

Book Review

Stage Presence
by Jane Goodall (London: Routledge, 2008)

VERONICA KELLY

Does stage presence derive from technique or mystique? And how might we talk about the 'electrifying' or 'mesmerising' effects of the 'charismatic' performer without – as I have just done – reaching for metaphoric descriptions from realms of science, pseudo-science or the supernatural? Goodall's study of the 'presence' of such performers who possess it (since not all do) starts and ends with the complementary powers of both audience and language to act as 'co-present' with the performer: to produce or receive the energies which can be seen variously as sucked inwards by the performer (the vampirising inflection of the occult model) or else radiating from the performer to galvanise the audience (scientific model). In a sense, the audience is this book's other main player. Whether the audience seen as is discharging or attracting the shamanic energies of performance, its co-creation of performer presence, along with its own considerable powers – responsiveness, volatility and an ever-present feral social danger – are read as essential for the manifestation of presence. In this study the crackle of performance 'electricity' is not treated as dismissible, or indeed even explicable through deflationary psychologies of mass audience delirium or self-hypnosis. Rather the focus is on the performer herself. How does s/he actually do it, and at what cost? How do technique and mystique together co-create the magic of presence?

With patience and precision the book picks apart the historical and discursive provenance of those seemingly unavoidable metaphors, variously derived from the historical archaeology of such 'real' and 'discredited' sciences and as astrology, physics, galvanism, psychology or physiology. To speak of the 'dazzling' presence of a performer is to re-animate culturally and linguistically embedded ideas deriving from past or contemporary scientific explanations: for material properties, for the operations of mind, and above all for energy itself and the mystery of its transmission between distant bodies. In the case of 'aura', it is to tap into the world of the spiritual, magic and mysticism. The social performer of great 'presence' retains a strong trace of the divine eucharistic Presence. The secularisation of this power produces the social authority and polish of the king or aristocrat. As Machiavelli in *The Prince* analyses the elite socialisation process, this kind of 'innate' or 'natural' physical ease and charisma are and must be learned: studied and practised, rehearsed and performed to negligent perfection such that the work of culture is

effaced by the dazzling illusion of a transfigured superior nature. Yet, simultaneously and scandalously, many actors whose regal authority enraptured their contemporaries were born (or buried) in slums or ditches: Brecht's theories of actorly self-study and socially-informed analysis might serve here as our theoretical guide to the alluring complications of performative class signifiers.

But our performer can, and indeed must, be also a 'magus': a type of shaman, pythoness or wizard, both greater and less than human, who mediates between the community and the unseen life powers. In his or her theatrical element of secularised ritual mysteries, this connection with semi-archaic sacred mysteries makes the performer in equal portions both terrifying and therapeutic. We seem to encounter one who can still summon the flash of lightning and the rumble of thunder in order to agitate the imaginations and very bodies of his audience, or to transport it to heights of poetic and mystical rapture. Here, moderns would turn for validation to the alchemical writings of Artaud. So on the scientific side we have electricity, galvanism, animal magnetism, chemistry, waves, impulses, vibrations, attraction, radiation, hypnosis; while from another direction there are magic, mysticism, genius, aura, charm, enchantment, glamour, charisma. And from the modern context of celebrity we will find as well – whether as genuine bonus add-ons to presence or sometimes masquerading as the real thing – such factors as star quality, ambition, talent, image-making skills and just plain sexiness. For those so favoured these are seen as supplementary to performer presence, but they are its epiphenomena rather than its essential attributes. Many non-star performers have presence; quite a few with star quality lack it (15-16).

Goodall asks for the establishment of a 'poetics of presence' and superbly demonstrates its excitements and possibilities. Such a poetics can allow us to speak of the theatrical experience with respect for, and clear awareness of, its deep and even atavistic cultural roots, but also of its ever-updated contemporaneity. While Johnny Rotten's onstage detonations and Michael Crawford's physically virtuosic Phantom are treated in the book, so are the performative *mise-en-scène* and the experiential testimony of the initiates of the ancient Eleusinian mysteries. Of the sinisterly 'mesmerising' late nineteenth-century constellation of Irving, Dracula and Svengali she notes that '[s]upernaturalism and the drama of the expanded life cycle had found their way back into the heart of cultural modernity, feeding off exactly those scientific ideas that should have banished them' (94). But 'science' and primitivism cannot be at war in this account since they travel in our culture in necessary lockstep. The two must be thought together since in modernity they are typically inextricably dialogic discourses. From the Enlightenment onwards, scientific discourses and performance aesthetics have developed by multilaterally exchanging prestige, languages, explorations and explanations. In the case of the scientists Anton Mesmer or Nikola Tesla, their practitioners might move comfortably between both domains.

Goodall chooses as examples internationally well-known performers: Garrick, Siddons, Rachel, Irving, Bernhardt, Nijinsky, Baker, Robeson, Piaf, Dylan, Humphries. Her work bridges theatrical and performance studies, and through its choice of such mass-popular

icons and divas as Bowie, Olivier, or Callas invites a wide audience into the conversation. *Stage Presence* contains no illustrations, which is unusual in a book about historical performance. It signals, firstly, that it is discussing not performance histories but experiential phenomena; and secondly that language – poetic, figurative language – is the pre-eminent medium by which the dazzling afterlife of presence expands itself and tracks into cultural knowledges and deep memory. Thus the reader too is invited to read collaboratively with the text, extrapolating from the carefully chosen examples and lending our own interpretive and affective energies to the seductions and subtleties of Goodall's lucid explorations, completing our own 'circuit' of forces and investments. Early in the study the author, a scholar of Artaud, declares her position that the 'magic' of performance need not be sought solely in the twentieth-century's orientalist raid on Asian indigenous performance traditions, a project in quest of 'pure' performance and presence felt necessary to redeem a world of cosmopolitan and promiscuous mass entertainment forms. Rather, we are invited to drive deeply into 'the resilient continuity of the western tradition of theatre' (7), both elite and popular alike, to track and celebrate the various locations and manifestations the performer's power to have us glimpse the forces of life or death at work in mortal consciousness. Goodall sees her work as complementary to modern intercultural studies, and also in dialogue with important recent theoreticians and historians of performance discourse as Auslander on liveness and Roach on that mysterious 'it' which some figures, actors and laity alike, appear to just have.

If actors of the early modern period could be said to 'attract', how did they do it in a world increasingly seen as governed by scientifically explicable material forces, unless charges of witchery and magic were retained just to cope with their case? The chapter 'Drawing Power', with its careful punning title, traces the language of Newtonian physics being used as explanations for how actors command the imagination by seeming other than themselves. Newton's gravity shook up a mechanistic or hydraulic world view: if attraction and repulsion can operate on matter over distance, the question arises of just how such theories can be discussed without trespassing into the domain of the divine or the occult. For the late seventeenth century some answers were provided by conceptual materialisation of the interstitial spaces as ether or effluvia: invisible tiny particles of surrounding matter subtle enough to penetrate bodies supplied the missing transmissive agent. Actors and audiences, then, could be in actual contact via the medium of the ether. But then the questions arises: 'was the performer the source, the repository or the channel for the energy circulating between the stage and the auditorium?' (67).

Then, with the advance of knowledge of electricity, the actor can be variously seen as the repository and/or the generator of crackling energy, so Shakespeare was appropriately read by (and depicted in art as accompanied by) flashes of lightning. He might be felt as genuinely electrifying or merely as flashy, or – where female – literally meretricious as well. Divas such as Rachel or Bernhardt could be metaphorised as a sort of Leyden jar, storing up and discharging electricity. But, whether battery or generator, does the electricity originate within her or fire up as the result of collecting and concentrating the ambient forces of social desires and audience energies?

Mesmer added showmanship and psychology to his scientific research on gravity and concluded that some rare exalted ones just had it, and that the 'it' was superior willpower which bent others into its orbit. The 'hypnotised' chicken-clucking subjects of the stage magician show are not far away here. The conscious and responsive 'magnetism' of Irving or Bernhardt fits comfortably into the occult needs of a civilisation where people were tantalised by the cosmic vistas of deep space and time revealed by science, but who led lives of social and psychological constriction. Goodall refuses to arbitrate in the question of the ultimate source of the energy: both the vampire and the discharging generator or battery are valid metaphors to think of performance, since its crucial operative condition is identified as the establishment and maintenance of a functioning energy circuit.

Goodall writes of, and with, creative and interpretive pleasure which generates considerable readerly pleasures. There are many brilliant insights, such as the comparison between Hitler and Paul Robeson where she draws the distinction between the categories of presence and charisma, the latter 'a heightened life force which animates a whole career and fuels the trajectory of a sustained mission in the world' (46). Both Hitler and Robeson had charisma, which has the potential to fatally consume its carrier. Hitler was possessed of considerable if limited performance skills: energy, drive, will, oratorical genius, and a good sense of crescendo and climax. Yet unlike the true mimetic actor who does not will to dominate by imposing a mythologised projection solely of 'himself', Hitler's script was monolithic, inflexible and 'paranoid' (48), and eventually his dark occultism imploded. The democratically inclined yet personally aristocratic Robeson, by contrast, 'demonstrates charisma and stage presence in equal measure' (51). In the discussion of the exuberant Josephine Baker, the *'étoile noir'* and darling of Europe, Goodall situates her within the reign of electricity and the early-century fascination with light. Performers of all kinds, popular and avant-garde alike, were now typically placed in a dazzling wash of lighting, but while 'other dancers wore sequins and jewels ... Josephine made it look like the light that shone out from them was generated by her own body' (134). The 'lightness' of light entertainment, as Goodall explains it, is not all meretricious dazzle and sequins, but involves qualities of speed, adroitness, nimbleness and skilled receptivity to audience mood (136-37).

In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor argues for the shifting of scholarly attention 'from written to embodied culture', re-aligning methodological focus from 'texts and narratives' to 'gestures and embodied practices' (2003, 16). But writing is itself a medium of performance and one well positioned to extend and respond, analyse and complement the specific historical erotics and magic of 'gestures and embodied practices', here of the presence-pumped popular entertainer or star actor. The alternative is mute and powerless unresponsiveness. It is important though to recognise the unstable dynamics of the enterprise: writing about performance of any era remains a presumptuous act of slightly edgy magic: the necromantic conjuring of alluring and elusive ghosts. Yet in any culture's imaginative repertoire these 'ghosts' are central symbolic figures of identity, transcendence, transgression and social focus, and hence offer objects of serious interpretation. *Stage Presence* suggests and demonstrates a vocabulary in which the erotics and effects of major performers can be approached and situated in the web of knowledges shared by the

audiences of their time; and, in the case of the filmed actor, of the other historical formations through which their performances will now travel. To speak of performance history at all is to disturb both presentism and the neat compartmentalisation of historical moments: as Roach says of the eighteenth century, the point to understand about it is that 'it isn't over yet' (2007: 44). Goodall's lays out the scientific and mystical provenances of star discourses, and their metamorphic transmutations when they enter the radiant circuitry of the performer-audience relationship. She advances a precise awareness both of the precise discursive origins of star-talk and of its maddening imprecision. Stage 'presence' dances between technique and mystique, and there is far more going on in the latter which is always going to evade complete linguistic and metaphoric capture. In its survey of the always just out of control performer, *Stage Presence* itself models and performs the charged desire for the transcendent selves offered by the embodied virtuosos of performance.

References

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Veronica Kelly is a theatre historian whose interests involve popular modernity, actors as vectors of the cultural cosmopolitan, and the international dimensions of early twentieth-century Australian touring theatre. Her most recent publication is The Impact of the Modern: Vernacular Modernities in Australia 1870s-1960s co-edited with Robert Dixon (University of Sydney Press, 2008). She is an Honorary Research Advisor at the School of English, Media Studies and Art History, University of Queensland.

Editorial Note

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