy drop boxes, van Hove’s stage is everywhere and nowhere at once, trafficking on the uniform look and feel of the world’s cathedged centres of privilege and power. Van Hove’s staging, however, also embraces the language, casualness, and soundtrack of global popular culture, such that—through the agency of surtitles—we hear Coriolanus bend his ripe invectives against the tribunes and plebeians into even cruder formulations such as ‘rip out the tongue of the monster’ and Cleopatra threatening to ‘play football’ with a messenger’s eyes, and watch Antony and Cleopatra (both in the flesh and in screened displays) cavoit like overindulged Hollywood celebrities, while Bob Dylan’s ‘Times They Are A-Changin’ invites us into the proceedings and his later dead-ended ‘It’s Not Dark Yet’ escorts us out of them.

The historical and political specificity of Shakespeare is particularly challenged by the increasingly sophisticated technology deployed in this contemporary updating, prompting such questions as: How does the technology-driven thrust into contemporaneity alter or adjust the content of individual plays? Do, or can, the plays occupy overlapping physical or historical spaces at the same time? And, what do these alterations of time and physical space encourage or require of audiences in terms of their range of response? By not only inviting audiences to share the stage with his actors and their observations with each other, but also encouraging them to channel their experience of the plays through displaced projections, is van Hove encouraging the emancipation of the spectator or modelling and mirroring the contemporary subject’s passive entrancement by visual media? More to the point, does the invitation to the audience to occupy the stage, beginning approximately twenty minutes after the start of the production (with the proviso that the audience return to their seats an hour before its conclusion), effectively constitute a form of obligation, as conventionalized in its way as the obligation to sit in one’s assigned seat during most other theatrical productions? Indeed, does the accompanying proscription against any additional form of participation or intervention in the performance—which proceeds on the increasingly crowded stage as if the onstage audience were invisible—render the very idea of audience immersion implausible? What would an immersive audience experience look like in the first place?
These last questions are prompted by the growing vogue for immersive theatre experiences that has recently been generated by the seemingly endless run of Punchdrunk’s environmental performance piece/installation *Sleep No More*—a much more physically expansive but comparatively low-tech, ‘artisanal’ mash-up of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and both Daphne du Maurier’s and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*—in a former warehouse in Manhattan’s Chelsea district that the producers have renamed the McKittrick Hotel. (*Sleep No More* had its start in London in 2003, was reinvented and expanded for performance in a refurbished school in Brookline, Massachusetts in concert with Cambridge’s American Repertory Theater in 2009, and has since become institutionalized at its Manhattan site where it has been running non-stop since 7 March 2011.) The performers of *Sleep No More* are generally surrounded by mandatorily masked auditors who follow them from place to place, or flock to the few spaces in the hotel where dramatic actions or events are being staged, with the crucial exception of so-called ‘one-on-ones’ that occur when selected auditors are culled out by performers for private encounters, which more often than not are scripted and chaste than impromptu and ‘provocative’. There is nothing close to this in the decidedly regimented progress of Roman Tragedies whose blocking, sound, lighting, video, and surtitle cues are rigorously scripted, synched, and monitored. In this respect, audience immersion—absent the occasional awkward collision between actors and auditors, or movement of wayward auditors into proscribed space—is limited to the cohabitation of spaces adjacent to the actors’ own movements and interactions.

*Immersion* thus becomes a descriptor for a displaced form of conventional witnessing, whose passivity is countered only by the active choices made by the playgoer in deciding which part of the stage to inhabit (or not) at different moments of the production—and when to return to his or her assigned seat. This ‘activity’ is, in turn, mitigated by the strong possibility that the awkward positioning of playgoers on the stage (whether in standing or sitting positions) may make it impossible for them to see the live actors without the aid of the ubiquitous television monitors. Since the appeal of much contemporary theatrical experimentation turns upon the opportunity for the playgoer to maintain at least the illusion of a possible interaction with the performer, the distancing enforced by having to view actors through the medium of a TV monitor might be expected...
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to disappoint spectators who had hoped to play a role more active than that of a live theatre audience for the recording of a ‘live’ televised display. As Robert Shaughnessy has recently noted:

Interactive performance, particularly in its more media-savvy formats, may be the corollary of a blogging, texting and twittering culture in which everyone has to have their say and in which no-one can ever really be left alone; but it is born of the desire to restore to, to retrieve within, performance an experience of the immediate, of the authentic, that has within mainstream culture been lost. In conjunction with this runs the desire, at least in theory, to re-empower the spectator so that she is free, or at least freer, to interact with the work as she chooses, no longer its consumer but its co-creator. In practice, the rigorous and sometimes coercive stewarding, or policing, of the behavior of participants in immersive performances means that their freedom of manoeuvre can be quite severely restricted, their range of interactive possibilities relatively limited, and their freedoms more rhetorical than real.

Shaughnessy’s observation on restrictions on the audience’s ‘freedom of manoeuvre’ speaks directly to the conventions enforced on auditors of Roman Tragedies. Prior to the start of the production, spectators are formally apprised of their rights and privileges, which I prefer to construe as ad hoc conventions enforced upon them as de facto obligations, a selection of which includes:

You are free to sit on the stage or in the auditorium.
You are allowed to change your seat and move around throughout the performance.
The stage will remain open to the public up to an hour before the end of the performance, after which we request that everyone return to the audience.
You are encouraged to take pictures and tweet using the hashtag #RomanTragedies.

Just as initiates in the mysterious conventions of Sleep No More crave both the intimate contact hypothetically afforded by one-on-ones, and up-close witnessing of the performers’ more provocative displays—for example, Lady Macbeth taking a blood-cleansing bath—most auditors drawn to Roman Tragedies come expecting to move from their assigned seat at the first opportunity, and possibly even order drinks and check their email simply because they are invited to do so. (This, in any case, was my experience at the two productions I attended in Montreal and Brooklyn.) What onstage auditors discover, however, is that their path to engagement with the performers is, more often than not, blocked by duly delegated ‘minders’ and by spacing and seating designs that actually encourage (and often require) the mediation of the generously distributed TV monitors to establish clear sight lines. Indeed, audience members who opted to sit onstage in pursuit of immersion implicitly decided to watch or ‘monitor’ the ongoing play from the flat-screen displays (or ignore it entirely). As Christian Billing notes in his remarkably instructive review essay on a performance of Roman Tragedies at London’s Barbican Theatre:
most of those onstage watched the performance on television; if audience members left to go to the restrooms [...] more flat-screen televisions throughout the Barbican played the same images as those onstage and on the auditorium cinema screen. There was no escaping the version of events that the technicians, stage right in the video-editing suite, wanted audience members to see. (421)

The offstage audience, meanwhile, could choose to focus either on the live actors or on their considerably larger and often more compelling close-up projections, or to move between them while also casting their eyes on the surtitle translations and non-diegetic content projected on the smaller monitors, though, as Billing notes, ‘Even the most experienced professional theatergoers struggled to watch the actors in person, rather than on screen,’ which, he adds, ‘was precisely the point’ (421) (see Figure 16.2).

Given the number and variety of screens and the projected action, images, and verbal messages displayed on them, Roman Tragedies prompts audiences to adopt the distracted viewing habits that obtain at professional basketball and ice-hockey games where the live-action players have to compete for audience attention with their replications on large overhead screens and on smaller vending-station monitors. While auditors who keep or return to their seats may remain caught up in the multitasked challenge of parsing the full panoply of onstage bodies (of actors and fellow auditors alike), pre-recorded media footage, and live-feed relays, the competition for audience attention van Hove generates between his live actors and their projected images almost always resolves in favour of their projected images for auditors who choose to leave their seats and move onstage. This is especially the case when the actors choose to play directly beyond their auditors’ physical sight lines. The most obvious example of the onstage audience not seeing clearly a range of actions to which the offstage audience has more direct access occurs when Mark Antony ‘dramatically’ steps out from behind the speaker’s podium in Julius Caesar and casually seats himself on its front-facing side at the edge of the stage, thereby moving out of the sight lines of the onstage audience while facing the auditorium audience straight on. Van Hove further challenges his already multitasked audience by having Antony step out of the range of the fixed camera recording his funeral oration, in the process requiring a video technician to follow his every mood and movement, conveying both to the theatre audience and the imaginary homebound audience of crisis-stricken Romans a
sense of ‘liveness’ he could not convey had he allowed himself to remain a mere stationary talking head. Yet the ‘liveness’ he conveys is itself already a long-established convention of mediatized spontaneity—it’s what politicians often do to recuperate a sense of passion or sincerity during otherwise formal speeches or televised debates, and what countless sermonizers and pitchmen do to make themselves seem level with their flocks or customers. Van Hove, of course, knows this, as does (presumably) the media-savvy Mark Antony, who plays the crowd of playgoers (the only stand-ins here for the play’s evacuated crowd of plebeians) as cannily as he plots his moves inside the range of the video technician’s camera (see Figure 16.3).

With this turn, van Hove supplies a perfect counterpoint to Philip Auslander’s claim that ‘the depreciation of live presence’ in our culture ‘can only be compensated for by making the perceptual experience of the live as much as possible like that of the mediatized, even in cases where the live event provides its own brand of proximity’ (36). Auslander’s claim, in turn, suggests that, however positioned, both audiences, onstage or off, would more likely gravitate towards the mediated image than to its physical source in the body of the actor. This certainly seems to be the case when that image occupies the large screen that overhangs the stage, which more often than not features an outsized close-up shot of characters of the magnitude of Caius Martius, and occasionally even an image of the actor that is made while he is showing the offstage audience his back. The powerful appeal of the mediatized is no doubt unsurprising to anyone who lives in a world dominated by screens of every conceivable variety, but should prove of more serious concern to an institution like the theatre, whose long-prevailing claim to singularity is its traffic in live bodies, particularly now that so many theatrical performances have become mediatized. 3  

While encouraging, even enabling, the interpellation of his audience by visual transmissions, van Hove—as if in answer to Martin Harries’s query, ‘How might theatrical strategies modify the grip of mass cultural formations?’ (11)—characteristically encourages his actors to engage in the most visceral forms of physical and emotional performance, both in Roman Tragedies and most of his other theatre work. As in the long last movement of Antony and Cleopatra when the actor playing the guilty Enobarbus flees the theatre itself, and the monitors project his grief at betraying Antony from the vantage point of a live-feed camera on the street, van Hove often generates pointed competitions between the
unusual heat his actors bring both to their staged and screened displays of emotion and the supposed coolness of the visual media that seek to contain (and constrain) them. This becomes especially evident in van Hove’s staging of scenes of Caius Martius’ negotiations with the tribunes. In one instance, the stage is set up to feature a long conference table, with the principals arranged around it so that they all face the cameras that are (presumably) recording and transmitting the meeting to the Roman populace in a perfect simulacrum of a televisually-staged political talk show or debate. But the calculatedly formal set-up is a set-up in more ways than one, serving as the contrastive foil for an explosion of emotion that disrupts the established conventions of mass-mediated constraint. Indeed, the rage and violence with which the actor playing Caius Martius responds to the tribunes’ baiting was so spontaneously expressed at both performances I attended that it seemed very likely that one or more of the actors would spill off the stage and into the lap of the audience.

That van Hove’s actors seem equally ‘warm’ in both spaces (onstage and in their variably distributed images) may be said to demonstrate the capacity of the stage to master the very medium (namely, cinema or at least visual projection) by which it (and its audience) seems in imminent danger of being subsumed. Van Hove exploits to dramatic effect the doubleness, or doubled-ness, of the stage actor’s appearances in what amounts to simultaneously physical and cinematically enlarged close-up shot perspectives. The disproportionate size of the large-scale close-up projections of Coriolanus’ Volumnia and Caius Martius, in particular, bring the actor’s person and passion forward in such a manner that they seem direct projections of the actors’ minds and emotions. As such, they even approximate the now superannuated effect of traditional movie-theatre projection, whereby the image screened is made to seem the product of the audience’s imaginative or unconscious projections.

The intense connection between live actor and his or her outsized visual projection in Roman Tragedies, and the extent to which those doubled images compete for the audience’s attention, indicate the achievement of a level of productive ongoing engagement between the stage and what has more often than not been considered its unassimilable other: cinematic representation. In this respect, Roman Tragedies models a best-case instance of how the stage and the varied media of electronic reproduction may migrate from the more-or-less static side-by-side relationship termed ‘multimedia’ by Greg Giesekam, to the more actively integrated dialogic state he calls ‘intermedia’, ‘in which a significant amount of the actors’ performances appears on video, dialogue occurs between onstage and on-screen performers, and live relay regularly focuses attention on particular pieces of business or parts of a performer’s body’ (8). In multimedia productions, performances continue to be ‘built around fairly traditional understandings of the role of text and the creation of character’. By contrast, in intermedia, ‘more extensive interaction between the performers and various media reshapes notions of character and acting, where neither the live material nor the recorded material would
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make much sense without the other, and where often the interaction between the media
substantially modifies how the respective media conventionally function’ (8).

There will no doubt continue to be instances when multimedia and its related aesthetic of
adjacency or juxtaposition are all one will need or get from Shakespeare productions that
deploy visual projection. But as Roman Tragedies demonstrates, intermedia and its
enabling condition, ‘remediation’—the process by which emerging media both adapt and
are, in turn, (re)structured by the conventions of older media—represent a productive
path forward for art forms and formats which, in their most successful collaborations,
seem to be joined at the hip.

The Politics of the Spectacle

That said, I have several misgivings regarding van Hove’s conceptualization of the three
plays that are channelled and embedded in Roman Tragedies, which is underwritten by
the ‘house-style’ claim made in the Montreal production programme notes that
‘Toneelgroep Amsterdam explores behaviors and thinking created by globalization and
the subsequent porosity of national cultures and artistic genres.’ We don’t need to linger
over the vile term ‘porosity’ to find something seriously amiss in the idea that the
‘behaviors and thinking’ which Toneelgroep Amsterdam sets out to explore have been
‘created’ by the abstraction called ‘globalization’. This statement claims an unusually
broad representational authority that effectively compresses the great globe itself to the
manageable proportions of what the BBC World Service and CNN International say it is.
Such a claim has corresponding implications with respect to van Hove’s emulation of a
broadcast studio and/or conference space as the staging ground of his own mediatized
Globe, particularly in light of his production’s systematic representational exclusion of
the common people of Rome who make regular appearances in Shakespeare’s
Julius Caesar and dramatically alter the balance of plebeian/patrician power in Shakespeare’s
Coriolanus.

Infidelity to proprietary Shakespearean play-texts is less my concern here than is van
Hove’s allowing his no doubt justified cynicism about contemporary political
arrangements in Western Europe and North America to colour the imperial presumption
with which so-called ‘globalist’ habits of thought and behaviour circulate through the
fabric of the plays’ reproduction. Suppression of scenes involving the commons of Rome
and of their interactions with Menenius, the tribunes, and Caius Martius himself in
Coriolanus superimposes on the production what van Hove takes to be the closeting or
sequestering of power and the powerful in private rooms or executive suites as opposed
to public spaces—which increasingly seems to be the case in the North American and
Western European ‘worlds’ van Hove and his audiences inhabit. But these private rooms
are presented in so corporately exclusionary a manner that we lose touch with the extent
to which the play Coriolanus may be said to contest the individualist, celebrity-hero ethos
van Hove wanted to focus on a particularly modern inflection of what Shakespeare had to say about high-end politics and geopolitical power mechanisms and [ ... ] to explore how technologically mediated channels of political representation [ ... ] militate against meaningful dialogue between social groups in the modern world. For van Hove, rather than facilitating communication, modern media often prevent engagement and political debate, separating ordinary people from elite politicians, described by the director as creatures ‘sheltering in their bunkers’. (415)

Van Hove’s point is that modern media sponsor or generate the dominance of global power elites as opposed to merely channelling them or doing their bidding. But even if this claim were true (and I am not sure it is), need it follow that an internationally acclaimed experimental theatre company should uncritically mirror that condition and, in so doing, become another outlet of socially exclusionary representation and reproduction?

Van Hove’s wholesale suppression of Coriolanus’ crowd scenes, especially the revealing scene in which Martius both asks and does not ask for the people’s voices, and his omission of Menenius’ patronizing parable of the belly, not only render the Roman masses invisible, but preclude engagement by his own audience with any representatives of the plebeians other than the manipulative, self-aggrandizing tribunes. The power structure of overbearing patricians and overly confrontational tribunes is the only structure of Roman society put on display in van Hove’s mediatized reproduction of Shakespeare’s play, such that rather than interrupting the power structure’s discourse in the way Brecht, for example, had planned, van Hove could be said to give it comparatively free rein over the proceedings, in the process reminding us—in Guy Debord’s remarkably prescient formulation—that

the spectacle is not the inevitable consequence of some supposedly natural technological development. On the contrary, the society of the spectacle is a form that chooses its own technological content. If the spectacle, considered in the limited sense of the ‘mass media’ that are its most glaring superficial manifestation, seems to be invading society in the form of a mere technical apparatus, it should be understood that this apparatus is in no way neutral and that it has been developed in accordance with the spectacle’s internal dynamics. If the social needs of the age in which such technologies are developed can be met only through their mediation, if the administration of this society and all contact between people has become totally dependent on these means of instantaneous communication, it is because this ‘communication’ is essentially unilateral. The concentration of these media thus amounts to concentrating in the hands of the
administrators of the existing system the means that enable them to carry on this particular form of administration. (24)

I invoke Debord’s modelling of the society of the spectacle for its qualification of any claim to neutrality that might seek to explain van Hove’s complacency at carrying on ‘this particular form of administration’ in this way at this time. In transposing the deeply social and theoretically populist cast of a play like Coriolanus to the cooler confines of power politics as it is played out in boardrooms, boudoirs, and broadcast studios, van Hove arguably takes dictation from the protocols and practices of contemporary media, replicating their (only occasionally suspended) habit of erasing oppositional forces that well up from the unlovely street (or square in Cairo or Kiev): an erasure that is notably repeated in the recent film version of Coriolanus directed by and starring Ralph Fiennes—which begins with a powerful ‘contemporized’ scene of mass protest but thereafter renders the Roman populace irrelevant and invisible.

In the process of erasing the interruptive potential of the populist, van Hove simultaneously isolates what may well be called each play’s celebrity factor, and valorizes it by giving featured characters like Caius Martius, Volumnia, Mark Antony, and Cleopatra disproportionately more mediated and mediatized access to their audiences. Given the targeted cuts in the Coriolanus play-text in particular, such characters get considerably more face and body time throughout Roman Tragedies, appearing not only in the physical form of the onstage actor but also in an array of differently sized and shaped mediatized projections, most prominently in the larger-than-life format of outsized close-ups. Mark Antony in particular benefits from his presentation as the passionately moved but media-savvy apologist for Caesar, who, by removing his microphone from its stand and prompting a videographer to follow him, effectively takes charge of the means of mediatized production. That he does so in the manner of a talk-show host who is his own guest star makes the manoeuvre doubly insidious—and, arguably, doubly effective.

The only thing that’s missing in this scene is the elided cast of extras that might have doubled as Antony’s studio audience, a void van Hove’s on- and offstage audiences are presumably meant to fill. Having already had the opportunity to occupy the stage space itself, such audiences are, of course, already conditioned insiders in more ways than one, hence, more apt to feel like aiders and abettors of Mark Antony’s scheme than undeceived witnesses of his crimes of misrepresentation. As Klaas Tindemaans observes:

In Julius Caesar, as told by Ivo van Hove, the people of Rome are absent from the story, more than in his reading of Coriolanus. But at the same time the possibilities for us, as spectators, to observe the plots—the conspiracies—are ‘augmented’ by immersion. Now we can take a seat very close to the action, but in doing this we also sacrifice a part of our privacy: the images of the scenes are projected on every screen. We are embedded in the action, albeit as passive observers. We are
the passive subject of representation. In this adaptation of *Julius Caesar*, the intertwinement between the public and the private sphere is reinforced. (14–15)

Whether deliberate or not, Tindemaan’s choice of the term ‘embedded’ suggestively references the US practice of ‘embedding’ journalists among troops in its recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: a practice that made it difficult for journalists to maintain their emotional detachment from the troops and critical objectivity in their writing about the conflicts. As Tindemaans further contends:

when van Hove’s *Roman Tragedies* blurs the distinction between characters/actors and audience, the community of the auditorium is fragmented: those spectators who see themselves spatially involved in a political debate in republican Rome are unwillingly associated with different, opposed or even hostile points of view, they are no ‘audience’ anymore. (21)

Indeed, as playgoers who have kept to their seats gaze at a stage intermixed with actors and their fellow playgoers, and those on stage observe their embeddedness in the production’s mise-en-scène replicated in the TV monitors, it would be hard to imagine anyone’s sustaining a sense of distance and objectivity from the proceedings were it not for the sheer novelty of one’s positioning vis-à-vis the performance, which may take one out of the performance as much as it immerses one in it. For unlike the conventions that govern the cued responses of ‘live’ audiences of recorded TV shows—or those that shape the behaviour of visitors to *Sleep No More*—the obligation to serve as passive, embedded witnesses of the epic conflicts and crises of the historically high and mighty is not uniformly executed or enforced in *Roman Tragedies*, whose sheer expansiveness affords the formation of a number of competing subject positions for the resistant viewer. In this turn of the screw, I’ll confess to finding van Hove’s conceptualization of celebrity culture’s hold over the popular imagination powerfully realized, while regretting his failure to challenge more directly what he takes to be a global consensus.

My qualification proceeds from the expectation that experimental theatre will deliver the kind of critique, or generate the kind of debate, that more traditional Shakespeare companies (the RSC, for example) will not, given their always already collaborative connection to that early modern cult of celebrity fashioned by Shakespeare himself in plays such as *Antony and Cleopatra*. In the end, the disproportionate time and sympathy lavished on the legendary lovers and on their similarly indulged enemies and accomplices (130 minutes in all), particularly at the expense of the comparatively depopulated (and dramatically depleted) *Coriolanus*—which comes in at a greatly abbreviated 90 minutes and in which Caius Martius virtually becomes ‘every man himself’—indicates how the co-dependence of global media and political elites may be enabled by its theatrical reproduction. Indeed, *Roman Tragedies* may also demonstrate the extent to which serious theatrical practice has become colonized by the very entertainment industry that the marriage of global media, political and economic elites, and celebrity culture has spawned. I would like to think that van Hove assumes, with Hamlet, that it is the task of theatre to show ‘the very age and body of the time his form and pressure’, and expects us
to discern the excesses of a Qaddafi or Berlusconi (men who would also be everyone themselves) evoked by Coriolanus’s swaggering singularity, and even to register how much Antony’s midlife, Middle Eastern romance cost Rome and Egypt alike in terms of ‘human life and treasure’. It would be easier to do so, though, in this time of global financial crisis, debt defaults, and corruption in high places, had not van Hove also cut scenes like the one in *Antony and Cleopatra* in which the ‘third part’ of the world ‘is drunk’ (2.7) and the other two-thirds are doing their best to set it going ‘on wheels’.

**The Problem of Spectatorship**

I would nonetheless like to give van Hove’s approach to politics and the problem of spectatorship a more sustained hearing, and will start by addressing a blog posting on *Roman Tragedies* from January 2012 by the Londoner Orlando Reade. Reade starts with a critique of what he calls the ‘social’ problem of contemporary theatre, which he identifies with theatre’s serving a predominantly ‘secretarial’ function in society. He writes:

> Theater seems constantly to be telling us about something else’s view of the world. It is society’s little secretary. A secretary which thinks its speech combines the polyphony of voices and stratas in all aspects of the corporation. But in actual fact, in losing itself, in becoming a mouthpiece with no mouth of its own, it simply keeps the boss in charge.

The reader will note that Reade’s critique of theatre’s secretarial function almost exactly echoes my own critique of van Hove’s *Roman Tragedies* wherein I suggest that instead of intervening in some decisive way in the corporate, mediatized dominance of political culture, his production merely represents it, in the process effectively serving as its enabler. Reade, however, contends that van Hove’s production *does* intervene in theatre’s secretarial function, and makes its intervention particularly manifest ‘at the end of the performance, when many members of the audience were already heading for the door’. As he recounts, for those who lingered long enough to look, ‘a projection of 40 questions [appeared one after another on the moving band over the stage] concerning politics, theater, and acting’. A selection of these questions includes:

- Is it possible to have politics without a desire for power?
- Is anti-political rhetoric the key to popularity?
- Are all politicians actors?
- Is representative democracy the mother of all demagoguery?
- Is the state responsible for all its citizens?
- Is democracy more important than the life of a single individual?
- Are the masses blind?
- Is political humility a paradox?
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No one would consider any of these questions particularly provocative or profound. Rather, what captured Reade’s attention was their directness. As Reade observes, ‘[The projection] literally turned to the audience and said “what do you think? What does theatre have to do with politics?”’

Reade’s hopeful commentary hasn’t changed my mind about what I still find lacking—or worse, repressed—in the production itself. Van Hove’s decision to tack this presumed provocation on as a coda—which most of the audience is likely to miss, or not attend to very closely, as it files out of the theatre—reconstitutes the marginal position van Hove delegates to populist political intervention throughout *Roman Tragedies*. This position emerges in programme notes distributed at *Roman Tragedies* performances and locatable on the Toneelgroep Amsterdam (TGA) website where van Hove spins off quoted passages from Hannah Arendt that read: ‘Politics is the decisive possibility for each person to partake of the world in speech and action and to make a new beginning’, but ‘someone who wishes to speak only the truth stands outside the political arena’ since ‘politics means espousing a particular issue’. In response, van Hove contends:

This is in total contrast to the idea of an absolute truth. The truth is totally apolitical. Politics focuses on the achievable world. Truth and reasons of state are separate worlds. Politics exists thanks to consensus, while the truth is inviolate. Politics can only exist in the conviction that people can change. But politics can only do this if at the same time it accepts its limitations. The truth cannot be changed by people. (Ivo van Hove on *Roman Tragedies*)

Van Hove’s insistence that the ‘truth’ is ‘totally apolitical’, ‘inviolate’, and ‘cannot be changed by people’ turns on a philosophically idealist conception of truth, removed from the domain of what might be construed as objectively observable fact. But his reconstruction of Arendt’s distinction also exaggerates the distance between his limited sense of what is ‘achievable’ in the world and Arendt’s more expansive sense of the ‘possibility [of persons] to make a new beginning’, just as it exaggerates the difference between someone who wishes ‘to speak only the truth’ and ‘the idea of an absolute truth’ (my emphases), which presumably must remain unspoken. Tied as they are in *Roman Tragedies* to a dramaturgical elision of the facticity of Shakespeare’s body politic and a concomitant privileging of the ruling order, van Hove’s effort to blend a presumptive political realism with a rather extreme philosophic idealism not only seems at odds with Reade’s hopeful reading of van Hove’s dramatic designs, but also places van Hove at a critical remove from convictions maintained by Brecht and others about the transformative role theatre can play in society. It also qualifies the impression that by inviting his audience to share the stage with his actors, van Hove is effectively encouraging something approximating Jacques Rancière’s emancipation of the spectator.

In remarks on how the role of the spectator is constructed by the kind of theatre espoused by Brecht on the one hand and Artaud on the other, Rancière opens up a third possibility that has particular application to the variably immersive and critically detached configuration for spectatorship constructed by *Roman Tragedies*. Rancière
begins by contesting the notion that ‘the theatre is, in and of itself, a community site,’ an idea, he claims, on which both Brecht’s ethic of ‘distanced investigation’ and Artaud’s aesthetic of ‘vital participation’ are premised (Rancière 16, 5):

Because living bodies onstage address bodies assembled in the same place, it seems that that is enough to make theatre the vehicle for a sense of community, radically different from the situation of individuals seated in front of a television, or film spectators in front of projected shadows. Curiously, generalization of the use of images and every variety of projection in theatrical production seems to alter nothing in his belief. Projected images can be conjoined with living bodies or substituted for them. However, as long as spectators are assembled in the theatrical space, it is as if the living, communitarian essence of theatre were preserved and one could avoid the question: what exactly occurs among theatre spectators that cannot happen elsewhere? What is more interactive, more communitarian, about these spectators than a mass of individuals watching the same television show at the same hour? (16)

Given his denial that truth can be found in the politics that constitute and shape the life of cities or communities, and the effect of audience dislocation and displacement generated by the staging practice of Roman Tragedies, van Hove might well agree with Rancière that there is nothing ‘radically different from the situation of individuals seated in front of a television, or film spectators in front of projected shadows’. But given his belief that private citizens and theatre audiences alike are subject to the coercive constructions of reality imposed on them by political and media elites, he would be less likely to credit Rancière’s assertion that ‘in a theatre, in front of a performance, just as in a museum, school or street, there are only ever individuals plotting their own paths in the forest of things, acts and signs that confront and surround them’ (16). Rancière considers ‘this power of associating and dissociating’ to comprise ‘our normal situation’ as spectators (my emphasis), and claims that spectatorship ‘is not some passive condition that we should [or need to] transform into activity’ (17). For Rancière, even a theatre experience coercively designed to model or mirror the contemporary subject’s passive entrancement by visual media would not be enough to shut off ‘the capacity of anonymous people’ to exercise ‘an unpredictable interplay of associations and dissociations,’ which might not lead to any particular ‘truth’, political or otherwise, but which would prevent the audience from merely accepting dictation from the schoolmasterly director who is fulfilling the secretarial function Reade delegates to most contemporary theatre. Or to put it in terms that Rancière, Reade, and possibly even van Hove would approve, there is not only a world, but an audience elsewhere—physically continuous with but subjectively emancipated from the embedded one sitting, standing, listening, watching, blogging, tweeting, eating, drinking, consuming and being consumed by the spectacle on physical and electronic display.

Works Cited
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Notes:

(1) The performances specifically referenced and reconstructed in this essay took place on 29 May 2010 at the Monument-National Theatre in Montreal and on 17 November 2012 at the Howard Gilman Opera House of the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

(2) See the forum devoted to Sleep No More in Borrowers and Lenders, 7/2 (2012–13), especially contributions made by me (Cartelli), Colette Gordon, and J. D. Oxblood. For a much more detailed, wide-ranging, and altogether brilliant assessment of Sleep No More, see Worthen 80–147.

(3) As Hans-Thies Lehmann observes, ‘One question media theatre poses for the spectator is this: why is it the image that fascinates us more? What constitutes the magic attraction that seduces the gaze to follow the image when given the choice between devouring something real or imaginary’ (170). Lehmann himself has little to offer by way of response, ceding the ground of explanation to the following statement by Vivian Sobchack: ‘Television, video cassettes, video tape recorders/players, video games, and personal computers all form an encompassing electronic representational system whose various forms “interface” to constitute an alternative and absolute world that uniquely incorporates the spectator/user in a spatially decentered, weakly temporalized, and quasi-disembodied state [ … ] Indeed the electronic is phenomenologically experienced not as a discrete, intentional, bodily centered projection in space but rather as a simultaneous, dispersed, and insubstantial transmission across a network’ (78, 79). Although Sobchack cogently explains how viewers are interpellated by, and then incorporated in, visual transmissions, she fails to be of much help in explaining how—much less why—spectators participating in a mixed media event, identified as a work of theatre situated in a space called by that name, should often be more drawn to screen images of actors than to the proximate physical bodies themselves. As Philip Auslander notes, ‘This question is difficult to address in any other than anecdotal terms: when we go to a concert employing a large video screen, for instance, what do we look at? Do we concentrate our attention on the live bodies or are our eyes drawn to the screen, as Benjamin’s postulate of our desire for proximity would predict? At an industrial party I attended recently, I found the latter to be the case. There was a live band, dancing, and a video simulcast of the dancers on two screens adjacent to the dance floor. My eye was drawn to the screen, compared to which the live dancers [ … ] had all the brilliance of fifty-watt bulbs’ (38).
As an example of the way a contemporary experimental theatre company may generate the kind of critique I have in mind, or better, provoke its audience to respond more actively or critically to the performance on display, I would cite a touring performance of Thomas Ostermeier’s recent production of Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* I attended at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in November 2013, particularly the staging disruption that Ostermeier designed for that play’s fourth act. Ostermeier substitutes excerpts from an often eloquent, but ideologically confused and contradictory contemporary anarchist manifesto, *The Coming Insurrection*, authored by The Invisible Committee, for the rambling but comparatively more coherent public speech Ibsen scripted for his protagonist, Stockmann. Ostermeier also has Stockmann speak directly to the audience with the house lights turned on and, at the end of Stockmann’s speech, has actors who remain in character solicit questions, comments, and responses from the audience. Though the reports on the results of this diegetic ‘talkback’ vary, and uniformly record the clumsiness of the gesture, most indicate that this temporary opening up of the play’s fourth wall did more to engage the audience in active debate and critique than did the invitation to occupy the stage itself that *Roman Tragedies* offered for over five hours of its running time. However gratuitous or awkward it seemed, and even if it did no more than compel the audience to acknowledge its penchant for passivity in the face of challenge, the interruption gave the audience a temporary speaking role and a place inside the drama, making both it and the play seem more relevant than they might have been otherwise.

Indeed, a brief comparison between van Hove’s ‘embedding’ of these provocations in what amounts to the ‘credits’ section of his production and Ostermeier’s situating his interruption in the body of his play, clearly pinpoints the difference between van Hove’s peripheral and Ostermeier’s integrated interventions.

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