Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature

Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English

Band: 43 (2023)

Artikel: Postdramatic theatre and pre-theatrical drama, what's in a name? : An afterlife for early British drama

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1047010

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Postdramatic Theatre and Pre-Theatrical Drama, What's in a Name?: An Afterlife for Early British Drama

This essay reconsiders what made late-medieval British drama distinct from that of other periods and what it shared with those dramas. It argues for a form of afterlife for the medieval and early Tudor stage in the dramaturgy of postmodern performance. Responding to Hans-Thies Lehmann's claims for a *post*-dramatic theatre, it suggests that we should also think about a *pre*-dramatic theatre, or rather a *pre-theatrical drama,* existing, not in the tragic theatre of ancient Greece, but in late medieval England and Scotland, and that the *postdramatic* and the *pre-theatrical* have much in common in their radical approaches to stagecraft.

Keywords: *Postdramatic theatre*, playhouses, pre-theatrical drama, interludes, morality drama

In this essay, I will reconsider what made late-medieval British drama distinct from that of later (and indeed earlier) periods – and what it shared with them.[1] But I will approach these questions via what might seem an odd claim about a form of afterlife for the medieval and early Tudor stage in the dramaturgy of postmodern performance. In so doing I will be drawing out the implicit suggestion that if we can talk, with Hans-Thies Lehmann, about a *post*-dramatic theatre, might we not equally talk about a *pre*-dramatic one too, not as Lehmann argues in the tragic theatre of ancient Greece (34, 70), but instead in late-medieval England and Scotland, and might the two be meaningfully connected?

Lehmann's claim, building on a long tradition of German theatre scholarship, was that the most significant (and only truly revolutionary) transformation in modern theatre history came with the non-narrative

[1] I am grateful to Pascale Aebischer, Guillemette Bolens, John J. McGavin, Eleanor Rycroft, Margaret Tudeau-Clayton, and the anonymous reader for *SPELL* for their very helpful suggestions during the evolution of this essay.

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happenings and performance art of the later twentieth century and their successors. Prior to that, he argued, all of the theatre-work produced between the English Renaissance and later modernity, however vociferous its claims to novelty, was dominated by a single, essentially realist paradigm, which, following Peter Szondi and, most obviously, Bertolt Brecht, he called *drama* (Lehmann 21; Szondi; Fischer-Lichte 1997, 2002 passim). Founded on the Aristotelian principles of mimesis and action, *drama*, in this Brechtian sense, assumed its function was to tell stories (Brecht's term was *fabel* [story] *theatre*), delivering internally coherent works, structured around empathy-inviting characters, and narratives in which audiences were invited to invest intellectually and emotionally, observing a play-world – a "fictive cosmos" in Lehmann's words (22) – happening behind the conventional fourth wall in a production driven by scripted dialogue (21, 34). In so doing, spectators supposedly became merely passive observers of the performance event. As Platon Kerzhentsev put it, "The entire development of bourgeois theatre has brought with it the absolute passivity of the spectator" (Fischer-Lichte 41).[2] *Postdramatic* theatre, Lehmann claimed, rejected each aspect of this model, just as Brecht and the early twentieth century avant-gardes had tried less successfully to do half a century or more earlier.

Lehmann's argument is, of course, fundamentally about how the performance events of the (post)modern period are different, and why that difference matters. But, might it also offer a way of thinking about earlier performance history? In what sense(s) might the British drama of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries be helpfully seen as *pre-dramatic*? But first a few words on the term *postdramatic theatre* itself. Szondi, Erika Fischer-Lichte, and Lehmann all use the term *theatre* to describe the generic practice of performance, and *drama* for that particular performance paradigm which they suggest dominated western stages from the Renaissance onwards (Fischer-Lichte *History of European Drama and Theatre* 5). So, *theatre* is taken to be the constant, and *drama* a particular iteration of it. But, viewed from an English perspective at least, this labelling seems unhelpful, indeed, to have the terms precisely the wrong way around. For, by referring to the generic performance practice as *theatre* we inevitably, and largely silently, adopt a very particular, historically contingent inflection of performance practice as if it were a timeless

2 Platon Kerzhentsev, *Das Schöpferische Theater* ("The Creative Theatre"), translated into German by Richard Weber, Prometh, 1980, 161, cited and translated into English in Fischer-Lichte, 1997 41. See also, Szondi, 8, and Artaud 54–55.

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norm. And this is especially unhelpful in discussions of a performance culture in which there were, of course, no *theatres*, in the post-Renaissance sense of the word.[3]

In part, the question is accentuated by the only partial overlap of the terminology in use in English and German and potential losses in translation in both directions (Fischer-Lichte, *History of European Drama and Theatre* 12–13, 340–341; Szondi 7). In English the term *playhouse* for a multi-function theatre-building has fallen out of general usage. So, *theatre* must do potentially confusing double work to denote both the art-form and the structure that characteristically houses it in the modern world. But the conflation has significant implications for our understanding of both dramatic practice and its associated aesthetics. In England from the 1560s, and more obviously from the turn of the seventeenth century onwards the *theatre* (as physical structure, socio-commercial enterprise, and idea) became, despite the fact that much acting took place elsewhere (Davies 25–69), the overwhelmingly dominant model for thinking about the performance of plays, at least until the rise of the site specific and *found space* performances of (post)modernity (Carlson 132). A hint of this shift from thinking about *acting* to thinking about *theatre buildings* can, perhaps, be gained from the fact that, when Thomas More explored the idea that life was like a play in the 1510s, he suggested that kings' games were a matter merely "played upon scaffolds," in which the real identities of the actors were known to their neighbours (More 83; see McGavin and Walker 172–175). But when Sir Walter Raleigh revisited that idea at the other end of the century in "On the Life of Man" it was as a comparison with a full-blown enterprise with its own architectural setting of tiring houses, seats for spectators, and a curtain that can be drawn "when the play is done."[4]

As I will suggest, the further one reads into Lehmann's account of the principles of *postdramatic* theatre – its self-reflexivity and refusal of

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3 I restrict the discussion here to theatres in the modern conception. The complexities involved in using the more ambiguous, multi-function early-modern term *playhouse* are helpfully revealed in Davies.

4 "What is our life? a play of passion, / Our mirth the music of division, / Our mothers' wombs the tiring houses be, / Where we are dressed for this short Comedy, /Heaven the Judicious sharp spect[at]or is, / That sits and marks still [*always*] who doth act amiss, / Our graves that hide us from the searching Sun, / Are like drawn curtains when the play is done, / Thus march we playing to our latest rest, / Only we die in earnest, that's no Jest" ("On the Life of Man," spelling modernised).

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closure, its openness to contemporary circumstances and the presence of the audience, its incorporation of non-narrative elements, its refusal to prioritise text above performance, etc. – the clearer it becomes that the *postdramatic* revolution was actually an attempt (in English terms) to *untheatre* theatre. It sought to sweep away all the assumptions and the accumulated baggage accreted around the idea and the institutional apparatus of 'the theatre', to re-expose the bare-bones of the unhoused, mobile, porous figures of early performance. So, while for scholars of modern drama it is perhaps understandable to see *playmaking* and *theatre* as near synonyms, from a pre-1560s perspective they are anything but. To describe playmaking as *theatre*, even in 1580, would have been to conflate many diverse performance practices with just one of the venues in which they might take place. It collapses the long history of performance into a flattened, modern perspective that excludes more than it seeks to describe. In reality to call play-making and acting *theatre* is as limiting as calling all music-making *concert hall* or all joke-telling *comedy club*. It offers up a historically specific, commercially and architecturally determined, and ultimately ideologically inflected version of an activity as if that were the thing itself (Boal 133–135; Read 5).

But simply reversing the terms *drama* and *theatre* does not close down the generative potential of Lehmann's thesis. Indeed, the very questions raised by the idea of a *postdramatic* theatre open a helpful space in which to revisit some old issues regarding pre-playhouse performance in Britain. Essentially, what *postdramatic* theatre does is take the conventional assumptions of a well-made play and deliberately subvert them, challenging audiences to recognise and appreciate those acts of subversion. With the pre-theatrical drama, by contrast, there was really no pre-existing model for the performers to subvert; and, consequently, no need to *untheatre* theatre. The precedents offered by classical drama, for example, were neither fully understood nor consistently followed until later in the sixteenth century. So writers and performers were free both to experiment *ab initio* and to borrow from and adapt other performative genres familiar to them (such as processions, ceremonies, flytings, tableaux, and games), or to draw from literary forms such as fabliaux, verse narratives, and humanist dialogues, and bring heightened, ironized versions of real-world events (the reading out of proclamations, duels, wrestling matches, jousts, or the confessional speeches and executions of condemned prisoners) into their plays without apparent concern for formal transgression. The result was almost inevitably a performance culture that was flexible, audience-facing, and porous to the world beyond the play. It was also both site-spe-

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cific and even (in moments such as the delivery of a self-contained sermon or the reading out of putative Acts of Parliament in Sir David Lyndsay's *Satire of the Three Estates* of 1552-1554 (604–605 and 610–612)) quasi-verbatim in nature. The distinction between play-form and real-world events was therefore blurred almost as a matter of course.

To turn to another key feature of the *postdramatic* theatre, its self-reflexivity, this too was an inherent part of pre-theatrical drama, a consequence of its uncertain status as an art form simultaneously homeless and yet deeply rooted and invested in its places of performance, a practice without the equivalent of an artist's studio, yet with an intimate connection with the spaces and communities with which it engaged. It had, notoriously, to be generated, performed, and consumed in other people's spaces, spaces designed and used primarily for other things, even if sometimes by the same people who were now performing as well as receiving the play there. Hence, pre-theatrical performance needed repeatedly to explain itself to those with a prior claim to those spaces, to justify its existence and its claim to attention, to apologise, even if only with mock-humility, for its presumption in appearing where it did. The young boy acting as Prologue to Nicholas Udall's *Respublica* (1553) thus entreats spectators "of gentle sufferance / That this our matter may have quiet utterance," trusting not to cause offence and that the audience will stay to the end (lines 3–8, 14), while Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucres* (1490s) ends with the actor nominated only as 'B' offering a fulsome apology for the shortcomings of both actors and writer and concluding, "Yet the author thereof desireth / That for this season // At the least ye will take it in patience. / And if there be any offence / (Show us wherein or [*ere*] we go hence)" (lines 2336–2340). Within a few decades such apologies would be merely formulaic, and there is, as I suggest, a degree of false modesty at play even here. But the sense of intrusion and of being there on sufferance was nonetheless, I think, authentic here, and a real issue to be acknowledged and circumnavigated with an appeal to laughter. And in making these wry apologies for their intrusion into spaces not their own, the pre-theatrical performers were prompted to ask, again both playfully and at the same time entirely seriously, the same kinds of questions as did their *postdramatic* counterparts. What *is* this thing that I am writing or performing? What are its generic limits, its social functions, its cultural, political, or religious value?

Such self-reflection is also evident in the traces of performance to be found in the archives and antiquarian writing of the period. And it is there still more obviously in the earliest printed texts, in which we see drama

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taking its first steps from being a purely ephemeral practice towards becoming a commodified art-form in its own right, with a continuing physical presence and economic value. As the latter, it would generate its own artefacts to be traded and an infrastructure to sustain it, *scripts* to sell for private reading or for other companies to perform at other times in other places. 'Four may play it easily,'[5] title pages begin to promise, assuming readers who share the same assumptions about, for example, the possible motives for purchasing playbooks, the likely resources of acting companies, and what might constitute a 'playable' script. This process would lead to the building of a significant number of playhouses: substantial, enduring, often multi-purpose structures dedicated to the sustaining of what was by then an established commercial practice: a creative *industry* to rank alongside printing, sculpture, or pictorial art.[6] But in the earliest days, prior to the mid-sixteenth-century, the self-reflexive anxiety of all those involved in producing and marketing play-texts (from writers to printers and booksellers) about what exactly this new and potentially paradoxical commodity – *a performance artefact* – was, or might be used for, is evident in the descriptions they gave these texts on their title pages, which tried to explain them in terms of other more familiar forms and more marketable genres. They tentatively offered readers "a *dialogue* […] compiled in manner of an interlude," (*Gentleness and Nobility*, emphasis added) or "A *treatise* […] in manner of a moral play" (Anonymous, *Everyman*, emphasis added). The association with the better-known dialogue form, evident in the first of these, is also implicit in the formulation, "A merry play *between* […]" various named characters, used in William Rastell's editions of Heywood's *Johan Johan* (1533) and *The Pardoner and the Friar* (c.1534). Plays were thus sold, not on their own terms, but as something *like* a treatise, or *like* a dialogue, but yet not quite identical to either.

Subsequently, printers began to carve out a set of distinctive qualities that gave play texts an appeal of their own, based upon the Horatian injunction to mix improvement with delight. Thus, for example, John Allde's 1568 second edition of Fulwell's *Like Will to Like* called itself

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5 The description, clearly aimed at small (probably itinerant) acting companies, comes from the title-page of Wever. Similar claims are made, for example, for the anonymous *Wealth and Health*: "Four may easily play this play," and *Impatient Poverty*: "Four men may well and easily play this interlude."

6 For the problem of defining playhouses in this period, see Davies 1–29 and passim.

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"very godly, and full of pleasant mirth." What they did *not* do, however, at least not at first, was seek to position the moral play or the interlude in terms of the precedents provided by the classical theatre, despite a relatively well-established tradition of printing Latin plays for the school and university markets (Walker, *The Politics of Performance* 10).[7] Indeed, Richard Pynson, who himself published the six comedies of Terence between 1495 and 1497, when he came to publish *Everyman* in the 1510s, described it, as we have seen, as "a treatise in manner of a moral play," avoiding classical terminology entirely. Why so? The broad conclusion is surely that this 'new' vernacular art-form understood itself – or wished *to be* understood – as something distinct from the classical drama. It did not fall readily into the genres of tragedy or comedy, it did not subscribe to the Aristotelian *unities*, and it was clearly not written for, and did not require, a *theatrum* in which to be performed.

Only slowly, it seems, did the idea catch on that vernacular English plays with 'merry' content and positive outcomes might be consistently described as 'comedies'. Hence John Rastell's edition of the anonymous *Calisto and Melebea* (c.1525) was tentatively described as "a new comedy in manner of an interlude," but his own *The Nature of the Four Elements* (c.1525-30) described itself instead as "A new interlude and a merry," and *Fulgens and Lucres* (c.1512), which combines a comic narrative with a classical Roman setting, was equally described only as "a go[o]dly interlude." As late as 1568, indeed, Henry Bynneman was still hedging his bets, calling the anonymous *Jacob and Esau* "A new merry and witty comedy *or* interlude" (emphasis added).

To return to the idea of *theatre* and theatres; a theatre, of course, places a frame around a performance. As the origins of the word in the Greek *theatron* ("a place for viewing," *OED*) suggest, it puts spectators literally in their place. Physically, it arranges the participants in accordance with the preordained roles of performer and spectator, marking out the respective territories of each. Culturally, it frames the performance event and everything surrounding it as a transaction governed by the protocols between customer and service-provider. So, the experience of a theatre audience is that of a licensed visitor to a realm set apart from their

[7] Latin drama was taught in Cambridge from 1502 and Oxford from 1505, with a number of grammar schools following suit. For a fruitful account of early-Tudor drama's seemingly conscious decision to refuse to embrace Tragedy in particular, see Pincombe, especially 114–116. For a discussion of the presence of tragic material embedded in John Bale's *King Johan* (1538), see Cavanagh.

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everyday experience. In the pre-playhouse period, by contrast, the performance spaces were coterminous with everyday space, *playing places* marked out only temporarily by agreement between actors and audience for the duration of a show. 'Make room, make room', the actors cry, and spectators either do or they do not. The eponymous protagonist of the *Interlude of Youth* (c.1512-3) makes his way into the acting space with a cry of "Aback, fellows, and give me room!" (line 40). Provision in John Pickering's *Horestes* (1567) offers the more elaborate, "Make room and give place; stand back there afore!" (Pickering sig. Div) giving spectators more time, perhaps, to respond to his less demonstrative entrance. In the York Smiths' pageant of *The Temptation of Christ*, Satan moves through the crowd in the street with "Make room belive [*quickly*] and let me gang [*walk*]" (line 1, spelling modernised). Equally, the actor playing the Son in Thomas Ingelend's *The Disobedient Child* (1567) has lines that allow him, if necessary, to push through the crowd *out* of the playing space as well as on the way in: "Room, I say, room; let me be gone!" (sig. Biv), as does Nought in *Mankind*, "Make space, sirs, let me go out!" (line 701). Evidently, only when all present agreed that the entertainment was over could a pre-theatrical play really be said to end.

It is the actors who are the guests in this scenario, invited into the hall by its owners, or into the town by its denizens, or they are themselves members of the same communities as the spectators, co-opted from among them to deliver an event or create a pastime for everyone, as were the members of the craft guilds that produced the York Corpus Christi play. On such occasions the audiences (or a majority of them) were always already 'at home' and the performance was a welcome irruption of licenced playfulness into the fabric of their own activities.[8] The pre-theatrical play world was thus not framed as a separate realm ("a fictive cosmos" in Lehmann's term) by the space, marked out as the subject and object of *theatre*; rather the performance worked to transform a space into something not so much *other than* as *as well as* its normal self. For the playing space never lost its identity as hall or street, field or yard. Nor did the performance try to erase that identity. Rather, it supplemented it, acknowledging and drawing upon its existing associations, bringing, for example, a debate supposedly from ancient Rome into Cardinal Morton's

[8] In this sense, the pre-playhouse drama stands in contradistinction to the idea, expressed most succinctly, perhaps, in Norman Holland's suggestion that "Plays happen in special places" (Holland 70). It was the play itself that made pre-theatrical playing spaces *special*.

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hall in London in Medwall's *Fulgens*, and being completely explicit that this is what it was doing, never for a moment trying to create the illusion that spectators are actually *there* in Rome, even vicariously, or that the Roman characters are not actually always *here*, being played by actors, in the Tudor hall. And all the time the presence of the roles of A and B, both simultaneously members of the household audience and agents in the plot, keep fresh in spectators' minds the fact that what they are watching is a play, whose plot might conceivably even be altered at their own whim ("By my faith," says A, "but if it be even as you say, / I will advise them to change that conclusion" (128–129)). Here, all the Romans are represented openly as merely 'players', performing their pastime after two successive meals for which the audience is told it should be duly grateful.

In a similar way, the York religious pageants brought representations of the Nativity, Passion, and Resurrection of Christ onto the streets of the city. This allowed audiences to experience vicariously the emotional impact of standing at the foot of the Cross, or witnessing the Harrowing of Hell, without ever losing sight of the fact that they were doing so in front of pageant wagons they themselves had perhaps helped pay for, and were standing before Holy Trinity Priory or the courts of justice on the City's High Pavement, or at the end of Gropecunt Lane (now more sedately Grape Lane) in the red-light district, locations each with their own distinct contemporary resonances and associations, by turns pious or magnificent, judicial, commercial, or seedy. Each site inflected the meanings that spectators might detect in the pageants played there (McGavin and Walker 1–66). All of this was a very long way from *(the) theatre*, as it was understood from the seventeenth century onwards.

So, in early drama there was never the scope (or any perceived need) to create an "empty" stage in the manner imagined in Peter Brook's experimentation of the 1960s (1).[9] Early drama's spaces of performance were inevitably already filled with a plenitude of previously inscribed and ongoing meanings. The plays performed there had to jostle for signification with the resonances created by those other functions, resonances that were by turns either latent or strikingly obvious. Rather than trying to compete, the drama made a virtue of necessity and co-opted those pre-existing associations into their own symbolic and affective structures; each space resonant with the functional associations and implicit hierarchies of class, profession, and gender linked with its quotidian location and

[9] For powerful critiques of Brook's formulation from a modern perspective, see Read 19 and Carlson 132–133.

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functions. Thus, for a woman or a man to watch the same pageant, depicting, for example, the story of Mary Magdalene or the trial of Christ, played at the end of Grape Lane with the red-light district in the corner of one's eye,[10] or on the High Pavement with the buildings housing the contemporary law courts in plain sight, might thus be a very different experience. Likewise, the experience might differ at these or different moments: for a young or an old person, someone healthy or sick, able-bodied or with a disability, a parent or a child, a priest, a lawyer, a prostitute or one of his or her clients. For each of these people, these spaces might mean something quite different and so the pageants played there probably did too.

What I am describing here has been helpfully termed 'ghosting' by Marvin Carlson in his study *The Haunted Stage*. Reacting similarly to Brook's idea of the empty space, Carlson persuasively notes that,

> Brooks' creative interpellation does not create a theatre out of a void but makes a theatre out of a space that previously was thought of as something else. The distinction is a critical one […] because the "something else" that this space was before, like the body the actor that exists before it interpellated into a character, has the potential, often realized, of "bleeding through" the process of reception, the process I have called ghosting. (133)[11]

Within the found spaces of pre-theatrical drama, indeed, the 'previous uses' tended not just to bleed through into the present performances but to be always fully present and in plain sight. There remained, not simply personal and cultural memories of earlier functions, but a living awareness of current and future uses too. The other uses of a medieval street or Tudor hall co-exited with the dramatic interpellation, silently but insistently pressing their case to resume and to reclaim the space as fully their own the moment the performance ended.

Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall have elegantly described the framed easel painting of the post-Renaissance period as "bossy" (8). It teaches its viewers how to look at it, restricting their freedom to view it

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10 I am grateful to Eleanor Bloomfield for the allusion to playing at the end of Gropecunt Lane, delivered in a so far unpublished paper to the Medieval English Theatre conference in 2020.

11 I am grateful to Pascale Aebischer for bringing this to my attention; although I wrote this essay in ignorance of Carlson's important study, I take the opportunity to note the overlaps in our arguments in the notes, and to acknowledge the fact that he got there first.

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from other angles, to imagine it in unexpected, potentially subversive, ways. "One can, of course," they suggest, "look at an easel painting from an eccentric angle, but there is, usually, nothing to be gained by this. […] The field of control […] is expansive" (8). And a similar piece of coercive framing is attempted, albeit never completely successfully (McGavin and Walker 1–42), by the theatrical stage. Its audiences are situated so as to focus their attention on the stage area. The play's effects, its entrances and exits, asides, and physical business are all predicated on that particular spatial relationship between stage and spectators and only fully legible within it. By contrast, the pre-theatrical street plays, the touring plays, and even the great hall plays, had to be created without such complete confidence in the likely geography and topography of performance. In a street the crowds might situate themselves in various ways, and might move or mill about during the performance, shifting the dynamics of address. Equally, no touring venues would be configured in quite the same way. And, even in a known venue, benches and tables in a hall might be arranged differently depending on the numbers dining, thus restricting or expanding the playing area, while the unpredictable presence or absence of particular charismatic or elite diners might radically alter the social and cultural dynamics of a community audience. Playing with the king or queen present was, for example, a very different proposition to playing in their absence. And plays had to be written and rehearsed with such indeterminacies in mind, allowing for the accommodation of such variables, both trivial and profound, in the conditions of performance. Their writers could never assume the same right to be 'bossy' as could their playhouse successors. That bossiness needed to be devolved to the actors to improvise *in situ*. This would have been equally true, of course, for those plays written in the 1580s and thereafter where performances at court, in one or more playhouses, and on tour were all possibilities. Such plays needed to be equally adaptable, and so could be thought of as both pre-theatrical and theatrical at different times, depending on the auspices of any given performance.

Pondering a related issue, Lehmann observes that the experience of *simultaneity*, rather than the careful, sequenced shifts of focus fundamental to narrative drama is a prime feature of *postdramatic* performance (87). Too many things happen at the same time, forcing spectators to choose which to attend to. And they often did in pre-theatrical drama too. But, whereas this is a deliberate strategy in modern performance, in the earlier period it was an almost inevitable consequence of the circumstances of performance, in which the actors had always to play against the backdrop

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– or perhaps more properly the foreground – of the communal life of a royal or noble hall, or a public street, in which the reactions of particular spectators to what they were watching, or not watching, themselves formed rival centres of attention, and an important aspect of the experience of witnessing the play. 'Is that the bishop watching from the brothel window?' 'Oh no, the king is yawning! … Did he laugh when I did? Did he see me laughing?'

In most pre-playhouse drama there was, then, no 'illusion,' and no attempt to represent an imaginary world seemingly separate from the physical environment hosting the production either.[12] The actors might allude to imaginary spaces in the play-world (as Fulgens does, for example, when he says, in passing, that he will walk a while in his garden), but these spaces are offstage, elsewhere, and in Fulgens' case simply an obvious ploy to allow the actor to leave the stage for a time. While the actors are on stage, they see what the audience sees. And the audience sees everything that is currently physically present in the space, so the actors acknowledge these things too as they act around them.

Such performances were thus not contained within a distinct 'fictive cosmos.' Nor were their audiences necessarily static or passive, needing to be provoked to engage with the actors, as Lehmann claims of *drama*'s audiences. The cries of 'make room!', the ranting boasts of the tyrants, and the bawdy banter and antics of the Vices, all of these presuppose an active, mobile, potentially restive audience, likely to take issue with the actors' claims at any point, requiring not to be provoked from passivity but, rather, variously to be quieted, directed, corralled, or managed at different points in a production.[13] Similarly, the moral plays and interludes drew richly on the powerfully inscribed hierarchical geographies of the halls they played in, with characters differentiating between thronging standing servants, seated gentry, and enthroned patron(s) as they moved about the hall. "Brother, hold up your torch a little higher," says Merry Report convivially to a servant in the hall in Heywood's *Play of the Weather* (l.98). In *The World and the Child*, Folly asks "all this many […] / That standeth here about" (the standing spectators in the hall) to judge a

[12] For a fruitful discussion of this issue, see Debax 32–33. Again, there is little sign here of that effect claimed for theatre and art more generally by Norman Holland, via which spectators "cease to pay attention to what is outside the work of art; [and] concentrate their attention wholly on it […] begin to lose track of the boundaries between themselves and the work of art" (66, see also 72, 79).

[13] For the potential raucousness of early drama audiences, see Carpenter.

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disputed hit in a fencing match (lines 560–561). In Medwall's *Nature*, Worldly Affection calls for a stool from "a pyld [*bald*] knave" in the audience (l.518), while in Fulwell's *Like Will to Like*, the actor playing Nicholas Newfangle is directed to throw a playing card, the knave of clubs, "unto one of the men or boys standing by," hoping he will drop it so that he can instruct him to pick it up, thereby 'proving himself' a second knave by association (sd, Aii(v)). More soberly, Mercy in *Mankind* famously demonstrates his moral discrimination when addressing the audience by distinguishing between "ye sovereigns that sit and ye brethren that stand right up" (line 29). And still more sombrely, an outdoor performance such as that called for by *The Play of the Sacrament*, the production seeks to generate a sense of community among actors and audience members alike by ending the play with a procession into the nearby church, led by the actor playing the bishop (Walker 2000 230, sd following line 785).

The pre-theatrical drama did not, then, seek to convince audiences that they were anywhere other than where they actually were. Thus, counter-intuitively, perhaps, the only real "illusion" evident in the early theatre canon probably came at those moments when what the audience was watching seemed to be, not an imaginary world beyond the everyday into which they were being seductively drawn, but that everyday world intruding itself on the performance, threatening to impede the actors in the execution of their work. When an actor playing a poor man enters the playing space of Lyndsay's *Three Estates*, for example, walking through the audience, begging for alms as he goes (lines 1934–1937), or when the actors playing A and B in *Fulgens* step into the middle of the hall before the action starts to chastise the audience and ask each other if a play is expected, then at least some spectators might have been briefly 'tricked' into thinking they were witnessing something outside the "agreed pretence" (Butterworth 2) of the performance, and tempted to respond to it as they would in everyday life, wondering whether, perhaps, they ought to shoo the intruders away so as not to "spoil the play" (McGavin and Walker 171–176). Here it is the apparent irruption of the real that is the illusion, not any "dream time" (another of Lehmann's dismissive phrases (155)) notionally created by the actors. But this can happen only in contexts where the real is already so interwoven with the conditions of performance that such irruptions are always entirely possible and might even be expected.[14]

[14] See McGavin for a powerful example of such a context.

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With this in mind, it is useful to think again of a play like *Fulgens*. One of the things that it does is present something that Lehmann might think of as a fictive cosmos (of sorts), a story set long ago and far away in ancient Rome. But the way it does so serves to undermine the very notion that that cosmos, that story, is in any way separated from the performance environment in which it is presented. For the other, more immediately obvious thing that the play does is stage a discussion *about* the presentation of the Roman story, voiced by actors who, as I have suggested, readily acknowledge the presence of the audience, the presence of the actors who will present the story, and the nature of the festive setting in which the play is being performed. Thus, the play openly represents its mechanism for presenting the story as a key part of its own action; "Peace, no more," B tells A and the audience, "for now they come! / The players be even here at hand" (lines 198–199). The act of 'framing' a Roman cosmos is thus itself framed as a fictional enterprise for the audience's amusement, so spectators' total immersion in that world is never possible either. What is happening here is more properly *presentation,* not *representation*, and the actors doing the presenting remain visible through their roles as they do so.

Lehmann is surely right to claim the fundamental difference between even Brecht's theatre and the *postdramatic* events and happenings that are his own focus. Only in such events does the performer abandon any claim to representation or narrative entirely in favour of simply moving or remaining static in a space. Here there is indeed no illusion, no pretence. The person shouting seemingly unconnected words and phrases really is shouting, the person self-harming in the gallery really is self-harming, even if they do so within the quotation marks of a pre-arranged performance event. They are not shouting or self-harming as if they were someone or somewhere else. The pre-theatrical drama had no equivalent to this, beyond, perhaps, the non-narrative performances of jugglers, dancers, and musicians which might punctuate an interlude or accompany a pageant through the streets. Pre-theatrical drama remained *dramatic* in Lehmann's sense, in its commitment to narrative or exposition, to the *something* that it presented that *pointed beyond itself*, even if that pointing was itself ironically foregrounded as a part of the performance. So, the early drama is no doppelgänger for the *postdramatic* stage, even if its spirit clearly haunts the aspirations behind it.

What the pre-theatrical drama offers in excess of both the *postdramatic* and the Brechtian stages, though, is its commitment to collaborative playfulness, its open-ended invitation to spectators to play along, to con-

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tribute to the meaning of a performance even when the matter being presented is deadly serious. Thus, ironically, given the unwarranted reputation of the late medieval moral drama for unrelenting didactic earnestness, close examination proves it to be every bit as self-reflexively playful as anything produced in the twenty-first century, and probably more trusting and respectful of its audiences too. Even where its subject is the salvation of the soul, there are always moments in the action, or figures on the stage, who invite spectators to view the performance *as* a performance. And there is no attempt to shock or outrage spectators as there is in much *postdramatic* performance, and no real effort to deliver didactic content wholly *straight* either. And the pre-theatrical spectator is always addressed, not as a passive observer of illusion, but as a potentially willing collaborator in meaning-making, their reward for collaboration being a sense of shared, conspiratorial enjoyment.

If we might think, then, of *postdramatic* theatre as having the same relationship to dramatic theatre as abstract art has to representational art – in that it aspires to be craft without mimesis – we might perhaps think of the pre-theatrical drama's relation to dramatic theatre as closer to that between medieval manuscript illumination and Renaissance representational art. Innocent of the supposedly 'naturalistic' principles of perspective and scale, illumination, like pre-theatrical drama, readily acknowledges both its own artifice and its function as an accompaniment to a text or a theme. Like a manuscript *mise-en-page*, the pre-theatrical drama wears its representational role very lightly, combining pertinent matter with impertinent, high with low, and surrounding its core 'text' with eye-catching illustrations and routines that play off of that central text, neither fully *illustrating* it, perhaps, nor yet being entirely irrelevant to it either.[15] Where the illuminator always acknowledges the words on the page, even if only as surfaces on or around which to pose playful figures, thereby drawing attention to the materiality and physicality of the page itself, so the pre-theatrical actor acknowledges the material and cultural conditions of their performance, thus keeping the presentational medium always in the consciousness of the spectator. So, A and B in *Fulgens* or the Vices of Heywood's interludes act in similar ways to the figures who peer around the edges of a manuscript text, haunt its margins, or balance on its surfaces. *Yes*, they implicitly suggest, this *is* a piece of paper or *this* an interlude, a set of words with serious meaning for its readers or witnesses. We all understand how this works, but let us, having acknowledged that fact,

[15] For an excellent exposition of this principle with regard to manuscript marginalia, see Bolens.

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have some fun with the medium at the same time as engaging with the message. In so doing, pre-theatrical drama probably ensured a rather more congenial relationship with its audiences than either the Brechtian or the *postdramatic* stages aimed at,[16] without sacrificing its capacity to challenge their behaviour and assumptions.

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[16] For a similar suggestion, see Wickham: "the makers and players of [pre-Reformation] interludes enjoyed a social and intellectual environment conducive to virtuosity in artistic achievement – a relationship between artist and audience distinguished by mutual understanding and respect" (35).

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