

# UC San Diego

## UC San Diego Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

The Master of Ceremonies : Dramaturgies of Power

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9b69j831>

### Author

Brueckner, Laura Anne

### Publication Date

2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

The Master of Ceremonies: Dramaturgies of Power

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Drama and Theatre

by

Laura Anne Brueckner

Committee in charge:

University of California, San Diego

Professor James Carmody, Chair  
Professor Judith Dolan  
Professor Manuel Rotenberg  
Professor Ted Shank  
Professor Janet Smarr

University of California, Irvine

Professor Ian Munro

2014

©

Laura Anne Brueckner, 2014

All rights reserved

The Dissertation of Laura Anne Brueckner is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Chair

University of California, San Diego

University of California, Irvine

2014

## DEDICATION

This study is dedicated in large to the sprawling, variegated community of variety performers, whose work—rarely recorded and rarely examined, so often vanishing into thin air—reveals so much about the workings of our heads and hearts

and

My committee chair Jim Carmody, whose astonishing insight, intelligence, pragmatism, and support has given me a model for the kind of teacher I hope to be

and

Christopher David Barnes-Vardijan, who, it turns out, was right the whole time.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page .....	iii
Dedication .....	iv
Table of Contents .....	v
List of Figures .....	vi
Acknowledgements .....	viii
Vita .....	ix
Abstract of the Dissertation .....	x
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1: The Master of Ceremonies .....	7
Chapter 2: The Chairman of the <i>Broadside Music Hall Revue</i> .....	72
Chapter 3: The Emcee of <i>Cabaret</i> .....	125
Conclusion .....	205
Works Cited .....	208

## LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1.1a: Hosts Steve Martin and Alec Baldwin, Academy Awards ceremony, 2010 .....	32
Fig. 1.1b: Kingfish and Eddie, MCs of Oakland-based Hubba Hubba Revue, 2010 .....	32
Fig. 1.1c: Alec Baldwin and Steve Martin as a binary pair of MCs sharing a “Snuggie” .....	36
Fig. 1.2: Anne Hathaway and James Franco as a binary pair of MCs hosting the Oscars in 2011 .....	37
Fig. 1.3: Edie, the “Mistress of Sensuality” of Cirque du Soleil’s <i>Zumanity</i> , 2010	48
Fig. 1.4: Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences president William C. de Mille as Master of Ceremonies, with Hans Kraly, Mary Pickford, and Walter Baxter at the 2 <sup>nd</sup> Academy Awards ceremony in 1930 .....	49
Fig. 1.5a: Host Seth MacFarlane, Academy Awards ceremony, 2013 .....	50
Fig. 1.5b: Host Ellen DeGeneres, Academy Awards ceremony, 2014 .....	50
Fig. 1.6a: Joel Grey as the Emcee, <i>Cabaret</i> , 1972 .....	52
Fig. 1.6b: Alan Cumming as the Emcee, <i>Cabaret</i> , 2014 .....	52
Fig. 1.7: Academy Awards hosts Steve Martin and Alec Baldwin with women in background .....	58
Fig. 1.8: Alan Cumming as the Emcee, with female dancers, 2014 .....	59
Fig. 2.1: “Map of Dickens’ London” by Don Carson .....	75
Fig. 2.2: The stage in the environmental area called Mad Sal’s Dockside Alehouse .....	77
Fig. 2.3a: Bill Roper as Chairman Thaddeus Codswallop, 2009 .....	81
Fig. 2.3b: Daniel Morgan as Chairman Obediah Feltrup, 2014 .....	81

Fig. 2.4: Bill Roper as Chairman Codswallop performing "Why Don't Women Like Me?" .....	111
Fig. 2.5: Roper as <i>Broadside</i> Chairman Codswallop, flanked by Can-Can Bijou dancers, 2010 .....	116
Fig 2.6: The <i>Broadside Music Hall Revue</i> cast giving the show's closing salute.....	122
Fig. 3.1: Joel Grey in the opening sequence of the 1972 film version of <i>Cabaret</i>	131
Fig. 3.2a: 1987 <i>Playbill</i> , Grey as the Emcee .....	133
Fig. 3.2b: 2014 <i>Playbill</i> , Cumming as the Emcee .....	133
Fig. 3.3a: Front, CD cover of <i>Cabaret: The New Broadway Cast Recording ...</i>	136
Fig. 3.3b: Back, CD cover of <i>Cabaret: The New Broadway Cast Recording ...</i>	136
Fig. 3.4: <i>Cabaret</i> billboard at the Kit Kat Klub (formerly Studio 54), New York, 2014 .....	137
Fig. 3.5: Nine of the first 14 Google image results on basic search terms (Joel Grey Cabaret), in the order in which they appeared on 29 Nov 2014 .....	157
Fig. 3.6: The first nine Google image results on basic search terms (Alan Cumming Cabaret), in the order in which they appeared on 29 Nov 2014 .....	158
Fig. 3.7: Alan Cumming as the Emcee in the 2014 Roundabout production of <i>Cabaret</i> .....	159
Fig. 3.8a: Cumming's Emcee's harness costume for "Wilkommen" .....	172
Fig. 3.8b: A close-up shot showing more harness detail .....	172

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my committee, Professors James Carmody, Judy Dolan, Ian Munro, Manuel Rotenberg, Theodore Shank, and Janet Smarr for the precious gift of their time, insight, and unaccountable patience

I would also like to acknowledge professors at other institutions along the way who gave generously of their time, brilliance, support, and faith when I needed it most:

Stephen Booth, UC Berkeley

Brenda Ness, Santa Monica College

Dunbar Ogden, UC Berkeley

Christina Preciado, Santa Monica College

I would also like to acknowledge theatrical groups with whom I've been privileged to work, for sharpening my perceptions of the complexities of popular performance:

The Broadside Music Hall

Dogs In Doublets

La Scuola di Stravaganza

Stark Ravens Historical Players

As well as specific theatre-makers whose feats of uncommon vision made it possible for me to enter the fascinating world of the MC:

Broadside Chairmen Daniel Morgan, Bill Roper, and David Springhorn

Event producers Phyllis, Ron, Kevin and Leslie Patterson

As well as Crowded Fire Theater, the artistic home where every project teaches me more about dramaturgy as discipline and as relationship, and Theatre Bay Area, the “day job” that is so much more

## VITA

2000	Bachelor of Arts, University of California, Berkeley
2004	Entertainment Director, As You Like It Productions
2010-2012	Director, Broadside Music Hall
2005-2006	Intern, Dramaturgy and Literary Management Berkeley Repertory Theatre
2007-2013	Teaching Assistant, University of California, San Diego
2014	Doctor of Philosophy, University of California, San Diego and University of California, Irvine

## FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Theatre (Dramaturgy)

Studies in Dramaturgy  
Professor James Carmody

Studies in Directing  
Professor James Carmody

Studies in Renaissance Theatre  
Professor Janet Smarr

Studies in Spectacle Theory  
Professor Emily Roxworthy

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Master of Ceremonies: Dramaturgies of Power

by

Laura Anne Brueckner

Doctor of Philosophy in Drama and Theatre

University of California, San Diego, 2014  
University of California, Irvine, 2014

Professor James Carmody, Chair

This dissertation argues that the theatrical master of ceremonies, an entity seen in many genres of popular theatre across centuries, exists in every instance as the expression of specific understandings of (and anxieties about) coercive social power. By examining key dramaturgical components of this entity, and comparing them to attributes of several modes of real power, I will show how the MC adapts the presentational techniques of power for the stage, producing a phenomenon I call “synthetic authority,” and how his appearance, dramaturgical position in the show, and use of space and of speech always refer to sources of coercive power beyond the

theatre's walls.

This study argues that there are three chief dramaturgical attributes of a theatrical MC. The first is his dramaturgical **singularity**, which describes both his uniqueness as a figure on the stage and his central-yet-outside position with respect to the rest of the show, especially as it manifests in his practice of interstitial framing. The second is his **high onstage status**, the result of many visual, sexual, spatial, interpersonal signals and behaviors that serve to align him with economic and other power elites. The third important dramaturgical attribute of the MC as a type is his capacity for **direct address**. The MC, through his ability to speak directly to a crowd, wields enormous power, literally sculpting with his words the theatrical reality in which the audience participates. This is also his most direct route to the synthetic power that allows him to run the stage: his ability to appropriate the discourses of power elites of many kinds and present them as his own in the course of a performance.

Theatrical MCs tend to perform their control of the theatrical environment in one of two main registers: one warm, stable, and paternalistic; one cold, complex, and dominating. While “warm” MCs function conservatively, to reassure audiences and reaffirm existing power relations, the different power of the “cold” MC challenges the audience, making room for critique of the uses and sources of power.

Overall, I hope to demonstrate that MCs perform discourses of coercive power originating from sources outside the theatre by appropriating their gestural, vocal, and visual signals, and that out of them, he creates a synthetic authority by virtue of which he controls his areas on the stage, the stage itself; and the theatricalized combination

of stage and audience seating area I call the “world of the room.” The ultimate goal of this study is to contribute to the dramaturgical (versus historical or theoretical) study of contemporary unscripted American variety theatre, especially by exposing the complexity of its dramaturgies, and developing useful critical language specific to the forms and goals of variety theatre that may be useful as scholars continue to build work on this topic.

## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation argues that the theatrical master of ceremonies, an entity seen in many genres of popular theatre across centuries, exists in every instance as the expression of specific understandings of (and anxieties about) coercive social power. By examining key dramaturgical components of this entity, and comparing them to attributes of several modes of real power, I will show how the MC adapts the presentational techniques of power for the stage, producing a phenomenon I call “synthetic authority,” and how his appearance, dramaturgical position in the show, and use of space and of speech always refer to sources of coercive power beyond the theatre's walls.

More, I will argue that theatrical MCs tend to perform their control of the theatrical environment in one of two main registers: one warm, stable, and paternalistic; one cold, complex, and dominating. Far from being absolutes, these “warm-control” and “cold-control” patterns exist as twin constellations of gestural, vocal, sartorial, and other signals, which any MC may employ and combine at will in a single performance. However, the case studies I examine here present contrasting examples from fairly deep in each territory; this allows me to demonstrate that the highest concentration of coercion is present where one would least expect to find it: in the “warm” style of MC, who presides over the theatrical space that is his to control by innate, unquestioned right. While the colder style of MC may feel less welcoming, I will argue that it is this entity that creates room for a critique of coercive power by presenting it as the dangerous result of strategy and force rather than a natural attribute

of a specific person or class of people.

In Chapter 1, I offer terminology that will be important to this project and outline the project's main ideas. Very little dramaturgical study (versus historical or theoretical) currently exists on contemporary American variety-style theatre, so terms of art pertaining specifically to the dramaturgical forms, rules, and goals of variety theatre are few. The common dramaturgical language used by working theatre-makers—even basic concepts like “character” or “plot”—derives from an understanding of theatre whose default mode is fourth-wall realism, so it can hardly be a surprise if these terms fit variety concepts poorly at best, misleadingly at worst.

I also enumerate the chief dramaturgical attributes of a theatrical MC. The first is his dramaturgical **singularity**, which describes both his uniqueness as a figure on the stage and his central-yet-outside position with respect to the rest of the show, especially as it manifests in his practice of interstitial framing. The second is his **high onstage status**, the result of many visual, sexual, spatial, interpersonal signals and behaviors that serve to align him with economic and other power elites.

The third important dramaturgical attribute of the MC as a type is his capacity for **direct address**. The MC, through his ability to speak directly to a crowd, wields enormous power, literally sculpting with his words the theatrical reality in which the audience participates. This is also his most direct route to the synthetic power that allows him to run the stage: his ability to appropriate the discourses of power elites of many kinds and present them as his own in the course of a performance.

Throughout, I explain how each of these attributes relates to coercive power, drawing on historical antecedents, examples from other media, my two chief case

studies, and ancillary examples of other MCs and variety performers. I also illustrate how some kinds of departure from this dramaturgical structure (in the form of comic or subversive inversions) actually prove its durability.

In Chapter 2, I offer, as a case study of a “warm-control” MC, the role of the “Chairman” of the *Broadside Music Hall Revue*, a San Francisco variety show that has been running every winter in since at least 1975. I provide a description of its performance context: an annual holiday festival called the Dickens Fair that creates the immersive theatrical environment within which the Broadside show operates. In this immersive theatrical environment, performers use specialized terminology that reflects a unique understanding of character and space—I explore this set of terminology.

In discussing the Chairman, I focus on the performance of actor Bill Roper, who held the role during the first span of time I served as the show’s director. The unusual way in which he was cast, his unusual problem he faced in learning the role, and his unusual approach to overcoming this problem all provide fertile soil for dramaturgical analysis.

Further, I examine the ways in which the singularity, high onstage status, and direct address manifest in Roper’s performance, and how they are inflected by Roper’s conscious choice to work in a “warm-control” style. Arguments from Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked*—which argues that power that operates invisibly, unnoticed, and unquestioned is the most coercive—bear particularly strongly on how the Chairman, as a warm-control MC, represents and reaffirms hegemonic power.

As director of the show during Roper's tenure, I was also able to take advantage of the opportunity the show afforded to test out some of my ideas about onstage power; here I show how specific changes made to the actor's role—but not his character—increased his onstage effectiveness. The most significant of these experiments produced results that were as dismaying from a political standpoint as they were successful from a dramaturgical standpoint. Finally, I compare Roper's Chairman to another *Broadside* Chairman: his successor, Daniel Morgan, who often operates in a colder register, as well as to ancillary examples provided by other MCs that operate in the warm-control style but differ in some particulars.

In Chapter 3, I offer, as a case study of a “cold” style of MC, the Emcee in *Cabaret*, focusing on the performances of Joel Grey in the 1972 film and Alan Cumming in the 2014 Broadway production by Roundabout Theatre in New York. I describe the cold-control MC's hallmark—aggression—and use concepts from classic sociology to parse out some of the signals of aggression deployed at the beginning of each Emcee's performance to establish his dominance. I also describe how he differs from Roper in *Broadside* and from the “warm” style of MC in general.

Cumming's Emcee in the 2014 production presents an onstage presence unanimously described as “unsettling.” I propose that this “unsettling” effect is the product of the MC's high status, the cold-control MC's aggression, the show's spectacle, and the Emcee's strategic performance of several kinds of unknowability, including his psychological opacity and his unpredictable mobility across geographical, dramaturgical, and sexual boundaries. I explore at length—using interviews, images, and primary documents—how this unknowability is constructed in

the 2014 show. I bring concepts from the work of Joseph Roach to bear on the relationship of psychological opacity to iconicity, and the work of Marjorie Garber to bear on its sexual unknowability.

I conclude with a detailed description of a surprising sequence from Cumming's performance: an unscripted "audience participation" segment in the middle of the show, which I saw in September 2014. As the events on stage departed from both the nuance and limitations of scripted theatre, the nature of the show transformed, wholly assuming a traditional variety show dynamic, with its unsubtle but sturdy charm. I outline the dramaturgical structure of the "audience participation" sequence—an old, traditional favorite of variety performers—and deliver an explication of this sequence that illustrates how its mechanisms, under the guise of play, in fact enact processes of subjugation to coercive power, drawing deeply on Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. I close with the observation that the persistence of the MC as a representation of every imaginable kind of power reveals the actual reason for his existence: our collective, instinctive anxiety about power, which we know is both necessary—maintaining the social structures upon which we rely—and dangerous—wielding the ability to subjugate and destroy.

Overall, I hope to demonstrate that MCs perform discourses of coercive power originating from sources outside the theatre by appropriating their gestural, vocal, and visual signals, and that out of them, he creates a synthetic authority by virtue of which he controls his areas on the stage, the stage itself, and the theatricalized combination of stage and audience seating area I call the "world of the room." I reassert that "warm" MCs function conservatively, to reassure audiences and reaffirm existing

power relations, while the different power of the “cold” MC challenges the audience, making room for critique of the uses and sources of power. The ultimate goal of this study is to contribute to the dramaturgical (versus historical or theoretical) study of contemporary American variety theatre, especially by exposing the complexity of its dramaturgies, and developing useful critical language specific to the forms and goals of variety theatre that may be useful as scholars continue to build work on this topic. This is a meaningful endeavor because performances of power are all around in everyday life, especially in diversions presented as mere “entertainment,” and an understanding of the ways in which power may be encoded, enforced, built, and/or borrowed is vital to positioning oneself with respect to its force.

## CHAPTER 1: THE MASTER OF CEREMONIES

A Master of Ceremonies is a strange and compelling figure. He appears, voluble and canny, in countless popular theatrical and paratheatrical performance forms, especially unscripted variety-style entertainments such as circus, vaudeville, burlesque, and cabaret. He also turns up in plays and films, not to mention television talk shows and radio programs. In fact, the role of the Master of Ceremonies (MC) is a long-standing performance tradition, with roots in both religious and courtly office, that makes use of a dizzying range of imported and domestic rhetorical, sartorial, and gestural practices. Using performance techniques culled from legal, religious, financial, journalistic, and academic disciplines, the MC has been both voicing and influencing American social sentiment from at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to the most recent Academy Awards show.

The term “Master of Ceremonies” is clearly flexible enough to accommodate a great deal of variation; however, when compared to one another, his theatrical manifestations, over decades and across genres, display a fascinating level of dramaturgical sameness. Picture a “typical” MC, and you will most likely envision an adult male, quite likely white, on a stage, wearing some kind of formal attire, addressing commentary directly to an audience from a physical and/or discursive position “outside” of the show. It does not matter if the show in question is a spectacular circus or a tiny cabaret; the MC possesses a signature set of attributes comprised of these and other dramaturgical components that renders him eerily recognizable despite all his surface malleability. Examining these attributes, through

two main case studies and a number of ancillary examples, is the purpose of this dissertation.

### **The Blind Spot**

An article search in JSTOR on the phrase “Master of Ceremonies” yields a range of almost random-seeming results, from the familiar *Cabaret* figure to a folkloric analysis of “The Rice Ritual in the East Visayan Islands” and a 1904 study on the career of a White House official bearing that title during the Madison Administration. That these far-flung examples could share enough significant structural or performative features to make the same title apply to all is surprising; that all three authors use the same term without any examination of the term itself points to an assumption that it does not require explanation. This fascinating blind spot is not only conceptual but political.

Incurring a great debt to Peggy Phelan’s *Unmarked*, this chapter will show how the key dramaturgical attributes that shape the theatrical Master of Ceremonies are the very tools he uses to create this blind spot. Phelan’s exploration of the power differential operating in all modes of representation hinges on the tendency in “Western metaphysics” to divide the world into binaries, one term or entity being “marked with value”; the other, “unmarked, lacking measured value and meaning.”<sup>1</sup> The power wielded by those marked with value allows them to arrange the world to their liking, in a curious mirror-image of that process:

---

<sup>1</sup> Phelan, 5.

Within this psycho-philosophical frame, cultural reproduction takes she who is unmarked and re-marks her, rhetorically and imagistically, while he who is marked with value is left unremarked, in discursive paradigms and visual fields. He is the norm and therefore unremarkable; as the Other, it is she whom he marks.<sup>2</sup>

This observation supplies a key prompt for this discussion. It is phrased here in terms of sexual difference, but, as Phelan demonstrates, applies forcefully in Western culture to the Other marked with racial and class difference as well. Through my investigation of the Master of Ceremonies, I intend to explore the onstage manifestations of these other binary divisions and Otherings—those related to socioeconomic position (the monster we call “class,” with its attached judgments in the areas of taste, legality, cleanliness, intelligence, morality, etc.), sexual orientation, and more besides. The fascinating aspect of the role is this: the MC can either stand in dramaturgical opposition to the low/Other (as the high term of every binary, holding all of the valuable, “unmarked” cards), or he can appropriate selected markings of Otherness under specific dramaturgical conditions for the purposes of a certain kind of performance (often comic). The only thing he *cannot* do is evade or ignore these divisions. The job of performing the MC role is exactly the job of assuming command of the theatrical environment while displaying visual, gestural, spatial, and verbal signals that broadcast a specific position in all possible binaries, thereby legitimating Western culture’s politically charged sociocultural divisions (even and sometimes especially in the breach). This is why this role is so invisible in both theatre histories and scholarship; it is the embodiment of Phelan’s normative and therefore unremarkable “unremarked,” a figure whose dramaturgical existence celebrates the

---

<sup>2</sup> Phelan, 5.

unseen ordinating classes' power to make and continually reinforce those divisions. I contend that, through the role of the Master of Ceremonies, variety performance forms such as music hall, vaudeville, circus, cabaret, and burlesque, present a specific and politically forceful message about social power—one that has escaped attention precisely because of its ubiquity and its direct relationship to hegemonic norms.

### **Dramaturgical analysis**

How do we identify the stable structural components in unscripted theatrical forms such as variety performance, much less analyze them? How do we describe a theatrical entity such as the MC that exists everywhere but has no original? We become dramaturgs. Throughout this dissertation, the critical lens I use is dramaturgical (versus historical or theoretical) analysis, which, to me, has two significant characteristics: a promiscuous approach to theory and research—whatever resource illuminates a given component is valuable—and an empirical mode of collecting data. This means that, as a dramaturg, I attempt to understand the role of the MC in variety performance in the same way I attempt to understand any character in a play: I read (or watch) very carefully and note what patterns arise.

In the MC, Phelan's power binaries manifest as a set of dramaturgical attributes, which, as I will explore in detail later, work together in performance to both distinguish the MC as a specific and consistent theatrical type and grant him his immense onstage power. They also work to legitimize a specific, coercive political arrangement by presenting a theatrical world ordered and run by a single powerful authority figure. This figure, often coded in various ways as white, affluent, and male

(and so lacking marks of the racial, classed, or gendered Other), embodies this world's source of ontological and interpretive power, lawful order, and legitimate violence.

Firmly installed as the source of power, he commands all available, observable space—both onstage territory and the theatricalized combination of stage and audience space that I call “the world of the room”—and, by so doing, precludes any alternative to this scenario.

Further, theatrical MCs tend to work in two main patterns of behavior, each of which presents this nexus of power differently: “warm control” and “cold control.” It is important to point out that these are patterns of onstage appearance and behavior; the terms “warm-control MC” and “cold-control MC,” where used, refer to the primary tendency each displays, not static type. Any MC, at any moment, in any performance, may utilize components of either of these patterns at will. An MC working in the warm-control pattern will include elements in his performance that produce him as benevolent, stable, mature, and paternalistic. Essentially, he is friendly, though there is much more to this pattern than that. A warm-control MC is the proud and welcoming host who takes pleasure in presenting a smoothly-running show full of impressive and/or charming artistes to his beloved audience. On the other hand is the cold-control pattern MC, who is essentially unfriendly, though again there is much more to it than that. He is the adversarial, complex, sarcastic, and dominating overlord who mocks (and sometimes punishes) performers and crowd alike.

The case studies of “warm-control” and “cold-control” MCs I present in this dissertation do draw deeply on the dramaturgical vocabularies of their respective patterns, though some of the smaller examples are less clear-cut. This dichotomy

allows me to demonstrate that the highest concentration of coercion is actually present where one would least expect to find it: in the “warm” style of MC, who presides over the theatrical space that is his to control by innate, unquestioned right. While the colder style of MC may feel less welcoming, it is this entity that creates room for a critique of coercive power by presenting it as the dangerous result of strategy and force rather than a natural attribute of a specific person or class of people.

Before going too much further, I would like to address the methodological trap lurking in a phrase I have used already: “the MC.” The definitive article deceptively implies a definitive manifestation. Where can we find such a thing in its pure state to serve as the standard for other instances? The answer, of course, is “nowhere.” Research into stage characters can sometimes yield an “original” or “classic” version of that character, based on the publication dates of relevant playscripts and the other usual archival data. Variety-style entertainment leaves few archival artifacts, besides showy posters and newspaper reviews (and those only if they are lucky); moreover, the whole variety enterprise is based on theft and imitation. Any pretense of having defined or located a “true” or “classic” version of the theatrical Master of Ceremonies, then, would be an error. As with folk tales, folk dances, and other forms of vocal or embodied art (the unwritten “repertoire” that Diana Taylor contrasts to the documented “archive”<sup>3</sup>), there is no “real” or “pure” Master of Ceremonies. He exists as a constellation of countless influences and variants scattered across performance genres, countries, and centuries.

---

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, 1-52.

To avoid circular reasoning, I have based my main case studies on examples that self-identify as Masters of Ceremony. The first is the Chairman of the *Broadside Music Hall Revue*, an unscripted faux-Cockney music hall variety show that has been running more or less continuously since 1970. I will also examine a familiar manifestation in scripted work: the Emcee from *Cabaret*. This entity, modeled explicitly on the conférenciers of Berlin cabaret, appropriates signature attributes of the unscripted, popular-performance MC to achieve a specific expressive goal—which, naturally enough, centers on coercive power.

By offering focused dramaturgical analysis of major recurring tendencies in these modern American versions of the MC, I hope to expose the powerful blind spot that the MC inhabits. I hope to demonstrate that the Master of Ceremonies is a type or class of onstage role with stable dramaturgical qualities that can be fruitfully examined, even—or especially—when a given performance seems to alter or subvert them. As I describe these qualities, it will become clear how the host of the Academy Awards, a circus ringmaster, a sideshow talker, the host (or, increasingly, hostess) of neo-burlesque performance, and the announcer of a variety-style or cabaret show all share characteristics that set them visually, spatially, rhetorically, and dramaturgically apart from the other performers over whom they preside. These characteristics, moreover, codify types of power that, taken together, operate almost invisibly to win and exploit the audience's confidence, a political action with exceedingly interesting consequences. Naturally, comic and/or subversive renditions of the MC role certainly exist; they frequently achieve their goals by inverting or undermining one or more of these key power attributes for a specific effect. This is power's mirror image, however,

not its opposite. Since both comic and subversive performance derives humor from showing “what should not happen” happening, the pointed absence of a given power trait in an MC actually proves its centrality to the MC’s power under normal circumstances.

In this chapter, I hope to demonstrate how the MC’s use of these gestures to construct a dramaturgy of authority is fraught with political danger as well as artistic possibility, and how deeply manipulative and deceptive the appearance of simply “announcing” can be. I feel that analysis of this political entity and his relationship to the performances in which we find him will propose a useful shared structural model (or at least a cluster of key tendencies) underlying apparently disparate performance traditions, and show how this role can embody, adapt, or challenge traditional tropes of power. My ultimate goal is to provoke more thoughtful assessment of the complexity and political significance of variety-style performance forms too often dismissed as mere “entertainment.”

### **Character, Figure, and Role in Variety-Style Entertainment**

One of the difficulties in adapting traditional dramaturgical analysis to a theatrical form it was not developed to describe is a lack of purpose-built terminology. In this dissertation, I will adapt the terms “character,” “figure,” and “role,” using them in specific ways to describe discrete aspects or valences of a performer’s presentation as they manifest in variety performance.<sup>4</sup> The word “character” especially requires

---

<sup>4</sup> Here, I use the term “aspects” in its theological sense: the MC can be said to have different “aspects” in much the same way Athena or the Virgin Mary does: discrete, internally consistent, context- and location- dependent manifestations that may incorporate different or even conflicting characteristics,

some revisiting in the context of variety. We certainly know of characters in scripted plays and films, such as the Emcee in *Cabaret*, who execute the duties of the MC and are never or rarely glimpsed outside that role, resulting in a conflation of these two valences. However, the standard, realism-based construct of “character” itself, as a representation of a unique, psychologized being that experiences desires and takes actions to satisfy those desires, is a category of individual performance much more central to realistic drama with printed playscripts than to variety-style performance. A variety performer may certainly talk about his or her “character,” but in this mode of performance, it refers to a different phenomenon: an original, thoroughly flexible and sturdy stage persona, not derived from a printed playscript, that the performer has likely been developing for years.<sup>5</sup> Some personae accompany the performer offstage as well, similar to celebrities’ public personae, which belong to the same category.<sup>6</sup>

Variety performers often base these “characters” largely on themselves. While “in character,” they typically bear a memorable and peculiar name and inflate one or a few of their own personality traits into a solidly performable persona that has the ability to make clear and entertaining theatrical choices. These characters tend to display basic but strong ways of responding to the world, such as aggression, recklessness, wit, avarice, drunkenness, lechery, et cetera. This seemingly simple construction, however, is a device of truly ingenious design. Developing a variety

---

while still being considered a single entity. In another sense, the role of the MC also operates in numerous “valences” during a given performance; like an electron in its shell, any given MC will tend to emphasize a particular set of approaches to (or modalities of) the MC-audience relationship. As opposed to aspects, valences don’t conflict; they’re shells, empty layers of possibility, a set of positions that the electron (or MC performance) in question is more likely to assume than others, and between which it can jump immediately.

<sup>5</sup> Roper, personal interviews, 10 Aug. 2010 and 7 Oct. 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Roach, 12, 39-40. Roach formulates a prominent aspect of this durable persona as the “role-icon.”

character requires a performer to craft an integrated performed self that he or she can productively and entertainingly inhabit for extended periods of unscripted performance time, onstage and sometimes off. It must allow these performers to interact with anyone whom they encounter and respond instantly and theatrically to any unforeseen circumstances that arise without leaving the fiction they inhabit. Obviously, then, “character” clearly does not function in the same way for a variety performer of fifteen years’ tenure (usually as a stable comic type) as it does for a classical actress who strives to learn word-perfect and thoroughly embody a deeply psychological role for a four-month run.

Separate from all of these considerations is “figure.” I use this term to describe the MC from the outside, referencing the striking visual image and performance tropes of the MC as a performing body, evidencing highly stylized attire, attitude, and address, situated in the stylized space of the stage alongside but in contrast to other figures that may share the same space. It is by nature stereotypical; the “figure” of the MC on the covers of popular sheet music, for example, does not necessarily have as its referent any actual character that an individual performer has developed, nor the full set of duties and privileges that constitutes his “role.” The figure of the Master of Ceremonies has a life of its own. As a term, “type” comes close, due to its denotation of dividing stage entities into fairly static, contrasting categories, but “figure” preserves the focus on the visual, especially regarding the item’s outline or shape, as well as the connotations of being singular and confined to a characteristic pose that I find very useful. The “figure” of the MC, for me, includes a striking costume; a signature movement aesthetic, including his use of space as well as his vocabulary of

stylized physical gesture; and a characteristic sound palette, the showman's patterns of cadence, pitch, and volume. Say the following phrase out loud, loudly: "Ladies and Gentlemen!!!" and you will feel what I mean.

Finally, there is the "role" of the Master of Ceremonies. This is an office, a job that a wide range of characters could conceivably execute—although the valences of "role" and "character" can merge to varying degrees in different genres and instances. The MC role, regardless of the character executing it, comes complete with a specific power relationship to the show's other performers and a set of show-related duties that the performer in the role must fulfill. He can fulfill these duties well or badly (there are many bad MCs), but *to fail or neglect to fulfill them is to be something other than an MC*. It is in the sense of his onstage "role" that the MC's performance most directly relates to the dramaturgical structure of the variety show. The nature of the tasks themselves, the many means for successfully fulfilling them that the dramaturgy and aesthetics of the variety-style show places at the MC's disposal, and the theatrical (and political) results of their successful fulfillment, are my chief interests within this study.

An example illustrating the distinction between character and role in a variety context is the aforementioned *Broadside Music Hall Revue*, a comic send-up of a Victorian Cockney Music Hall show staged every winter in San Francisco. This show is run by a performer who serves in the role of the "Chairman," which is that show's Master of Ceremonies.<sup>7</sup> From 2009 to 2012, an actor named Bill Roper played a character named Thaddeus Codswallop who held the Chairman's role. Codswallop is a sturdy and flexible performance construct that Bill has developed, as his personal,

---

<sup>7</sup> Roper, perf., *The Broadside Music Hall Revue*, 11 Dec. 2010.

mobile theatrical persona. Thaddeus Codswallop could, for instance, be theatrically “fired” from the Chairmanship, and relinquish those duties, but that would not change Codswallop’s character psychology. Roper could even continue to perform in the show as Codswallop with no harm to the fiction of the show. Alternately, the show’s director could assign the role of the Chairman to another performer’s character in Bill’s absence, which I did during the show’s 2010 run, entrusting it to performer Dan Morgan as his character Obediah Feltrup, who assumed the role permanently in 2012. Obediah Feltrup did not, as a result of this promotion, change in any theatrical aspect save that of how much power he could wield onstage. His character’s comic tendencies, previously contained by Codswallop’s authority, suddenly had free rein, limited only by his new responsibilities in keeping the show running smoothly and on time. In either case, the role belongs to the show that uses it, while the character belongs to the performer who has developed it.

Meanwhile, the *Cabaret* Emcee represents a different balance between character and role; both the 1972 film and the 2014 stage version make use of the unstable relationship between the two to demonstrate the insidious power that the combination represents, by shifting suddenly between them, and, at different times, seeming to blend one into the territory of the other. We rarely see this character operate outside the set of the MC’s duties and privileges; he does not even have a name other than “Emcee.” Even when the camera follows him offstage (within the world of the film) or backstage, he continues to play the character of the performer who takes on the role of the MC in the local cabaret, but also seems to carry with him the MC’s right to address and judge others.

As further examples from contrasting performance modes, I offer the hosts of the Academy Awards ceremonies, who also perform a kind of character that predates and follows their duties as MC: their public media personae, which they inhabit before and during their service in the role of MC and retain once that role has been fulfilled. At the other end of the cultural spectrum, we find a similar formula; the MCs for economically priced burlesque and drag shows are often burlesque and/or drag performers themselves, with well-developed performance personae that they inhabit onstage and off. These characters precede the performer's taking on the MC's duties, and continue to enrobe the performer once these duties are completed, either at the end of the show or when they set down the microphone for a moment and perform in the show themselves.

One more definition: I use the modifier "variety" in this paper to distinguish the forms of theatre under consideration from all scripted theatrical forms, no matter how variegated or experimental, especially those based in narrative, such as comedies or dramas, as well as from all scripted forms of theatre. This distinguishing term conveys one of the key structural tendencies that makes a cross-genre dramaturgical study of the Master of Ceremonies role possible in the first place. Live entertainment forms such as vaudeville, cabaret, music hall, circus, and burlesque share two main structural similarities: the set of discrete "acts," "bits," or "turns" that make up the show's menu, and some form of Master of Ceremonies who addresses the audience directly as he begins, conducts, contextualizes, and concludes each show's set of performances. Circuses have ringmasters; burlesque and vaudeville shows, like the Oscars, have MCs or hosts; and cabarets have conférenciers. Even during pre-

television technological crazes such as that for “magic lantern shows”<sup>8</sup> and “illustrated songs,”<sup>9</sup> the announcer operating the machine also introduced the show, recited the narrative that linked the images, and described what the audiences were (supposed to be) seeing. This practice continues in amusement park rides such as Disneyland’s “Haunted Mansion,” with its recorded voice track of its male, narrativizing, contextualizing “Ghost Host.” Even in the shabbiest “vaude houses,” where each act was announced only by harried theatre staff changing the numbered placard on an easel (numbers which corresponded to the printed bill for the evening), this combined machine fulfilled the function of a Master of Ceremonies—though you could also easily say that a Master of Ceremonies combines the function of billboard and bill. The easel was placed in a specific, separate location coded as different from the actual “stage,” not unlike a Master of Ceremonies; the bill contained not only factual information such as an artist’s name and the title of her/his act, but also energetic illustrations and verbal ballyhoo designed to increase audience interest. These two structural components—a set of varied entertainments and a single narrator/announcer/storyteller whose unscripted thread of oratory stitches them together—are the two necessary ingredients for a “variety” show.

### **Early Appearances of the MC**

“Master of Ceremonies” is an impressive-sounding title, and if it sounds grandly archaic, that is because it is a very *old* title. In the Catholic Church, the Master

---

<sup>8</sup> Oberdeck, 102.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, 17-20.

of Ceremonies (MC) is an office that dates back at least as far as 1886, and possibly to 1600 or earlier.<sup>10</sup> The MC traditionally assists the celebrant in conducting the more formal religious rituals of the faith. As discussed in the *Ceremonial of the Roman Rite Described* [CRR], the MC’s duty is to ensure that the ritual is conducted smoothly and correctly by signaling to the participants the proper time to begin or end certain processes, and by presenting or withdrawing important ritual garments or objects as they are needed. In many rituals, this office is duplicated, with a first MC—who must be a priest—addressing the needs of the celebrant, and a second MC—who may still be in sacred orders—focusing on the other participants.

Interestingly, the CRR warns MCs against drawing attention to themselves: “his movements must be purposeful and kept to a minimum,”<sup>11</sup> “On no account should the MC wave or cause any unbecoming distraction,”<sup>12</sup> and instructs that “Clapping or clicking of the fingers is repugnant: it is better to say ‘genuflect’ softly but sufficiently loudly to be heard by those in the sanctuary.”<sup>13</sup> Only on rare occasions does the MC address the congregation; one such instance is during the Papal Blessing, which happens only three times per year,<sup>14</sup> during which “The MC or some other priest may [ . . . ] usefully tell the congregation (if this has not been previously done) about the plenary indulgence, and the conditions for gaining it (confession, Holy Communion, prayer for the Pope’s intentions—a *Pater* and an *Ave*—and being free from all

---

<sup>10</sup> Fortescue, Reid, and O’Connell state in *Ceremonies of the Roman Rite Described* that they have consulted the 1886 edition of the *Caeremoniale Episcoporum* (CE) for clarifications of the MC role. The first edition of the CE was published in 1600, combining and revising the *Ordines Romani*, a collection of assorted materials, some as old as the seventh century. Further research will be needed to determine the MC’s very first appearance in these works.

<sup>11</sup> Fortescue, Reid, and O’Connell, 121.

<sup>12</sup> Fortescue, Reid, and O’Connell, 125.

<sup>13</sup> Fortescue, Reid, and O’Connell, 126.

<sup>14</sup> Fortescue, Reid, and O’Connell, 223-224.

attachment to sin, including venial sin.”<sup>15</sup> During the same service, “the MC (or some priest, in surplice) reads the announcement of the blessing, in Latin and the vernacular.”<sup>16</sup> Finally, a Christmas Day article in the *Washington Post* on the current Master of Ceremonies in the Vatican, Guido Marini, reveals ways in which the MC can influence the style of the performance of religious rite, which can clearly spark considerable controversy.<sup>17</sup>

Parallels between dramaturgical properties of this role and the “showbiz” MC emerge instantly. The Catholic MC must be at least on his way to being ordained, and therefore traditionally male. He is charged with monitoring and regulating the behavior of others, even others operating in roles more visible (made-to-be-seen) than his. The large majority of his duties are to be carried out as invisibly (unmarkedly) as possible, but he can exert a powerful influence on the style of the performance. And the information that he imparts directly to the congregation is, most would say, important: instruction on how to achieve the salvation of their souls, followed by the announcement of the Pope’s blessing, a notification that they are about to experience an actual change in spiritual status (from unblessed to blessed). Clearly, congregations trained through ritual observance to attend to and receive such important announcements are conditioned also to receive other kinds of information in situations that are similarly coded with respect to a speaking authority; the variety MC borrows from religious announcement dramaturgies at least some of his signature style of address.

---

<sup>15</sup> Fortescue, Reid, and O’Connell, 224.

<sup>16</sup> Fortescue, Reid, and O’Connell, 224.

<sup>17</sup> Horowitz, 2010.

Another role with a similar title appears as a political office in mid-1600s England. According to *Office-Holders in Modern Britain* (OHMB), King James I established the “Master of the Ceremonies” as an appointed office with the duty of formally presenting visiting dignitaries to the English royal court.<sup>18</sup> The following description of the role appears in the 1720 edition of *The Present State of the British Court* (PSBC):

This Office was instituted by K. James I. for the more solemn and honourable reception of Ambassadors and Strangers of Quality, whom he introduces into the Presence. The Badge of his Office is a Gold Chain and Medal, having on one side an Emblem of Peace, with K. James’s Motto, and on the reverse the Emblem of War, with Dieu & Mondroit [sic]. He is always suppos’d to be a Person of good Address, and Master of Languages. He is constantly attending at Court, and has under him an Assistant, Master, or Deputy, who holds his Place during the King’s Pleasure. There is also a third Officer call’d Marshall of the Ceremonies, whose Business is to [re]ceive and distribute the Master’s Orders, or the Deputy’s, for the Service; but without their Order can do nothing. *In the King’s Gift*.<sup>19</sup>

Again, certain dramaturgical parallels and their implications are striking. This Master of (the) Ceremonies is specifically charged with introducing individuals paying a temporary visit, and, if other forms of introduction in the English Renaissance are any indication, delivering in the process a carefully crafted and hyper-consciously performed verbal assessment of their importance. The MC’s role was also encoded in his singular attire. He—for in this society any public speaking office was unthinkable for a woman, with the notable and controversial exception of Queen Elizabeth—also bore a conspicuous badge of office. Discussing one contemporary portrait of Sir

---

<sup>18</sup> “Dependent Sub-departments: Ceremonies 1660-1837,” *Office-Holders in Modern Britain: Volume 11 (revised): Court Officers, 1660-1837*.

<sup>19</sup> *The present state of the British court &c*, 1720.

Charles Cotterell, Master of the Ceremonies to King Charles II, Eisler describes the badge as “elaborate” and “even more impressive than the [Order of the] Garter”<sup>20</sup>. Even more interestingly, this badge carries intensely conflicting messages on its two faces, tensions operating in the function of the Master of the Ceremonies himself. One side bears the legend *Beati Pacifici* (“blessed are the peacemakers”); the other, *Dieu et Mon Droit* (“God and my right,” referring to the doctrine of the divine right of kings, an absolute power of life or death over those ruled, subject to no earthly authority). These opposing valences were bound together in one concrete symbol, with the subtle and perilous fluctuations between them reliant on and conveyed through countless shifting performative cues.

Clearly, this courtly MC, as opposed to his clerical counterpart, was in the business of drawing attention. The PSBC’s requisite that the Master of the Ceremonies be “a Person of good Address” indicates a role involving extensive and skilled public speaking, a crucial skill considering the often-bloody results of failed diplomacy in the period. However, a complex form of unmarkedness persists: the success of this MC would also depend on his pronouncements being read by the Court as truth or fact on some levels—as not (but also, in numerous diplomatically useful ways, not entirely distinct from) his personal opinion; he must strategically perform performing transparency and neutrality.

The requirement that he be a “Master of Languages” is clearly related to his duties as verbal representative of “Ambassadors and Strangers of Quality” from other lands, but also hints at a need to master the political and performative languages of the

---

<sup>20</sup> Eisler, p. 151.

Court; that he is supposed to be “constantly attending at Court” indicates the importance of his staying close to the center of power and keeping abreast of both the most minute shifts in the political landscape and the countless highly context-dependent verbal and nonverbal signals used to express and respond to them. Here, comparisons to the “Emcee” from Fosse’s film *Cabaret* feel inevitable: his greeting, “Wilkommen, Bienvenue, Welcome” to every “Freimdich, Étranger, Stranger” that begins the show’s introductory musical number confirms both his confident polyglossia and his diplomatic duty of introduction. The sharp satire he stages in subsequent music numbers is highly context-dependent and engages in the same practice of performing peace to mask a threat, attacking that which he portrays (and those for whom he portrays them) under the cheerful guise of mere entertainment.

The courtly office of Master of the Ceremonies also commanded a salary of £200 per year, paid directly from the Crown (“In the King’s Gift”), with an allowance of £100 added in 1686. However, the person holding this office could also expect that his income would be supplemented by gifts from departing ambassadors.<sup>21</sup> This illustrates a possibly sizeable conflict of interest facing the courtly MC. To maximize the benefit to himself (by presenting visitors in a positive light) while still executing his duties to the Crown, he must demonstrate truly extraordinary skill in performance: he must flatter without being seen to flatter unduly; present information in such a way that it reads as truth, not personal opinion; and indicate the various rank and status of the parties involved through use of a complex calculus of performative cues; all while observing the formal and political constraints of his official mode of address at the

---

<sup>21</sup> *Office-Holders in Modern Britain*, 114.

royal court. We see here that variety entertainment's frequent tension between the stage and house has old roots; playing the audience (or monarch) off the soloists (or visitor)—and vice versa—is familiar territory inextricable from commerce and ripe for creative exploitation for the performer in the MC role.

### **The MC in America: origins**

At the time of this writing, not much scholarship has accumulated on the performances of theatrical Master of Ceremonies in America. Even research work specifically addressing the kinds of 19<sup>th</sup>-century amusements built around an MC mention this role in passing, if at all, a tendency that aligns with Phelan's description of invisible, unremarked power. As one example, John Springhall's otherwise excellent book *The Genesis of Mass Culture: Show Business Live in America, 1840-1940* is nevertheless typical in its focus on the individual acts and the business of American entertainments, overlooking MCs almost entirely. His chapter on P.T. Barnum makes no mention of his use of MCs in any of the showman's ventures; his chapter on blackface minstrelsy names famed "Interlocutor" E.P. Christy once, then never returns to the subject; his chapter on the history of the circus makes no mention of the role of ringmaster whatsoever, his chapter on Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show mentions longtime MC Frank Richmond in a solitary sentence, and nothing more.<sup>22</sup>

We do know that, originally, the MC role was chiefly functional. His work onstage often combined with substantial offstage duties and privileges, such as when the house manager or theatre owner served this function, especially in smaller cities

---

<sup>22</sup> Springhall, p. 67, 120.

and towns. This has made it difficult to locate a point of origin for the specifically theatrical version of this role in America. Additionally, what was to become “American theatre” did not simply spring out fully formed once the string of scrappy colonies won their independence; it was a grab bag of styles and performers that, to modern eyes, would probably resemble chaos. Major theatrical influences from England included Shakespeare<sup>23</sup> and Music Hall, and even when American theatres jettisoned British content as unsuitable for a new nation of rational republican men (I use the term “men” advisedly; women’s attendance at the theatre was limited and policed by a dense network of social mores), many of the inherited structural features remained. In the first two-thirds of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an evening’s entertainment typically consisted of a varied set of acts—scenes from Shakespeare and opera interspersed with jugglers, singers, gymnasts and animal acts.<sup>24</sup> With all of this going on, clearly *someone* needed to call the shots, if only to keep the horses from treading on the monkeys.

Stage management aside, what led showmen to devise the MC as a *theatrical* role? What problems were they trying to solve? One answer is economic. Early American theatre was by definition commercial. Theatre historians, especially those who have spent time exploring American popular entertainment, have pointed out various ways in which the emergence of the economic middle class during the mid-1800s affected theatrical culture.<sup>25</sup> One result that is quite significant to my investigation of the Master of Ceremonies, is that theatrical entertainment became split

---

<sup>23</sup> Levine, p. 11-82.

<sup>24</sup> Levine, p. 21-33.

<sup>25</sup> Bank, 47-59. See also McConachie, 147-176.

into “high” and “low,” with “respectable” persons shunning all performances deemed vulgar or unrefined. In order to increase profits, then, proprietors had to devise ways to soothe the anxieties over social and moral “cleanliness” versus “contamination” that came to characterize this new “middle” class—while still providing some kind of thrill.<sup>26</sup>

Two men who sensed that massive profit was available to those who could achieve this were P.T. Barnum and B.F. Keith. To assure their image-conscious middle-class audiences that they were attending respectable houses of entertainment, each of these two men, in his own way, constructed a sort of MC role for himself: a strong, patriarchal, largely discursive figure whose purpose was to firmly instruct theatergoers both in proper theatre-going etiquette and in proper interpretation of the performances they saw. Their strategies differed; Keith, a strict disciplinarian who fired acts for small errors, made much of the “refinement” of his shows, flatly stating that nothing objectionable could possibly be seen in his theatres because he, Mr. Keith, forbade it. This maneuver functioned to preclude any objection to the sometimes-frank performances on his lavish stages by categorizing offense as interpretive error.<sup>27</sup>

Barnum concocted a more complex MC persona by repeatedly informing his public that, though his dime museum exhibits might *seem* sensational (and much ink was spilled describing how very sensational they seemed), the Barnum collections were actually shrines to scientific and moral education, with himself at the apex of this

---

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Erdman examines this successful formula in detail in *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals, and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915*.

<sup>27</sup> Erdman, 2-3.

empire as its great curator.<sup>28</sup> Each man created a strong, autocratic, paternalistic public persona that broadcast a clear interpretive stance on the entertainment on offer, forcefully and preemptively limiting the available interpretations of all occurrences within their venues. By doing this, each was able to heavily influence the reality his audiences experienced, and to craft this experience into one that they found both reassuring and exciting enough to pay for. Both Keith and Barnum became millionaires.

The particular performative circumstances the performers faced also favored the creation of the theatrical role of the MC in early variety, vaudeville, circus, and burlesque performance. Venues could offering any number of challenges, including but not limited to: the serving of alcohol causing audience inattention and/or over-zealous participation in the show; high noise levels resulting from audience socializing and uncooperative acoustics; the heterogeneity of their immigrant urban audiences who often lacked a common language, much less a foundation of shared context; and small, poorly-equipped stages. Proprietors had to consider these factors as well, and turn a random assortment of performers representing a grab bag of types and talents into “a show” worth paying for. This required the host to either become or engage a single performer with an authoritative presence who would bring order to the stage and house while providing information about the acts and instructing the audience in matters of decorum and taste. This was the path that many “song and supper clubs” took in London, producing the Music Hall’s Chairman,<sup>29</sup> a path that in Montmartre

---

<sup>28</sup> Springhall, 22-35.

<sup>29</sup> Garrett, 3.

produced the cabaret conf rencier,<sup>30</sup> and in New York gave rise to the concert saloon’s master of ceremonies.<sup>31</sup> In these examples, with control as his purpose and the proprietor as his model, even the earliest theatrical MC would find benefit in theatrically appropriating signals of power to strengthen his authority and allow him to run the show.

In dramaturgical terms, “running the show” is a massive task. Variety-style performance, like much performance in general, captures and dramatizes tensions from the outside world, even in its structure: variety dramaturgy in particular recapitulates widespread, contentious, even violent sociopolitical processes unfolding in America as the cities rose and attracted wealth, industry, and immigrants, and as the new “middle class” sought and discovered conceptual distinctions to make between themselves and those lower than themselves. Variety-style dramaturgy mirrors this social tension, pitting the “low-other” group of variegated, mismatched performers that comprise the show against the power of the MC, the onstage representative of what Barbara Berglund calls the “ordinating classes”<sup>32</sup> and Lawrence Levine describes as, “official culture.”<sup>33</sup> This, I feel, is the main reason that a successful MC’s performance must incorporate such a wide a range of performative signals that indicate or support so many kinds of high status—like Barnum and Keith, he must be the authority, demonstrably in charge of everything around him, a representative of the elite masterfully displaying the curious, attractive, and unusual in small bites to thrill those careful, “respectable” middle class audiences, while protecting those anxious

---

<sup>30</sup> Appignanesi, 17.

<sup>31</sup> McNamara, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Berglund, 1-16.

<sup>33</sup> Levine, 1-82.

people from any chance of social or other contamination through his firm control of available interpretations of the performance event.

### **Dramaturgical attributes of the contemporary MC**

How does the MC achieve the necessary authoritative presence, dramaturgically speaking? Among other features, MCs share three key theatrical attributes. First is his **dramaturgical singularity**, a central-yet-outside relationship—discursive, structural, and usually spatial—to the rest of the show.<sup>34</sup> Next is a uniformly **high onstage status**, especially as supported by aspects of his appearance, interactions with others, and control of the performance space. Last is his practice of **direct address**, the conceit that allows the MC to claim so much power of so many kinds. You will, no doubt, notice some slippage and overlap in these traits as we proceed; the divisions I make are provisional, merely useful. This is because all three traits interrelate on a deep level: direct address and dramaturgical singularity can contribute to high status, high status and direct address support dramaturgical singularity, and this curious dramaturgical singularity combines with high status to

---

<sup>34</sup> While this phrase may look like a careless combination of mismatched spatial terms, it actually expresses a point I want to make about the unique dramaturgical relationship of the MC to the rest of the performers in “his” show. The exact problem is that the MC’s relationship to the show actually does embody both of the two different models of opposition central/peripheral and inside/outside—but only one term of each opposition applies to him. The MC is the central point, the hub, around which the show’s acts spin. He is singular; the other performers all share a category. The opposite of “central” would seem to be “periphery,” of course, but that does not apply to the MC, since the periphery can be occupied by any number of other peripheral roles or characters who share a similar relationship to the hub, and again, the MC is a singularity. Also, a role or character in the periphery of the stage fiction tends to relate still to that fiction in the same way as the other characters onstage, with the added characteristic of being farther away or less important; that hardly describes the MC’s relationship to the stage fiction. He not only runs the show; he sees and knows things they do not. “Outside,” then, describes the other half of the MC’s ambivalent dramaturgy best, since that term places him in an oppositional yet singular relationship to the batch or team of characters whose members all participate at a similar level in the shared fiction of the show.

support the conceit of direct address. To provide a better sense of how this works, I will explain each of these attributes briefly before exploring them in more depth.

A signal part of the MC’s central-yet-outside relationship to the rest of the show is his **dramaturgical singularity**. No one else on stage exists in his peculiar dramaturgical reality, which exists both deep inside and far outside the show. He manages the other performers on the stage, but most of the time is not one of them; he is also both part of and apart from the audience. While he may choose to join a number or execute a solo turn, when it concludes, he returns to his own realm. No one else shares his onstage status or space, nor does anyone else execute his onstage tasks.

This is one of the dramaturgical tendencies that some performances transgress or invert, with interesting results. Some variety shows boast a pair of MCs, such as the televised Academy Awards ceremony and, on the local, street-price level, Oakland’s Hubba Hubba Burlesque Revue. However, these interesting instances actually produce twin MCs—binary stars located together onstage and operating in tandem—rather than two discrete Masters of Ceremonies.



Using more than two MCs in a performance, as the Oscars program is wont to do, dilutes the role's power in interesting ways; not only does each additional participant dilute the MC's power by sharing it among a larger number of performers, but the role itself diminishes in power; this kind of show relies less on the MCs' direct control and appears to run almost by itself.

The MC's central-yet-outside attribute also refers to his dramaturgical pattern of **interstitial framing**. In most variety-style theatre, the MC's performance encloses the performances of all others who appear on his stage, preceding them with introductions and following each of them with a transition "bit" leading to the next introduction. On a larger scale, the MC opens and closes the show, enclosing its entire narrative arc within his own performance. This framing allows the MC to do powerful political work. Using this technique, the MC is able to provide continuity and context for what might otherwise be a chaotic experience. But he also forecloses alternate interpretive possibilities by constantly contextualizing events in accordance with his own (the show's own) cultural categories and priorities. By telling the audience what they are about to see, and then telling them what they just saw, the MC influences what they do see, and in effect, what exists.

The MC also displays uniformly **high onstage status**. His appearance and demeanor always display characteristics that raise him above the other performers (and often the audience) in certain theatrically legible ways. Typical components of this high onstage status include appearance markers that identify him as a member of various power elites, such as formal attire and a traditional tendency to be white and

male. In fact, both his attire and his actual sexed/gendered/raced/classed/aged/able body generally occupy the “high” end of any high-low binary applied to it. His high onstage status also involves spatial markers, such as a designated onstage performance area physically separated from the other performers/performances, and a gestural freedom indicating mastery of the space in which he moves. Instances that deviate from these patterns generally make artistic or social comment by doing so.

The MC in variety-style entertainment also engages in **direct address** to the audience. Dramaturgically, this combines with interstitial framing to operate in a number of significant ways. Through his introductions, he dictates the local reality, presenting the audience with specific perspectives on the show and the individual acts over which he presides that shape their experience of it. This act makes it more difficult, and even undesirable, for them to pursue alternative interpretative frames. This interpretive and contextualizing function is a fundamental dramaturgical attribute of an MC.

He uses a rhetorical style that draws heavily on other direct-address genres to inform, persuade, and confront the audience. He also adopts oratorical techniques, jargon, and reference sets of numerous high-status roles from other performance genres not explicitly linked to art or entertainment; the judge, the auctioneer, the preacher, the academician, the journalist, and the politician have all donated (sometimes unwillingly or unwittingly) their dramaturgies—including their own iterations of singularity, framing, high status, and direct address—to their ballyhooing cousins. In doing this, an MC appropriates these elite groups’ sociocultural power as well, creating a valuable onstage commodity I call “synthetic authority.”

These are the main attributes—dramaturgical singularity, high onstage status, and direct address—that, combined, produce the surprisingly stable, highly codified figure of the Master of Ceremonies. This figure has the immense power to define reality for the audience, a power that takes on a real, political dimension because of performance’s power to naturalize and legitimize the arrangements it presents. Therefore, the stage figure of the economically (and otherwise) “superior” white male authority figure standing apart from a variegated, chaotic “show” and controlling it, while assessing its truth and/or value draws authority from the very real social power of his offstage counterparts, even as the presentation of such a stage figure reinforces the social power of real-life patriarchs by repeatedly and entertainingly proposing worlds in which this type of person naturally controls reality.

### **The MC’s dramaturgical singularity**

The MC is not just another part of the show, not fully allied to either house or stage (and potentially inimical to both). Rather, the MC is a singularity. In fact, this peculiar singularity is a hallmark of his dramaturgy across all of the many variety genres in which he appears. The MC’s relationship to onstage others, in terms of dramaturgy, includes his peculiar register of hyper-visibility and invisibility (he is in the show but not of it, or vice versa), the chronological extension of his duties before and after any given “act” he introduces, and the consistency of his performed persona in contrast to the motley progression of variety acts. Traditionally, there is only one of him on the stage at any one time; he is not, for instance, part of a team in identical costumes. Even when events feature two MCs, as do many Academy Awards

ceremonies and the productions of the *Hubba Hubba Burlesque Revue*, the pair of performers in the role still fulfill the same tasks and are attired similarly; they form a binary that is singular in terms of its relationship to the rest of the acts in the show.

The Oscars ceremony in 2010, for example, featured Steve Martin and Alec Baldwin as twin hosts in almost-identical tuxedos; the tension produced by splitting the MC role between two bodies produces the comedy behind a promotional shot of the two men sharing a “Snuggie,” a cozy blanket/robe usually designed for one person; the photo’s comic illusion of Martin and Baldwin sharing a connected body acknowledges the split and attempts to fuse them back together.



Fig. 1.1a (repeat): Steve Martin and Alec Baldwin host the Oscars in near-identical tuxes.



Fig. 1.1c: Binary MC pair Alec Baldwin and Steve Martin sharing a Snuggie. Photo: Ed Bark

Meanwhile, the 2011 ceremonies featured two similarly aged, early-career actors, Anne Hathaway and James Franco, both attired consistently in luxe formalwear, including the pair’s mirror-image drag sequence. This image does similar comic work as the Martin/Baldwin images; it signals the tension caused by splitting the MC role

between two bodies by problematizing their difference through a comically excessive and incongruous gesture of equivalence.



Fig 1.2: Cross-dressed hosts Anne Hathaway and James Franco at the 83<sup>rd</sup> Academy Awards ceremony. Photo: Mark J. Terrill

To be singular is also to be set apart. This unmoors the MC’s performance from the limitations of a single rhetorical or gestural context, allowing him the freedom to shift between or layer multiple reference sets at will; this capacity contributes to the MC’s “trickster” tendencies toward shapeshifting, code-switching, and gender bending. This can be seen in the performances of both Joel Grey and Alan Cumming as the *Cabaret* Emcee, as well as drag performer “Eddie,” who serves as the “Mistress of Sensuality” in Cirque du Soleil’s cabaret-themed “adult” show *Zumanity*.

Singularity renders the MC powerful, conspicuous, exceptional, and significant—possessed of the uncanny, intense power of the sacred/profane object or person. The Master of Ceremonies embodies pure, amoral, extralinguistic force, sheer intensity and velocity before many of the received cultural binaries rush in to classify

its nature or effect: good and evil, classical and grotesque, desirable and dangerous, intimacy and violation, male and female. He oscillates inside and between the terms of all such binaries—except one: high status versus low status.

To address singularity in terms of onstage location, the MC will often seem to claim and control a “home base” area on the stage. The space set aside for the MC in the geography of the stage is exactly that—set aside. This space can be a temporary space repeatedly established on the stage by a spotlight, which changes when the MC enters it and reverts to its prior state once the MC leaves it, or it can be a stationary area and/or monument, such as a podium, located off to one side of the stage. Whether mobile or static, the MC owns the space he is in, which his performance makes clear through a variety of markers and cues, including his physical calm and stillness within it; his uncontested, constant or repeated presence within it; and the fact that others on stage decline to intrude into it except by permission or invitation.

The *Cabaret* Emcee has a mobile home base, as does Edie, the *Zumanity* MC, and the “inside talker” for the Coney Island Circus Sideshow. In this space, though numerous performances can occur, it belongs to none of the other performers in the same way as it does the MC.

Alternately, many MCs enjoy a home base that provides a view of the other performances and audience from a location coded as “outside” the performance (geographically, but also dramaturgically). In the *Broadside Music Hall Revue*, for instance, a massive oak barrel at the downstage left edge of the stage platform serves as the Chairman’s onstage station of power.

Where the MC's space is marked with a physical object, this object actually distorts and magnetizes the space of the stage. It becomes a landmark or monument of power, much like the urban monuments Henri Lefebvre analyzes in *The Production of Space*.<sup>35</sup> With the world of the room functioning as a society in little, its different areas and monuments represent the urban landscape, mirroring its spatial and therefore necessarily political relations. The position of other performers' bodies relative to this monument means something in the power scheme of the stage. Relations of property and permission arise, since the MC has the power to allow or disallow other performers to occupy this space.

Naturally, any given stage position another performer occupies relative to the barrel can indicate several different or even opposite relationships to power, depending on how this position meshes with other performative signals the performing body conveys. For example, high-status-marked bodies close to this nexus of power can read as near-equals, while low-status bodies read as toadies or suplicants; high-status bodies far away from it can be fellows or competitors, while low-status bodies far away become outcasts or monsters. There is no neutral position with respect to a monument of power on the stage.

The MC and his monument form a dyad of signified power, a binary system. This signal is strongest when they share the same space, when the MC stands at his monument and performs from that location. Forays away from the monument, again, read as exactly that: forays, temporary trips, destined to resolve in the MC's return to his rightful place once he completes the presently necessary task. In fact, when the

---

<sup>35</sup> Lefebvre, 220-229.

MC leaves the monument, his power is divided between himself (his body), and the object of power he has left behind. If the MC leaves his monument, a field of tension—however strong or weak—appears in the space between the two, like a stretched rubber band. The tension this produces is two-sided; it anticipates both his return (and the resulting reassuring consolidation of power into one locus), and at the same time reveals the possibility that he will not return, rendering the monument and the power it signals vulnerable, available for usurpation or theft.

The MC's dramaturgical practice of framing turns his singularity into political power. The MC sets the entire show in motion by providing a big introduction, invites us to enjoy ourselves . . . and then, we think, the show begins. I find it intriguing that from an audience point of view, the show proper does not really begin until the MC's introduction concludes, not until the first act takes the stage—as though the MC's performance is coded as something *other* than “the show.” The end of the “show” presents a similar scenario. Once the final act ends, so does “the show,” rendering the MC's parting address a strange non-show presentation, suspended between fiction and truth while dealing in both. This is one way in which the MC, while undeniably visible, is also invisible in strategic ways, a trait reminiscent not only of the Catholic version of the role, but of Peggy Phelan's theories of the unmarked, which I will discuss, and to which I owe a great deal in developing my overall argument.

The MC's style of framing is interstitial as well as initial/final. He introduces each act, then reenters after the act concludes to deliver his assessment of its quality or value—for instance, by calling for applause. Once the audience has responded to his assessment, he introduces the following act, and so on. This interstitial pattern of

taking position both before and after every individual instance of “performance” gives the MC key structural properties of recurrence (as opposed to acts that appear only once) and continuity (he stays the same while the other performers vary); these properties encourage audiences to look to him as a reliable baseline for their own experience. At the end of the show—that is, after the final act has concluded—the MC delivers a farewell or closing speech; this farewell, like his introduction, operates in a peculiar performance register that is not exactly the show, but is also *not* not the show.

### **Interstitial Framing: Vaudeville, the American Success Narrative, and the MC**

Vaudeville has been described as the ultimate American form of entertainment, a democratic meritocracy where any average Joe could work up his act, show it to an audience, and succeed.<sup>36</sup> This appealing and powerful trope relies for its strength on a related-but-submerged truth about the mechanisms of power and cultural legitimacy in America. Rather than a forum encouraging a free-for-all of varied popular expression, what vaudeville actually provided was a highly structured opportunity for the average Joe to attempt to perform and inhabit the middle-class fantasia of the American success narrative. When this forum was presided over by an MC, his pointed commentary indicated clearly how successful the individual performer had been.

The narrative goes like this: the individual starts out in the world; the individual encounters difficulties; the individual proves himself worthy, triumphs over these difficulties and attains “success.” The dramaturgy of almost all male vaudeville routines recapitulates this success narrative, clothed in a stunning range of forms.

---

<sup>36</sup> “*Vaudeville*,” PBS, 1997.

After being introduced by the MC, a juggler steps on stage, establishes his character, goes through some easy tricks, encounters difficulties (or makes it look like he does), and then ends his act with his most difficult trick, followed by a triumphant flourish and bow to the audience as he basks in their applause and his new, higher status. A tap duo enters the stage; they begin by doing some flashy steps together; they diverge into a tap-off where each shows his own particular skills, trying to out-dance the other; and then (with the contest ending in a draw, but their individuality proven) they come together again for a difficult and impressive finale in unison—followed by triumphant grins and the classic final pose, arms outstretched. In a straight singing routine, the performer enacts the success arc by either working up to an impressively difficult note or flourish, or by performatively highlighting the song's lyrics, which will usually follow this narrative structure; very good song performers do both. Even odd and obscure acts such as paper-cutters, glass-swallowers, and strong men adhere to the success narrative, which powerfully yokes the Aristotelian dramatic arc (rising action-crisis-falling action) to the cultural values embraced increasingly in American cultural rhetoric and law as the middle class began forming in the mid-1800s: individuality, hard work, facing the ultimate challenge, and ultimate success—all in the project of achieving social legitimacy.

The fact that some routines—generally comic ones—end with the performer being defeated and accepting failure (and the MC's derision) actually proves the rule. These routines depict the unexpected, inversions of norms, what should *not* happen. Their humor lies in a validation of the social values of the success narrative by

showing its obverse: an unsuitable person attempts in an incorrect way to attain a success he misunderstands or somehow does not deserve, and fails.

Each term in this comic equation reveals the American success narrative's hegemonic force. "Unsuitability" and "deserving" are cultural determinations made by applying a complex calculus of social and moral values to various traits displayed in performance by the performer/character. This calculus also applies to the "incorrect" ways to achieve success, as well as to the appropriate vs. inappropriate goals for the character to prize as constitutive of success. A character that strives openly for money or power, for example, falls afoul of American cultural and moral rhetoric (though not practice); therefore it is inappropriate—hence comic—for the character to baldly pursue those goals. The inevitable result of this inverted, comic narrative is that the unsuitable character is punished for his "mistake"; he is either returned firmly to his rightful, usually humble place in society, or he is set back even farther, sometimes covered in cream pie, losing even the low status he had at the outset of the act.

Replicating this narrative theatrically validates it in a number of powerful ways. Its apparent democratic nature (and a desire for social legibility) enlists non-normative performers into the cultural project of centralizing and concretizing hegemonic values by encouraging them to both embody and retell the American success narrative—one that, in reality, is designed to exclude them. In addition to recapitulating the success narrative within the dramaturgy of the act, the performer also attempts to participate in it materially by crafting an act that, with repeated successful performances, will bring him enhanced status and monetary gains.

The involvement of the “individual” in the American success narrative also should not go unnoticed; our Horatio Alger hero is classical, closed, impermeable, fixed, and either free of non-normative identity markers (such as femaleness or non-Christian religion) or comically emphasizing them so as to capitalize on the spectacle of their strangeness. The success narrative of the variety-style show on the whole involves the MC first establishing his authority and the rules of the show; this could be why we do not consider the show to have started when he begins speaking; he must first demonstrate the rules. Then, over the course of the acts, the show increases in energy until it reaches a crisis point of intensity and/or spectacle; then the MC asserts mastery over all elements again for a harmonious, group finale under his leadership. He closes off the show with his concluding performance, the other end of the frame, and bids the audience good night.

### **MC’s high status as appearance, interactions, and control of space**

Our second dramaturgical point of entry is the MC’s uniformly high onstage status. The performance signals for “high status” are myriad and vary by context, and often overlap with the MC’s other dramaturgical attributes. To focus the discussion, I plan to examine the markers of high status typically present in the MC’s appearance; his relationships with others, both on stage and in the audience seating area (the “house”); and his control of the theatrical space. “Appearance,” in this context, refers to a number of components, including both fixed physical attributes (size, age, and race, for example) as well as more changeable markers (mode of dress, hairstyle, and maquillage). The MC’s relationships with others are chiefly outlined by his behavior

toward them, which usually displays features of dominance, and the ways in which they behave in response. “Control of theatrical space” refers to how the MC moves within it with respect to the other figures and objects the performance space contains, and how these spatial relationships form a dramaturgical pattern conveying a sense of his entitlement to that space. His management of the theatrical space is important too, as it creates the pressurized phenomenon I call the “world of the room.” Regardless of genre, regardless of period, the Master of Ceremonies appears again and again as the master of the show and its reality, the “high” end of any binary based on status and power. This high status has a reciprocal relationship to his singularity: each feeds the other. No other character onstage has as much power.

### **High status: appearance matters**

All matters of the Master of Ceremonies’ appearance ultimately boil down to signals of high social status relative to the other onstage characters and the audience, along lines of heteronormative, patriarchal hegemonic power. The first factor in the MC’s onstage appearance is a basic social dividing line conferring power: male sex. Traditionally, as seen in the Catholic and Renaissance precedents for this role, MCs are male, and comic or subversive variations from this tendency are marked in certain ways *as variations*.<sup>37</sup> The MC role described in Chapter Two, the Chairman of the Broadside Music Hall, has only ever been performed by men in its 44-year history.

---

<sup>37</sup> This is the reason behind what may be one of the most apparently retrograde conventions of this dissertation: referring to the MC throughout as male. This is not accidental, and in fact, points the way for future study. There have been, are, and will be female MCs. They did, do, and will trouble the sexed and gendered markers of power in ways worth studying. My task in this study, however, is to lay out a dramaturgical typology for the MC role, which, in its focus on hegemonic power as the origin of the MC’s attributes, must acknowledge that the female MC is a late and exotic modification.

The two most recent performers in the role, Bill Roper and Daniel Morgan, both stand over six feet tall with broad shoulders, not only male but stereotypically masculine. The two most prominent performers of the role of the Emcee in stage and film versions of *Cabaret*, Joel Grey and Alan Cumming, are also both male, though nothing in the description of the Emcee in the script dictates that the actor must be male.

The typical gender-coded stylings and sexual orientation of the MC also follow hegemonic norms. Both Roper and Morgan portray the *Broadside* Chairman as uncomplicatedly masculine in demeanor and exclusively heterosexual in inclination. Interestingly, both Grey's and Cumming's iterations of the *Cabaret* Emcee role involve at least some feminine-inflected attire, as well as makeup; in terms of sexual orientation, Grey's Emcee has been characterized as "presexual,"<sup>38</sup> while Cumming's Emcee performs an enthusiastic bi- or omnisexuality. This has prompted an avalanche of comments on this topic from critics and historians, marking the anxiety generated by a portrayal of an MC's gender and/or sexual orientation that varies from the expected pattern.

Both Emcees present a male in charge, but their feminine-inflected appearance and uses of the body also lay claim to the power of spectacle through the appropriation of hegemonic signals of feminine display. Grey and Cumming both wear makeup, both appear in dresses and wigs, and Cumming frequently appears seminude with raised arms and an arched back; all of these are spectacularizing performance practices

---

<sup>38</sup> Copeland, 26.

that function to place the Emcee at the apex of *both* kinds of gender-coded power: the position of the “to-be-looked-at” as well as the wielder of the authoritative male gaze.

Gender performance and sexual orientation also figure prominently in comic or subversive inversions of the role. Female MCs, especially if they are holding the stage alone, often adopt heterosexually masculine performance tropes, for instance, by wearing a top hat and tails or delivering approving commentary on the sexual appeal of the show’s female performers. It is important to note that both the *Broadside* show and *Cabaret* strive to depict a historical time period. In more modern and/or subversive formulations we find a wider range of gender performance; masculinity is no longer the only path to authority. In some cases, this may be because this factor matters less than it used to in achieving the power that comes with socioeconomic and professional prominence (as in the case of modern female Academy Awards hosts); in other cases, it is because gender is a theme that the performance has selected for interrogation (as in drag MCs). The Las Vegas-based Cirque du Soleil show *Zumanity* features an example of a drag MC (in this instance, a physically male MC in female-coded clothing): Edie, the show’s “Mistress of Sensuality.” During the performance I attended on 18 May 2010, Edie never appeared on stage in male clothing or without a wig and makeup—and her performance was structured around this complication of gender performance. While dressed in glamour drag, Edie told jokes during the performance that pointed to her “actual” (male) sex, even making fun of an audience member who treated “her” as a biological female.<sup>39</sup> Again, the source of the role’s comedy is the nexus of anxiety created by conflicting gender signals in Edie’s

---

<sup>39</sup> *Zumanity, the Sensual Side of Cirque du Soleil*

appearance, which prioritized femaleness, and her verbal performance, which relentlessly pointed back to “her” maleness—more emphatically by far than if the male performer had simply (unmarkedly) appeared onstage in a tuxedo.



The MC’s attire itself is also specialized as to class, aligning him visually with the power of the economic elite. He appears in almost every instance in some kind of upscale formal wear, or at least the most formal wear seen onstage; in comic formulations, it is often a calculated parody of formal wear. The Academy Awards ceremonies provide a highly visible example of traditional attire for an MC. Since the first awards ceremonies, the overwhelming tendency has been for those executing the Master of Ceremonies role to wear a specific form of formal attire—a black tuxedo jacket, tailcoat, or other formal coat normally reserved for the most upscale or serious occasions; white shirt; black or white bow tie, black trousers, and black shoes.

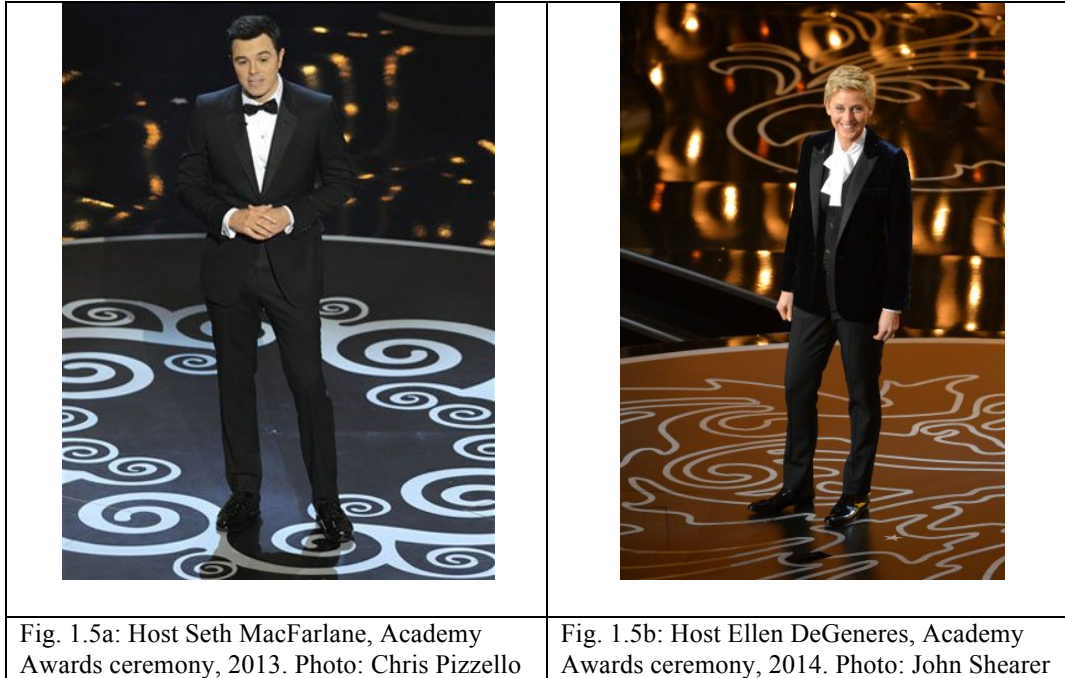


Fig. 1.4: Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences president William C. de Mille (second from left) as Master of Ceremonies, with Hans Kraly, Mary Pickford, and Walter Baxter at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Academy Awards ceremony in 1930. Photo: *Oscars.com*

Academy Award ceremonies in the earlier centuries of the U.S., naturally, saw variations on men's formal costume, including formal vests, cummerbunds, silk ascots, formal braces or suspenders, button studs, raised collars, gloves, canes, watch fobs, spats, and top hats. All garments were, without exception, part of that period's formal attire. While attire for male hosts of the "Oscars" did make a brief foray into more casual straight ties during the 1940s, hosts returned to the "gold standard" of the tuxedo.<sup>40</sup> Allowing for fluctuations in fabric choice, cut and color of jacket (black or white), width and color of tie (black or white), this traditional costume has continued with impressive consistency to the present day, with hosts' attire in 2013 and 2014 displaying similar levels of formality to those seen in each preceding decade.

---

<sup>40</sup> "Oscars History," *Oscar.go.com*.



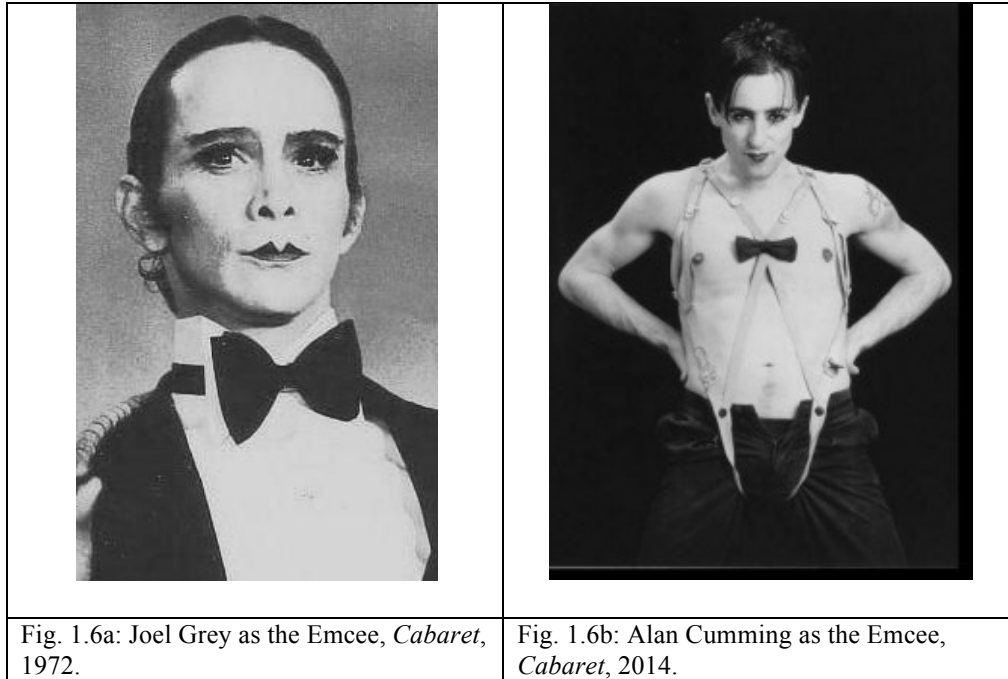
The obverse of this strong tendency toward formal attire is the pattern of comic or subversive exceptions that prove or twist the rule. Both of the case studies presented in this dissertation, the Chairman of the *Broadside Music Hall Revue* and the Emcee of *Cabaret*, represent variations on the class marker of formal wear. Both, also, do so in ways calculated to call attention to the actual distance between the onstage representation of economic power and real economic power, presenting this distance as part of their parodic nature.

*The Broadside Music Hall Revue* presents a lightly parodic, comic inversion of the formally-attired MC in its Chairman. During the three years that I directed this show, two different performers took on the role of Chairman, Bill Roper and Daniel Morgan. Each of these actors wore conspicuous attire that both mimicked and comically failed to attain the genuine formality of upper-class men's fashion; in the "tramp" or "clown" tradition, their costumes observed a roughly correct silhouette, but

included garments cut in the fashion of various different decades, displaying questionable fit, gaudy colors and patterns, and cheap fabric. An interesting twist on this production is that, while the show seeks to reproduce the look of a Victorian English music hall, where the Chairman would have worn a top hat and tailcoat, the show itself is a wholly American institution. All of the actors are American, the show was devised and produced by Americans, and it is produced in the San Francisco Bay Area, where it has been running with only brief interruptions since 1975. This means that its costume conventions encode an additional layer of American comment on historical English tropes of status and power.

Parodies of formal wear come in all varieties, exaggerating and therefore rendering available for critique such elements as silhouette (class resides in cut; the top hat may be made of tattered felt but its outline still renders it a higher-status hat with respect to similarly disheveled hats of other shapes), fit (oversized or too-small garments are a standard comedy staple commenting on class by showing a man whose ludicrous aspirations to undeserved high status prompt him to wear upper-class clothes regardless of their suitability to his body), color or pattern (formal suits in gaudy fabrics also serve as a comedy stand-by commenting on the refined cultural taste the upper classes supposedly enjoy), or fabric (extremes in either roughness—burlap—or glossiness—satin—comment on class in different ways by exposing the wearer as, again, someone who wishes to display a status he does not have, deserve, or understand). All of these variations draw their power to critique and subvert from the remarkably static silhouette, fit, color and pattern (or lack thereof), and fabric of men's formal wear in the United States.

The Emcees in the stage and film versions of *Cabaret* take parody in a different direction. Theirs is not a comic inversion but a dark one, their Weimar-kink-formal costumes an intentional mockery of the male formal attire expected for his role as part of a strategy of domination, in the pattern of cold control.



Age, or at least maturity, also seems to be a factor in the MC's appearance. In the examples I have been investigating, the MC is necessarily "an adult" in the fiction of the show in which he appears. The performer who plays him may be the oldest-looking in the show; this conveys authority as long as he does not appear frail. He may or may not be the youngest-looking performer in a show; but he must appear to have attained at least a "mature" age in relation to the show's other performers. As an interesting illustration of this, the current Broadside Chairman, Daniel Morgan, has performed with the show for over a decade, including the span of time during which

several less skilled actors were hired (and then fired) as Chairman. The producers of the Dickens Fair, while admitting that he was an exceptional actor, declined to cast him in the Chairman role for years, because the other most significant character on the Mad Sal's stage, Mad Sal, was played by an actress markedly older than he was, which would have interfered with his onstage authority. He was required to literally age into the role, a process that was accelerated by a change in casting of the Mad Sal character in 2013.

Last but by no means least, MCs tend to be white. Inequalities in social power, economic and educational opportunities, and class mobility allotted to American citizens by virtue of skin color alone have a deep, painful, and ongoing history in the United States, and so it is no accident that the MC's visual codes of superiority include whiteness. Exceptions to this tendency occurred early, with African-American MCs hosting all-Black vaudeville (the TOBA circuit) and later all-Black burlesque. But the tradition of whiteness persists; the Oscars, for example—a central ritual of American ordinating culture—did not feature a single African-American host *for 43 years* until Sammy Davis, Jr. appeared in 1972, and even then, he shared his duties with three other white hosts.

### **High status: control of space and the “world of the room”**

Another component of the MC's high status is his apparent mastery of both the stage and the combination of stage and audience area I call the “world of the room.” These different kinds of control over space work differently, but all support the MC's dominance. In all cases, the MC is the ruler of the stage, which operates in this way as

a geographically bounded area. In the most traditional renditions, no one on the stage disobeys or even ignores the MC; their attention to his words and obedience to his orders facilitate the smooth running of the entertaining show in which they wish to participate. The political implications of this spatial mode of high status is clear: in order to participate in this fun, you must submit to his governance. In comic or subversive renditions, of course, quiet disobedience may occur; when spotted by the MC, however, the result must be a confrontation where the MC reclaims his authority, by either securing the offending party's acquiescence or banishing them from the geography of the stage. If he somehow fails to do this (as in the case of improv shows gone awry), it damages both his power and the functioning of the show.

Encircling the special geography of the stage is a larger territory I call the "world of the room." This is an interestingly persistent feature of variety-style theatre: the conceit that the stage and the house are both part of one theatrically, thematically consistent environment. Both *Broadside* and the 2014 Broadway production of *Cabaret* make use of this device. The *Broadside Music Hall Revue* represents the efforts of actors playing fictional characters who perform their show upon the stage of a fictional brothel. The performers are performers and the audience is an audience, but both are seen through a theatrical overlay that integrates them in a shared fiction, presided over by the Chairman. Similarly, in the 2014 *Cabaret*, actors play the fictional Emcee and Kit Kat Klub performers who execute their gyrations on the stage of a fictional run-down Berlin cabaret; stage and house both coded as belonging to the same "world."

This conceit has several interesting results. First, the audience, by entering this theatricalized audience area, become characters in its fiction. Audiences at Mad Sal's become brothel patrons in search of some risqué fun; audiences at the Kit Kat Klub become urban Germans—also, as it happens, in search of some risqué fun. It is a light overlay, but it exists. As such, however, audience members place themselves under the control of the MC, who rules the world of the room. He can, for example, theatrically order one of them to leave; if the person is participating in the environmental fiction of the club or brothel, the only theatrically consistent response available as a character is to actually leave.

This leads to the other main characteristic of the world of the room: it functions as a model of society, exit from which is coded as exile, disappearance, or death. The world of the room is one undivided conceptual kingdom, governed by a single ruler, around whom are arrayed concentric circles of obedient denizens whose consent to his rule is the spiritual price of admission to the “show” that is society. The world of the room nourishes the MC's high status by presenting its system of power relations, centering on his power, as the only one available; everyone in the world of the room, on stage or off, is subject to the MC's control. *Broadside* makes overt, comic use of this effect through the actors whose characters are called “chuckers.” If any stage performer forgets lines, or otherwise fails in the middle of a performance, the Chairman can call out for them to be “chucked,” and a number of these actors will rush the stage and physically remove the performer, ejecting them outside the world of the room. Once this threat to order has been neutralized, the Chairman resumes control of the society whose values had been threatened by the offending actor's behavior.

The Master of Ceremonies' control of all available theatrical space is a necessary ingredient of his high status; in fact, they reinforce one another. Mastery over space is often coded in the amount of open air and ground surrounding a given performer, but it can also manifest in volitional and confident movement through the space, as seen in both of the case studies that follow. In the film, Joel Grey's Master of Ceremonies moves freely about not only on the stage of the Kit Kat Klub and within the club as a whole, but in the frame of the film as well. The salient characteristic here, again, is power—*Cabaret's* Master of Ceremonies commands the space around him and can move through it if he chooses. The MC must move through space neither too quickly nor too slowly (though typical dynamics of stage status make it difficult for him to move too slowly to retain his status).<sup>41</sup>

Ideally, he must also take care to frame himself appropriately with respect to the view the audience has of him. That is, he must be surrounded by a suitable amount of open space within the proscenium arch, the three-dimensional bubble of the thrust stage, or the edges of the raised platform, which signals his command of a luxurious amount of space and freedom. This freedom is both the liberty to move about without obstruction and freedom from being encroached upon physically by other performers; through this process of positioning, the MC has the pleasure of owning space, space that protects and creates the individual, closed, "classical body" that Peter Stallybrass describes.<sup>42</sup> This works in all three dimensions; the MC must not position himself too close to any visible stage edge (width) or vanishing point (depth; again, typical

---

<sup>41</sup> Johnstone, 33-74. In these pages from *Impro*, Johnstone sets forth the dazzlingly lucid account of the dynamics of onstage status, complete with clear instruction in practical application, that has made this book indispensable to many performers.

<sup>42</sup> Stallybrass, 124.

dynamics of stage status make it difficult for him to be too close to the audience and still remain physically on stage), and in circus or other theatrical forms involving multiple vertical levels of performance, the MC must also have clear space above his head that no other performers enter.

The MC's confident manner of speaking, moving, and occupying space on the stage signals a personal, innate superiority; his innate superiority gives him the ability to command those on the stage or in the world of the room. His rule over the geography of the stage and the world of the room, his ownership of certain stage areas, the way the presence of his monument warps the space of the stage, and his dominion over the world of the room all proceed from and support his onstage power. The expectation that the MC command the theatrical space is proven by comic inversions where a lack of mastery on his part is risible.

### **High status: interactions with others**

In all interactions with onstage others, as well as with the audience, the MC is the dominant party. Even in comic formulations, challenges to the MC's authority are temporary; revealing, again, the expectation by staging the "what should not happen" as comic. In most cases he speaks but is not spoken to, unless he requires an answer of someone. In interesting extremes, he is framed with multiple similar mute female bodies, a formulation that renders him a unique, strong, subject by surrounding him with objects. One instance of this is the entrance of hosts Steve Martin and Alec Baldwin to the 2010 Academy Awards. These two—older white men in formal

attire—ride onto stage on a descending platform, around which scantily clad chorines are arrayed (vertically and to each side—but not too close).

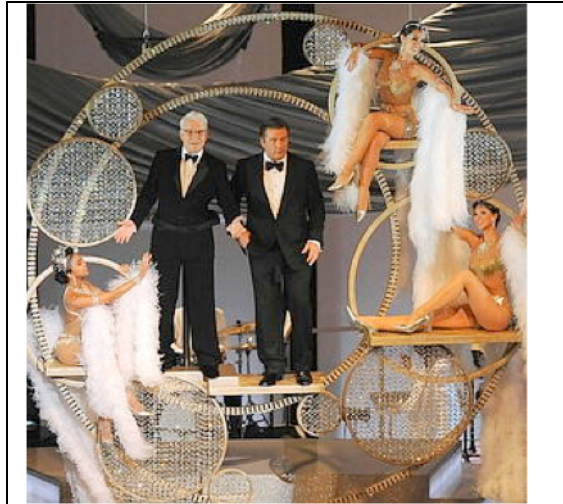


Fig. 1.7: Academy Awards hosts Steve Martin and Alec Baldwin with women in background. Photo: Michael Caulfield

Numerous elements of this entrance signal their participation in the representation of patriarchal power. The chorines give stage focus to the two men through choreography and the direction of their gaze but the men do not return it; the men stand straight and relatively still while the chorines undulate “appealingly”; and, once the platform comes to rest on the stage, they stride away from the women directly and confidently without looking back: a signal that they are not in the least concerned with the women’s presence. The chorines’ exit, in this case, looks almost awkward, the result of having realized their pointlessness on stage, however unlikely it is that that was the intent of the choreographer and producers.

*Cabaret*'s Emcee also dominates in his interactions to onstage others; he speaks to literally no one on stage, addressing only the audience. This is especially visible in the 2014 Broadway production; no other performers get close to him without his consent, though he is free to choose to get close to them. During the famous introductory song, he displays spatial and informational power over the other cabaret performers; he slips in close to them, touches them, and names them for the benefit of the audience. His proximity to other performers is even dominating and exploitative at times; in a number of instances, he caresses and smacks the “Kit Kat Girls” while they pose, mute and available.



Fig. 1.8: Alan Cumming as the Emcee, with female dancers, 2014. Photo: Joan Marcus

The Emcee also takes part in some of the variety turns performed on the cabaret stage. His participation in these comic turns is another display of power; he typically drives each song and takes the bulk of the solo time. In only one instance does he share the song and focus—the duet “Money” with Sally Bowles—and only in the film; in the stage production, “Money” is the Emcee’s solo, with the Kit Kat Girls, as they do in “Wilkommen,” echoing “his” lyrics. Chapter Two outlines an experiment I conducted with Bill Roper, the Chairman of Broadside, along these lines, with great and dismaying success.

All in all, the MC’s signals of high status cover the widest range of behaviors and appearance factors, and are the most important to the smooth functioning of the show. Almost any other factor in the MC’s performance may be inverted for either comic or subversive purposes, but his high status may not flag. If it is challenged, the challenge is typically resolved quickly and definitively in the MC’s favor, so the show may go on.

### **Direct Address**

The third major dramaturgical attribute of a Master of Ceremonies is his use of direct address. According to Richard Butsch, the role of the MC began as a managerial means of crowd control, during the rowdy 18<sup>th</sup> century when audiences quite freely threw dangerous or noxious objects onto the stage to register their displeasure with any aspect of the evening’s entertainment.<sup>43</sup> The use of direct address, then, was no *au courant* stylistic innovation but rather originated in sincere, repeated appeals to the

---

<sup>43</sup> Butsch, 24, 51.

audience members to keep their rotten vegetables, fishhooks, and bisected goat carcasses to themselves. As audiences became more docile, the MC's use of direct address could transition from crowd control to merely re/engaging the audience (that is, using the voice and demeanor to claim and reclaim the audience's attention from the other enticements the theatrical environment offered). Ultimately it became a refined mode of relationship building that allowed empathy, subtlety, ambivalence, and social commentary.

The variety performer's awareness of the historical potential for thrown garbage and the ever-present need to grab (and re-grab) the attention of attendees directly affects the dramaturgical contours of variety entertainment. Nothing demonstrates this so well as a "variety" or "vaudeville" show staged in a lush, purpose-built theatre for a silent, attentive audience; all the gestures and gimmicks are too loud, too weird, oddly unnecessary. Why are you yelling? Why flap your arms around like that? Why talk to me as though you expect me to answer? Variety dramaturgy, especially direct address, is designed specifically for the optional-attentiveness distribution of activities and ways of using time more common to bars and pubs than to opera houses.

Direct address is the *sine qua non* of most forms of variety stage entertainment. Its dramaturgy is complex and unstable, since it requires the performer to establish a recognizable type of unequal dyadic relationship with the audience, and then elaborate, subvert, or otherwise manipulate and transform that relationship repeatedly over the course of the performance. Ideally, this recognizable relationship is also one in which the audience finds it pleasurable to participate. It must provide enough structure to

direct the audience in how to successfully play along, and reward it for doing so with increased pleasure. It must also be flexible enough to absorb and incorporate unexpected and sometimes uncooperative audience behavior. This relationship is established, manipulated, and maintained by a number of dramaturgical means: the performer may shift the mode of verbal address in such a way as to indicate a new relationship formation: hailing the audience, for example, as though they were suddenly inimical to him and required placation, or as though they all harbored some rakishly lascivious or lewd intention and required a good-natured scolding. These shifts all function to reinvigorate audience interest in the show by regulating the rhythm of the performance. In each case, the performer identifies some growing threat that has the power to stop the show (here, the audience's hostility or arousal) and so exerts control to eliminate that threat—then the performance continues, the crisis having provided excitement leading to renewed energy and reinvigorated interest.

The MC's art of direct address lies exactly in this establishment, maintenance, and transformation of relationship, and the dramaturgy of this theatrical act encompasses all of the gestures of language, movement, posture, costume, and setting—working within a vocabulary of dyadic relationship types and usually involving a power inequity that his performance constantly signals and manipulates.

Regardless of genre, the effective execution of the MC role in American variety-style entertainment involves building onstage synthetic authority by performing key gestures of power appropriated from what Berglund calls “ordinating” social traditions, practices of economic and political elites that have structured American social reality, including the sartorial codes already discussed. The MC's

discourse, in turn, winds through and between the dialects proper to many socially legitimate recognized modes of power: political rhetoric, religious oratory, academic jargon, the verbal formulae of the judiciary, the auctioneer's and hawker's cant of market economics, and journalism's splashy headlines and editorial style of address. What the individuals entitled to use these modes of discourse have in common is that their words have real consequences; they *do* things, in the Austinian sense.<sup>44</sup> These roles give people the power to change reality through performative utterances such as: "Sold!" "Guilty!" and "You are absolved." Words such as these are powerful things—and the varied discourses of these practices form the basis of the MC's performance arsenal.

And as with all performance, the MC's use of these power gestures reinscribes the power they convey, reaffirming its legitimacy. As the theatrical Master of Ceremonies introduces, guides, and concludes any given "show," his central/outside position, high status, and direct address enable him to fluidly perform countless numbers of these gestures, all positioned within their specific performative circumstances to convey and reconvey to the audience one single, insistent message: "Listen to me—I am in charge—What I say is real." By portraying a speaking subject, this act of performance proposes a reality wherein that entity is both naturally entitled to subjectivity and naturally entitled to speak, that is, to frame the reality it experiences in its own words and according to its own priorities and sympathies. This speaking subject, moreover, does all this while also naturalizing the political mechanisms structuring the world in which it is entitled to speak. Guy Debord's

---

<sup>44</sup> Austin, 1-24.

summation of spectacle applies forcefully here: “What appears is good; what is good appears.”<sup>45</sup> The very appearance of the speaking subject proposes, and proposes solely, the political arrangement of the world in which it is entitled to speak. “Without these structures,” the act of performance says, before the speaking subject has even cleared its throat, “this speech you are now hearing would be impossible. Therefore, since you are hearing this speech, it is possible, therefore the political structure of the world in which it exists is valid.” Like Debord’s spectacle, the MC’s one-way stream of information and evaluation determines what is there and what is not, what has value—and of what kind—and what does not. There is no response because there can be none. And similar to the “unmarked” forms of social and political power Peggy Phelan investigates in *Unmarked*, the MC runs the show while appearing to be outside it, appearing not to be one of the performers on “show,” hence not visible and available for critique in the same way. He controls and judges the terms of its reality by virtue of an insidious, invisible authority that is all the more dangerous because it goes unnoticed, unanalyzed, unquestioned.

Peggy Phelan locates the urge toward representation, including performance, as the subject’s continuous desire (and failure) to see itself; it therefore seeks in its environment objects and Others, or representations of them, to return its gaze. It is possible that this hope for “a potential reciprocal gaze”<sup>46</sup> whereby the subject can confirm its identity through its simultaneous relation to and differentiation from the Other is a foundation of the oddly thrilling dramaturgical phenomenon called direct

---

<sup>45</sup> Debord, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Phelan, 16.

address. According to Phelan's reading of Lacan, we hunger for our gaze to be returned by anyone and anything, because it is only through being seen and recognized by another that we can assure ourselves of our continued existence—an especially urgent project because of the deep, nagging awareness that the self is fictional, and constructed solely through such exchanges. Direct address, the native tongue of the Master of Ceremonies, draws all of its power, potential, and perverseness from this primal and fundamental desire. This desire to be seen—and seen, moreover, as we would wish to be seen—is so intense that an incomplete or flawed fulfillment is as annihilating as a denial, more so, maybe, because of the fear of being fixed and judged as that which one is not nor wishes to be. When a warm-control MC's eyes rake the audience, of course, the effect can be utterly benign: the best man at a wedding reception welcoming guests and announcing sundry activities. The cold-control MC's gaze, however, can be a searing searchlight, an aggressive, distorting force vested by the audience's own drive to be seen with the power to see, select, hail, and thereby instantiate a stylized version of the subject's identity, substituting it not only for the inaccessible Real but for the subject's usual or even preferred version. What the MC chooses to "see," as his gaze meets that of each subject in the audience, is both an expression and a coercive reinscription of the political structures underpinning the given theatrical project (which is another especially urgent project because the continued existence of such structures—such as that of the self—requires constant reconfirmation).

This is one of the most dangerous components of the dramaturgy of relationship that the Master of Ceremonies builds through direct address. As Phelan

notes when cautioning progressives about the perils of visibility politics, selection can mean exposure, surveillance, and sanction as easily as it can mean celebration and affirmation;<sup>47</sup> in the case of the Master of Ceremonies, it relies entirely upon the political project being undertaken by the show as a whole. Pink Floyd's concept album *The Wall*, for example, includes several characters in divergent roles of social authority, but who all derive their power over others from a more or less coercive use of direct address, including a schoolmaster, a judge, and a (fascist) political leader. The fact that one performer, Roger Waters, voices all three of these characters in the scope of a single album<sup>48</sup> does a great deal to link them conceptually to one another, but even more, each of these "characters" uses direct address as a weapon to single out and punish. The judge excoriates and sentences the "you" of the song in which he appears (a role assigned to the audience via the Althusserian function of "hailing"). The rock star, during a concert, points out racial and religious Others and Others of nonheteronormative sexuality in the fictional audience, which overlays the actual audience, and exhorts the "fans" to "get them up against the wall." In the film of this concept album, this segment is accompanied by sequences of racially mixed couples being pulled apart and the Black partner being beaten. This character's use of direct address can be summed up in his line, "There's one in the spotlight, he don't look right to me./Get him up against the wall." And the fascist leader orchestrates a grand spectacle of power with himself at the visual and discursive center, urging the assembled crowd to acts of violence against variously constituted Others. This album,

---

<sup>47</sup> Phelan, 10-11.

<sup>48</sup> "Soundtracks for Pink Floyd The Wall," *IMDb.com*.

while the product of an English band, found dizzying success in the U.S. too, signaling a recognition of and resonance with the dramaturgy of coercion it explored.

That is the dangerous side. The Master of Ceremonies would not be nearly so fascinating as a theatrical entity if this were the full range of his abilities. There is, of course, a flip side to being exposed and hunted: being chosen and cherished. While the gaze of the Master of Ceremonies necessarily singles out, sets apart, and isolates the subject who meets his eyes, the question of whether this is a punishing or affirming gaze is simply one of polarity, not intensity.<sup>49</sup>

Having a specific set of attributes selected for engagement by the MC is, of course, not always an unpleasant experience for an audience. In the warm-control pattern, the set of attributes the MC “sees” is often one the audience members are inclined to find flattering; this constructs the MC-audience relationship as supportive, genial, and oddest of all, deeply true. The positive images of the Self that the MC reflects back can, if the performer is skilled, align with how the subject wishes to be seen but rarely if ever is, and may give him or her the rare sense of being appreciated for good qualities the world ignores. This type of MC-audience relationship produces an ambiance of fellowship as boisterously cheerful as its negative is harrowing. Borrowing Phelan’s terms, the subject has the positive experience of feeling seen and known. In fact, the subject may find it more pleasant to experience the Self through the positive if slightly inaccurate attributes reflected back from the Other than to be *truly* seen and known, warts and all.

---

<sup>49</sup> In a way, the negative or positive nature of the gaze is similar to the negative and positive numbers on a number line. The distance from zero, from balance, is the level of intensity of the encounter, while the punishing or rewarding nature of the gaze finds expression on the negative and positive axis.

A chief use of the MC's power of direct address is to employ it as part of his interstitial framing to define, interpret, and contextualize the varied fare that appears on a variety-style theatre stage. The Emcee from *Cabaret*, during his famous intro to the show, notifies his audience that "In here life is beautiful . . . The girls are beautiful . . . Even the orchestra is beautiful!" Meanwhile, this moment in the film reveals that "the girls" and "the orchestra" are actually rather bizarre-looking; either gaunt or overfed, with strange, extreme hairstyles and makeup lending them a quasi-clownish appearance, and wearing what looks like a combination of streetwalker chic and sequined circus castoffs.<sup>50</sup> The Emcee's speech instructs the audience in how to see both these women and real life; "life" may feel as rough as these "girls" look . . . but "in here," in the realm where the MC has the authority to dictate the terms of reality, this disjointed, extreme, lurid scene is beautiful, because he says it is. This works in two ways: authority (his high onstage status grants him interpretive primacy), and reward. Once the MC presents his assessment, it becomes more rewarding for an audience member to accept the proposed interpretive frame—inside which is the entertaining fiction proposed by "the show"—than to oppose it, leaving the audience member outside both the frame and the fun.

In the midst of the potential chaos of variety-style entertainment, where the human hunger for increasing onslaughts of spectacle and sensation prompts producers to ever-denser outpourings of visual and auditory information, the figure of the MC provides, as mentioned, reassurance, a guide to assist with interpretation and contextualization. The individual "acts" in a variety-style show engage the audiences

---

<sup>50</sup> *Cabaret*, 1972.

to different degrees, from full direct address to no address whatsoever. In fact, one element in balancing a variety bill is to break up/manage acts with different levels of direct address to distribute them in a pleasing pattern over the course of the evening's entertainment. The MC, however, operates strictly in direct address mode, never leaving the position of interpretive power.

### **Conclusion**

In the examples I have offered here, the constellation of characteristics that marks a theatrical figure as a Master of Ceremonies generally includes the three major facets of the role that I have examined: singularity, high onstage status, and direct address. These attributes operate together and support one another to position the MC to build a specific form of relationship with the audience: he is the authority, and they are subject to this authority. While this power relationship is vastly unequal, in warm-control formulations, the inequality can feel reassuring, even pleasurable, a sentiment which, if examined, might parse as: "Thank goodness he is in charge; he really knows what to do." The cold-control MC threatens where the warm MC encourages, but his command of the relationship is never in doubt.

Anyone who has seen a gifted MC work, and watched him deftly steer an entire audience into embracing perspectives and behaviors they might never have expected, has also probably wondered how that performer managed to convince this whole room of people to listen to him, to trust him, to accept what he says as truth. I certainly did; I began this paper as in investigation into the numerous dramaturgical

gestures and signals this positioning requires. MC-ing is the art of constructing a relationship that feels real and solid enough to motivate conformity behaviors, yet temporary/provisional/stylized enough to lower inhibition, opening attendees up to engaging in actions, interactions, and relationships that they might not normally pursue, those that under other circumstances would have negative effects on their lives. A skilled MC can build a safe space around a group of diverse attendees and make them a team, all there to enjoy the same thing, all willing to enjoy what they are told they are enjoying (the liquor, the bawdiness, even the insulting other characters onstage, all in fun, of course).

However, as my examples also illustrate, each of these facets is available for revision and subversion to achieve new theatrical goals, so the MC is constantly developing in new ways. Some forms of variety-style theatre function conservatively, reaffirming white male hegemonic power over a spectacular procession of racial, sexual, and economic Others, but other forms of variety-style theatre, especially drag manifestations, use variety dramaturgy to investigate and critique the power and authority coded into its traditional structure and common tropes. Whether a variety show is conservative or subversive can rest entirely on the dynamics of the power relationship between the MC and the acts. In both conservative and subversive iterations, the show's performers obey the MC, but his mental acuity, their willingness, their success in obeying, and many other components of the show's overall dramaturgy, can serve to either legitimate or undermine his—and therefore society's—authority. It is also chilling to recall that there is a sinister flip side to compelling oratory too. A talented orator can also provoke in a crowd racist, mob-minded, angry,

hysterical and unreasonable behaviors. The fascinating thing is that this dramaturgy of power exists at all, that this combination of highly charged performance features seems to produce almost automatically the sturdy, near-archetypical role we recognize as the Master of Ceremonies.

## CHAPTER 2: CHAIRMAN OF THE *BROADSIDE MUSIC HALL REVUE*

### **The *Broadside Music Hall Revue***

Imagine a show that has been running, on and off (mostly on), since 1970, outlasting four producers and numerous directors. No script. A fluctuating number of performers who have chosen their own character names and costumes, performing material they have come across in any of a number of ways. Individual and group performances that change with every show, occurring alongside other performances that have not changed by so much as a syllable in over ten years. No set blocking, only the most rudimentary choreography—to use the term generously—which is not written down, but taught from memory to new cast members by more experienced performers, and altered periodically to accommodate cast members' abilities. A standing practice of physically lifting and carrying performers offstage and “chucking” them outside the house if they make mistakes in their lines or lyrics. An entire troupe of can-can dancers. A prop assistant who, for some reason, is called “the Weasel.” And most interesting of all: full houses of attendees, laughing and often singing and dancing along, usually standing room only, three times a day. What is going on here?

If this chaotic event resembles a circus, that is understandable. This theatrical curiosity is the *Broadside Music Hall Revue*, and it bears more than a few dramaturgical similarities to the realm of ring and ringmaster, as well as to other American variety entertainments such as vaudeville, burlesque, drag, and even blackface minstrelsy. *Broadside* presents a comic depiction of a lower-class Cockney

British music hall show, staged in the murkiest den of vice in the dodgiest corner of the East End of London, during the reign of a young Queen Victoria. While this show is British in its overall conceit, however, its origins, cast, and even dramaturgical structure class it firmly with other American variety entertainments such as burlesque, vaudeville, blackface minstrelsy, and even the theme park. Like many types of American variety theatre, moreover, the Broadside show features a Master of Ceremonies, called the “Chairman.” The dramaturgical components of the Chairman role, the ways in which one performer understood and filled that role, and the interesting results of stepping out of the role for one weekend during the show’s 2010 season, are the focus of this paper.

### **Performance context**

The *Broadside Music Hall Revue* is one of many shows staged within the larger Victorian-themed theatrical event called *The Great Dickens Christmas Fair and Victorian Holiday Party*, produced each winter in San Francisco. This event was founded in 1970<sup>1</sup> by Phyllis and Ron Patterson, who also invented and produced the original *Renaissance Pleasure Faire* in 1963.<sup>2</sup> By devising visually rich, temporally distant, thematically united large-scale theatrical environments, within which hundreds of performers performed scripted shows on stages and improvised “gigs” in the “streets,”<sup>3</sup> the Pattersons and their events provided fertile ground for many types of

---

<sup>1</sup> Kevin Patterson, e-mail to the author, 19 Oct. 2010.

<sup>2</sup> “Origins of the Faire,” Red Barn Productions.

<sup>3</sup> In this context, “streets” is a term of art, used by performers at this event in specific ways. Following the example set by the original Renaissance Pleasure Faires, living history-style theatrical events typically organize their design aesthetic around the conceit of representing a historical city (London, in

variety performance rarely seen elsewhere. These physically and technically demanding, performer-centric events have contributed to the survival and revival of American variety performance in ways that theatre scholars have yet to explore deeply, and have also served as a training ground for a number of performers who later achieved mainstream artistic success. Alumni of these events include the Reduced Shakespeare Company<sup>4</sup> and TV and film actor Bill Campbell.<sup>5</sup>

*The Great Dickens Christmas Fair and Victorian Holiday Party*, or “Dickens Fair” for short, is an indoor, Victorian-themed theatrical event designed to reproduce a picturesque fantasia on London at Christmastime during the last half of the 1800s; its design aesthetic draws strongly on comic images and botanical motifs popular in Victorian illustrations and woodcuts. Built inside the exhibition halls of San Francisco’s Cow Palace, the Dickens Fair presents variety entertainment both geographically—the venue is laid out in discrete neighborhoods, like a theme park—and by way of its numerous, stylistically varied performances. These performances take place on the event’s six stages, as well as in the walkways between its booths and

---

the case of the Dickens Fair). This being the case, the performers support the illusion by referring to the network of built paths and walkways through the event as the “street.” This usage compares the event’s set of pathways to the literal streets that the actual city would contain, while also establishing them as comprising a single, stable type of performance space with certain characteristic limitations and benefits, all of which influence the dramaturgy of the performances staged there. “Street” becomes a term of art because it serves to distinguish the types of performance that performers at the event produce. “Street gigs,” for example, are semi-structured, largely improvised comic scenes that performers stage to entertain the “patrons,” i.e., paying customers, standing nearby. The opposite of the “street gig” is the “stage show,” representing something more fixed, more durable, taking place upon a raised platform and, not incidentally, conveying more prestige upon the show and performers. In discussion with other performers, creative ideas are often sorted into one of the two categories: “That’d be a good street gig, but it wouldn’t make sense as a stage show” versus, “You’d have to do that as a stage show, there’s no way it would work on the street.”

<sup>4</sup> “Complete Timeline,” Reduced Shakespeare Company.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Campbell, perf., *Taming of the Shrew*, 1992.

bars, decorated to resemble London streets. For example, a performer portraying the young Queen Victoria progresses through the streets of her theatrical London

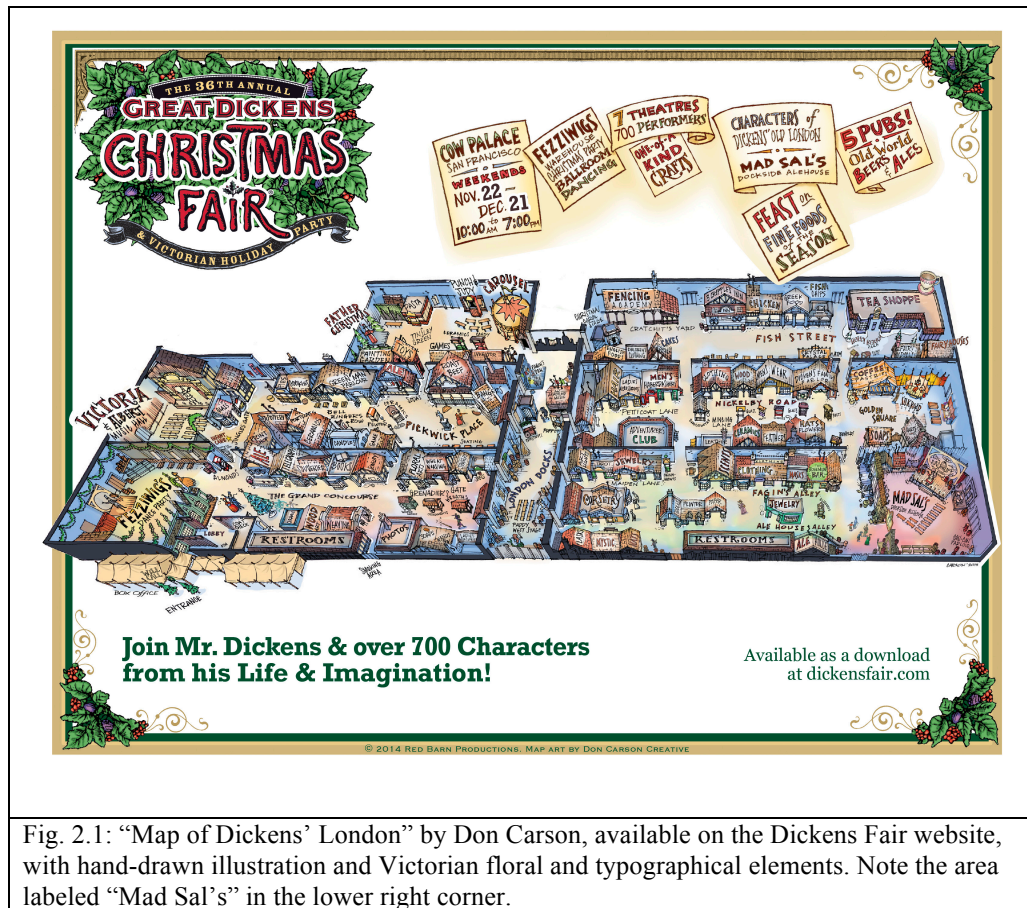


Fig. 2.1: “Map of Dickens’ London” by Don Carson, available on the Dickens Fair website, with hand-drawn illustration and Victorian floral and typographical elements. Note the area labeled “Mad Sal’s” in the lower right corner.

once a day with her entourage, receives “state visitors,” and goes shopping for Christmas gifts for her children with the performer portraying the Prince Consort. Robert Young, the actor who portrays Charles Dickens, walks the event greeting attendees, and gives readings from *A Christmas Carol* in his lamp-lit parlor once a day. Food vendors hawk vittles more or less in keeping with the Victorian English theme: sausages, fish and chips, meat pies, and beer. Performers portraying grubby chimneysweeps trudge down the streets in packs, “gigging” (theatrically interacting) with other performers and with the event’s attendees. Six different purpose-built

stages—each of them attached to a bar serving beer, wine, hard cider, champagne, and hot rum drinks—run from noon to 7:00 p.m. offering up a varied schedule of shows, each of which repeats two to three times a day. The variety of visual, culinary, kinesthetic, and theatrical experiences an attendee can experience within this event is impressive.

At the end of the event farthest from the entrance doors is the environmental area<sup>6</sup> called “Mad Sal’s Dockside Alehouse”; performers and regular attendees call it “Mad Sal’s.” This area theatrically represents a rowdy, lowest-of-the-lower-class brothel-cum-theatre in East London.

---

<sup>6</sup> “Environmental area” as a term of art has very specific meanings within the performance context of the Dickens fair. This term describes smaller performance areas within the event, where a cast of performers cooperates to present a theatrical illusion of “daily life” in the Victorian period. While the performers in these areas do not literally restrict themselves to displaying only historical behaviors and objects, the directors of these areas and the affiliated casts put forth a greater effort to provide the audience with a historically accurate depiction of typical Victorian décor, activities, and conversations. Performers often portray historical figures, characters from Dickens’ work, or well-researched “average” Victorian characters, and often perform some period activity, such as spinning yarn in a “family parlor,” or delivering speeches on naturalist themes to other characters in a “lecture room,” all for the benefit of the audience members who are watching. Environmental areas engage in a complicated negotiation of the theatrical “fourth wall;” some of them are designed to welcome audience members in and involve them in the activities and conversations pursued within. Others present a more closed-off, almost diorama-like performance, where the performers engage in conversations and activities staged for the audience to watch but not join; the same environmental area can provide both kinds of performances at different times. Mad Sal’s is a very large environmental area within the event, and so, while it contains a stage, the stage is a component of the area’s theatrical presentation of the brothel/bar/theatre; it is a literal stage performing the role of a historical stage. When speaking, performers often shorten the phrase “environmental area” to “area,” though in the special context of the Dickens Fair event, it retains the same specific meaning explained above.



Fig. 2.2: The stage in the environmental area called “Mad Sal’s Dockside Alehouse,” before the first show of the day at 1 p.m. The low lighting is meant to simulate twilight. Note that the walls of the theatrical area extend beyond the edges of the simple stage platform; note also the Chairman’s large oak barrel at the right of the frame. Photo: Laura Brueckner

It contains a small platform stage with a painted backdrop, a huge oak barrel, and a nearby piano, audience seating for approximately 160 attendees with additional (usually-filled) standing room bringing the house count closer to 200. The stage is flanked by some intentionally shabby wall and door set pieces, and a smaller, ground-level performance space on either side of the stage. To house left of the stage is the parlor of the brothel’s madam, Mad Sal, and to house right of the stage is the area that the can-can dancers’ characters use for illicit but profitable “entertaining” (which includes a bed in plain sight of the audience).

The area's decorations are bizarre, lewd, gaudy, and mismatched, not so much suggesting as declaring a social equation between poverty, criminality, immorality, and poor aesthetic judgment. A taxidermied cat in an attitude of fatal surprise rests atop the piano, for instance, wearing a plaid bow around its neck, while on the walls hang numerous and varied prints of ladies in various states of undress. On one wall hangs a particularly large oil painting of a lingerie-clad woman whose identity is unknown, though rumors persist among the performers that the model is the current producer's mother, in younger days.

The character of Mad Sal, the brothel's madam, presides over the area; this character has existed since 1970, and was first performed by Judy Kory, followed by Eleanor Harrold, Kathi Lapora Richards, and Linda Underhill. Robin Driskill assumed the role in 2000,<sup>7</sup> and was succeeded by Laura Gregory in 2012. In general, the performers who work in Mad Sal's, in keeping with the theatrical illusion of the area, portray the poorest, lowest-class, most diseased and addicted, least-educated population of this version of London: there is a roving cast of coal-smearred, poorly-behaved chimney-sweeps, a cast of bar bouncers (called "chuckers"), and a cast whose members play petty street criminals, prostitutes, and assorted drunks and vagabonds (called "the Scum"). Membership is fairly stable; once a Dickens performer joins a cast, the large tendency is for that person to remain part of that same cast for at least a few years, sometimes for the duration of his or her affiliation with the event, which can span twenty years or more. Performers whose casts interact (as the casts based in Mad Sal's do) can also get to know each other quite well. This dynamic, over the

---

<sup>7</sup> Robin Driskill, performer, e-mail to the author, 15 May 2011.

years since the event was created, has produced a community of performers whose shared experience at these events is the foundation for their relationships.

### **The Broadside Music Hall and the *Broadside Music Hall Revue***

The performers whose work as Chairman I investigate in this paper, chiefly Bill Roper and to a lesser degree Daniel Morgan, belong to the cast of one specific show performed on the stage within the Mad Sal's area: the *Broadside Music Hall Revue*, or, in brief, the "*Broadside* show," which has been running since the event's beginnings in 1970. To make one key distinction: in this paper, this italicized title refers specifically to the show that is put on by the comic performers who are collectively known as the (un-italicized) Broadside Music Hall, or, simply, "Broadside." The show and the group of performers are discrete entities in logistically significant ways I will explore.

The Broadside performers operate at a different level of representation than those who play chimney sweeps or chuckers, as well; they perform *the roles of performers*, another reason that it is both difficult and important to distinguish between the valences of fiction that structure these performances. The need to make unusually fine distinctions such as this is indicative of the linguistic challenge posed by this project's engagement with a performance form not usually addressed in scholarship. Many such distinctions exist, however, and much of the work of this project lies in distinguishing and describing specific uses of particular terms of art. In this, my dramaturgical analysis of the *Broadside* shows is aided (and likely also limited) by my own history with the group: I joined it as a performer in 1998 and

assumed the directorship of the Broadside Music Hall show for the 2010 run, quickly realizing that I could use it to develop and test out theories about the dramaturgical properties of the Chairman role.

### **The *Broadside Music Hall Revue*: typical show structure**

Strangely, of the American entertainments that serve as its antecedents, the dramaturgical structure of the current *Broadside Music Hall Revue* most closely resembles that of post-1850s blackface minstrelsy, as those shows became larger, more professional, and more sentimental, and had begun to focus on appealing to middle-class family audiences. Both of these American entertainments share the three-part structure of an opening comic segment, a set of variety acts, and a closing burlesque; as well as ongoing interplay between a central MC figure and the show's "low/Other" comics. In the *Broadside* show, the role of the Chairman predominates; he is the MC who gives the show its pace and tone. Meanwhile, most descriptions I have encountered of minstrelsy's MC, the "interlocutor," mention none of this character's contributions to the show's structure past its opening sequence.<sup>8</sup> This absence—the strange invisibility of the MC—is common in scholarship on other American variety-style theatre as well. This paper represents my effort to reverse this trend, to turn its assumptions inside out by addressing the Chairman's role as an example of the theatrically important role of the Master of Ceremonies, and as a key component of the *Broadside* show's dramaturgical structure. Therefore, I contend that,

---

<sup>8</sup> Springhall, 67-68.

within the roughly divided segments described above, the *Broadside Music Hall Revue* includes four distinct types of performances:

1. Numerous “solo turns” or “turns,” featuring just one performer
2. Rarer small-group numbers that involve two or three performers
3. Full-cast song and dance numbers that involve all *Broadside* performers and often audience participation
4. The focus of my interest: the singular, overarching, nonmusical performance of the performer playing the Chairman as he presides over the show.



Fig. 2.3a: Bill Roper as Chairman Thaddeus Codswallop at the Great Dickens Christmas Fair and Victorian Holiday Party, San Francisco, 2009. Photo: Rosemary Guglielmelli



Fig. 2.3b: Daniel Morgan as Chairman Obediah Feltrup at the Great Dickens Christmas Fair and Victorian Holiday Party, San Francisco, 2014. Photo: R.J. Johnson

The actual order of performances in a typical, 55-minute *Broadside* show runs as follows: the Chairman opens the performance with a substantial introduction, followed by the full-cast group number “Knees Up Mother Brown,” which contains the show’s most complex choreography, and during which the artistes performing solo turns later in the show introduce themselves, as their character, in spoken verses. “Knees Up” begins the show with a burst of sound and a flurry of coordinated movement that attracts audience attention to the stage; once this is accomplished, the show settles into a series of solo turns with perhaps a small-group number. Each artiste’s performance is preceded by the Chairman’s “intro” to the number and followed by his parting remarks, or “outro.” About one-half of the way through the show comes another full-cast group number that calls for audience participation, to re-engage the attention of the audience. After this comes the home stretch: two or three more solo turns, one final star solo turn (the showstopper, usually by Molly Burke or Dan Morgan), and a can-can dance performance by Can-Can Bijou.<sup>9</sup> The *Broadside* show then concludes with the full-cast burlesque “Poor But Honest,” narrated by the Chairman, who then delivers a set of closing remarks and leads the cast in enjoining the audience to “Bugger off!”<sup>10</sup>

While this format is remarkably stable from year to year, the individual turns (and sometimes casting in the group numbers) that fill it out can change frequently and sometimes abruptly. Illness, injury, work or car emergencies, and special requests can influence the actual list of songs scheduled in each set—even on the day of the show,

---

<sup>9</sup> Can-Can Bijou is a San Francisco dance troupe; when performing at the Dickens Fair, its members portray French ladies of easy but expensive virtue in the Mad Sal’s area.

<sup>10</sup> *The Broadside Music Hall Revue*, 2010.

or ten minutes prior to start time—and changes to the “set lists”<sup>11</sup> posted backstage are common.

### **Character and Chairmanship**

In 2010, the year I assumed directorship of *Broadside*, the cast included Rory Alden, Tanya Anguita, Molly Burke, Terry Downward, Robin Driskill, Dominic Bridwell Elemirion, Misha Frankly, Dan Morgan, Ed Pizzini, and the Chairman, Bill Roper. The piano accompanists were Richard “Scrubly” Koldewyn (of the notorious Cockettes) and Win Meyerson. Each has developed a distinctive, broadly comic character that he or she has performed continuously over the course of his or her tenure with the show; this character is the fictional lower-class Victorian music hall singer he or she portrays. Characters and character names are permanent, usually involve bawdy innuendo, and are either chosen by the performer (such as Dan Morgan’s character, Obediah Feltrup), given by the show director (Ed Pizzini’s

---

<sup>11</sup> In 2010, “set list” as a term of art was in a state of flux. In 1998, it referred to the list of turns for a given performance day (of two shows per day) that director David Springhorn had determined ahead of time, but kept secret from the cast. Under these circumstances, show order was as much a surprise to the artistes as to the audience. Subsequently, Springhorn began hand-writing set lists and posting them backstage; performers knew which songs they would perform only directly before the first show of the day. The primary denotation of “set list” continues to be the physical document posted backstage; the most recent information printed or written on it is the final word. Recently, though, “set list(s)” also began to refer to the Word document publishing the show order that the current Broadside director would email out to the cast on Thursdays, specifying the sets for all shows on both weekend days. The term had made the jump into the digital, though it retained similar formatting to the previous hand-written set lists. The domain of referents of “set list” has only recently begun to include the Excel spreadsheets that I personally used in 2010 to organize each show’s turns, which changed constantly before reaching their final order, and so were not considered finalized until I had emailed them out to the cast. Interestingly, each day, Bill Roper would copy the information from the spreadsheet into a Word document, formatted similarly to the earlier iterations of the “set list,” and post them backstage, even though every performer had likely seen the spreadsheet version and might even have a copy of it in his or her pocket. Something about this information seems to require us to post it backstage, following a specific visual presentation. This may not at first seem thrilling, but to witness firsthand a traditional, pen-and-paper method of show preparation undergo its transformation into digital form is to gain insight into how the artists using these documents understand the information both forms contain, when the information becomes “real” or “official,” and what we consider the essential features of such communications.

character, Willie Quick), or inherited as a legacy name passed down from its original actor (my character's name, Eileen Dover, was originated in 1970 by Megan Kenyon and borne by several other performers before I inherited it in 1998). The performer Molly Burke, who plays the show's diva Molly Twitch, has portrayed that same character in every *Broadside* show since 1986.

The notion of "character" that obtains in this theatrical context, then, is clearly an unusual one—certainly not one utilized in most theatre today. In fact, it closely resembles the mode of character development and in-habitation seen in clowns,<sup>12</sup> burlesque performers, and comic drag queens. The *Broadside* performer, like the clown, burlesque dancer, or drag queen, adopts a striking name (through choice or gift) and develops a character with a distinctive appearance and generally one or two extreme and exaggerated personality tendencies, then fleshes out this character through improvisation and exploration, usually over the course of a number of years. The result, in the case of *Broadside*, is a theatrically larger-than-life extension of the performer's self, as he or she selects and performs material that supports and showcases his or her talents through the humorous excesses of that character.

My analysis of the Chairman role examines chiefly the performance of Bill Roper, who, as his character Thaddeus Codswallop, played the role of Chairman from 2008 to 2010. As I will explain, his performance of the Chairman role is influenced deeply by his background in variety performance, his physical and personality type,

---

<sup>12</sup> Davis, 170. Davis notes that, much like the *Broadside Music Hall*'s characters, "each clown's costuming and makeup style served as his distinctive trademark;" and Davis' division of clowns into stable "types" that portrayed traditional characteristics and observed traditional pairings (Auguste and whiteface clowns, for instance) suggests that a clown performer chose one type of clown to play for extended periods of time.

and his goals as a performer. I found that examining specifics about how Roper learned, perceived, and performed the role yielded intensely interesting insights into possibilities within the dramaturgy of the Chairman role itself and its relationship to real social power. Neither did the power associated with the Chairman role remain entirely onstage; at one point, Roper needed to bow out of the role for the weekend of 4 and 5 December, 2010; his substitute, Morgan, teased him about being replaced. This light tension, though expressed in friendly humor, revealed a great deal about each actor's understanding of the importance of the Chairmanship (i.e., what was actually at stake in this temporary hand-off) and of his own position relative to the role.

### **The Chairman as Master of Ceremonies: dramaturgical features**

The *Broadside Music Hall Revue* is based on the English “music hall,” a robust mid- to late Victorian popular entertainment that developed out of informal singing-rooms (called “free-and-easies”) attached to pubs in the 1830s; by the 1860s it was the most popular form of entertainment in the nation. Music hall shows invariably featured a Chairman, an authoritative stage figure responsible for introducing each performer and fanning up audience enthusiasm for each “turn,” i.e., the performance, usually of a song, that the artiste was about to deliver. It was also the Chairman's duty to send the artiste off the stage once her or his turn was finished, usually with some parting remarks on the performance or performer. Dagmar Kift's description of the role of the English Chairman is worth quoting at length:

[The Chairman] was the most important character in the early halls. He had been the leader of the amateur choirs in the free-and-easies and from there his role had been upgraded to that of master of ceremonies in the singing saloons and music halls. By contrast with the other tables in the auditorium his own table was parallel to and in front of the stage. From here he announced the individual stars, encouraged the audience to applaud, admonished them to drink and at the same time tried to ensure that matters did not get out of hand. Attired in immaculate evening dress he, more than any other person in the early years, was responsible for giving the halls their tone and dignity. But the manner of his introductions and the language of his patter with its satirical exaggeration of middle-class and aristocratic speech patterns made it quite clear that he was at the same time parodying the members of those classes whose dress habits he was imitating. A high point in the life of many a visitor to the halls was to be able to share his table, as it were sitting practically in the spotlight. For it was the Chairman who dominated proceedings in the halls until shortly before the turn of the century.<sup>13</sup>

It was along these lines that David Springhorn created his Chairman character, Alfie Wallop, along with the entire *Cheapside Music Hall Revue* in 1970, the show that would become the *Broadside Music Hall Revue* after his departure in 2003. The same dramaturgical features that characterize other instances of the MC role in American variety-style theatre also structure the role of the Chairman as it functions in the *Broadside* show, namely singularity, direct address, and high onstage status. The role of the Chairman in the 2010 season of the *Broadside* show provides an interesting case study because of the ways in which certain aspects of casting and performance transgressed or altered standard manifestations of two of these features: singularity and high onstage status. In both instances, departure from standard pattern caused mild disruptions in the operation of the show, in the form of teasing between cast members

---

<sup>13</sup> Dagmar Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class, and Conflict*, trans. Roy Kift (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge UP, 1996) 22.

and small performance issues onstage. The standard manifestations of the main dramaturgical features of the MC receive focused attention in Chapter 1, so I will focus on how these components function in performances of the *Broadside* show.

Typically, the *Broadside* Chairman observes this rule of singularity in the usual sense: as the only performer holding that role in a given show, and as the sole constant onstage presence in a show comprised of variety turns. In the case of the *Broadside* group, the principle of singularity also extends to casting; the group contains many artistes, but only one performer in the cast ever holds the role of Chairman at a time. However, prior to the start of rehearsals for the 2010 run, Roper let me know that he would be unable to perform the second weekend of the run (4 and 5 Dec. 2010), because he would be presenting at a conference out of town. This meant—since, as discussed earlier, group membership is the stable status that confers the right to perform in the show—that I would have to find a performer to execute the Chairman’s duties for just that weekend, rather than replacing Roper for the entire run. Not that I would have dreamed of replacing him; it had taken four years to find someone as visually and temperamentally suited to the role and talented as Roper in the first place.

Daniel Morgan, the show’s lead comedian, was the logical choice. He had ten years of experience in the show, had observed every previous Chairman first-hand, and was a formidable comic improviser. I asked him about covering the role at the very beginning of our rehearsal period, knowing that he would need time to prepare; Morgan, who had wanted the Chairman role for years, readily agreed.

At that point, a change took place: instead of the Chairman being a singular position in the group with a unique relationship to the artistes, there were suddenly two “Chairmen” in the *Broadside* cast: the official holder of the role, and the ambitious, talented artiste with longer experience in the show who would fill in for him for two days. This dual MC situation, since it ran counter to the standard pattern of singularity, produced joking exchanges of one-upsmanship between Roper and Morgan that repeatedly pointed to their understanding of the role as normally and ultimately singular; i.e., only one of them could *really* “be” the Chairman. Both men’s joking bluster revealed the slight anxiety produced by this unusual double-Chairman situation, indicating that the standard formation of the MC as singular entity held sway in both performers’ concept of the Chairman role.

The *Broadside* show does not problematize or innovate on the standard formulation of the dramaturgical feature of the MC role I call singularity, which includes a kind of framing, both initial/final and interstitial. An MC provides interstitial framing for all other performances in a variety show by preceding each of them with an introductory speech and then returning to the stage to deliver another speech after each concludes. The *Broadside* Chairman’s dramaturgy exhibits this structure as well, and Roper follows this pattern in every show. During the introductions to the individual turns, for instance, the Chairman draws the audience’s attention to himself through employing vocal techniques like speaking in the showman’s ballyhooing bellow, conveying emphasis through varied pitch, volume, and rhythm; using his gavel; and taking center stage. He steers that attention toward each artiste as she (for example) rises to begin her turn, by pivoting his body or

angling his arms toward them as he concludes his speech and yields up center stage. Once the turn is completed, he then reclaims the audience's attention, by using his gavel, resuming center stage, and offering parting remarks on the individual artiste or her performance. He then begins the next introduction. Like other types of MC, the Chairman frames not only the individual turns but the show as a whole; he opens the show with an initial introduction and closes the show with a final comic speech.

This dramaturgical pattern alone (i.e., the Chairman's constant, reliable reappearance in a show otherwise comprised of one-time acts) would suffice to mark him for the audience as a sort of stable benchmark indicating an appropriate position to take on the show's offerings. In this way, his framing resembles the filmic technique of the "reaction shot," where the camera cuts from a significant event to a given character's face; film spectators tend to interpret that close-up as the character's response to the event that preceded it. Similarly, the Chairman provides the audience members watching the *Broadside* show with a familiar face to look to for his reaction after any given event. The dramaturgical structure of interstitial framing therefore positions him as the authority on this world, demonstrating how to interpret it and relate to it.

The Chairman's use of direct address, another basic dramaturgical feature of the MC, also contributes to his position of authority. This is another feature that the *Broadside* show uses in a straightforward fashion; the dramaturgy of the role does not interrogate the terms of this form of discourse. His power to speak to the audience combines with the role's singularity and bookending to establish a relationship with the audience that becomes their primary relationship in the show—they learn to look

primarily to him for the information his speeches deliver. In the Broadside show, the content and style of the Chairman's direct address establishes the parameters of this relationship, one in which he is by turns instructor, peer, and proxy.

The Chairman employs the instructor function when, for example, he instructs the audience in the proper words and dance steps for an audience participation song. In this function, he broadcasts information and rules to the artistes and the audience. He employs the peer when he shares his reactions and opinions (for example, praising a singer whose turn has just finished) by speaking to audience members in a candid fashion, as though to a friend. In the proxy function, he engages with the artistes in ways that represent the interests of the fictional audience that this relationship creates, for example, asking a comically recalcitrant artiste if she will "please sing us her pretty song." These three roles may, of course, combine and shift in the course even of a single sentence; the fluid nature of authority and its many forms and signals place a banquet of performative tropes at the Chairman's disposal. All three of these functions serve to teach the audience how to think and behave during the show.

Through direct address, the Chairman also sets forth the terms of the reality in which the other performers and the audience operate for the duration of the show. For example, he displays his power to speak from center stage, thus demonstrating a tacit set of rules about what this area signifies; he issues judgment on events that take place in the show and, by so doing, demonstrates both what is to be considered significant and/or valuable (or not), and that he is in the position to judge in the first place. The Chairman can stop the show to praise, question, and tease members of the audience about anything at any moment. He can literally set the show in motion or stop an

artiste's turn by shouting a command, or, if he chooses, spend valuable stage time conversing with an audience member. His command of the verbal channel transmitting directly to the audience, as with other types of MC, demonstrates control of language, self, and stage. No other role on the stage during this show has even vaguely comparable dramaturgical power.

A singular central-yet-outside relationship to the show and direct address both contribute toward an MC's high onstage status, which the role requires in order to convincingly grant the performer and/or character the right to regulate the show. While the singularity of the Chairman's role was complicated and tested during the 2010 *Broadside* season by temporary casting needs, many of the ways in which the show handles the fourth and final feature of the MC's role—high onstage status—are built into its characteristic dramaturgy. In fact, essential components of the Chairman's role in this show deviate from or invert the standard pattern of status-granting signals; this generates much of the show's comic tone by rendering status and its mechanisms explicit and available for comment and critique in specific ways. Other signals in an MC's appearance and demeanor also contribute toward high onstage status, interestingly, many of these signals are those which align the performer with several kinds of politically and economically privileged classes: formal attire indicating wealth, male sex conferring the favorable position in a patriarchal culture, visible racial whiteness, mature age, heterosexuality, physical ability, and access to vocabularies and forms of discourse available chiefly to the educated. *Broadside*, however, as a *comic depiction* of a variety show, upends and inverts a number of these characteristics; it is the show's exposure of the mechanisms that (would typically)

produce the Chairman's high onstage status that distinguishes it from a straightforward variety show merely containing comedy.

### **Bill Roper: Chairman of Broadside**

"Typecasting" is usually a derogatory term, but variety performers readily acknowledge its utility for creating recognizable characters; good performers acknowledge their physical and personality type and elaborate on the framework it provides to create a robust and clear character that audiences can understand quickly and without strenuous effort. In this sense, the MC is no different from other figures of the variety stage. Bill Roper, a 48-year-old video game producer from Concord, California, is well suited to the Chairman role in a number of these ways. Running down the list of standard characteristics that serve to position the MC as a possessor of social power, he is male, white, older than most of the cast, fairly tall and physically imposing, heterosexual (though the key thing is that he performs heterosexuality in his onstage commentary), and dressed in clothes of good quality and formal cut relative to the conceit of poverty and poor taste that structures the area's aesthetic. Personally, he is considerate, generous, and affable, and his typically relaxed physical stance and calm demeanor project an ease on stage that readily converts into high status. Like Renaissance England's courtly Master of the Ceremonies, Roper is also an experienced public speaker, with a quick mind and a wide vocabulary (including a growing collection of obscure Victorian off-color slang) that allows him to reply appropriately and quickly to unforeseen performative events and interactions. This steadiness and flexibility in improvisation is a necessary trait in successfully engaging

in direct address and maintaining the high onstage status that the role of Chairman requires.

Interestingly, Roper's onstage performance of the high-status Chairman is enhanced by another kind of status: his standing in the community of performers that work at the Dickens Fair. Roper was one of the chief individuals behind *World of Warcraft*, a massively popular and commercially successful multi-user video game that earned him a legitimate reputation as a creative innovator. Also, the Poxy Boggards, a singing group Roper co-founded in 1992, has had notable success; their original song, "I Wear No Pants," was selected by the Dockers apparel company for their Superbowl commercial in 2009,<sup>14</sup> which serves as another example of Roper's creative abilities. These biographical details, I feel, aid his portrayal of the Chairman role, due to the genuine respect that the performers feel for his creative accomplishments, which influences their interactions with him.

### **Learning the role: experience, research, legacy**

Roper was cast as the Chairman of the *Broadside Music Hall Revue* for the show's 2008 run, and has performed as the Chairman for each of the 2008, 2009, and 2010 runs. With three shows per day, during the four or five weekends that fall between Thanksgiving and Christmas, and with very few absences, Roper has played the Chairman in roughly 70 shows. Still, three seasons is a relatively short tenure in

---

<sup>14</sup> Poxy Boggards, perf., "I Wear No Pants," 2009, Online video clip, *YouTube*, 21 May 2011 <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nys0i\\_FRjTI&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nys0i_FRjTI&feature=related)>.

this complex role, part of an equally complex show. Approaching his third season, Roper was, by his own admission, still learning and finding his feet.

Over the course of several months of meetings, rehearsals, and performances preceding the 2010 run, I worked closely with Roper to investigate the essential elements of the role's presence, appearance, and relationships (both with the other characters and with the "house"). Our goal was to develop a dramaturgical understanding of the role as it existed, and discover how we could further improve Roper's effectiveness in the role. The path of this exploration would prove both interesting and complicated for my research. Roper was relatively new to the role and the show, while I had been involved with the show since 1998, had observed all four previous performers in the role of Chairman, and was now the show's director, as well as a scholar researching variety dramaturgy. I was therefore attempting to interview the new Chairman about his preparation and performance decisions, while simultaneously, as his director, actively shaping his preparation and performance.

Roper's introduction to the role was unusual. Variety artists traditionally build their characters and/or acts by modeling themselves on other successful performers they have watched closely in performance (leading in the heyday of vaudeville, for example, to blatant theft of material and vitriolic copyright wars).<sup>15</sup> Direct mentoring is also common. When Broadside performers Tanya Anguita, Dan Morgan, and Robin Driskill encouraged Roper to audition for the Chairman role, however, he had never

---

<sup>15</sup> The documentary *American Masters: Vaudeville* contains a number of interviews with vaudevillians describing this method as their main education in performance. See also Erdman, 107-112. Erdman relates one example of vaudevillians' attempts to secure copyright over performance material as their own, even as other performers were performing the same type of dance (and making the same ownership claims): the "Salomania" that swept US vaudeville from 1908-1910.

even seen the *Broadside* show, and had no idea what the role entailed. Even after being cast, Roper received little direct information about the role, outside of a set of logistical duties: “It was never really, exactly discussed what the Chairman *did*.”<sup>16</sup> What would have been his main source of information in a traditional variety setting was notably absent—Roper was unable to watch and did not converse with the originator of the show and the Chairman role, David Springhorn.

Springhorn’s legacy presented another complication. Springhorn had held the Chairman role, as well as the directorship of the show, for over thirty years, and his “devastatingly quick” wit and “insanely caustic” comic delivery had become legendary among the community of performers who regularly perform at the Dickens Fair and similar events.<sup>17</sup> His termination from the group and the show prompted a name change from “Cheapside” to “Ballyhoo,” and later to “Broadside,” heralded a split between the directorship and the Chairman role, and was followed by considerable turnover in both positions. Three other performers subsequently attempted to fill the Chairman role, but none were successful, and each was released from the role at the close of the run. It was Springhorn’s legacy, then, that Roper found himself confronting, as fellow performers and longtime audience members alike mused about the “Golden Age of the Springhorn era.”<sup>18</sup> Realizing that his predecessor’s performance work had “set a standard [ . . . ] that’s going to have to be met, or altered, or something,”<sup>19</sup> Roper decided that he would build a Chairman character that was entirely different from the version Springhorn had played, rather

---

<sup>16</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 7 Oct. 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 11 Aug. 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 11 Aug. 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 7 Oct. 2010.

than attempting to follow the same pattern. Roper already knew many of his strengths as a performer, and also knew that vitriolic wit was neither his forte nor something he enjoyed: “I don’t want to be the Chairman who slashes everybody.”<sup>20</sup> He felt that this choice to go in a different direction would neutralize comparisons between his own performance work and the rosy memories that longtime fans of the show might hold of Springhorn’s “reign.”

Roper had resources that helped him build his own version of the Chairman role, however. With an educational background in Commercial Music (California State University, Long Beach) he was able to learn, understand, and perform the show’s songs quickly and with confidence. Even more importantly, he had an almost 20-year tenure with a vocal group called the Poxo Boggards, which he co-founded in 1992. Their performances had exposed him to literally hundreds of audiences, giving him ample opportunity to develop his confidence, showmanship, and skills in interpreting audience response. In interviews, in fact, Roper uses very concrete and specific language when describing audience response; he not only knows when he feels that performance material “works” during various moments in a show, but often describes audience response in terms of specific mental or emotional reactions: approval, confusion, interest, revulsion, and revelation.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, in our first interview on 11 August 2010, Roper often responded to questions about his decisions regarding the Chairman with anecdotes describing discoveries he had made while performing with the Boggards; realizing, for example, that audiences can be

---

<sup>20</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 11 Aug. 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 11 Aug. 2010 and 7 Oct. 2010.

intimidated by physically larger performers, they handed off some of the show's off-color material to the smaller members of the group and got better audience response. This pattern of equating the two shows indicates that Roper found the skills and insight gained in those earlier variety performance situations fully transferable to the variety performance circumstances and audience dynamics of the *Broadside* show. With this amount of variety performance experience, Roper had a practical foundation for making decisions about his version of the Chairman role.

Once cast as *Broadside's* Chairman, Roper also began to look for books on the subject. Tanya Anguita lent him a copy of *It Gives Me Great Pleasure* by Michael Kilgarriff, a contemporary English music hall Chairman. This book, which Roper calls “the Bible of the Chairman . . . that everybody goes out and gets,”<sup>22</sup> contains direct instruction on how to perform the role of the Chairman, containing speeches intended to be used verbatim<sup>23</sup> and describing the necessity for “a strong, authoritative personality” and citing “period dress” as the requisite attire.<sup>24</sup> He bought the second Kilgarriff volume, *It Gives Me Further Pleasure*, on eBay. Although there are many detailed and useful books on the history, material, and personalities of music hall, Kilgarriff's focus on practical performance instruction for the role of Chairman renders his work a unique resource for Americans; these two books were Roper's only textual sources of information on the role.

Even these books proved an imperfect fit for the type of Chairman that Roper envisioned, however. He wanted to develop a style that would contrast with that of the

---

<sup>22</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 7 Oct. 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Kilgarriff, 49-126.

<sup>24</sup> Kilgarriff, 8.

earlier Chairman in whose shadow he found himself standing: more of a welcoming host than a sharp-tongued autocrat. His goal became to “engag[e] the audience in a way that was more about bringing people in [ . . . ] It’s all about you and the audience, and this stuff goes on for all of you to enjoy.”<sup>25</sup> The instructions and examples in Kilgarriff’s books, however, display a definite tendency toward the cutting humor that characterized his predecessor’s approach. So, while the Kilgarriff books provided Roper with an invaluable source of first-hand instruction in vocabulary and phrasing for Chairman’s speeches, and the Chairman’s general relationship to the other artistes on the stage, he still had to adapt, rather than adopt, these materials.

Any performer taking on the role of Chairman in this show (and possibly any MC-type role) faces a fascinating double bind: the combination of traditional dramaturgy and unscripted material. Like the masked performers of the Italian *commedia dell’arte*, the performer serving as the Chairman has complete freedom in choosing what to say, but must maintain absolute clarity in his own established character and in his relationships with other characters and with the audience.<sup>26</sup> The Chairman bears a massive amount of responsibility during the show: he must generate all of his spoken performance material himself, much of it improvised in the moment, and he must also know the structural possibilities and limitations of the form (and his location and function within them) so well that his choices reinforce, rather than disrupt, the characteristic dramaturgy that both cast-mates and audience expect. His cast-mates in particular rely on his skill in keeping the show’s dramaturgy clear,

---

<sup>25</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 11 Aug. 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Duchartre, 30-40.

stable, and recognizable because they are all improvising too; the Chairman's steady control of the show provides them with an anchor that enables them to experiment with their material. The *Broadside* Chairman must do all this while taking care to use pleasingly inventive and surprising theatrically Victorian language that gives the impression of in-the-moment creation even if partially predetermined; to be regarded as successful, his material must under no circumstances sound memorized. As Roper admitted in one interview, he found taking on the many responsibilities of Chairman "daunting," not only because of the legacy of the first (and last) successful Chairman, but because the complex dramaturgy of the show made the role something that it was possible to actually do *wrong*, rather than just relatively well or poorly.<sup>27</sup>

### **Perception of the role as work: runaway trains and sacrosanct barrels**

At the time of our interviews, Roper's perception of the Chairman role reflected his uneven instruction in it; in both interviews, the elements of the role that he mentioned most often and described in the greatest detail were its responsibilities and logistical concerns, reflecting imperatives that the event's artistic director, Cat Taylor, and Robin Driskill, the then-director of the Mad Sal's area, had issued to him when he was cast: "I'm responsible for time-keeping, to make sure that we are in and out on time, and it is up to me to take things by the reins, as has been [made] clear to me from when I first started, if something starts running askew. [ . . . ] I need to rein them in. [ . . . ] [I need to] maintain the order that seems to be what a Chairman is

---

<sup>27</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 7 Oct. 2010.

supposed to be doing, and directing the flow, and engaging the audience.”<sup>28</sup> This sense of responsibility Roper felt for ensuring the success of each show through conscientious execution of specific Chairman duties structured his performance of the role in ways we found both helpful and less helpful. This proved to be especially true in the case of his Chairman’s approach to onstage status.

In our interviews, Roper repeatedly mentioned the work he feels he must do as Chairman to ensure that each show runs the way it should, often explaining this work in terms of what he feels is the show’s inherently chaotic nature: “There are times where I feel like I am the conductor on a runaway train, and my job is to attempt to bring us into the station as best I can. Yes, we are off the tracks, but we’re going to get there, by God.”<sup>29</sup> Throughout our discussions, Roper uses the imagery of insanity, circuses, runaway trains, and detonating bombs to describe his sense of the show’s high energy, resistance to order, and potential for disaster. His use of the metaphor of tracks and station is particularly telling, since it indicates that he feels pressure to make the show follow a certain path, and arrive at a specific destination; it resembles his impression, mentioned earlier, that it was possible to perform the Chairman’s role not just poorly but *wrong*. This may reflect the justified anxiety of a performer who had to collect many of the performance tools for this role from scattered sources and assemble them into a coherent performance on his own, with little knowledge of the show’s established tone, dramaturgy or aesthetic. It may also signal Roper’s detection of a preservationist impulse in the show—that it has entered the developmental stage

---

<sup>28</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 11 Aug. 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 11 Aug. 2010.

that follows a cultural phenomenon's days of growth and innovation, when subsequent participants attempt merely to keep it in place. Regardless, this sense of responsibility strongly structures his perception of the necessary components of a successful Chairman performance, and therefore the steps he takes to accomplish them.

For example, during his first year with Broadside, Roper built "the Chairman's book," a performance preparation document<sup>30</sup> that he brings onstage, which contains a list of each artist's songs along with the set of introductions he has developed for each song. Roper also uses the Chairman's book to record "bits" of improvised material that worked onstage, or to note changes that are being made to a given performance while it is still in progress.<sup>31</sup> That Roper devised this document, unique in *Broadside* performance practice, indicates that he felt that introducing artistes correctly, recording material that had proven successful for future use, and smoothly adapting to contingencies that arose during the show were significant components of a successful performance.

The Chairman's book is also an interesting development in the history of the role. David Springhorn has been a professional entertainer of the vaudeville style and a ceramics artisan for decades; his primary interactions with information do not necessarily involve written text. When he was Chairman, there was no way to know

---

<sup>30</sup> I am developing this phrase as a term of art, used to refer to documents that a performer prepares to record elements of his or her own performances in order to generate future iterations of those performances. These documents are not intended to have any artistic value in themselves, and are more similar to a recipe than a script, with discrete components that can be altered at will. The Broadside performers make heavy use of documents such as these, since there is traditional business that sometimes requires adjustment, and because, outside of pre-written songs, performers must generate all of their own new material. The Chairman's book is a major and detailed performance preparation document, but hand-written notes about choreography, often resorting to scribbled diagrams and written on repurposed sheets of paper, and pages containing newly-written speeches or song verses also fall into this category.

<sup>31</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 11 Aug. 2010.

which of his material was memorized and which he was producing on the spot, but there was never a book in his hands. This meant, of course, that when he departed the show, all of his knowledge and expertise left with him. Roper, however, works in the technology field, where preparing and consulting documentation is a natural step in approaching a complex project, hence his resort to the written word when planning his performances. Roper's willingness to share his book with me indicates that, if he were to depart the role of Chairman, he might be disposed to make this material available to his successor: the possible beginning of a Broadside Chairman's manual. The old set of values remains, however: as of 2010, Roper was proud to tell me that he'd begun to refer to the book less often, and to deviate from some of its prepared intros in favor of spur-of-the-moment inspiration, which indicates that, for him, the goal is to generate his performance in the moment, drawing at will on experience, on material stored in memory, and on immediate creative impulse.

Roper's view of the Chairmanship as labor influences his character, Thaddeus Codswallop, as well, a consideration that sometimes produces dissonances with the high status that an MC requires. In one interview, a question about costume led to a sudden and illuminating description of Roper's perception of his role as Chairman in relation to the rest of the show:

I kind of like not wearing a coat on stage. One, because I'm big and I overheat. Two, [. . .] I think visually it gives the impression of, "Okay, whew, I can take my coat off, I gotta roll my sleeves up; I'm up here to, like, manage this crazy group of people." So it's more workaday, [. . .] I'm here to *work* on this thing, rather than be kind of aloof, [. . .] It's more like, "Holy crap, this ship is about to sink, and if I don't roll up

my sleeves and jump in and try to fix the engine and bail some water out, God knows what's gonna happen!"<sup>32</sup>

While the general image of Thaddeus Codswallop as a managerial Chairman is in keeping with the MC's typically high status, Roper's removal of his coat onstage creates a disruption in the visual codes of high status that typically operate to structure the role. Sitting hatless and coatless on a stage with other characters who have retained their hats and coats renders Roper's attire in that moment less formal than theirs, no matter what quality the respective garments may be. In this context, Roper appears less important, i.e., less connected to elite social strata and activities where formal wear is appropriate and required. This finds parallels in Roper's verbal formulation of this managerial role as "workaday" and as subject to outside imperatives, things he has "gotta" do. While the resulting drop in status does not damage the Codswallop character, it renders him less visually suited (and therefore theatrically entitled) to the power he enjoys as MC.

Images of work structure Roper's perceptions of his use of onstage space as well. When Roper describes his impressions about the portion of the stage and the stage structures (like his barrel) that show tradition allocates for the Chairman's use, his replies reflect both an artistic desire to portray his character clearly through the visual codes of available space surrounding him, and a variety performer's hard-earned knowledge of practical reasons why this space needs to be clear of other performers and their props. At bottom, these issues are one and the same: both high status and safe, effective work require the freedom to operate without impediment; this

---

<sup>32</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 7 Oct. 2010.

example encodes that freedom as space, but time can serve a similar purpose. When referring to the fiction of the show, in which Roper portrays the Chairman of a low-down, seedy East London Victorian Music Hall, he acknowledges that, in a larger sense, the performance of this role includes demonstrating certain kinds of control over the entire house and stage: “to a greater extent, the theatre is mine, and then the stage is mine.”<sup>33</sup> However, he immediately shifts to a more pragmatic discussion of the implications of space: “but I definitely have my area, with my stuff,”<sup>34</sup> his concept of ownership of space includes not just the character operating within the fiction of the show but the performer’s actual, practical need to have a work space clear of other performers and their props.

In fact, Roper spends the bulk of his discussion on stage space detailing how he needs to use certain spaces without hindrance in order to effectively execute his duties, rather than describing the same need in terms of the necessary information about his “character” that his ownership of the space might convey to the audience. Describing the top surface of the Chairman’s barrel as “sacrosanct,” for example, Roper would seem to be talking about how to support the fiction—rather than defend the labor—of the Chairman (sacredness, as a specific class of high status, being an agreement between people to treat a certain person, place, or thing in a reverent way, mostly by staying away from it). However, Roper’s description consistently blends the fiction of status and the practical concerns of the performer, usually ending up by prioritizing the latter:

---

<sup>33</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 7 Oct. 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 7 Oct. 2010.

I need to have a space to use the gavel if I need to. I have my Chairman's book open. [I]t's like my little desk, my little work area. And if people come by and they put their drink on there or they put this or they put that on there, I'm like all, "Aah! You're cluttering my work area!"<sup>35</sup>

Cluttered work areas, gavels crashing down on teacups, and drinks spilled on important show documents loom large in Roper's ruminations on "his" space. His focus on practical considerations supports his characterization of the Chairmanship as "a job" with duties that both require and deserve space. This formulation of the Chairmanship as labor would seem to reinforce visual codes of high status rather than impeding them, since one result is that other performers refrain from leaving their items in Roper's "work area." However, the barrel is far from tidy; Roper's book, mug of water, gavel, and other assorted items produce visible disarray on the top of this work area that hints at a possible loss of control and hence a loss of status.

### **Status considerations and comic formulations**

Performance considerations other than those related to the MC's duties can interfere with the functioning of codes of high status as well. This is especially true, I feel, in comic formulations of the role like the *Broadside* Chairman. In many non-comic formulations, each of the dramaturgical features of singularity, direct address and high onstage status manifests in a straightforward manner: the MC is singular, frames the other acts, engages in direct address, and both claims and enjoys high onstage status. Comic formulations, however, intentionally alter or invert one or more

---

<sup>35</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 7 Oct. 2010.

of these features; the oddness of the deviation from the expected or standard pattern, and, as a result, its striking incongruity with the features that remain unaltered, is part of what makes the comic portrayal funny.<sup>36</sup> The *Broadside* Chairman, as I have been explaining, adheres to most standard patterns of high status such as maleness, whiteness, maturity, and formal attire. Where the dramaturgy of the role's high status necessarily deviates to produce its intended type of comedy is in the realm of social class and economics; in an inversion of the non-comic pattern, this Chairman is a lower-class MC with no money. As a simple binary inversion (from "yes: has money/is upper class" to "no: has no money/is lower class"), this does not question or disrupt any of the background assumptions directly relating money or social class to high status in the first place, and produces no theatrical confusion. As a fundamental component of the theatrical conceit of the environmental area, moreover, this money/class comic inversion is built into the role and into the show, and is not a choice available to the performer. Previous unsuccessful Chairmen, in fact, had misunderstood this dynamic, and chosen to dress in a more upscale manner than was appropriate for this show, intending to bolster the character's high status. This inability to distinguish the role's intentional comic inversion of the display of wealth from other non-inverted components in its performance of status muddied the clarity of this binary inversion and neutralized the tension that should have produced the fundamental engine of the role's comedy.

---

<sup>36</sup> The Emcee from *Cabaret*, as a non-comic instance of the role, provides a fascinating example of deviation from standard MC patterns that does not produce comic inversion but politically resistant subversion.

**Performance issues: status of character versus role**

Roper has made several significant choices in building the comic character that he performs when filling the Chairman role, Thaddeus Codswallop. Some choices, like those regarding his costume, function beautifully to reinforce his character's claim to the high status belonging to a Chairman, in both its successful and comically unsuccessful formations. Other choices, however—such as his character's style of interaction with women—represent an imperfect transfer of other variety performance experience to the Chairman role. A number of these choices, which tend to position Thaddeus in low-status positions relative to the women he discusses or encounters, do not harmonize with other components of the role's dramaturgy and therefore produce, rather than a clean comic inversion, a slightly hazy dissonance that does not fully support the overall performance of the role.

The Dickens Fair management requires almost all performers to build their own costumes for the event, which are subject to approval by the event's costume designer for general historical accuracy. Roper, then, had a great deal of freedom in determining how his character would dress, and his successful choices in assembling a costume appropriate for a comic MC demonstrate considerable historical and theatrical acumen. His character's clothing includes a black top hat, white shirt, striped cravat, green plaid "barker's jacket," red plaid waistcoat, green striped trousers, white spats, and black shoes. Not only does this costume's silhouette effectively locate it within theatrical approximations of late Victorian attire, it presents visual cues that, within the aesthetics of the event, signal his character's low socioeconomic class: garish, mismatched patterns; large-pattern plaids; a battered, secondhand top hat; and

spats that are in such poor repair they barely stay on his shoes. This costume also successfully reflects the Chairman's high social position within this group of lower-class characters: the fact that he has spats at all, and that his clothing has no visible holes, stains, or patches conveys that he has a bit more money than most of the under-class rabble that constitutes his immediate associates. Finally, its bright colors and loud patterns ensure that he is easily visible on stage.

On top of all this, Roper has managed to build a costume that also integrates well with key choices he has made in developing his character. As discussed earlier, Roper's most fundamental character decision was to diverge intentionally from the domineering performance styles of previous Chairmen, deciding instead that his Chairman would be a sympathetic character. According to Roper, however, his experience performing with the Poxo Boggards taught him that his imposing size and booming voice can make him an intimidating figure on stage. In interviews, Roper describes situations where this is useful to him as Chairman, such as regaining control of a stage turn gone haywire or "shutting down" hecklers in the audience who are interfering with others' enjoyment of the show, but he also acknowledges that it can be problematic. With the Boggards, he found that authority also had a distancing effect, and that audiences more readily sympathized with characters of performers who were smaller or less threatening in some other way.

This led him to decide, when developing his character, to temper the distancing authority of his physical presence with displays of obvious comic lack, such as vanity,

stupidity, cowardice—or, in Thaddeus Codswallop’s case, all three—to retain the audience’s sympathies.<sup>37</sup>

In keeping with this decision, his character displays a combination of foolishness and comically ill-founded vanity, which prompts daring but incorrect forays into both vocabulary and wardrobe; Thaddeus uses large words incorrectly and dresses in terrible colors and patterns that he believes to be very fashionable and impressive:

I’m obviously some kind of a clownish character, because [assumes character voice] ‘Look at the crazy colors I have on!’ and ‘Look at the—look at the *wild* right here!’ Like, ‘You can’t take me *that* seriously.’ Which I think is [ . . . ] for my character, a good dichotomy, too, where it’s like, [assumes pompous voice] ‘I’m the Chairman! I—you have to listen to me, I run this show! These are – these are the artistes! You are in my theatre!’ And I’m kind of dressed like an idiot. Right? So don’t really take me all that seriously.<sup>38</sup>

Roper’s costume is theatrically successful; while its good state of repair and relatively fashionable lines signal a slightly higher income than that of the other male characters on the stage, assaults the eye with its bright colors and mismatched patterns, a display of poor taste that, in this performance context, offers a comic inversion in the structuring of status that associates aesthetic judgment with class.

This decision to make his character less intimidating, however, is not without its problems, one of which is the confusion of his overall onstage status that results from assigning conflicting traits to the different valences of his performance.

Associating poor fashion sense with low social class is one thing; associating it with

---

<sup>37</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 11 Aug. 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 7 Oct. 2010.

foolishness is another. In contrast with the choice to make his *character* charmingly foolish, Roper's discussions of the *role* of Chairman invariably describe its essential dramaturgical function as one of genuine control over a complex, often resistant set of elements. It makes little theatrical sense that a foolish person could achieve this level of control, which means that these considerations of character and role cannot actually be brought into alignment; the result is an uneven performance, where Roper oscillates between the comic foolishness necessary designed to engender audience sympathy for his character and the authority, presence of mind, and quick verbal repartee required to address the demands of his role.

Roper's decisions about the way his character would speak about and interact with women onstage operated in a similar fashion: solving a number of performance problems while creating a few others, chiefly related to the Chairman's status. His one solo turn, assigned to him by a previous director, uses a song called "Why Don't Women Like Me?" and takes the form of a complaint that women do not find him attractive. As Chairman, Roper first attempted to perform this turn with anger and bluster, *demanding* to know the answer, but found audiences did not respond to it well. He retooled the turn, and presented the song as a genuine complaint from a sad-sack character: Thaddeus Codswallop truly mystified by the female of the species. Roper's execution of this character number was spot-on, and he was gratified to receive genuine and vocal audience sympathy.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 7 Oct. 2010.

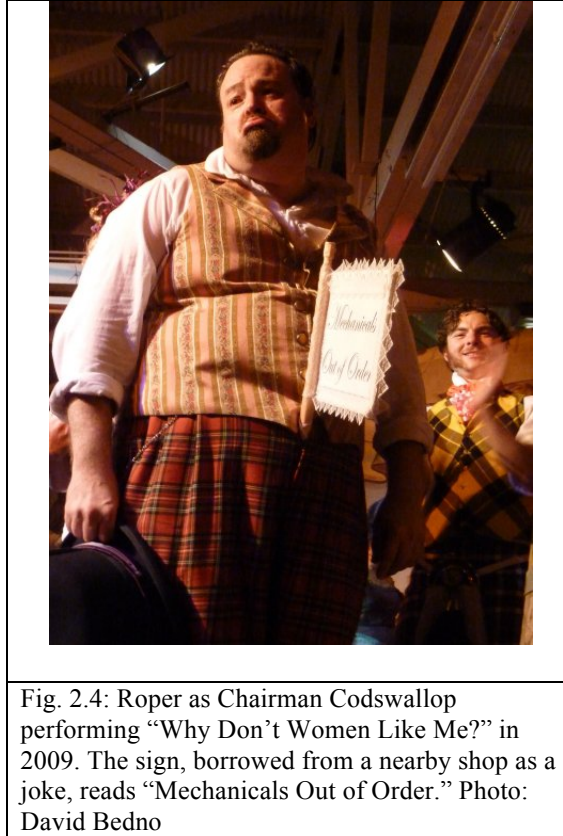


Fig. 2.4: Roper as Chairman Codswallop performing “Why Don’t Women Like Me?” in 2009. The sign, borrowed from a nearby shop as a joke, reads “Mechanicals Out of Order.” Photo: David Bedno

However effective this approach had been for his character, as director I could see that it also reduced his onstage status as Chairman, and it took him longer than it should have to reclaim the audience’s focus when he completed the song and moved on to other tasks of the role. In 2010, as director, it was my responsibility to guide this song in another direction, asking Roper to perform it as though he was being a disingenuous cad exploiting the sympathy his complaints provoked in the women around him for his own ends; it was not as funny as Roper’s former iteration, but his onstage status as Chairman was less diminished. The fact that there is no clear way for the veteran performer Roper to deliver this song from a position of high status indicates that it is a poor match for him in performance material.

Roper is also cautious about the fact that, as a large man, he can appear genuinely threatening to women onstage. He therefore, unlike the other male performers in the show, is wary of engaging in lascivious behavior or commentary for comic effect. Instead, he takes the utterly non-threatening, lower-status role whenever a female performer approaches him on stage, performing a comically overwhelming attraction to her that verges on terror, by stumbling, stuttering, almost falling off his chair, and pretending to overheat.<sup>40</sup> Playing the Chairman, this encouraged the laughter of the audience, but also diminished Roper's high onstage status.

These instances of ill fit between the valences of character and role illuminated that, whatever the character playing the role of the *Broadside* Chairman might be, that role had specific dramaturgical requirements. While certain components of the MC's high onstage status could be safely inverted for comic effect without damaging the performance, such as the appearance of wealth and class as displayed in costume, others, apparently, could not. Roper's performance of a blustery comic foolishness did not support well his execution of duties that required intelligence and competence, and the impulse to invert the (sadly traditional) male/female power dynamic by placing them in control muddied the outlines of the Chairman role by diminishing the degree to which he could immediately reclaim authority over a stage that still, visually, included those same women.

There is more to explore concerning this question, but that key word, "visually" seems to be a significant determiner in which of these status components

---

<sup>40</sup> Bill Roper, personal interview, 7 Oct. 2010.

can be manipulated for comedy without damaging the performance's effectiveness. What the examples from Roper's performance indicate is that the crucial distinction between the two types is visibility, and possibly presence of any sort, even in song. When Roper displayed lower-class tastes in clothes, he was nevertheless the most "refined gentleman" visible and present upon the stage, and therefore still had the highest status available within the fiction in which the show participates. When Roper performed low-status behaviors in his dealings with women, the woman who stood at the high end of the status relationship was physically present on stage; in the example of the song, the occupants of the high end of the status relationship were not only the women who snubbed him in the song's narrative but the men onstage who, with girls on their arms and in their lap, clearly had no such difficulties. Thus, one distinction between components of the Chairman's high status that can be inverted, versus those that cannot, is a function of who occupies the highest visually available status position within the performance structure.

### **Status-raising technique: the female form as frame**

As director, I felt that these structural incongruities regarding status in the layers of Roper's performance were impeding his effectiveness in the role, regardless of his intelligence and talent, and slightly blurring distinctions in the show that needed to be stable and clear in order to produce sharp comedy. Rather than work against Roper's instincts to perform a comic and non-threatening lower status, I decided to attempt to bolster his onstage status by simply increasing the number of high-status signals his performance included, to balance out the conflicting signals. One way to

achieve this was to take advantage of the function of visibility/presence in the status relationship, and surround his Chairman with lower-status characters on stage, affirming his place at the other, high-status end. The obvious—and telling—solution: dancing girls.

While watching footage of the 2009 Academy Awards, specifically the first entrance of hosts Alec Baldwin and Steve Martin, I had been struck by the relationship they performed to the female bodies that entered, occupied, and exited the stage. The women, dressed showgirl-style (that is, in very little), visually framed the two hosts as the whole group descended on a moving platform onto the main playing space. The women focused a good deal of their attention on the two men, who walked away from them without so much as a backward glance, in a common trope conveying status and power. The women remained on stage for a brief, not terribly comfortable period after that, and then, oddly, almost slunk off in the shadow of the men's pointed neglect.<sup>41</sup>

What I learned from this dynamic was that women framing men lent prominence to the men; arguably, this is true of any performer who appears flanked by and attended to by others, who themselves share some signal dissimilarity to the central performer. This contrast can consist of any visually representable difference (African-American children dancing around and framing a white adult singer, for example, was a staple of vaudeville).<sup>42</sup> Here, though, the contrast happened to be sexual, and the performers framed happened to be the MCs of the show.

---

<sup>41</sup> See Fig. 1.7, Chapter 1.

<sup>42</sup> Kibler, 119-25.

After witnessing the “female form as frame” strategy employed at the Oscars, I decided to see what a similar operation would do for Roper’s Chairman. I asked the dancers of the San Francisco dance troupe, Can-Can Bijou, to make sure that at least one of them accompanied the Chairman whenever he returned to his barrel after an introduction. These dancers are uniformly quite attractive, and provide much of the nonverbal glamour spectacle of the show. Throughout the performances, then, I asked that one or two dancers attend the Chairman—and that was the extent of the direction I gave them. What developed from this was a firm and satisfying vindication of this framing approach, as well as the less comfortable realization that this show—*my* show—was helping to promote and prolong the silencing, objectification, and spectacularizing of the female performing body.

Roper, following his introduction of each soloist, generally returned to his barrel and sat on a wooden stool slightly behind it to watch the turn. Much of him was still visible to the audience. When I added the can-can dancers to his space, their performers’ intuition led them to execute a physical and focal arrangement that echoed exactly what Messrs. Martin and Baldwin had orchestrated. When Roper sat on the stool, the dancers chose to stand behind the Chairman, one draped on each shoulder—or, in cases where only one dancer was free, she stood on the shoulder closest to the stage, effectively between Roper and the soloist. They would turn part of their focus on him, smile at him, drape their arms on him, and hike up their dark skirts to show the audience their white ruffled petticoats and stockinged legs, unmistakably upping the sexual ante (and status meaning) of this visual arrangement. I was puzzled, however, as to why the one dancer, if there was only one, would choose the stage-side

shoulder to perch on, in defiance of the usual performer instinct to clear other performers' lines of sight and focus unless one is participating in it.



Fig. 2.5: Roper as Chairman Codswallop, flanked by Can-Can Bijou dancers, 2010. Photo: Chris Cochems

The reason, I feel, has two components. First, the area behind the stage-side shoulder was better lit and less crowded, affording the audience a better view of the dancer. Second, the relationship of gaze to status so ably demonstrated by our Oscar hosts, who never once looked at the women they entered the stage with, manifested here as well. In order to focus on an individual artiste's turn, the Chairman would have to look past the woman framing him. So, the direction and focus of the Chairman's gaze became part of the status calculation that I had set in motion, and which the dancers were refining in practice. This pointed gesture of looking past women engaged

in sexualized display, coupled with the comfortably seated position that contrasted with the dancers' standing, left no room for question as to who was in charge of that corner of the stage. Additionally, while the dancers would drape their arms around the Chairman, sometimes play with his hat, or touch him in other ways, his hands rarely, if ever, moved to make contact with them. This formed a nonreciprocal current of physical focus that augmented those already present in the "looking-past" gaze and the seated/standing body positions. It most certainly contributed toward my directorial goal of raising the Chairman's apparent status to the highest rank on the stage. And it seemed to work almost subliminally for the performers asked to execute it, a realization that was troubling as well as satisfying.

As a result of my "female form as frame" adjustment, Roper's Chairman now shared another characteristic with the 2009 Oscars hosts and the "Emcee" character in *Cabaret*. All of these are male, dress formally, and address the audience directly. Now, they also shared a command over one or more nearby attractive, voiceless, female bodies. Not only that, but this command over those voiceless, displayed bodies was so solid that it could even include belittling them—even, if only in the Chairman's case, by choosing to direct his focus and hands somewhere else.

### **Successful status performance and the dramaturgy of "Bugger off!"**

Each performance of the *Broadside Music Hall Revue* concludes with comic parting remarks from the Chairman. Once the final number of the show has finished, and the applause has begun to die down, the Chairman strides to the center of the stage and makes a flowery and sentimental appeal to the audience (usually enjoining them to

“carry the joy of Christmas with them always,” and similar holiday exhortations). This speech follows a winding path and, when it concludes, it does so with a very abrupt, loud, and cheerful obscenity offered up by the entire *Broadside* cast. The traditional blocking for this concluding sequence, and Roper’s performance within it in the show on 11 Dec. 2010, demonstrates the successful execution of a number of previously discussed status signals that results in a clear and unmistakable performance of authority. In fact, my examination of this conclusion to the show will demonstrate how it combines all of the MC’s basic dramaturgical features of singularity (including framing), direct address, and high onstage status into a single sequence that resoundingly exemplifies these aspects of the Chairman’s role, all in one minute and 16 seconds of performance.

In order to begin to describe how this sequence functions, I will first supply the transcript of Roper’s speech during the *Broadside* show on December 11. I have developed some special notation because, while he is delivering the verbal component of the sequence, Roper also executes a few dramaturgically significant gestures and movements, changing the location of his gaze and focus. In the instances where Roper gestures *while* continuing to speak, slash marks indicate the beginning and ending of the physical action, by marking the words spoken while the motion is begun and completed. For example: if Roper were to take off his hat while speaking a sentence, but this gesture began and ended while he spoke the two middle words, “my dear,” the transcript would look like this: “Hello, /my dear, [takes hat off]/ lovely evening, innit?” I hope to develop this notation further to address issues of comic timing in this research, especially the ways in which the relationship of a given gesture to a piece of

speech can expand, emphasize, or even contradict its grammatical and semantic meaning. The transcript of Roper's text on December 11 follows:

[Looking at piano player:] Well done, Professor. Give us a little /tinkling, [makes piano playing gesture]/ will you? [Faces audience. Music begins.] Ladies and gentlemen, it 'as been our pleasure to try to bring you— /'Allo! [rocks forward on toes as can-can dancer grabs his leg]/—some holiday cheer this lovely Christmas eve. [Looks down at dancer now hugging his leg.] /*There's* [looks back to audience]/ some holiday cheer. [to dancer, but without looking at her:] Little higher, dove. There we are, nice, thanks, dove. [to audience:] Now, we hope that you will take the spirit of Christmas what we 'as given you today, carry it wif you everywhere—when you're on the streets of London, when you're back 'ome wif your family, when you're sittin' around your Christmas goose, 'aving your delicious meal, piled 'igh wif food what may make you want to sleep as opposed to be on a stage performing, and you're there, and you're lookin' in the eyes of your family, your relatives, your loved ones, those what means the most to you in the entire world, just fink of these /two words [gestures "two" with left hand]/; these two sweet, magical words what sums up the entire—the entire Christmas season. And of course, those two words are . . . /BUGGER OFF! [Roper and cast give the rude two-finger salute]/<sup>43</sup>

This brief sequence accomplishes a great many things dramaturgically, almost all at once. It places Roper in a situation of clear singularity, both because he is the only one speaking, and because the cast physically surrounds him by moving into a traditional blocking formation they call "story time" (so called because it resembles children gathered around someone who is reading them a story). This piece of physical business placed Roper in the center of over a dozen people: all of the *Broadside* performers and any can-can dancers who have performed in that particular show. Not only that, but most of these other performers, especially those immediately

---

<sup>43</sup> Bill Roper, perf., *Broadside Music Hall Revue*, dir. Laura Brueckner, The Great Dickens Christmas Fair and Victorian Holiday Party, Cow Palace, San Francisco, 11 Dec. 2010, Performance and DVD.

surrounding Roper on the stage, direct their gaze and focus toward him for the duration of his speech. The fact that this sequence marks the end of the show also situates this instance of Roper's performance as part of the framing structure that the Chairman employs. Roper engages in direct address that, in this sequence, operates on a number of different levels; his mention of "the streets of London" operates fully within the fiction of the event, but it also supports his Chairman's direct address role as instructor, refreshing the audience's memory that the operating conceit is an environmental one and reminding them that they are supposed to enjoy the illusion of being in London. On another level of signification, his request to the piano player to begin the music, as well as his reference to being "on a stage performing," signals the show *as show*, as a theatrical display intentionally set apart from "reality."

With regard to the Chairman's high onstage status, so many components of this sequence reinforce this feature that the resulting combination produces one of the clearest successes in status performance in the show. Roper's request to the piano player, though it is phrased in polite words, is an unmistakable command, since Roper's gaze and focus return to the audience as soon as his command is spoken, assuming rather than waiting to see whether the accompanist will oblige. This same dynamic characterizes his interaction with the can-can dancer who, in the spirit of improvisation, decided to surprise him by grabbing his leg while he delivered his closing speech. Though Roper is surprised, he does not turn his focus to her until he finishes the sentence he'd begun before she acted. He looks down at her, then calmly returns his focus to the house, pausing in his intended speech only long enough to give her an order, to move her hands so as to improve the physical gratification his

character is supposed to be receiving from this interaction. What is interesting here, is that, even though she does not in fact, change the position of her hands at all, Roper thanks her as though she did. In fact, it is because she *does not* comply that he has to continue as though she had, because his high onstage status relies on his commands being obeyed without question. When the dancer does not comply, Roper *must* begin to speak again to preserve his status; it draws the audience's attention back to his face and away from questions of where the can-can girl's hands are (or are not), and combines that ability to steer focus with speech content that indicates a successful command that has been obeyed.

The performances of the other *Broadside* cast members thoroughly support Roper's high status in this sequence as well. As mentioned before, not only do they gather around him in "story time" formation, most of them turn their faces and focus toward Roper for the entirety of the speech he delivers. As he speaks, some of them echo his words in gestures, demonstrating not only that they (their characters) feel his words are important enough to warrant visual clarification, but also that they (their characters) feel that Roper has power such that it will benefit them to "kiss up" to Thaddeus by showing him how important they find his words to be.

The final vindication of the Chairman's high onstage status comes with the punchline to his meandering speech. Since Roper devises this speech afresh for each performance, it may or may not contain recognizable verbal landmarks to notify the cast exactly how long he will continue to speak before they must join in. Roper signals that the end of the speech is approaching by steering its content toward some imagined instance of conversation, usually between the "you" of the audience and a loved one,

focusing in on looking deeply into their eyes, and either thinking of, remembering, or saying the two words “BUGGER OFF!” During this wandering speech that may contain any number of jokes, absurdities, and false endings, the cast must continue to gaze on him with rapt attention (and try not to laugh). He indicates when it is time for them to speak by inserting a significant pause after some verbal formulation that contains the grammatical set-up for the punchline, and it is then—and only then—that they all lend their voices to support Roper’s authority by shouting words that, arriving as they do at the end of Roper’s speech, properly and theatrically belong to him.



Fig. 2.6: The *Broadside Music Hall Revue* cast giving the show’s closing salute. Roper, center, has pie on his face, the result of a rare prank pulled moments before. Photo: R.J. Johnson

## Conclusion

As a specific type of Master of Ceremonies, the Chairman of the *Broadside Music Hall Revue* has the theatrical duty to establish his authority and maintain the

show's pace, aesthetic, reference set, comic register, audience engagement, and other performance parameters through numerous signals in his own performance. The costume that the Chairman wears, the way he makes use of the stage space, and the content and style of his address to the audience are only the most conspicuous elements in the enormous range of dramaturgical information he provides to the audience members about what kind of performance world they're immersed in, what their role is in this world, and how they should feel about it all.

Bill Roper, as *Broadside* Chairman Thaddeus Codswallop, performs a role structured by the MC's basic three dramaturgical features of singularity, direct address, and high onstage status. Within this structure, he has developed an individual approach to the role that reflects his genuine effort to build the uneven and incomplete training that he received into a coherent performance, his understanding of the hard work and responsibility the role entails, and his rich experience in other modes of variety performance.

While a few of these decisions produce less-than-perfect results, the ways in which they do not succeed actually provided the most valuable insight into the imperatives that normally structure the Chairman's role. An examination of poor song choice and of theatrically less effective interactions with women, for example, led me to realize that it was merely a mismatch between character and role that blurred the lines of Roper's Chairman's status, and that this could be reversed. Moreover, it led me to the discovery of differences between comic inversions of status signals where the persons/characters situated as the high complement to the Chairman's artificially lowered status were visible/present on stage versus those where they were invisible,

which will likely be a fruitful path for future research. This project has also confirmed my belief in theatrical performance as a laboratory for theory, and the value of fieldwork in the study of theatrical forms not easily captured in playscripts; careful consideration of seemingly small slices of performance can reveal how much complexity can reside in a glance, in a pause, in the moment.

### CHAPTER 3: THE EMCEE OF *CABARET*

As a case study of an MC exercising cold control, I will examine the role of the “Emcee” in *Cabaret*. My main examples will be Joel Grey’s Emcee in the 1972 film and Alan Cumming’s Emcee in the 2014 Broadway production by Roundabout Theatre; other iterations will come into play, but only in small measure. The 1972 film, directed by Bob Fosse, provides access to the well-known performance of Joel Grey—a performance that strongly resembles, according to Grey, the original concept for the role.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the 2014 stage show (a revival directed by Sam Mendes of his 1998 production, which also featured Cumming in the Emcee role), was open and running for most of this year, affording me opportunities to see Cumming’s performance in person. While there are obvious limitations to using examples drawn from scripted Broadway theatre (much less a major film) to illustrate what remains an overwhelmingly unscripted, popular-performance phenomenon, the *Cabaret* Emcee is useful for a host of important reasons, including his origins (modeled on actual MCs witnessed by the show’s creators, director Hal Prince and composer John Kander<sup>2</sup>); the research on the dramaturgy of cabaret performance that has gone into creating him; and the fact that his appearance, behavior, function, and demeanor have been enthusiastically documented and discussed since his 1966 Broadway debut, providing

---

<sup>1</sup> In a 2003 interview for NPR, Grey is asked to describe how the film version of the Emcee is different from the stage version; he replies simply, “I don’t think he is” (Grey, “Before ‘Les Mis,’ ‘Cabaret’ Revolutionized the Film Musical”).

<sup>2</sup> Prince was inspired by a performer he saw in 1951 in a club near Stuttgart called “Maxim’s.” He describes the performer as “a dwarf MC, hair parted in the middle and lacquered down with brilliantine, his mouth made into a bright-red cupid’s [sic] bow, who wore heavy false eyelashes and sang, danced, goosed, tickled, and pawed four lumpen Valkyres waving diaphanous butterfly wings” (Prince, *Contradictions*, p 126). Kander also saw a cabaret MC perform at the Tivoli in Copenhagen (Leve, *Kander and Ebb*, p 42).

a wealth of textual material for study. And it comes full circle; as part of the 2014 Broadway production, Cumming's Emcee actually performs an unscripted sequence each night that both adheres to traditional MC dramaturgies and illustrates how these traditional dramaturgies, under the guise of play, in fact enact processes of subjugation to coercive power.

### **Cold control**

In Chapter 1, I described the attributes of the cold-control MC. As opposed to the warm-control MC whose leadership of the stage seems natural, safe, and reassuring, the cold-control MC creates an atmosphere that feels coercive, dangerous, and unsettling. His reign is solitary, and his performance is laced with hints that any challenge to his rule will be met with violence. He takes evident pleasure in the exercise of power for its own sake and enjoys exploiting others, sociopathically uninterested in their well-being. To support the feeling of danger this MC seeks to cultivate, shows with a cold-control MC will often make heavy use of black in scenic and costume design, as well as (coincidentally designated) "cold" colors: cold reds, bluish burgundies, blues, and purples, as well as cold metallics. Clothing will be stylized, and streamlined sometimes to the point of being restrictive (corseting, military, fetish wear); sound and music will often feature heavy percussion and minor keys.

Dramaturgically, the cold-control MC's power can be characterized as dominance. Where the warm MC's power is a power *to* (the power to present interesting acts to the audience, for instance), the cold-control MC's is a power *over*: over the other performers as well as over the audience. The cold MC establishes this relation of dominance through demonstrating the onstage power every MC wields, including synthetic authority, and commanding the local reality, including the spectacle of mute female performing bodies. The cold MC in particular adds to this mix a signature set of specific, strategic kinds of aggression and unknowability; this is what makes him feel threatening to audiences.

He establishes this relationship of dominance firmly at the beginning of the show, and often enforces it throughout the show's performance by initiating and executing sequences of domination over various others, both on stage and off. The more skilled the MC at cold control, the more he can vary these sequences of domination and still keep each one recognizable, dramaturgically sound, and effective. Contrary to what one might expect, it is not the warm-control MC but rather the MC working in a cold control pattern that can present a trenchant critique of coercive power; he does this by openly using various types of power, against others, with evident pleasure. This presents power as the dangerous result of strategy and force rather than a naturally ordained attribute of a specific person or class of people.

The *Cabaret* Emcee exemplifies the cold-control MC as a nexus of interlocking dramaturgical strategies that, together, construct him as the embodiment of the threatening (potentially lethal) aspects of power-as-dominance. Before assaying the mechanics that produce the Emcee's particular brand of cold control, it's useful to

review how he and Bill Roper's Chairman, our warm-control MC, actually embody hegemonic power in significantly similar ways. Both of these MCs, for instance, are phenotypically male, racially white, mature in age, able-bodied, confident in demeanor, and verbally articulate. Both access synthetic authority and exercise the privilege of direct address; interestingly, both also employ sexual innuendo. Both appear as dramaturgically singular entities in their respective productions, around whom mute female bodies cluster and perform. Both appear in a variation of formal wear that links them visually (even if ironically or comically) with the socioeconomic upper classes. Both occupy a central-yet-outside position with respect to the dramaturgical structure of the overall performance. And both command the show's spectacle and the local reality that contains it, functioning as masters of the "world of the room" in which their performances take place.

The first difference I noticed when beginning to research the *Cabaret* Emcee, however, is that the overwhelming majority of what has been written and said about him—by both those inside and outside of the organizations responsible for crafting him—attributes to this entity a marked malevolence, parsed in a range of intensities from merely "unsettling" to actually "evil," and/or mentions the unease that he provokes. None other than Joel Grey has said, when asked about his impression when he first encountered the "character" of the Emcee: "I never encountered him. I'd run away. That would be terrifying."<sup>1</sup> This distinct unease is the hallmark of a cold-control MC. Like other cold-control MCs, the Emcee of *Cabaret* establishes his dominance over the audience through a number of dramaturgical strategies (including behavioral

---

<sup>1</sup> Grey, Joel. NPR, 2013.

and sartorial) that render him aggressive, unknowable, and spectacular, which, combined, keep the audience alarmed, off balance, and visually overwhelmed, and therefore disempowered. Aggression, unknowability and spectacle are everywhere in both Grey's and Cumming's performances, so I'll focus specifically on how these manifest in each Emcee's eyes, face, and body on stage to construct his particular brand of power-as-dominance.

### **Eyes and Aggression**

Both Grey's 1972 Emcee and Cumming's 2014 Emcee display a wide range of aggressive behaviors, verbal as well as physical, but the sequences that use aggression to establish dominance over their audiences involve intense, prolonged eye contact. As sociologists have documented, eye contact between individuals can carry any number of different meanings, depending on the participants and context. In their much-cited article "Eye-Contact, Distance and Affiliation," Michael Argyle and Janet Dean assert that proactively established eye contact conveys chiefly messages of friendship, sexual attraction, hate, dominance, or submission.<sup>2</sup> This correlation is so strong that, in some cases, it can function as causation.<sup>3</sup> Too much eye contact, however, can be an alarming thing; Argyle and Dean argue that, during conversation, eye contact can last

---

<sup>2</sup> Argly and Dean, 1965: "If there is EC [eye contact], both [persons A and B] may know that A's attitude to B is one of sexual attraction, friendship, hate, dominance or submission. There may be a rapid sequence of communications, in which EC plays a central part, and which serves to establish the relationship between A and B. For example, suppose A wants to dominate B: A stares at B with the appropriate expression; B may accept A's dominance by a submissive expression and looking away; or B may outstare A, or simply withdraw by looking coldly away."

<sup>3</sup> Sociologists David Frederick, Robert Schafer, and Leslie Dobbartin designed eye-contact experiments framed as "interviews" between subjects and researchers of opposite sexes, where the researchers intentionally made eye contact of different lengths of time when interacting with different subjects. The results showed that the more eye contact the researcher made during the interview, the more attraction the subject reported feeling for the researcher afterward (Frederick et al, p 38).

3-10 seconds and still feel comfortable for both parties, noting that “When glances are longer than this, anxiety is aroused.”<sup>4</sup> While theatregoing obviously involves specialized uses of the gaze that differ from those of social interaction, it remains both true and important that 1) a *sine qua non* of an MC is his direct address to the audience, where he reciprocates their eye contact in a more social pattern than do actors in fourth-wall plays or even scripted plays containing set speeches of direct address—the latter because the audience’s reactions may influence the unscripted MC’s performance choices; and 2) there is a known range of time after which unbroken eye contact becomes pointedly uncomfortable—and it’s *short*.

The ability of intense eye contact to convey aggression can be felt in the Fosse film. The film begins with a dark screen, opening credits, and the sounds of vague crowd murmurs punctuated by the clinking of flatware and glassware. When a hazy image does appear, underneath the opening credits, it takes almost a full minute to fully resolve into something recognizable; it’s a warped mirror reflecting the people in the room in which it’s hung. The sound of musicians warming up begins to embroider the background noise. In the twisted mirror, we watch a blurry woman in a blurry red dress make her blurry way from one corner of the frame toward the other as an insistent drumroll rises to dominate the soundscape. Suddenly, a cymbal crashes and a large, distorted shape leaps into view, blocking out all else—a dead-white face with dark, unblinking eyes staring directly at the viewer.

---

<sup>4</sup>Argyle and Dean, 289.



Fig. 3.1: “Joel Grey, image in a distorted mirror shot – ‘Cabaret’ 1972.”  
Grey in the opening sequence of the 1972 film version of *Cabaret*.

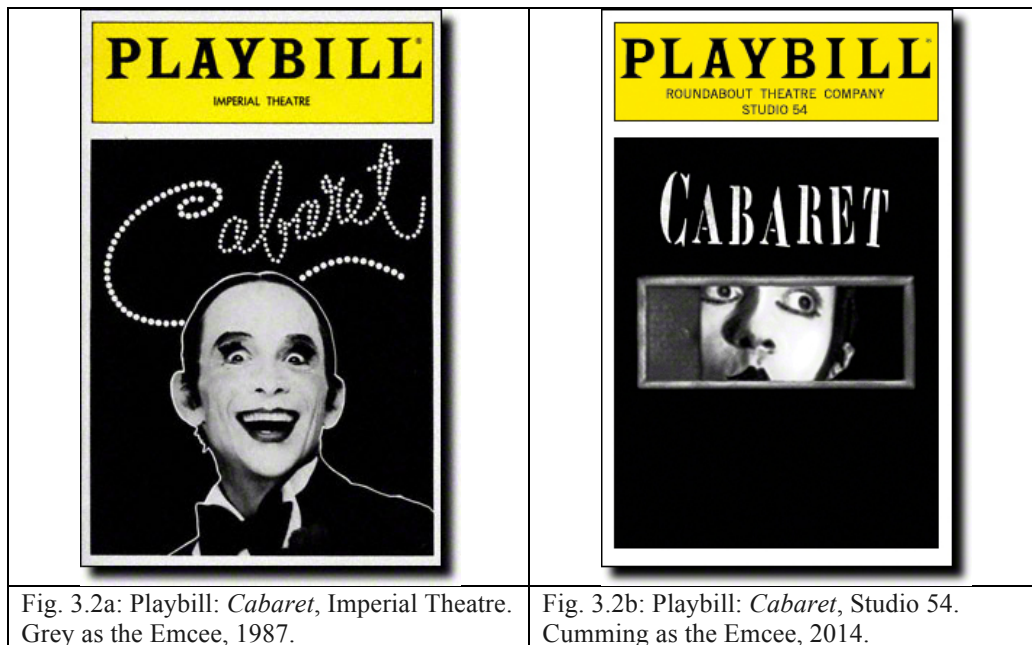
This entity maintains this unblinking eye contact for five pregnant seconds, then smirks—an even less friendly expression, which, after about two seconds, widens into a rictus, still topped with those unsmiling, glaring eyes. He maintains this intense, challenging eye contact the entire time, even as he turns away from the mirror—we were looking at his reflection, we discover with a jolt—to face the camera directly. The Emcee holds this unbroken glare for a full nine seconds, then suddenly lifts his eyebrows and launches toothily into the opening song, “Wilkommen.” This bizarre entity does not blink *at all* until twenty-five seconds into his appearance.

This sequence establishes the Emcee as not only powerful but dominant and dangerous. The twenty-five long seconds of unblinking stare represents 250% of even the most generous time estimate for comfortable eye contact; it’s made even less comfortable by the fact that his eyes are starkly unsmiling. This conveys that the

Emcee's interest is not friendly, leaving only the potentially aggressive interest scenarios (including aggressive sexual interest). The subsequent smirk also codes the Emcee as dominant in this sequence. A smirk—a half-smile that does not include the eyes—tends to indicate that the smirking party knows something important that the ignorant other does not, and moreover, that the smirker enjoys having this advantage over the ignorant other. Meanwhile, the Emcee's glaring eyes continue to bore into the spectator; here is the cold MC relishing his dominance over the powerless. He doesn't so much smile as bare his teeth, still with those intent, unblinking eyes: a warning in any species.

Finally, the film's sudden shift in perspective reveals the Emcee's dominance in yet another way. Turning from the mirror to the room, eyes now held unnaturally wide, teeth bared, it's clear that the Emcee is aware of his position in space and the fact that he's been looking into a mirror; he does not share the abrupt disorientation the audience experiences upon realizing that the nature of the visual field is different than it appeared to be. Rather, the inhuman smoothness with which his wide, staring eyes track as he executes his turn, combined with the highly stylized manner with which he begins his opening number demonstrate that, compared to the rattled spectator, he enjoys a superior amount of knowledge and control. This sequence—which, on its surface, employs nothing more than eye contact and a smile, yet firmly communicates a message of aggression and establishes the Emcee's relationship of dominance over the audience that will persist for the duration of the film—lasts barely more than two minutes.

An interesting complication of the aggressive message in the eyes is the “eyebrow flash” ten seconds into the sequence—a quick facial gesture, normally unconscious, that is recorded in sociological studies as indicating friendly recognition and a willingness to communicate.<sup>5</sup> Instead of resolving the challenge issued by the intense eye contact, however, this gesture merely interrupts it, leaving us disoriented (wait, was he actually being friendly all this time?) in much the same way that the mirror shift does—we’re suddenly unsure of something we’ve seen—with an added frisson of anxiety, because the threat we perceived in the Emcee’s stare has not been neutralized; it is still in there somewhere, waiting.



<sup>5</sup> “First comes the orientation, at least by the face and eyes, to the individual; this is followed, if you recognize the person, by an eyebrow flash of recognition; next come the salutation, followed by the presentation of the palm in some kind of waving gesture. The eyebrow flash is the most important aspect of the process, since it determines whether or not further exchange will occur. The flash takes place in two stages; in the first phase, the greeter looks at the acquaintance, raises his lids slightly and sometimes puts his head back a bit. In the second stage, an instant later, the eyebrows are raised, and the eyes open widely; this second stage is the signal that recognition has occurred.” (Duke, p. 401).

Roundabout Theatre's 2014 revival of Sam Mendes' 1998 *Cabaret* launches the show in a similarly unsettling way, employing prolonged eye contact to firmly establish a relationship of dominance over the audience—one that resurfaces repeatedly throughout the show. Once the improvised preshow segment is over and the preening showboys and sullen chorines who were teasing the audience have slunk backstage, all of the stage and house lights go down, and everything falls silent and still for a moment. Suddenly, at extreme upstage center, a tiny door (several inches wide, a bit above five feet off the stage floor) slams open with a metallic clang, revealing a sharp rectangle of light framing just Cumming's Emcee's eyes. He looks at the audience, intently, and he does this for an extended, uncomfortable amount of time (10 seconds on 5 Sep. 2014) before he shuts this peep-door and enters the stage for the opening number, "Willkommen."

In concert with these staring eyes surrounded by darkness, the metallic sound of the peep-door adds another dimension to the Emcee's dominance over the audience. Setting aside the remarks of one reviewer who paid so little attention to the rest of the production (not to mention German history) that this moment put him chiefly in mind of a speakeasy<sup>6</sup>, the reverberating clang of metal on metal immediately summons to mind a heavy prison door, with a slot allowing the guard to look in. What this means, in the case of the 2014 *Cabaret*, is that the audience is on the *inside* of the cell, anonymous, in pitch-black darkness. The Emcee, on the outside, stares in at them with impunity for an insolent, extended amount of time, expressing his right to do so.

---

<sup>6</sup> Mandell, 2014.

The point that this opening sequence makes, similar to the opening sequence of the 1972 film, is about power: the Emcee has it, we don't. Associate director B.T. McNicholl makes this very clear in his description of the sequence that launches the 2014 show:

The opening peephole moment is very important, because the power shifts right there. When the audience walks in, they see the actors on stage, warming up. And the message they're sending to the audience is: "This is our space, not your space. You're entering our space; we own it, but you're visiting," you see. And then, the lights go down, cymbal crash, and then the little peep-door opens and he's looking at you, but you can't see him. You don't know *who's* looking at you. He has all the power. Because he can see you, but you can't see him. He's checking you out, but you can't check him out. So it puts him immediately into the power of the evening, not you.<sup>7</sup>

This strategic use of the Emcee's eyes to create an aggressively imbalanced power relationship is clearly a cornerstone image for the entire Roundabout show concept. The image of Cumming's Emcee's wide-open, unblinking, watchful eyes not only dominates the theatre billboard, but repeats on the cover of every *Playbill* (unnerving when you see dozens of them scattered around a room). It also appears on the covers of *Cabaret: The Illustrated Book and Lyrics*, published to commemorate Sam Mendes' 1998 Broadway production;<sup>8</sup> Roundabout Theatre's "Upstage Guide," the educational packet available for download from the company website;<sup>9</sup> the volume of sheet music for all songs from every stage version of the show, *The Complete Cabaret*

---

<sup>7</sup> McNicholl, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Masteroff, Kander and Ebb, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> "Cabaret Upstage Guide," 2014.

*Collection*;<sup>10</sup> and both the front and back covers of the 1998 “*Cabaret: The New Broadway Cast Recording*” CD.



Fig. 3.3a: *Cabaret: The New Broadway Cast Recording*, CD cover front.

Fig. 3.3b: *Cabaret: The New Broadway Cast Recording*, CD cover back.

In fact, Cumming’s Emcee’s eyes adorn more of the show merchandise than any other graphic—of the 27 items for sale in the Roundabout Theatre online store, nine of them feature the eyes of Cumming’s Emcee.<sup>11</sup> The next most popular graphic, the generic stencil-style “CABARET” logo decorates only 55% as many items (five altogether). The character of Sally Bowles only two items: a t-shirt that reads “Maybe Next Time”—her image is not on the shirt—and a small bottle of green nail polish (though DVDs of the 1972 film are also for sale); Michelle Williams’ Sally, unlike Cumming’s Emcee, gets nothing.

<sup>10</sup> Kander and Ebb, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Roundabout Theatre Company Store, 2014.



Fig. 3.4: *Cabaret* billboard at the Kit Kat Klub (formerly Studio 54), New York, 2014. Photo: Laura Brueckner

The strategic use of uncomfortably extended eye contact, in both the 1972 and 2014 versions, contributes to the Cabaret Emcee’s power by mimicking social signals for aggression, thereby intimidating the audience. Though all parties, if asked, would hopefully agree that the theatrical Emcee represents no actual physical or even social threat, the fundamental communication channel of eye contact operates beneath the level of conscious thought. As a result, almost all of the theatre critics and other writers who describe the Emcee, even in brief, seem to touch on the malevolence they sense in his performance. Writing about the 1987 revival featuring Joel Grey, the late Clive Barnes, writing for the *New York Post*, mentions Grey’s Emcee’s “viciousness.” The *New York Times*’ Frank Rich, reviewing the same production, pronounces, “There can’t be a creepier sight on Broadway;” Howard Kissel of the *New York Daily News* calls him “a vision of Satan.” Fast-forward to 1998, when Alan Cumming’s Emcee debuts on Broadway; the *New York Daily News*’ Fintan O’Toole uses the terms “dangerous” and “disturbing” to describe him, while Clive Barnes takes the

opportunity afforded by his 1998 *New York Post* review to reminisce about Grey's "sinister" Emcee. In 2014, Cumming's Emcee is described as the "corroded soul" of the show by Adam Feldman of *Time Out*; Marilyn Stasio of *Variety* calls him, among other things, "cruel and menacing" as well as "dead-eyed and cold"; and the *New York Times*' Ben Brantley dubs him, simply, "nasty."

Keith Garebian's 2001 book-length study on *Cabaret* eclipses them all in the profusion of terms it offers to describe the Emcee's threatening aspect; between Garebian's own observations and quotes from reviews on various actors' performances, the Emcee appears on 66 of its 196 content pages, frequently referring to his purported malevolence; the Emcee is "aggressive" (160), "a creep" or "creepy" (102, 103, 176), "demonic" (72, 120, 153, 169, 173), "devilish" (42, 78, 120), "diabolical" (135), "evil" (83, 195), "lethal" (160), "menacing" (191), "Mephistophelean" (123), "sinister" (67, 106, 176, 192, 195), "threatening" (175), "unapologetically evil" (162), and "vile" (78). Terms linking the Emcee explicitly with the devil or the demonic occur, on average, once every 13 pages. Along these lines, it's worth noting that terms describing the Emcee's threatening aspect are often linked with others hinting at his impressive, possibly supernatural, coercive power; apparently "lethally in control" (160), the Emcee's "sinister power" (192), "special power" (121), "demonic energy" (121), and "innate authority" allow him to "master his audience" (35) while also "commanding the floor show" (118). The Emcee also observes the evening's events with an "all-seeing eye" (157) as the "all-knowing, all-seeing one" (169) and "cosmic demiurge" (175).

A further refinement of the power that the strategic use of intense eye contact gives to the *Cabaret* Emcee—and a further confirmation of the sociological schema of the range of meanings behind it—is the fact that many critics and historians writing about the Emcee use language that construes his interest as not only malicious but sexual. Both extended analyses and brief summaries display a fascinatingly consistent vocabulary in this area, though they span several actors' interpretations of the role, numerous productions, two genres, and almost 50 years. In fact, they frequently call out the Emcee's sexuality and his malevolence in the same breath, as though they experience these characteristics as inextricably fused—which, of course, they are, in the behavioral trigger of prolonged eye contact.

Among these writers are Clive Barnes who, in the same 1987 *New York Times* review previously mentioned, calls Grey's Emcee “demon-slick.” The *New York Daily News*' Fintan O'Toole, in his 1998 review, calls Grey's 1972 Emcee a “succubus” (not an incubus, interestingly), both “seductive and sinister” and “wonderfully, smoothly sinister.” In 1998, *New York Times* theatre critic Ben Brantley, reminiscing about the 1987 revival, describes Grey's Emcee's bivalence as an “acid, insinuating manner”; writing in 2014, he refers to Cumming's Emcee as “adorably creepy.” Mizejewski refers to his “glittering, haunting appeal.”<sup>12</sup> Garebian also offers observations on the Emcee's alloy of malice and sexual appeal: the Emcee is “heady and horrible” (79), a “devilishly gleeful libertine” (120), “vividly poisonous” (160), “wickedly charming” (162), and “luring yet challenging” (166); he performs and enjoys a “grotesque charm” (117), a “dangerous sexiness” (176), and a “sinister and sexual edge” (195).

---

<sup>12</sup> Mizejewski, 166.

What the frequent and consistent use of compound phrases like these indicates is the observers' inability to resolve the conflicting messages in the Emcee's aggressive eye contact behavior into a single, reliable meaning. His unblinking stare indicates his intense interest in those who meet his eyes, conveying both aggressive, threatening messages and messages of sexual enticement. As a result, audience members may feel both attracted and repelled, but on a level lurking below analytic reason; meanwhile, they are prevented by the etiquette of theatre from acting on either impulse, while the Emcee seems to run riot over the available visual and spatial field, subject only to his own whims. This places him firmly in the position of dominance over the audience, since he is able to provoke both unease and desire in others, but does not experience it himself.

### **Face and Psychological Opacity**

In addition to his eyes, the *Cabaret* Emcee uses his face in strategic, stylized ways to present one specific type of unknowability that, especially paired with his aggression, ensures his dominance by provoking anxiety in the audience: psychological opacity. Similar to the conceit of his direct address to the audience, deploying language for its presentational impact rather than its truth value, both Grey's and Cumming's Emcees *present* their facial expressions to the audience rather than revealing inner emotional or psychological states through them.<sup>13</sup> The opening

---

<sup>13</sup> Most of the time, the exception proving the rule; the abrupt pivot that leads to the conclusion of the 2014 Roundabout production comes as such a jarring surprise because the presentational/camp quotes

sequence of the 1972 film is a useful example; Grey's Emcee's smiling face tells us no more about his inner emotional or psychological state than his unsmiling expression did. Both, rather, are expressions he (*qua* fictional performer) assumes intentionally in order to achieve some goal with respect to the audience. The faces of both Grey's and Cumming's Emcees, in fact, deliver a firmly controlled broadcast of the onstage entity's performative intentions—attaching an “in order to [verb] the audience” to every grin and pout—but nothing of his interior.

This has had a strong effect on writers examining the show, to put it mildly. In addition to the malevolence and sexual interest that reviewers and historians glean from the Emcee's eye-contact behavior, many record that his facial behavior—another premium channel for high-stakes social signals—is highly unsettling. For some, the Emcee's use of his face gives the impression that he is something other than human. In addition to the aforementioned range of devils, demons, and demiurges, writers have compared both Grey's and Cumming's Emcees to non-human walks of life. In Garebian alone, the Emcee is called “feral” and a “monster” (61), as well as “reptilian” (190). The most persistent and telling set of comparisons, however, are to things that are *not* alive, but that eerily *resemble* the living: dolls, puppets, marionettes, skulls, clowns, and other simulations of the human whose non-human-ness is nonetheless betrayed by their frozen, immobile faces.<sup>14</sup> Walter Kerr, reviewing the 1966 premiere for the *New York Times*, calls Joel Grey's Emcee “the gleeful puppet of pretended

---

around the Emcee's facial expression suddenly fall away, revealing emotion that we realize, with a jolt, is “real,” in a character-psychology sense.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, representations of merely *still* faces don't typically rattle us: normal photographs of people's faces, for example. It's the combination of a frozen, unreadable face with eyes that move and/or make contact with our own that is unnerving.

joy”; in his 1987 *Times* review, critic Frank Rich calls Grey’s Emcee a “wind-up doll” and a “caricature.” That same year, also in the *Times*, Clive Barnes calls Grey’s Emcee a “fantasticated devil’s puppet”; in 1998, he writes that Cumming’s Emcee “dominates the scene like a manic marionette from sex hell.” This view is shared by Ben Brantley, who, in the same year, writing for the same paper, calls Cumming’s Emcee a “satanic marionette.” Garebian also offers comparisons of the Emcee to a “marionette” (117), a “demonic doll” (153, 169, 173), and a “harlequin” (87).

This last term is part of a strong pattern in descriptions of both Grey’s and Cumming’s Emcees that describes their facial makeup in terms of clowns. Both Emcees’ faces draws comment of this type: Walter Kerr, in his second *Times* piece on *Cabaret* in 1966, refers to the Kit Kat Klub’s “painted clowns” and “lipsticked Emcee”; Linda Mizejewski, in her scholarly work, *Divine Decadence*, refers to Grey’s “garishly painted face” in the 1972 film; *New York Daily News* theatre critic Howard Kissel, in a 1987 review, calls Grey’s face “clown white,” while Frank Rich of the *New York Times* continues his 1987 review of the creepiest sight on Broadway by citing Grey’s Emcee’s “hideously mocking grin.” Ben Brantley describes Cumming’s Emcee’s “white grease paint and pandering smile” in a 1998 *New York Times* review; in 2014, Marilyn Stasio of *Variety* calls his makeup “ghoulish.” These references to the Emcee’s makeup link the *unheimlichkeit* of his face not to makeup’s disorienting use as a feminine affectation (more on this later) but specifically to the ability of thick makeup (“painted”/“grease paint”) to conceal details of facial expression.

What the many writers who compare the Emcee to dolls, puppets, and clowns (and other homunculi with eerily still or stylized faces) are responding to is

psychological opacity and its power to frighten. When conversing with another in person, we expect that our interlocutor's face will give us some measure of access to their inner state; when this access is denied, either through lack (the Emcee's blank or highly stylized facial expression) or visual interference (his "garish makeup"), we feel stripped of a basic, crucial social (and historically, literal) survival tool, without which we are vulnerable—especially when the other we face seems more powerful. Goffman writes, "[T]wo distinctive features of face-to-face interaction [are] richness of information flow and facilitation of feedback,"<sup>15</sup> pointing out that not only do we expect to receive information from the other's face as a fundamental feature of in-person communication, we expect to receive information specifically about our interlocutor's impression of and intent toward *us*, which we use in order to shape our subsequent actions. Goffman writes that each individual in a face-to-face encounter "can see that he is being experienced in some way, and will guide at least some of his conduct according to the perceived identity and initial response of his audience."<sup>16</sup> We receive neither from the Emcee in any reliable way. Even worse, the facial expression commonly seen on dolls, puppets, and clowns—often a sort of frozen mirth—suddenly seems menacingly artificial when combined with staring eyes, like a disguise worn intentionally by the entity to mask its true intent (which must be baleful, or why attempt to conceal it?).

Psychological opacity also produces a power imbalance that adds to the anxiety. While the Emcee's frozen or stylized facial performance conceals his

---

<sup>15</sup> Goffman, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Goffman, 16.

emotions and intentions, our faces expose our inner states to his view. Goffman describes this situation where one interagent is in a position to receive the other's facial (or other physical) messages without revealing their own, as "asymmetrical"; he gives the examples of psychiatrists in certain clinical settings and priests in confession<sup>17</sup>—both relationships, I would like to point out, that involve a large discrepancy in power, always in favor of the concealed party. McNicholl's previous statement sums up the asymmetrical arrangement that begins the 2014 production wonderfully, pointing out that Cumming's Emcee "has all the power. Because he can see you, but you can't see him. He's checking you out, but you can't check him out."

Both Grey's and Cumming's Emcees, by combining intense eye contact with highly stylized makeup and/or strategic, presentational use of facial expression, obstruct audience members' access to the Emcee's emotions or intentions. This applies also to comparisons of the Emcee to the living but non-human, whether monster, grotesquerie, feral animal, or reptile; in all cases, this thing is scary because we cannot tell what it wants, but it is likely that its interests are *not* aligned with ours. Especially if it is staring at us.

**Categories: role, character, symbol, "real guy"**

This psychological opacity has other interesting consequences as well. For one thing, it makes him oddly uncategorizable using any of the standard terms for theatrical entities. He is defined by both outsiders (journalists, historians) and insiders (creative team members, theatre staff) using a range of terms, including: a role, a

---

<sup>17</sup> Goffman, 15.

character, a “star turn,” a symbol, an emblem, and a “real guy.” None of these classifications holds true for the entire span of his performance, however. While he does display attributes of each at one time or another, he manages to elude or exceed them all; none of these labels captures more than the momentary outline of a dramaturgical gesture that disappears as soon as it’s executed. The fact that even those who participate in producing the Emcee persist in explicitly problematizing the “fit” of these terms—some of which contradict one another—and expressly favoring some terms over others—though not the *same* ones—points to the Emcee’s strangely hollow center and the unknowability that is part of his construction as a nexus of power.

Contradictions surface quickly when we review the range of terms for the Emcee used by insiders in interviews—including the ultimate insiders, Joel Grey and Alan Cumming, as well as other professionals involved in the 2014 production, associate director McNicholl and Roundabout Theatre education dramaturg Ted Sod. All of these individuals have had both excellent opportunity and strong motivation to consider the question carefully (to say the least). I contend that this is actually the reason why their language around the Emcee gets so strange. Though they all go to great pains to define the Emcee accurately, clearly conveying both that this is a question of genuine importance for them and that they are aware of its importance for audiences, each defines the Emcee in ways that sometimes conflict with (or directly contradict) the others, and even, in some instances, themselves. This is decidedly *not* the product of sloppy thinking or sloppy theatremaking. Rather, it is the result of diligent, intelligent, imaginative work in presenting the complex nature of coercive power through the deployment of a stunning range of its signals and codes. As power

operates differently in different contexts, not all of its signals and codes will rhyme in one two-hour space; by allowing different signals and codes to coexist and clash in the performance of the Emcee, these productions have arrived at a depiction of power that is more thorough, nuanced, and unflinching than one more easily summed up and neatly outlined.

Of the terminological variances, the oscillation between “character” and “role” is the most interesting in terms of power. In American theatre, “character” often functions as a convenient catch-all term for any onstage entity, but only because the default mode of American theatre is psychological realism; its vocabulary has become the Tupperware of the theatre, its terms assuming the position of generic use despite their quite specific (and dated) origins. Although “character” and “role” are sometimes used interchangeably in the workaday bustle of making theatre, these terms actually encompass conceptual territories that differ chiefly (and markedly) in the degree of human-style psychology we expect each to present.

So what does the term “character” mean that differentiates this term from “role”? A closer look at descriptions of the *Cabaret* Emcee reveals two criteria that this onstage entity does not meet: biography and psychology. The actors, unsurprisingly, articulate the lack of biography the most concretely. Both Grey and Cumming note, for instance, how peculiarly little biographical information they received on the Emcee. According to Grey during his 2013 NPR interview, when he first saw the 1966 script, it didn’t offer the Emcee’s age, or even his name, much less any description of salient personality traits: “There was no description at all. There was just: an MC. Seedy MC.” Cumming, in an interview with Roundabout education

dramaturg Ted Sod for the company's educational supplement, is even more particular: "You have to remember that the Emcee isn't really a character—he isn't described as a certain age—or in any specific terms—he is really more of a symbol."<sup>18</sup> In this interview, Cumming too references a model for "character" that requires an age and other "specific terms," e.g., biographical details. All the Emcee has, all he wants, and all he reveals is his function: Emcee. Without an age, a biography, or even a name, he lacks the necessary ingredients to be a full "character."

Character biography, in realistic theatre, is important, chiefly because it typically provides clues about the character's motivations: *why* s/he wants what s/he wants, and why s/he will go to theatrically interesting lengths to get it. One of the pleasures that realistic, fourth-wall theatre offer audiences is the ability to watch from a safe remove while these onstage entities struggle to get what they want from one another. *Cabaret*, in both the film and the 2014 Broadway production, utterly denies the audience this pleasure where the Emcee is concerned. With no fourth wall, his scene partner is literally the audience; its members therefore have no god's-eye view of the relationship. And what he wants from the audience remains unclear, since his actions present a series of self-contained performances with nothing linking them except his physical presence and his function.

This lack of a coherent character psychology has caused distress for at least one actor previously cast as the Emcee by director Sam Mendes:

We had an actor once who was having a very tough time with the role, trying to figure out how to get from point A to point B, in terms of acting choices: how does this scene connect with the previous scene, and who am

---

<sup>18</sup> "Cabaret Upstage Guide."

I in this scene versus the last scene, and how did I get there? And twisting himself in knots. And finally Sam Mendes just says to him, ‘Look, stop trying to connect the dots. Stop. They don’t connect. Just play each moment, fully, for what it is. And the play—and the *production* will connect the dots for you.’ And he was right.<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, both Grey and Cumming themselves shift back and forth on the designations they use for the Emcee, even when they seem to be being quite careful to distinguish between them. In this quote from the transcript of his 2013 NPR interview (typos included, though emphasis is mine), Joel Grey uses “character” to refer to the Emcee as a fictional entity that is part of the play’s fictional world, and separate from himself, and “role” to refer to his function in the play’s narrative, his point of contact with the play as an actor:

And the Halperins [sic] called and he said we're doing a show about Christopher Isherwood, "I Am a Camera," and there's a *character* of an emcee. And I thought, oh god. He says and John Kander and Fred Ebb, who were friends of mine, also wanted me for that *role*, and I did not audition.<sup>20</sup>

This usage distribution seems clear enough, and remains consistent throughout the interview. When questioned in an earlier (2010) interview on the “riskiest situation” he’d ever been in on Broadway, Grey replies in a similar vein (emphasis mine): “I think maybe it was coming up with the *character* of the Emcee.”<sup>21</sup> Here, “character,” as in the NPR interview, refers to the Emcee as fictional entity, contained by a fictional world, for whom Grey was required to develop a biography. However, Grey’s usage shifts in other interviews. In two different interviews in 2013, he refers to the

---

<sup>19</sup> McNicholl, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Grey, NPR, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Grey, *Broadwayworld.com*, 2010

Emcee alternately as “role” or “character,” each term describing territory typically occupied by the other. In the January 2013 interview, Grey states (emphasis mine): “*My character* was cemented on stage. I think I found *my character* on stage.”<sup>22</sup> Here, suddenly, with the addition of “my,” the term “character” *does* involve a point of contact with the actor; it is not an entity that Grey regards as separate from himself. In the October interview, Grey replies to an interviewer: “Clearly, *Cabaret* was a role of a lifetime that I was allowed to create. [...] I get depressed if I can’t figure out how to play a role, and it takes me a long time.” This is another instance of concept drift; while “role of a lifetime” is common usage among theatre professionals (and in fact, at least one critic uses it to refer to Grey as the Emcee), Grey’s admission that sometimes it’s difficult to “figure out how to play a role” effects a distancing of the term from the actor and engages biography—the foundational “why” of the “how.” “Role,” no longer functioning as his point of contact with the play as before, now seems to describe the self-contained, separate entity that he had formerly labeled a “character.”

As in his Roundabout interview above, Cumming gets quite specific about the Emcee’s nature—but not always in the same way. In a YouTube clip of another 2014 interview, when answering a question about performing in the new revival, he actually interrupts and corrects himself in describing the Emcee (here the emphasis is his): “I feel like it works better, me being in it now, than it did 15 years ago. Because I think in a way, this character—this *role*, not this character, this *role*—is a star turn.”<sup>23</sup>

Setting aside the term “star turn” for now, we understand from both of these interview

---

<sup>22</sup> Grey, *Boy Culture*, 2013

<sup>23</sup> Cumming, *TheaterMania*, 2014.

statements that Cumming distinguishes the biographical “character” from the non-character designations “symbol” and “role,” and in fact, for him, “character” does not even apply to the Emcee.

This, too, seems fairly clear, until we return to the Roundabout educational supplement, the “Upstage Guide.” In this single 28-page document—which, I’d like to point out, is a document intended for use in schools, ideally privileging clarity—Cumming is all over the map. On page four alone, he uses the term “role” three times specifically to describe the Emcee; this is the same page whereon, as previously noted, he dismisses the term “character” as inaccurate, specifically choosing to define the Emcee as a “symbol”—not “role”—instead. And on the very next page, Cumming replies to a question about “the relationship between the Emcee and Sally” by saying, “I haven’t really had a chance to rehearse with Michelle yet, but I am sure we’ll have a chat about how *our characters* relate to each other” (emphasis mine). This casual use of the very term he explicitly discounts on the previous page shows not that he’s absent-minded, nor that the Roundabout editors aren’t careful, but that there is something about the Emcee as Cumming understands and portrays him that none of these terms encompasses completely; while the Emcee does not totally *fulfill* the requirements of “character,” he still exceeds the terms “role” and “symbol” in ways that *are* better described by “character.”

And then the next three sentences explode with shifting and qualified designations. Cumming first says, “It is more about leading the company actually”; “it,” here, standing for “performing the Emcee,” e.g., Emcee as role/onstage function. His next sentence is: “Really for the Emcee the most important actor I interact with is the

audience.” This follows previous sentence without qualification; demoting the company to secondary importance to the audience, which he elevates to the role of “actor,” but which is still an “actor” in a different sense than the actor whose “I” he conflates so fully with “the Emcee.” The *coup de grâce* arrives in the third sentence, where he notes, “The Emcee lives primarily in the world of the Kit Kat Klub.” In just these three sentences, Cumming presents the Emcee as mere theatrical function, leading the other actors in the cast; conflates “the Emcee” and himself as actor; sets “the Emcee” apart again through referring to him in the third person; and imputes to this separate, fictional entity enough of a biographical existence that he can be said, at least metaphorically, to “live” somewhere.

If it were only Cumming that described the Emcee in this unusually mobile way, we could attribute it to the actor instead of the Emcee, but Joel Grey is not immune to this either. In another online interview, in reply to a question about the hardest *role* specifically he’s had to play, Grey’s published answer includes (emphasis mine):

“There was an intensity and a darkness to the *character* of the Master of Ceremonies that it was sort of depressing. I mean, being *the embodiment of the Nazi Party*, you know, it meant I had a lot of responsibility to say that clearly as an actor.<sup>24</sup>

These actors, then, have variously described the Emcee as an onstage function, a “character,” a “role,” a “symbol,” and an “embodiment,” as well as Cumming referencing a kind of hybrid understanding combining the Emcee and himself as the actor playing the Emcee that comes close to resembling our warm-control MC, Bill

---

<sup>24</sup> Grey, *Big Think*, 2010.

Roper as Thaddeus Codswallop as the Chairman. Compared to Roper, Cumming seems to leave out the middle valence—the named, biographical “character.”

This picture is complicated further by other assertions about the Emcee made by two professionals involved in the 2014 production: associate director B.T. McNicholl and Roundabout education dramaturg Ted Sod. According to McNicholl, his duty as associate director is “to be with the director during the initial rehearsals, and then maintain the artistic integrity of the show going forward during the run;”<sup>25</sup> having joined director Sam Mendes’ *Cabaret* revival in 1999, he has been present for more of the discussions and creative decisions about the current Emcee than almost anyone else in the production besides Mendes and Cumming. In our October 2014 phone interview, he begins by giving Cumming’s Emcee biographical and psychological “character” status: “He’s not like Joel Grey in the original production, who was basically some sort of metaphor. Here he is a real person, with a real job to do.” McNicholl describes this job simply, but it is actually quite complex, from a dramaturgical standpoint: “[H]e is simply someone who’s doing his job. He’s been told by the director to bring on a brick, on a certain cue, and then toss it on a certain cue. And that’s it. He does his job.” In this sense, the Emcee’s “job” is related to the prevailing conceit of the production: that the cabaret is the frame for the whole world, and *all* of the scenes, even the book scenes, are actually “acts” on the cabaret stage. This is an expanded version of the notion of the Emcee’s powers and duties that departs from ordinary biography (he’s now the Emcee of some kind of complexly cosmic cabaret) but not necessarily psychology (even a cosmic Emcee can be “a real

---

<sup>25</sup> McNicholl, 2014.

guy, with a real job to do” vis-à-vis the cabaret that employs him).

But McNicholl also ends up demonstrating that his firmly delineated definition of the Emcee as “real” character cannot contain the full range of this entity’s power. McNicholl, like Grey and Cumming, uses “role” to mark the intersection of the actor and the entity he plays onstage—and he, like Grey and Cumming, also ends up referring to some larger, less human function or property of the Emcee that transcends the character/role binary. In all three interviews, interestingly, the metaphorical function comes second or belatedly in the speaker’s description, presented in far less strident, more qualified, and vaguer language, as if it’s less of a *decision* more of an *admission* that they know he also has larger powers. Where Grey calls the Emcee “the embodiment of the Nazi party” and Cumming calls him a “symbol,” McNicholl’s term is “soul.” Describing the Emcee’s final speech, McNicholl says (emphases mine), “He became sort of *the soul of the country* at that point: beaten, worn, tired, going forward”; a moment later in the interview, McNicholl uses the same term in describing the Emcee as we encounter him at the very beginning of the show: “[H]e’s very much the soul of Berlin and Germany at the time.” And the Emcee expands further yet. Replying to my question on whether the Emcee’s “job” spans the “real world” (book scenes), McNicholl offers this summary observation about the Emcee’s final lines and subsequent exit offstage (into a brightly lit, clinically empty upstage area that represents Nazi death chambers), “And so no, he’s not—certainly by the time you get to the finale, it’s about something much larger than the narrative, or the space, up to that point.” The “it” employed here does not refer merely to the show on the whole; in the context of this moment in our conversation, McNicholl’s “it” is a specific, focused

phenomenon: the entire range of functions, biographical details, historical resonances and other meanings that have all collected within the Emcee and his presence before us in moment. This constellation of meanings crystallized in the figure of the Emcee transcends all of these boundaries over the course of the production.

Roundabout education dramaturg Ted Sod is even more emphatic, but in the opposite direction. Sod's role at Roundabout is to gather research for the teaching artists and conduct interviews with prominent actors that are published in the company's "Upstage Guide" and subscriber materials; he also leads post-show question-and-answer sessions with the audience. He uses the term "character" only twice, in passing, and neither time does it rhyme with the sense in which McNicholl uses it; the territory his usage describes is much more loosely delineated (all emphases in his quotes are mine): "I really do think that the *character* is there to sort of remind us that we're part of this" and "He is the only *character* that really seems to bridge all the worlds."<sup>26</sup> Sod's emphasis, rather, is on the Emcee's larger, symbolic, metaphorical functions and powers. In fact, Sod's assertion about the Emcee as "the only *character* that really seems to bridge all the worlds" is followed instantly by a jump to another valence entirely: "And so, yeah, he is a *symbol*. He's a *symbol* of what was decadent, what was exciting, what was sexual and erotic, what was dangerous, what was irrevocable—he's a *symbol of the times*." According to Sod, the Emcee is not just a symbol, he's also "serving the purpose of being our sort of guide, as the audience," a friendly or at least instructive presence; however, Sod also ascribes to him a function that is threatening, almost poisonous. Speaking for the Emcee, Sod

---

<sup>26</sup> Sod, 2014.

says:

If I represent everything that's wrong with the world, if I represent the darkness that's lurking behind every political party and movement, if I represent all those forces that have no empathy for people who are not like them—I'm touching you now.

Sod also comes the closest to using language that embraces the Emcee's complexity:

"[Y]ou're dancing with a symbol of the devil. He's like a shapeshifter; he takes on so many different identities during the show, and each one of them sort of reflects the audience's soul or, you know, the theme."

In this description, Sod leaves behind the confining terms "character" and "role," and offers "symbol" only as an example of the "different identities" the Emcee embodies during the show. As this evidence should make resoundingly clear—because of the strong creative awareness and assiduous preparation of all of the professionals quoted, not to mention both Grey's and Cumming's by-all-accounts successful performances as the *Cabaret* Emcee—the usual theatrical terms for onstage entities, which have developed their current usages in and for a representational theatre whose default dramaturgical mode is psychological realism, do not and cannot fully describe an onstage entity drawn from the complex of performative valences that the MC can embody in traditional, unscripted, presentational, popular performance.

### **Iconicity**

The Emcee's psychological opacity has another interesting side effect as well: his iconicity. The lack of access to this entity's psychological interior, when combined

with *Cabaret*'s lavish stage spectacle, produces the Emcee solely as stylized, coruscating exterior, available without the hindrance of character biography for elevation to the status of icon. In fact, the visual record left by the 1972 film, and the modern ease with which images are distributed digitally, give us a degree of access to his exterior that borders on oversaturation. (In the 1998 Newmarket book alone, there appear 34 photos of Cumming's Emcee and two of Grey's Emcee; this means that an image of him appears on 26.5% of its pages, or, on average, once every 3 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> pages, bearing in mind that some pages have no pictures at all.)

Interestingly, in the cases of both Grey and Cumming, photos of the Emcee display marked tendencies that work together to produce a fairly stable, representative or iconic image. In the case of Joel Grey, images from the film predominate; a recent browser search on the terms Joel, Grey, and Cabaret turn up a range of images that look strikingly similar. Of the top 40 image results, fully 28 of them portray Grey's Emcee in a similar composition: they are close-ups, in which he is typically making eye contact with the camera, which show only his face or his face and body from the waist up. He is generally wearing the makeup and costume from the opening sequence of the show; his face displays the tension of performative stylization. Every one of the first 21 image results also show him totally alone in the frame, and only three images of him are not close-ups, showing even so much as his knees. Acknowledging that browsers customize search results according to the user's previous searches, which may have influenced the images I received on this particular day, this experiment is still reproducible by anyone who cares to do so.

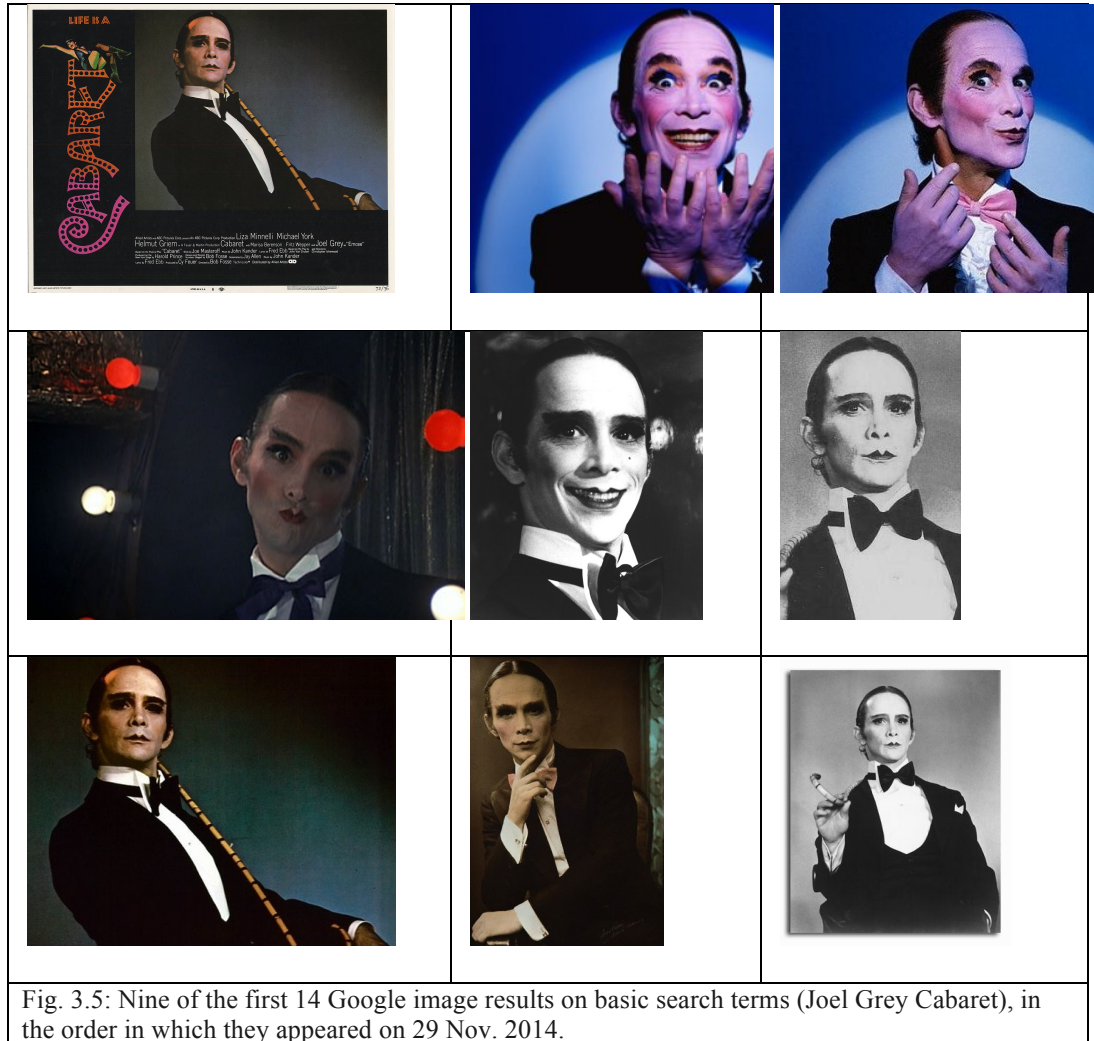


Fig. 3.5: Nine of the first 14 Google image results on basic search terms (Joel Grey Cabaret), in the order in which they appeared on 29 Nov. 2014.

The same holds true for Alan Cumming. Of the 34 images of Cumming’s Emcee in the Newmarket book, for example, 17 of them show him alone in the frame, in makeup, typically in his costume from the opening sequence. Applying the Google image search test shows that Cumming’s Emcee is shown with others in the frame—specifically the Kit Kat Girls—more frequently than Grey. He’s also frequently depicted with his arms over his head in various poses, where Grey is more contained. But the similarities are nevertheless striking: Cumming’s photos, too, tend to depict him wearing the opening sequence’s makeup and costume (they change a great deal

during the show) and, while the frames of many of the images are cluttered with other bodies, his is often the only face we see directed toward or to the camera, privileging his identity, while the others are rendered as bodies.



One example is photo #4 above, a slightly better version of which crowns Ben Brantley's April 2014 write-up in the New York Times, showing Cumming's Emcee center stage, arms raised in a suggestive dance move, wearing his most frequently

photographed costume, in the spotlight; slightly behind him and framing his exultation are the angled limbs of near-faceless female dancers who have turned or are turning away from our eyes.



Fig. 3.7: Alan Cumming as the Emcee in the 2014 Roundabout production of *Cabaret*.  
Photo: Sara Krulwich for *The New York Times*

The insistent presentation of the Emcee as a stylized, spectacularized lends itself strongly to the interpretations of the Emcee as symbol or emblem; if the outside is all that's available to audiences, the outside is where audiences will look for—and find—what the Emcee communicates.

It's here that Cumming's categorization of the Emcee as "star turn" gets its weight. The Emcee can be *nothing but* a star turn: he's central to all of the musical numbers in which he appears, his appearance is stylized into the realm of spectacle, he

demonstrates power over the entire world of the room—and *there is nothing inside*.

Finding that they can praise much about Grey's and Cumming's arresting, disturbing, exciting performances but not in the usual language (inasmuch as they cannot laud the actors' portrayal of a psychologically detailed and robust character), critics and other writers turn instead to the language of stardom and the iconic. Here are just a few examples of such language in reviews:

Walter Kerr, *New York Times*, 1966: "Master of Ceremonies Joel Grey bursts from the darkness like a tracer bullet" (note the conflation of actor with role; Kerr does not say, for example, "Joel Grey, in his performance as the Master of Ceremonies.")

Clive Barnes, *New York Post*, 1987: "[I]n 1966 Grey was billed merely a supporting actor in the show - but he burst through like a rocket, becoming its shooting star and later dominated the movie."

Ben Brantley, *New York Times*, 1998: "Alan Cumming commits grand theatrical larceny by commandeering a character that promised to be eternally the property of Joel Grey."

Linda Winer, *Newsday*, April 2014: "Cumming is better than ever—wiser, more dissipated, even more deeply entertaining in the role he stunningly recreated from Joel Grey's iconic original."

The Emcee's combination of a hollow interior and spectacularized exterior, then, supports several fascinating outcomes. It shifts his semantic weight to his exterior, facilitating and almost prioritizing his possible symbolic meanings (as we see, even those who want to call him a "real guy" can't let go) and speculation about those meanings. It also ensures that an overwhelming celebration of his image is the only available route to actually access him. And, finally, it bursts into print in the literature of the theatre as the breathless star worship of the actor *playing* the Emcee—the closest thing to an "inside" the Emcee has, as we also see in the examples above.

In this context, it's clear that Cumming's "star turn" statement deserves some further attention. In the more complete version of his statement below, he demonstrates a clear awareness that the mechanism of iconicity and stardom is related to the dramaturgy of the Emcee:

I feel like it works better, me being in it now, than it did 15 years ago. Because I think in a way, this character—this *role*, not this character, this *role*—is a star turn. And I wasn't really a star 15 years ago. And now I think it's...people are coming to see me do my star turn, and I think it works better in the whole structure of the piece than it did then.<sup>27</sup>

The Emcee is a "star turn" both because the absence of character psychology fastens the public's attention on the actor playing him *and* because to fill a powerful, spectacularly hollow shell like the Emcee requires the presence of someone who is more than an actor, someone whose larger-than-life presence in the minds of the audience can provide its members with a locus for their identification, connection, and awe.

Joseph Roach, in his work on celebrity titled *It*, explores some of the mechanisms that produce this star-turn effect in his discussion of "role-icons," a category of celebrity public persona. Roach, describing the audience's hunger for the star, arrives at this conclusion:

The role-icon represents a part that certain exceptional performers play on and off stage, no matter what other parts they enact from night to night. Betterton's career-long icon might be called "the tragedy king"; Siddons's, "the tragedy queen." Other actors may vie for these coveted roles, but the public will usually embrace only one at a time. Such role-icons affect box-office receipts because they raise expectations in anticipation of their auratic presence at an event regardless of the other attractions on the bill.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Cumming, *TheaterMania*, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Roach, 39-40.

Reviewing some of the comments about the Emcee's iconicity in light of Roach's formulation is revealing. Like Julia Roberts' long-held title of "America's Sweetheart" and Mel Gibson's erstwhile patent on the "Hero of Historic Battle" tag, Joel Grey has been identified with this single role to a fairly overwhelming degree. Grey, after completing the 1972 film, was next engaged in another stage project about an iconic, variety-show song-and-dance man, pioneering vaudevillian George M. Cohan. The Emcee also continues to inhabit Grey's present life; 42 years later, Grey is still asked about that role—always, and usually right away—in interviews, such as his 2013 chat on NPR, though he has done a great deal of other laudable theatrical work in the meantime. The same is true of Cumming; after a wave of anxiety about his replacing Joel Grey as the one and only Emcee, he has been embraced, and his current reign as the "Creepy Sex God" role-icon shows no sign of slowing down.

### **Having "It"**

As it turns out, Roach's book contains a great many further insights on how the combination of unknowability and spectacle produces the compelling appeal of the celebrity—insights that are uncannily applicable to a number of the dramaturgical mechanisms that produce the "iconic" *Cabaret* Emcee. Roach's "It," in its capitalized form, refers to the attributes that have made certain people in history "abnormally interesting"<sup>29</sup> and their effects on the group of non-celebrities he alternately calls "the public" and "the audience." He characterizes those who possess It as having "the power of apparently effortless embodiment of contradictory qualities

---

<sup>29</sup> Roach, 1.

simultaneously,<sup>30</sup> such as *sangfroid* and abandon, hedonism and austerity, or toughness and vulnerability. The celebrity's performance of mutually exclusive opposites such as these defies the public's ability to categorize them definitively; these polarities exist, Roach contends, in a balance so precarious that it can only be temporary, noting that "the empathic tension of waiting for the apparently inevitable fall makes for breathless spectatorship,"<sup>31</sup> meaning that our fascination is really based on our desire to see this maddening tension resolved one way or the other. He also attributes to "It"-bearers a specific relationship to images that offers the public a kind of presence that is also absence, an intense sexual attraction that also parses as danger, certain kinds of social apartness that prompt both adulation and rejection, and the fusion of the unique and the typical in the iconic. These bivalent components are present and working in tandem in the *Cabaret* Emcee, and, as he provokes both adulation and dread with his confrontational impenetrability, he represents a theatricalized version of the power Roach calls "It."

Roach's analysis of the role images play in the construction of It applies strongly to the strange magnetism of the *Cabaret* Emcee. Interestingly, the promotional materials for the 1966 premiere don't even show the Emcee, but by the time of the 1972 film—and, to an even greater extent, for the 1987 revival—his image comes to dominate the available imaging of the show. This strange visual availability coupled with actual inaccessibility is a foundational component of what Roach considers modern celebrity: "[Celebrity] images circulate widely in the absence of

---

<sup>30</sup> Roach, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Roach, 8.

their persons—a necessary condition of modern celebrity—but the very tension between their widespread visibility and their actual remoteness creates an unfulfilled need in the hearts of the public.”<sup>32</sup>

Fans of the *Cabaret* Emcee, therefore, must cope with a double helping of the “absence” and “remoteness” Roach mentions; not only are actors Joel Grey and Alan Cumming inaccessible to the public in the typical mode of celebrities, their Emcees’ psychological opacity renders him inaccessible, too—tantalizingly so, even/especially when we can surround ourselves with glamorous, excitingly high-contrast pictures of his luminous, numinous, spectacular form. No matter how many photos we gawk at, we can never gain more intimate access to that which the photos claim to represent—true, complete presence—because it was never there in the first place. We only focus all the more hungrily on images of his presence, which the world of media is quite glad to provide, as further fuel for the fantasy; as Roach observes, in a sentence that may as well have been written about the Emcee, “The most charismatic celebrities are the ones we can only imagine, even if we see them naked everywhere.”<sup>33</sup>

Another quality that Roach attributes to people who have It will sound familiar by now: their ability to form an intense connection with others that parses as either/both attraction or/and potential violence. “The intensity of this attraction”—that is, the attraction that the general public feels toward those who have It—“presupposes a certain element of danger, however—of rejection at least, if not something even worse.”<sup>34</sup> Grey’s magnetic Emcee—truly, it’s difficult to take one’s eyes off him

---

<sup>32</sup> Roach, 17.

<sup>33</sup> Roach, 22.

<sup>34</sup> Roach, 4.

onscreen—and Cumming’s Emcee, beckoning lasciviously to audience members with a pale, sinewy arm dotted with needle marks, both while maintaining eye contact too steady to be merely playful, play this game expertly.

Roach also identifies another attribute of individuals who have It that is actually a fundamental attribute of not just the *Cabaret* Emcee, but all MCs: singularity. Roach first notes that the individual who has It is marked by aloneness or apartness of various kinds, both in images depicting them<sup>35</sup> and in the social dramaturgy of our culture. He observes that to be singled out of the throng is also to be excluded from its fellowship:

In children’s games, the player ritually chosen to be “it” is simultaneously elected and ostracized. There is a kind of freakishness to having It; and, despite the allure, a potential for monstrosity.<sup>36</sup>

As we’ve seen, singularity in just about every possible mode (dramaturgical, spatial, and sartorial among them) is a key component of the MC as an onstage entity and of the *Cabaret* Emcee in particular. Roach’s observation about the double-edged nature of apartness provides a ground for the contradictory impulses represented in descriptions of the Emcee; he, like many of the critics writing about Grey’s and Cumming’s performances, notes the simultaneous presence of “allure” and “monstrosity.” In his discussion of social apartness, he also anticipates the dramaturgical logic of the Roundabout *Cabaret*’s chilling conclusion. In the final moments of that show, Cumming’s Emcee, standing quite alone in the middle of the stage, sings to the audience a spare, plaintive a capella “Auf Wiedersehen...à bientôt...”

---

<sup>35</sup> Roach, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Roach, 11.

to the signature run of notes from the chorus of “Wilkommen,” as he slowly strips off his black leather trench coat to reveal a Holocaust concentration camp prisoner’s uniform. He then turns away and walks slowly into the blank, bare space upstage, lit blinding white, where he joins the rest of the now-hollow-eyed cast in a slow-motion, funereal march toward their doom. In just a few words, Roach sums up crisply both the social and dramaturgical logic behind this ending: “celebrity sooner or later extracts in abjection what it bestows in glamour.”<sup>37</sup> It matters little that he is describing another play altogether, from a different century; such is our ambivalent relationship with those who stand apart, alluring yet unnerving in their difference, that the song remains the same.

### **Body: unknowability as mobility**

Another form of the Cabaret Emcee’s threatening unknowability is his preternatural mobility. As it has proven useful to examine the Emcee’s aggression through his eyes and his psychological opacity through his face, a consideration of his mobility, in several of its forms, may usefully focus on his body. The Emcee’s body enjoys a volitional mobility in (at least) three arenas that have a direct bearing on his onstage power: his sexual expression, the geography of the stage, and the dramaturgy of the play. Here, and for the balance of this chapter, I will focus on Cumming’s Emcee in the 2014 production as the example that displays the most varied expressions of mobility in these realms.

---

<sup>37</sup> Roach, 108.

The “sexual ambiguity” of Cumming’s Emcee is much remarked upon in writings about Cabaret—second only, in fact, to star worship of the actors in its frequency. Like the writers who fixated on Grey’s Emcee’s “androgyny” in 1972 because he paired masculine attire with feminine-inflected makeup and a dancer’s slender frame, many of the critics who note in 2014 that Cumming’s Emcee departs from the edicts of heteronormativity in his dress and behavior go not much further, which is a shame. Yes, it is true that there is a man wearing makeup on stage. Yes, it is true that his costume incorporates elements of attire traditionally coded as feminine. But to merely register this as “kinky” or “transgressive” is to stop woefully short of actually understanding how this display is being used in its theatrical context. Cumming’s Emcee cross-dresses for a reason, and the reason is power.

The gulf between popular, variety-style performance and mainstream theatre practice rarely feels as wide to me as it does when addressing how the two performance modes present and problematize notions of sex and gender. Variety-style theatre is devotedly and explicitly theatrical in its smallest details, and does not attempt in any way to provide a “mirror-up-to-nature” depiction of human personality or relationships except in the most heightened and stylized ways. This being the case, on the variety stage, all visible and behavioral signals of identity—phenotypical sex, sexual orientation, economic class, race (historically), and more—are understood as being absolutely artificial, mobile, performable, transferable, ready to be selected, put on, used, and then taken off again at half a moment’s notice like a fake mustache in the service of the ongoing onstage interaction. In the variety theatre mode, where the entire universe of identity signals is assumed to be available to any variety performer

at will, as easily as putting on a top hat or batting one's eyelashes, it is not a question of whether but of how contrasting signals are deployed at once—which ones, in what combinations, and in response to what stimuli—that do the actual work of the performance. Cumming's Emcee, in wearing pieces of clothing and ornamentation that seem to point in different gender directions, is therefore doing nothing more innovative than participating in exactly the performance tradition that the conceit of the show asks audiences to believe he represents. If anything, as a fictional variety MC, he is actually pretty boring; he sticks to his script, makes only safe and obvious gender-play jokes, and, for all that he does to modulate his relationship with the audience, he does so very slowly, unevenly (and not in an exciting way) and sometimes very indirectly, and with much theatrical indicating so that those in the house who don't happen to spend every night of their lives at plays don't get lost. Cumming is, of course, a truly phenomenal actor; as an actor, his performance of the Emcee's arc over the duration of the show is nuanced, detailed, and moving. What he does not do is behave like a variety MC. He does not leap cleverly between different sets of identity signals like a trapeze artist in full view of the rapt audience, in real-time, unscripted response to situations that arise on the stage.

This does not mean that there's nothing to be gleaned from the Emcee's presentation of gender or sexual orientation. What it does mean is that it's not where (or what) many people seem to think it is. As Roger Copeland and Linda Mizejewski both argue in their different, fiercely articulate discussions of "decadence" in *Cabaret*, the moral line of causation commonly drawn from Weimar perversion to Nazi horror is simplistic, lazy, and frankly, in Copeland's delightful phrasing, "just plain

unhistorical.” Both point out that economic devastation and fear was the engine behind both the desperate pursuit of less-than-legal income streams and cheap, sensational “fun” (in the guise of novel sex and drugs) and the equally desperate xenophobia of more conservative Germans that saw in Nazi rule a way to reclaim “their” country from everyone else, including all the “degenerates” populating the cabarets. This renders descriptions of the film or play that chastise its more sexually enterprising characters for their “immorality” (as does Garebian, and, historically, Hal Prince) curiously incongruous with what is actually happening on stage.

So what is happening on stage? In terms of the Emcee’s performance of sexuality and gender, a great many things. The ways in which his trans-sexy attire and his ambisexual flirtations with audience members give him specific kinds of power is the mechanism in which I am chiefly interested. Initially, as Copeland describes, Cumming’s “Master of Ceremonies is a seduction machine who slinks out of a black leather trench coat and greets the audience in three languages and at least that many sexual orientations;”<sup>38</sup> though his attire and flirtation shift over the course of the show, in all cases they broadcast a message about power. By adopting and shifting between different mixtures of visual, performable signs of masculinity and femininity, and of hetero- and homosexuality, Cumming’s Emcee continually positions and repositions himself with respect to the audience, in each instance choosing a presentation that gives him the upper hand in some way. Thus, by virtue of this mobility, he remains the more powerful partner in the MC/audience dyad under every circumstance.

Specifically, he does this through cultivating and encouraging the sexual desire of the

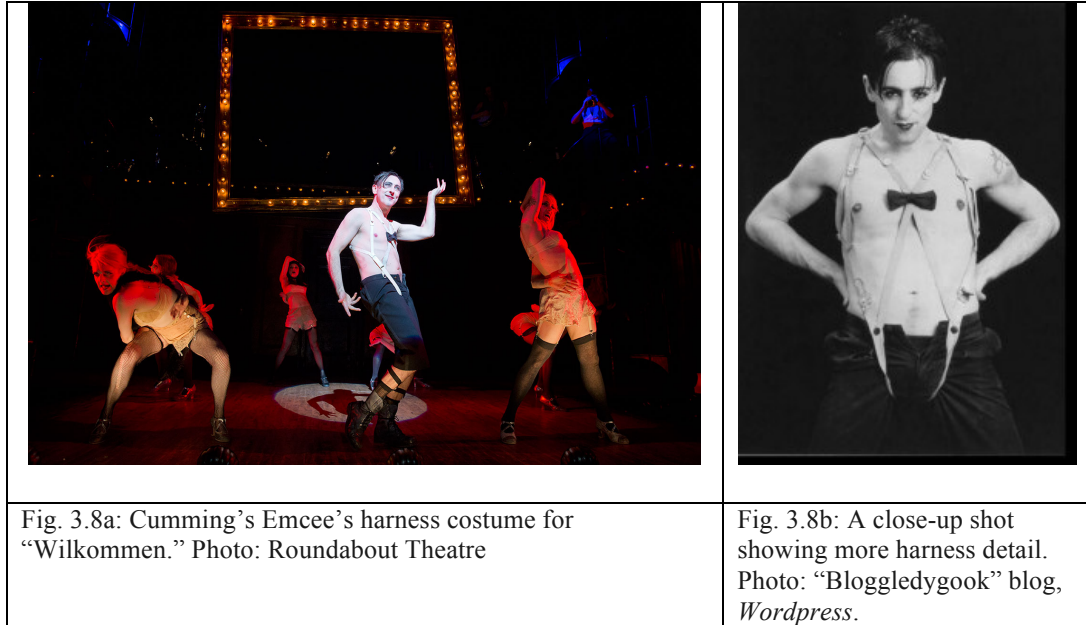
---

<sup>38</sup> Copeland, 26.

audience in a range of different ways, but without displaying any desire of his own—since desire has the disempowering effect of rendering the desiring party vulnerable.

His mobility in terms of his body and sexual orientation is fairly simple: throughout the show, he engages in flirtation with a range of cast members and audience members, regardless of their sex. One characteristic example occurred on 5 September 2014 during the show's opening sequence as he introduced the Kit Kat dancers and musicians. Right after introducing a saxophonist named "Hans," Cumming's Emcee turned to the audience and, grinning, delivered a naughty semi-aside: "You know, I've never known anyone to blow as good as Hans." Then, making eye contact with someone in the audience, his face lit up; straightening his posture to indicate full attention, he looked at and pointed toward this person and exclaimed with glee, "...except you're here again! Good memories!" Cumming's Emcee's mobility in sexual object choice adds to his power simply in that he is ready for anything—it shows that there is no person in the building with whom he could not, if he so desired, engage physically. Desire is the key, however; it is important that these flirtations appear motivated by playfulness rather than psychologically genuine desire on his part. After all, to reveal desire is, again, to be vulnerable to rejection and/or loss of status. In the example above, the Emcee's showmanship observed exactly these parameters; despite the energetic way in which he launched this joke, he delivered the lines in exactly the same cadence, volume, and tone as many of his other lines, and his eyes did not linger on the audience member once the joke had briskly concluded. All of these cues indicated that, though the Emcee was prepared for anything, there was nothing special or affecting about this particular encounter.

Cumming's Emcee derives power from his mobility regarding the visual signs of femininity and masculinity that adorn his body in a similar way. Though more subtle dynamics appear as well, he chiefly alternates between feminine or feminine-inflected sexual display and spectacle and masculine shows of authority and force—each one, generally, positioning him in the context of that scene as an entity wielding some kind of superior, gender-coded power. In each of the six songs he performs, for instance, his costume shifts to emphasize different modes of this power: once he strips off his large black leather trench coat to begin the show's opening number, "Wilkommen," he wears the following: heavy, stylized, feminine-inflected makeup; no shirt, but rouged, glittery nipples; black pants cut raggedly off at the knee; black sock garters, socks, and boots; and the ingenious twist on "formal wear" that has made this costume his signature look for the production: a complicated system of white straps, buttons and hooks, decorated by a neat black bow tie, that wraps around his torso and between his legs, standing in for a white dress shirt while simultaneously functioning as a sort of S&M harness emphasizing his crotch.



Like his mobility of sexual object choice, his confident mobility among feminine- and masculine-coded sartorial signals produces him as “something for everyone,” that is, a viable object of desire, regardless of whether the spectator typically prefers to sexually objectify men or women. In addition to the makeup he wears, Cumming's Emcee assumes a great many poses of the body—often with arms raised and/or framing his body—that emphasize his waist and hips in a manner more often seen in images (or performances) of women produced for a heterosexual male audience. The images presented earlier of Cumming's Google image search results give several examples.

There's more to it, though, and it's not pretty. Marjorie Garber's influential work on cross-dressing, *Vested Interests*, encourages consumers of cultural products to examine the political biases of narratives in which images of transvestites appear. (Noting that Garber explores and problematizes this term in specialized ways, I use it

merely to indicate an individual wearing at least some adornment typically coded as a sex not their own.) Using examples of *As You Like It* and the biography of lifelong transvestite musician Billy Tipton, Garber describes a “progress narrative” common in depictions of those that cross-dress that posits this activity as merely a strategic means to an end. These narratives, she argues, erase the existence of the transvestite by emphasizing the possible reasons other than self-expression or pleasure that a person could choose to cross-dress.<sup>39</sup> The 2014 *Cabaret*, we find, does this in two ways: by positioning everything the Emcee does as part of his job as performer (as McNicholl confirmed in his earlier interview, calling the Emcee “a real guy. With a real job to do”), including his stage appearance, and by attributing the Emcee’s gender-coded attire and adornment to a “progress” narrative—though of a bleakly different kind.

The “progress” narrative I speak of equates cross-dressing with emotional and physical collapse. At the beginning of the show, as we’ve seen, the Emcee’s sartorial and gestural presentation enthusiastically mixes masculine and feminine elements. However, his costumes and gesture become more and more sharply delineated along gender lines as the play continues and both he and Germany spiral downward. His masculine garments get more masculine as he begins to exert various kinds of coercive control (violating and beating the Kit Kat girls in “Money” and res/training the gorilla in “Through my Eyes”), and when he emerges from the darkness for his desolate torch song “I Don’t Care Much,” he is in complete, almost glamour drag: a cocktail dress; neatly sideswept, barretted hair; smoky makeup, and very glittery chandelier earrings that emphasize his movements. However, the impact of the number doesn’t reside in

---

<sup>39</sup> Garber, 67-92.

Cumming's Emcee's glamour; in addition to feminine attire, his body displays signs of intravenous drug use (a long trail of thin blood running down his left forearm; his obvious disorientation), offering an uncomfortably conservative narrative of progress toward ruin.<sup>40</sup> At the end of the song, he staggers and slurs, barely managing to announce Sally Bowles' entrance before wandering off stage, swaying earrings flashing an eye-catching warning about the now-established connection between cross-dressing on a more than merely playful, surface level with devastation. Copeland addresses this in his *American Theatre* review as well, the only critic I've seen do so; however, even his efforts to place this event into a larger, more humane context don't really do the full job. In arguing for a reading of the show as a contemporary warning about the cheap, sensational "fun" we find ourselves being offered by "the hidden persuaders of the advertising industry"<sup>41</sup> and about our own denial as we sense that something is going very, very wrong in our country but persist in "amusing ourselves to death" rather than face it,<sup>42</sup> he argues against his own clear-eyed analysis of "decadence" by positioning the phenomenon of cross-dress as part of the scenario of immature sensation-seeking that leads to destruction.

This arc of abjection touches down in the disturbing final scene, in which Cumming appears in the same black leather trench coat he sported at the beginning of the show, in the same black leather boots, but now minus any jewelry or other feminine touches. He's unambiguously masculine in dress and (or therefore, as the

---

<sup>40</sup> Photos of this costume are difficult to find. One YouTube video ("I Don't Care Much by Alan Cumming") shows Cumming performing the number in the original Mendes production in London, 1993, but without the drug-taking element:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPLUSvbiSHo&index=3&list=RDBsFMU7DReCg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPLUSvbiSHo&index=3&list=RDBsFMU7DReCg)

<sup>41</sup> Copeland, 28.

<sup>42</sup> Copeland, 88.

production seems to suggest) no longer high on drugs. Altogether, this rendition of his attire gives the impression that, weary though he may be, he's back in control again—in control of his senses and his gender. The next costume transformation, however, reverses that: he strips off his coat to reveal a concentration camp prisoner's uniform, and steps bleakly toward the offstage area where he joins other characters moving toward a death chamber. At this point, while we're reeling from a differently intense experience of the power clothing can have (the concentration camp uniform is concealed by the coat until the "reveal," which is staggering), there remains a visual *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* argument about the terrifying and inevitable consequences of cross-dress.

### **Spatial mobility**

Cumming's Emcee enjoys mobility in other realms besides gender and sexual orientation; another is spatial. Where Roper's Chairman displays a range of onstage characteristics legible as "stability," Cumming's Emcee is slippery, protean. This can be seen even in how differently they use the geography of the stage. Roper's work on the Broadside stage consistently returns him to one physical location: near his barrel and gavel, on the edge of the stage closest to the audience, on their right hand side. His constant, unchallenged occupancy of that location equates to a sort of de facto ownership of it that, established before the show begins and continuing until after it ends, precludes the audience from conceiving of alternative models for that social space; instead, they experience that area as a domain that is *naturally* his and always has been. Moreover, when Roper's Chairman approaches the audience to deliver each

bit of stage business, he does so from the same location and direction, and at the same point in time with respect to the acts he introduces or sends off the stage. Even his velocity is fairly constant. This allows those in the audience to reliably locate in the physical environment the dominant source of social power; this piece of knowledge allows them latitude to create a measure of power and safety for themselves. They can choose to sit closer to or farther away from the Chairman, using geography strategically to regulate how often and how intensely his eye may rest on them. Even after being seated, once the audience knows where the source of power is physically located and from what direction it will approach, they can decide how to adjust their own behavior to regulate their engagement with it. They may realize that sitting in the front rows makes them likely to make direct eye contact with the Chairman, and adjust their own eye contact patterns accordingly to either draw or deflect his attention. They may also realize that front-row seats may render them more likely to *especially direct* direct address from the Chairman, in the form of comments, questions, banter, or jokes—possibly at their expense—and brace themselves for this kind of attention. They can know a great many things about their position in this world and how to operate in that position in a way that suits them by simply knowing where the Chairman “lives” on the stage.

What a difference from the 2014 *Cabaret!* Where Roper’s Chairman projects stability, Cumming’s Emcee is a spectacle of mobility. He doesn’t so much “live” anywhere in the performance space as prowl all over it. Asked about staging techniques for the Emcee, associate director B.T. McNicholl says, “He’s literally everywhere; he’s up in the bandstand, he’s sitting in the frame, he’s up on the catwalk,

backstage, he's everywhere. He has no home. I mean, that you see, anyway. He's allowed to go anywhere."<sup>43</sup> This quicksilver mobility means that audience members cannot visually fix him in space; they cannot know reliably where he will be in terms of the geography of the stage, nor when he will appear (or approach them). This geographical unknowability, in a less powerful character or one that displayed less aggressive intent, could read as “magical” or “charming”: Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of these. However, coupled with other attributes of the cold-control Emcee (such as a relationship of dominance to the audience and/or other performers, and an aggressive use of his gaze) this geographical unknowability makes Cumming's Emcee seem dangerous, an entity that can attack from anywhere at any time, in response to which audience members may feel—and many have claimed to feel—a pointed sense of unease.

### **Dramaturgical mobility**

Cumming's Emcee's ability to “go anywhere” is not just geographical but dramaturgical. Roper's work in *Broadside* establishes early in the show that he will confidently and firmly claim center stage at knowable intervals: at the very beginning, between each turn, and at the end. And in every moment of the *Broadside* show, even when not announcing, he participates fully in its local reality; seated near his barrel, he reacts to onstage events, applauds soloists, and dialogues with audience members. Knowing where the Chairman “is” in a dramaturgical sense also provides audience members with a sense of a stable local reality, operating by fairly simple, knowable

---

<sup>43</sup> McNicholl, B.T., 2014.

rules, wherein they can locate a stable, safe place for themselves.

Meanwhile, the local dramaturgical reality that Cumming's Emcee controls is as mobile as he is; he brings the cabaret with him everywhere he goes. Where Roper's Chairman operates entirely within a single, fairly straightforward and coherent local reality, as do all of the other Broadside performers onstage, the Kit Kat Klub is a more complex world. In his *American Theatre* article, Roger Copeland notes what he calls the "central metaphor of Mendes' production":

Here, in effect, the Kit Kat Klub has swallowed up the reality beyond it. Every scene—even those that in Prince's production took place in the outside world—is now framed by the cabaret. The emcee [sic] is always there, presiding over and manipulating the action like a puppeteer.<sup>44</sup>

In this sense, Cumming's Emcee also operates entirely within the conceit of the cabaret—but one that has engulfed the world outside and now presents its events as theatre. In this specific iteration of the world-as-cabaret metaphor, the Emcee's power to shift between different dramaturgical modes becomes unlimited; not only can he go everywhere, he can do everything. Sometimes he yields the stage to other scenes that unfold (each with its own discrete, coherent local reality), and watches, silent and invisible to the participants. At other times, he physically enters these scenes and participates in them: invisible, he holds a pineapple aloft during the duet between Fraulein Schneider and Herr Schultz; invisible, he throws the brick through Herr Schultz's window and onto the stage. Occasionally, he steps even more fully into other scenes, maintaining his own identity but assuming a disguise, interacting directly with characters who respond to him as though he were indeed part of that environment (the

---

<sup>44</sup> Copeland, 28, 88.

German guard on Cliff's train). Finally—and this is the most fascinating display of his dramaturgical mobility—he singlehandedly transforms the entire “show” from a hybrid presentational/representational mode into a dialogic, participatory mode by choosing two audience members from the house to bring up on stage for an audience participation sketch.

This dramaturgical mobility is different from Cumming's Emcee's omnivorous use of space but related to it. Where his spatial mobility prevents audience members from being able to place *him*, his dramaturgical mobility ultimately prevents them from being able to place *themselves*. This is the bookend to the Emcee's unknowability, and a—if not *the*—main engine in the show's critique of passive spectatorship. The show begins as a simple, sassy, jolly lark with the opening number, “Wilkommen,” wherein the Emcee firmly establishes the relationship between himself and the audience as something fun and familiar, dyadic and stable in nature. He offers himself as the audience's primary partner in this world; through flirtatious direct address on a range of topics most people consider private, he becomes their intimate acquaintance. And he, through his mock scolding and invitations to (among other things) “try Helga,” casts the audience squarely in the role of rowdy, randy nightclub patrons. As we have seen in Chapter Two, all of this is stock MC technique. “Casting the audience” involves telling the audience who they are, which allows them to feel safe, and to relax into their designated role in the social scheme of the room. Telling them they are naughty revelers having a riotously good time is a traditional strategy, and an impressively effective self-fulfilling prophecy.

In the other types of scenes, however, his dramaturgical relationship to both the scene's local reality and to the audience varies, shifting without warning. When he is unambiguously the Emcee of a nightclub, the audience members are just as unambiguously that evening's guests, but when he transforms into an unseen observer of a psychologically realistic scene performed with a theatrical fourth wall, he ignores the audience entirely (as he does during the engagement party in Act One, scene 12); those in the house, who have imprinted on him like baby birds, then become dramaturgically stranded—their only “friend” has left them behind. There is no clear parallel shift for them, no corresponding role to assume in this new dynamic. The clear and comfortable performer-audience relationship established by “Wilkommen” frays and falls away piecemeal with each dramaturgical shift and dodge, leaving the audience to wonder, as Garebian asks, “Who are we in relation to the Emcee and to the cabaret?”<sup>45</sup>

The fact that the show is designed to disorient the audience is no secret; what is fascinating is that it results from Cumming's Emcee using traditional techniques of the unscripted variety-style theatre MC to form a stable, comfortable dyadic relationship with the audience—a relationship that the script then unravels, leaving spectators without the trusted guide on whom they'd been relying to contextualize their experience and give them an identity as a group. The audience members, who (at least on September 5) knew well enough how and when to respond to the Emcee's salutations when they were cast in the role of convivial nightclub patrons, responded to the subsequent shifts with silence (in the case of scenes featuring the Emcee's

---

<sup>45</sup> Garebian, 87.

invisible or visible participation) and then to the onset of the post-interval audience participation sequence with a dread so palpable that Cumming's Emcee actually commented on it. At that point, bereft of their "tour guide" and stripped of their initial identities as nightclub denizens—but without having that relational dynamic replaced by another recognizable enough to suggest any familiar codes of behavior—those in the audience no longer knew who they were, nor what their former "friend" the Emcee would next do to them or ask of them.

This non-character-ness is the defining component of Cumming's Emcee—as well as Joel Grey's film and stage Emcees—and the source of the dread he evokes; it is a dramaturgically strategic combination of social signals of status and aggression, visual excess, and several modes of unknowability that both provokes attraction and threatens destruction. In a number of high-priority ways, we are unable to locate this being—not just geographically and dramaturgically but also, we find, sexually and psychologically. Being hardwired as a species to deduce others' locations in these important matters (and thus our own locations with respect to them) as a requisite of survival, we become uncomfortably aware of our helplessness when confronted by the Emcee's aggressive, intriguing indeterminacy. This combination of spectacle, intensity, and unknowability is the core of the cold Emcee's power and the source of both our dread and fascination.

### **Audience participation sequence**

These aren't the only ways in which the Emcee uses extra-theatrical mechanisms to construct a relationship of dominance in the theatre. Following the

interval, director Mendes has added an entire scene to the production that is not in the book: an audience participation sequence.<sup>46</sup> A detailed explication of this sequence as it took place on 5 September 2014 will reveal how, in addition to the previously discussed elements, Cumming's Emcee draws on many extra-theatrical modes of power to effect a domination that recapitulates the subjection of the individual to power.

Over the course of the performance, Cumming accesses synthetic authority by drawing on codes belonging to several species of real social power. One fascinating instance in which Cumming exercises considerable synthetic authority is actually through a theatrical device so common, seen in so many types of popular, variety, and street performance, that it seems harmless, even banal: a simple "audience participation" (AP) sequence that occurs midway through the show. However, an examination of the AP sequence's dramaturgy, which follows a fairly traditional format, reveals that Cumming is actually drawing on juridical processes of the direst sort—including criminal trials, public executions, and coercive discipline—to quickly and clearly structure the relationship between himself and the audience volunteers in a way that precludes any interaction dynamic save that of obedience.

### **Description**

The *Cabaret* AP sequence comes directly after intermission. During the performance on September 5, 2014, Cumming, as the Emcee, was lowered slowly

---

<sup>46</sup> Mendes made this addition when premiering his production in 1993 at the Donmar Warehouse in London.

from the flies on a metal circus hoop about 4 feet in diameter. He reclined languidly on a small horizontal seat fixed to the stage-right side of the hoop; the hoop itself was decorated with silver lamé fabric. He wore a cheap-looking, silver-foiled top hat, and a white tuxedo tailcoat with ruffled silver lapels. Still no shirt.

Once Cumming's Emcee (and here again we encounter the difficulty of its being more or less accurate, at different moments in a popular performance, to refer to an onstage entity by the performer's name versus their role in the show, since part of the pleasure these performances offer is the experience of confluence of and oscillation between the two) reached the stage, he greeted everyone again, then began, with a showman's grinning bellow: "All right, everyone—it's audience participation tiiiiime!"<sup>47</sup> As the audience cheered (the balcony section was especially loud), Cumming's Emcee stepped offstage and entered the "house" (audience seating area), pausing at the racket from the balcony to look up at its occupants and tease: "You're only cheering because you're upstairs!" Then he straightened to his full height, waved, and called out, grinning—in some way speaking as part of the denizens of the orchestra in which he was standing—"Hello, poor people!" Uncertain audience laughter followed, the kind that follows a joke laying bare a social reality that Americans pretend does not exist.

He then continued to walk farther back into the house, scanning the rows of faces for a suitable audience participant. The house fell into a tense silence. After taking a few more steps in this atmosphere of dread, he stopped again and said, with relish, "I love the smell of fear in the morning." Laughter ensued; he'd not only

---

<sup>47</sup> Cumming, 5 Sep. 2014.

bluntly named the anxiety they were trying to conceal, he'd done it by riffing on the signal, often-appropriated quotation of the violence-saturated film *Apocalypse Now*. Interestingly, the laughter was also tinged with relief; by referencing well-known character Lt. Col, Bill Kilgore—and, by so doing, infusing his relationship to the audience with elements of the power dynamic proper to Kilgore in the film—he had shown the nervous audience what their role was in this new interactional process. Not knowing what their new role was had been unnerving; knowing had brought relief.

Several rows back from the stage, in the house right aisle, he chose a woman to be his audience participant, and escorted her from her seat back toward the stage. Once they were onstage, he asked her, “What’s your name?”

“Diane.”

He presented her to the house, announcing: “Diane, everyone! Isn’t she cute?” The audience gave assenting applause.

He then asked Diane to dance with him. Once they had assumed a ballroom dance position and begun to move, though, he asked her, with mock concern, “Diane, you’re not the greatest dancer in the world, are you?” After her (and the audience’s) semi-uncomfortable semi-laugh, he directed her, “Let’s just sway.”

They did this for a few beats. Then Cumming’s Emcee stopped them, stepped away from her, and holding her hand, asked, “Who did you come with tonight, Diane?”

“My husband.”

“Where’s your husband?”

Diane pointed out her husband in the house; Cumming's Emcee spotted him, grinned, and said, "He's cute too!" There was audience laughter at the gently-boundary-crossing same-sex-attraction joke.

Then, turning back to Diane, he asked her pointedly, "Diane, do you like sandwiches?" This triggered a bigger audience laugh at the more risqué *ménage-a-trois* joke, followed by another wave of laughter spurred by Diane's uncomprehending facial expression, which revealed that she didn't quite understand the metaphor. After the second laugh had died down, he stepped back from her, gestured grandly to her again, and re-presented her to the house as a success who had earned their applause: "Diane, everyone!" The audience, instructed by his tone and stance of proud showmanship that it was time to applaud her, dutifully complied.

Cumming's Emcee said "Thank you!" to Diane, and then, by maintaining eye contact with her while gesturing hospitably and semi-deferentially toward the steps that led down from the stage at house right into the house, he released her to leave the stage and find her seat again.

He repeated this audience participation sequence with an audience participant from house left—again, someone seated a few rows back from the stage, on the aisle. This time, the audience participant was a young man in his twenties. As he had with Diane, Cumming's Emcee brought him onto the stage, asked his name (which was Ty), presented Ty to the house, and then asked him to dance. This time, the jokes focused on Ty's potential homosexuality. When dancing, Ty moved a little more confidently than Diane had; after they'd danced a few steps, Cumming's Emcee asked, with a sly smile, "You've done this before, haven't you?"

When Ty (with a slightly sheepish grin) admitted that he had, Cumming's Emcee looked over his dance partner's shoulder into the house, and, delighted, bragged in a loud stage whisper, "I can always tell which ones!" In response to the joke, the audience laughter was gentle.

There was no asking about a companion this time. Once the dance was done, Cumming's Emcee released Ty back to the house as a success, encouraging audience applause at the evident completion of the bit. To signal the end of the entire audience participation sequence, Cumming's Emcee turned his body, outstretched hands, and eyes back toward Diane, in her seat, reintroducing her to the attention of the audience: "Diane!" Applause. He then repeated this for Ty, who by now was also seated: "Ty!" Slightly louder applause. Then, facing mostly center, he raised his eyes and hands toward the balcony: "Poor People!" And the sequence was over.

### **A closer look**

Now let's look at what is actually happening in this deceptively simple exchange. The AP sequence's express purpose in the show, according to both associate director B.T. McNicholl and Roundabout education dramaturg Ted Sod, is to demonstrate that the audience is complicit, though complicit in *which things* is harder to determine. McNicholl says:

[Director Sam Mendes] wanted to make the audience *complicit* in the action of the play. So you're laughing and laughing and laughing, and then all of a sudden, at a certain point, when it gets to the gorilla number and he says that awful line, "She wouldn't look Jewish at all," people *laugh* at it, because they're so conditioned to laughing. And then it's at that point that

the doors slam shut behind you and you're trapped, and it's a quick toboggan ride into hell, basically, from there on out.<sup>48</sup>

Sod, however, observed that many audience members don't recognize the more serious undertones of the sequence, saying:

I think the audience doesn't quite get it, intellectually; I don't think they have time to reflect on it. I think it's like, "Oh my God, Alan Cumming's dancing with me!" "Oh, pick me! Pick me!" I don't think they really get it...until the end.<sup>49</sup>

What the sequence does brilliantly, however, is illustrate how easily people can be trained to submit to authority; its techniques quote, and derive their effectiveness from, governmental or juridical processes for the application of coercion or violence to the individual—whose contours still haunt our palimpsest-like imaginations.

This tension is not lost on Cumming the performer. The glossy 1999 Newmarket Press product, *Cabaret: The Illustrated Book and Lyrics*, quotes a snippet from now-defunct weekly magazine *InTheater*, written by Kathy Henderson. "Every night at *Cabaret*'s Kit Kat Klub," Henderson writes, "Alan Cumming as the Emcee brings a pair of audience members on stage to share a dance." She describes notable incidents where Cumming either accidentally or intentionally chose actual celebrities as his audience participants—interesting glimpses into situations where the audience participant's higher social/public status outside the world of the room disrupts the usual power dynamic. But it's Henderson's quotation of Cumming at the end of the snippet that really stands out:

---

<sup>48</sup> McNicholl, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Sod, 2014.

“I always go for the butchest men,” Cumming explains, “because (the dance segment is) about humiliation in a way. The cabaret exists to unsettle the audience, and that’s why some people refuse to go up. That’s quite embarrassing, of course, but they’re more embarrassed than I am. And I get to say things like, “You know you want to.”<sup>50</sup>

Cumming’s use of the word “embarrass” connects this and similar AP sequences to punishment. The word itself is etymologically linked by various dictionaries to 17<sup>th</sup>-century Portuguese (from *baraça*: “noose”)<sup>51</sup> and Italian (*imbarrare*: “to confine within bars.”)<sup>52</sup> Many resources also agree that a common synonym, along with “humiliate,” is “mortify.” The common description of the feeling of intense embarrassment: “I wanted to die.” Humiliation is, characteristically, the result of exposure: the sufferer has been completely exposed, in view of a social body, as *less or lacking* in some socially normative characteristic or skill. This is especially the case if this lack contrasts with the image the individual typically maintains through social performance, with varying levels of “truth” (the further the social performance from the truth, the more intense the humiliation when this discrepancy is revealed) and intentionality (the more calculated the victim’s actions in maintaining their false social image, the more profound the humiliation when exposure reveals not only their truth discrepancy, but also their deficiency in the skill needed to “keep up the act”). The individual has been exposed as dumber, less cultured, poorer, less graceful—essentially, *less in control* of their body, language, impulses, mind, and/or social environment than the ideally normative subject belonging to that social group. (Of course here, as everywhere, the social ideal is not the actual; those watching the ritual

<sup>50</sup> Masteroff, Kander and Ebb, 1999.

<sup>51</sup> “Embarrass.” *Merriam-Webster.com*.

<sup>52</sup> “Embarrass.” *Dictionary.com*.

in anonymous safety, even if their own lives harbor the same truth discrepancy as the victim's, can at least congratulate themselves for being skilled or lucky enough to keep it hidden.) Control, however, is the key. For status-sensitive animals like humans, to be exposed as lacking control—or to be forced to submit to another's control—triggers a loss of status; extreme loss of status in a social context creates vulnerability to domination; complete domination by/subject to another leads to an annihilation of the subject—a social death that is, as far as our animal fears are concerned, indistinguishable from physical death.

This anxiety about control is what gives the AP sequence its threatening aspect. It is a game of control, no matter how blunted or hackneyed individual iterations may be. In the quote above, Cumming explicitly links the audience participation (AP) sequence with humiliation—and not just any variety, but humiliation specifically predicated on the fact that his Emcee's interaction with these men violates the boundaries of heteronormative masculinity. But there's even more at stake here. The AP sequence, a traditional device in many forms of popular entertainment, is a ritual that simulates no less than the total obliteration of the audience participant—a complete social subjection and/as an analogue to physical annihilation. Many structural and dramaturgical particulars—which appear remarkably stable across genres and ticket price points—link this ritual humiliation to the spectacular execution, the criminal trial, and the means and goals of coercive discipline as described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*.

Audience participation sequences share with the public executions Foucault describes the element of spectacle; both offer, with great ceremony, a transaction

pitting power against the individual, a ritual whose effectiveness relies upon its being witnessed by a crowd. Foucault's early criminal trial structure strongly resembles many aspects of AP sequences; each is an always-unequal contest, where the human locus of power (the judge or MC) knows more than the vulnerable individual singled out for attention, and may use trickery besides. Another regular component of AP sequences is a step wherein the MC trains both audience participant and audience how to respond, using several disciplinary mechanisms Foucault describes. There are also echoes in the AP sequence of Foucault's ritual of examination, and the carceral as the functioning, in concert, of a range of coercive techniques intended to inculcate the individual with the tools and desire to occupy their designated place in the dominant network of power relations.

### **Sequence structure**

Let's look at the actual structure of *Cabaret's* AP sequence as described above. It's actually fairly simple, and similar to many, if not most, other AP sequences. (MCs are not the only variety performers that use these sequences, either; in 24 years of experience with variety performance, I have seen it used by jugglers, hypnotists, magicians, and even a professional falconer.) Despite various differences, these AP sequences follow a format that is simple enough for even untalented performers to execute, and stable enough to allow skilled performers to embellish upon without disrupting its dramaturgical effectiveness. If the steps are followed, the power transaction in every instance is the same: the powerful performer subjects the less powerful audience member to his will.

Generally, AP sequences involve six basic steps:

- 1: Choosing.** The MC chooses an audience participant and brings him/her on stage.
- 2: Naming.** The MC solicits the AP's name and announces it to the audience.
- 3: Instruction.** The MC instructs the AP in the task s/he is to perform.
- 4: Interruption.** The MC interrupts the AP's initial attempts with criticism (including corrections, ridicule, or both), or with encouragement (including further instruction in/elaboration on the task).
- 5: The contest.** On the MC's signal, the AP attempts the task. Typically, the AP will either *fail* (fail to perform the task), *succeed* (perform the task), or *exceed* (perform the task in a way that exceeds expectation in one or more performative dimensions).
- 6: The victory.** The MC presents AP to audience as victor and encourages their acknowledgement of the AP's new, higher status through applause.

Now, let's look at each of the steps of this dramaturgical process in more detail, and map the steps of the September 5 *Cabaret* AP sequence onto its structure.

**First step: choosing.** Variety performers of all stripes choose their APs very carefully because this single choice determines the tone and efficacy of the entire rest of the sequence; those chosen must be, above all, tractable enough that the MC can guide them through the steps of the sequence with little interference and few or no surprises. APs that behave unpredictably or somehow negate the MC's authority can ruin the act—the act in question being the triumph of social control. One variety performer, Sean Laughlin of the variety performance team, “Sean and Dave,” often

does the AP choosing for their act;<sup>53</sup> he claims that he always looks for a man wearing a fanny pack, because, in Laughlin's words, "he's there to have a good time, and he doesn't care how he looks." This is his way of safeguarding against surprises; an AP who is overly concerned with looking foolish would be difficult to steer onstage.

Cumming, in choosing "the butchest men" for his APs, is taking a step to manage this same risk; he grabs the upper hand before the sequence has even begun by choosing "butch" APs who will likely be made uncomfortable by his cheery, aggressive, and up-close performance of queerness. (Interestingly, Ty, the male AP he chose on September 5, was young and slender, not presenting any overt signals of "butchness.") Cumming doesn't mention what criteria he uses when selecting female APs, but AP Diane from the September 5 performance was in her mid-thirties, pleasant-looking but not devastatingly attractive nor dressed to attract attention; she looked like someone who would be easy to guide through the sequence. And she was; she cooperated fully with every step, laughing a little anxiously whenever AC spoke to her, even when he insulted her dancing.

In all cases, the choosing step is marked by a profound, tense bivalence—described not only in Roach's discussion of human set-apart-ness as capable of provoking both intense adulation and violent rejection, but also in Foucault's study of coercive power, *Discipline and Punish*, where he traces (among other things) developments in the relationship between power and visibility in Western society. Choosing the AP and bringing them onto the stage utilizes two different types of

---

<sup>53</sup> Laughlin, personal interview, 2003. Watch a sample of their audience participation structure here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdByyu8ynvI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdByyu8ynvI)

visibility as found in Foucault: visibility as power, which places the MC in control because he commands the visible space and therefore the audience's attention, while they huddle in anonymity; and visibility as vulnerability, which positions all audience members as potential victims when the MC's gaze, the accusing gaze of power, rakes the house like a searchlight hunting for the one who will be singled out for the total exposure that is so allied to spectacular punishment in our cultural history that it provokes shudders of anxiety. This is what Cumming's Emcee acknowledges when he teases the balcony audience for laughing because they were "upstairs"; they were geographically far enough away from him in the theatre to be in no danger of being chosen, singled out, and brought up on stage. This combination of apparently opposite visibilities in the *Cabaret* AP sequence is fascinating because, instead of conflicting, Cumming's Emcee uses them in such a way that their mechanisms overlap, resulting in a world-of-the-room where no position other than his is both empowered and safe.

**The second step is naming.** The MC must get the AP's name and announce it to the audience; this transforms the AP from one of the nameless crowd into an individual, seen, singled out. It's true that, from a practical performance standpoint, the naming step is taken partially for convenience and safety; it provides the MC with a way to quickly get the AP's full attention should something genuinely start going wrong. But naming is a gesture of power in a deeper way, too; to name something is in some senses to control it, as well as to control how others see/feel about it. Anxieties about the power of naming often surface in sequences of this type as re-naming; the MC will solicit the AP's name, and then insist on calling the AP by a different name: "Mind if I call you 'Bob'?" After getting the AP's name, some MCs then assert

dominance in a second way, by passing judgment on their name: “Eloise? That’s a pretty name” (a gesture to flatter the AP and reassure them, especially if they’re nervous, that the MC is an ally); “Sigurdhild? Goodness, that’s a mouthful” (a gesture that serves as a platform for any of a number of off-color jokes that playfully/flirtatiously/aggressively extend the sexual tenor of the show into the AP sequence by projecting it onto the newcomer, turning them into part of the “show” by rebranding them as contributing to and/or exemplifying this atmosphere. Cumming’s MC did not make either of these next-level gestures in *Cabaret*’s AP sequence on Sep. 5, sadly—passing up this opportunity to elaborate on his power and so defanging the exchange somewhat.

The naming step retains echoes of non-theatrical, coercive power, specifically the practices Foucault describes that were designed to confirm the identity of the accused before the public execution. He recounts how condemned persons were sometimes forced to repeat their names and the gruesome particulars of their crimes not only at the doors of churches they passed on the way to the place of reckoning, but also, and for the final time, while standing alone and exposed to the view of the crowd on the platform where they would die.<sup>54</sup> This ritual practice of verbally confirming the condemned’s identity by speaking their name aloud reinforces not only the connection between crime and punishment but also between the criminal’s name, their singled-out-ness, and their destruction—the despicable notoriety of the outcast linking certain kinds of individuality to annihilation.

---

<sup>54</sup> Foucault, 43.

Foucault's account of the spectacular execution also observes that, after the practice began of covering the condemned's head or face with fabric, the crowds witnessing a public execution often showed anxiety that the person displayed before them, about to die, was not in fact the criminal accused of the crime. "When the woman Lescombat was hanged, care was taken to hide her face; she had 'a kerchief over her neck and head, which made the public murmur, and say that it was not Lescombat'" he recounts, quoting Anchel. Foucault then continues, "The people claimed the right to observe the execution and to see who was being executed."<sup>55</sup> In these displays, the people—as agents of the vengeance of their king—assumed the role of not only witnesses but, if need be, guarantors of the act that was ultimately staged for their benefit: "In the ceremonies of the public execution, the main character was the people, whose real and immediate presence was required for the performance."<sup>56</sup> By offering the identity of the AP to the audience, Cumming's Emcee casts the audience as witnesses to and guarantors at a ritual of power where the one singled out will be subjected to his will for their benefit. Moreover, through synthetic authority, the Emcee casts himself as the source and owner of that terrible, destructive power.

**The third step is instruction.** This can take many forms; the constant is that, in every instance, the MC directs the AP's next actions in some way. This can involve a literal description of the task and the actions the AP must take in order to perform it; orders to the AP to stand somewhere else, hold still, or hold some object; or the simple invitation, "Let's dance," that Cumming's Emcee issued to Diane and Ty. Regardless

---

<sup>55</sup> Foucault, 58.

<sup>56</sup> Foucault, 57.

of the specifics, the MC dictates the AP's actions on stage; their acquiescence confirms his authority to do so. This process is recognizable to MC, AP and audience because it bears the marks of the discipline that, for Foucault, results in “docile bodies”—bodies “that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved.”<sup>57</sup> This discipline in the use of the body's forces is coercive; the AP is not free to refuse the instruction; to do so would derail the entire project of the AP sequence. The MC derives synthetic authority from the verbal and physical vocabularies he borrows from official forms of discipline and training.

Echoes of Foucault's formulation of the examination and graduation can also be spied in this process, the result of “disciplinary time [...] imposed on pedagogical practice,” where an individual subjected to a regime of training would encounter exercises of increasing difficulty or requiring increasing precision, “different stages, separated from one another by graded examinations” in which the individual would prove mastery of the disciplines in which s/he had been trained.<sup>58</sup> This regime, if followed, would eventually allow the individual to progress from the “time of training” to “the adult time, the time of mastery”<sup>59</sup>—which is where disciplinary training and the instruction step of the AP sequence part ways. In order for the MC to maintain his power onstage, which is necessary for the arc of the sequence, he *cannot* allow the AP to achieve either adulthood or mastery. To prevent this, he must take a specific action: interruption.

---

<sup>57</sup> Foucault, 136.

<sup>58</sup> Foucault, 159.

<sup>59</sup> Foucault, 159.

**Interruption is step four.** No matter how poorly or well the AP is following the instructions given by the MC, the AP must be interrupted—especially if they are doing well, since the function of the interruption is to reestablish the MC’s power on/over the stage. Hence Cumming’s Emcee making negative comments about Diane’s dancing, and evaluating Ty’s moves approvingly: “You’ve done this before, haven’t you?” The positive or negative charge of the interruption doesn’t matter; through the interruption itself, the MC simultaneously reasserts the right to control the AP and reclaims the position of the audience’s primary focus.

**Step five, the contest,** displays the most haunting echoes of the techniques and mechanisms of traditional juridical violence. The contest is the AP’s actual, “official” attempt to perform the task, after all instruction is done, in front of the audience. As mentioned before, the AP can fail, succeed, or exceed in the performance of the task in any of a number of different ways. Interestingly, this is where *Cabaret*’s AP sequence on September 6 breaks down dramaturgically. I mention the specific date because Cumming improvises the AP sequence each night, so other performances would most likely contain different elements.

On September 5, while interacting with Diane, instead of Cumming’s instruction (“Let’s dance”) leading to the contest (where Diane’s success or failure *at dancing* would serve as the outcome, followed by the kind of victory appropriate for that outcome), the Emcee somewhat abruptly truncated the dance segment and changed the nature of the contest. With the series of questions he asked Diane, he changed the nature of their interaction into a new humiliation ritual, wholly unrelated to the dance just prior. Confused as to what the abandoned dance had been for, and

without instruction in this new contest, Diane was unsure of the goal of this new form of interaction and how she was expected to participate, so she became quieter and more physically still, trying to figure out this new game. The change had thrown her off balance, and threw the sequence off as well. Cumming's decision to end the verbal game quickly ultimately worked, however; he was able to construe the expression of incomprehension on Diane's face after the "sandwich" comment as a performatively legible form of failure, after which the audience would understand to applaud her.

And they did applaud. Why? Partially because Cumming's Emcee encouraged them to, and partially because, in submitting to the contest like a good sport, she had re-validated—and was allowing them to celebrate—the system of power relations structuring the entire encounter of that evening at the theatre, a system that gave them certain kinds of identity, knowledge, and safety.

The contest segment of an AP sequence contains recognizable elements of the life-or-death confrontations belonging to the public execution and early forms of the criminal trial as described by Foucault, making it easy for an audience to follow the arc of the exchange; they tell the same story. The concept of "the contest" as a struggle leading to a change in the distribution of power has a history long enough that it manifests in mythology: Rumpelstiltskin and his riddle for the miller's daughter, Jacob and his wrestling match with the angel. At its core is a bilateral confrontation; each of the two participants attempts to overpower the other, but only one prevails. This dynamic is as at home in the "harmless" audience participation sequence that's part of a commercial show as it is in Foucault's accounts of juridical torture and the criminal

trial. In fact, the performative elements of these unhappy industries that an MC borrows in structuring an AP sequence are what lend the contest its sense of danger.

As Foucault explains, however, power is a tricky commodity that can turn against those whose job is to commit its violence. By manipulating the rules of visibility-as-power, a charismatic condemned man could win the sympathy of the mob, leading them to riot against the officials and free him. The MC administering the contest runs a risk of having it backfire in a similar way, but under a limited number of conditions. Assuming that the AP is an ordinary person who goes up more or less willingly, the risks are fewer still—but they exist. The *Cabaret* contest is an example of a “failure” outcome, which posed no threat to the Emcee’s power; AP Diane was applauded merely for submitting to the authority of the Emcee, whose power grew by virtue of her performance of surrender. A success outcome reinforces the power of the MC just as effectively, though; an AP who succeeds in the contest, as the AP does in the YouTube video posted by variety performers Matthew and Jason Tardy<sup>60</sup>, bolsters the MC’s power by confirming not only the effectiveness and value of the training and the worthiness of the task, but also the system of power relations that gives the MC the right to train the AP and set them to a task in the first place.

Compared to the outcomes of failure and success, the outcome of *excess* is by far the most interesting. Some APs perform their task in excess of what the MC trains them to do, and/or in excess of what is required or expected for normal success; this can upset the power dynamic that allows the MC to run the show. This excess can take many forms. Many an MC has pulled up an audience volunteer that, unbeknownst to

---

<sup>60</sup> Tardy, Matthew and Jason, 2012.

him, happens to be unusually skilled in the exact actions the task he sets will require: the AP he “trains” to balance on one foot turns out to be a dancer who deftly raises her other leg over her head and grins at him; the AP whom he challenges with witty banter turns out to be a professional comic. Performance talent isn’t limited to physical or verbal feats, either; even a clumsy, not-terribly-clever Average Joe/anne can handily exceed the parameters of success by simply enjoying better rapport with the audience.

What happens immediately following an excessive success is fascinating. The MC has essentially two choices, which relate specifically to his contribution to the tenor of the show: the warm, paternalistic MC will tend to perform magnanimity, encouraging the audience to cheer for the surprisingly skilled AP while moving closer to him or her onstage so as to absorb and ultimately reclaim the audience’s focus when the AP departs from the stage. The cold-control MC will allow the AP’s excessive success to threaten to overshadow his authority—only to angrily, coldly, and/or tartly reclaim it by getting the AP’s attention, belittling them, and dismissing them from the stage. This process of allowing the audience to perceive the AP’s excessive success as a threat to the MC’s power, which the MC must act to reclaim through some performance of dominance, again convey that power is a function of strategy rather than something natural or innate.

The outcome of excessive success and the style of victory it leads to, like that of failure and normative success, inherits some points of its dramaturgy from darker processes. In the contest segment, the AP can achieve excessive success by triumphing over the MC either by virtue of his/her own unusual skill or of some weakness or failure on the part of the MC. This dynamic has, I believe, roots in traditions of

spectacular punishment that structure audience understanding of and response to outcomes of excessive success. In the example of public execution, Foucault notes that a condemned man sentenced to die whose executioner was inept or just unlucky would be pardoned if his execution failed;<sup>61</sup> the AP whose opponent MC is bad at his job can succeed excessively simply by outshining him.

Even more, in Foucault's description of juridical torture as "a strict judicial game" we find echoes of the AP contest, and vice versa:

And, as such, it was linked to the old tests or trials—ordeals, judicial duels, judgements of God—that were practiced in accusatory procedures long before the techniques of the Inquisition. Something of the joust survived, between the judge who ordered the torture and the suspect who was tortured.<sup>62</sup>

With respect to traditions that inform the outcome of excess, Foucault also mentions a rule that must have frustrated numerous holders of judicial authority and created an equal number of folk heroes: in juridical torture, "the rule was that if the accused 'held out' and did not confess, the magistrate was forced to drop the charges."<sup>63</sup> Thus, in instances where the accused person had more strength or will than the judge expected, they could succeed in excess at performing the task—the task of enduring torture—and in so doing win a specific kind of victory over not just the judge, but the entire legal system of which he was the instrument.

**The sixth and final step, the victory,** is the most deceptive. Unlike the execution or criminal trial, which had a wide range of uniformly distasteful results, all possible different outcomes of the contest seem somehow to lead to the same thing:

---

<sup>61</sup> Foucault, 52.

<sup>62</sup> Foucault, 40.

<sup>63</sup> Foucault, 40-41.

victory for the individual, with even unsuccessful or negligible efforts applauded by the MC and the crowd. This is an illusion. What has triumphed and is being applauded is the system of power relations itself. Through choosing, naming, and training, and setting the AP to a task, the MC has actually presented to the audience a spectacular rendition—a public ritual—ostending the successful subjection of the individual to coercive control. Once this subjection is complete, the AP has been transformed into one of the “docile bodies” Foucault describes as the goal of carceral discipline and, transformation complete, is sent back to rejoin the nameless crowd.

It is not only the audience participant forced to comply with the MC’s directions who undergoes this subjection. By obeying the MC’s instructions on where to look, what to look for, and when to cheer, the audience also submits to—and thereby reinscribes and reinforces acceptance of—a hierarchical system of power relations that uses coercive techniques of control to ensure the subjection of the individual to a range of disciplines in the service of its own maintenance. By cheering the AP’s ultimate surrender to the terms of this control, the audience is actually celebrating the reaffirmation of the system of power relations in which they themselves have a reassuringly fixed, known place and which they therefore have a vested interest in maintaining. This, obviously, extends far beyond the walls of the theatre.

### **In closing**

It’s important to acknowledge that there are substantial limitations in using scripted work to illustrate what was originally—and continues to be

overwhelmingly—a phenomenon of non-scripted theatre. Film, of course, departs the furthest from the spontaneous esprit of the unscripted stage MC and, unsurprisingly, the 1972 Fosse movie constructs Grey's Emcee as holding some kinds of power that differ from unscripted MC work in important ways—though much remains the same. Cumming's Emcee, in the 2014 Broadway stage production, provides a fruitful example for analysis chiefly because of the ways in which that entity, and that production, walk the edge of this difference in productive ways. Cumming's Emcee employs traditional techniques from unscripted MC work at the beginning of the show, making the audience comfortable, only to abandon those techniques or turn them against the audience, producing the disorientation that is one of the goals of the production. Cumming's Emcee also exploits this difference (to similar ends) in his performance of the unscripted performance sequences and gestures that overflow the boundaries of the script; his cold control issues a set of resistant statements about power by warning us of its treacherous surface appeal, which conceals a mechanism of subjugation. A true exploration of genre-related differences is beyond the scope of this project; I mention them simply to mark an interesting point of departure for further study.

It's important to remember that there is no ur-MC forming the model for the cold-control MC, of which the *Cabaret* Emcee is such a visible example, but rather that every MC is a unique constellation of dramaturgical elements chosen from both the cold-control and warm-control patterns. In this way, the warm-to-cold continuum is less like a linear spectrum than it is a Venn diagram with fuzzy lines. The persistence of the MC as a figure that participates in both warm and cold control

patterns, able to switch between them in an instant without warning, reveals the actual reason for his existence: our collective, instinctive anxiety about power, which we know is both necessary—maintaining the social structures upon which we rely—and dangerous—wielding the ability to subjugate and destroy.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, I have endeavored to demonstrate that the variety-show Master of Ceremonies is a remarkably stable theatrical entity, with dramaturgical attributes that remain strikingly common across genres and centuries. Rather than a historical or theoretical exploration of this entity, I chose to address the challenge of studying this product of an unscripted, all-too-often undocumented performance tradition using the lens of dramaturgical analysis. This allowed me to avail myself of not only its empirical approach—assuming nothing but watching performers and performances carefully until patterns started emerging—but its investigative flexibility, as no act of creative expression can be contained within or understood by virtue of a single interpretive framework. Dramaturgical analysis accepts all questions and all modes of research as long as they lead back to the techniques and uses of the stage in performance, as that is the real test of all our knowledge, every time. In this, I feel that dramaturgs and variety performers likely feel very similar: if something works, use it.

This analysis led me to identify dramaturgical attributes that an onstage entity must display if it is to function successfully as an MC. Dramaturgical singularity is one of these, describing his uniqueness as a figure and a role on the stage as well as his central-yet-outside position with respect to the rest of the show, as it manifests in his onstage location and his practice of interstitial framing. Another is the densely-coded channel of high onstage status, expressed through an (at times) overwhelmingly rich vocabulary of signals originating in hegemonic power binaries but constantly ripe for

revision, inversion, and subversion. The final attribute is the capacity for direct address, where so much of his power to influence lies; if high status is the “how,” direct address is the “what”—the ability of the MC’s direct address to shape theatrical reality at its most basic level and steer audiences toward a desired experience is the goal of all of the different identity category displays, whose shared message is, essentially, “Listen to me.”

I also discovered that MCs supplement their onstage power with synthetic authority as decorator crabs adorn their shells with other materials—presenting gestural, visual, behavioral, and verbal fragments of discourses belonging to power elites as part of their own performances, leveraging the potency of these signals to the exact degree that audiences respond to the encoded authority without locating its source beyond the theatre’s walls. Among other tasks, this synthetic authority contributes to the MC’s ability to manage the “world of the room,” that oddly pressurized, theatricalized, thematically unified environment comprised of both the stage platform and the house, where everyone who enters assumes at least a fine layer of fictional identity, influenced greatly by the MC’s descriptions of who they are within this fiction.

Finally, I was able to articulate that the virtuosity of the highly talented variety MC is his ability to shift adeptly between the visual and behavioral vocabularies of not only different but contrasting performance registers (warm/cold, but also masculine/feminine, inviting/threatening), as well to vary repeatedly the formulations of the nevertheless stable dyadic relationship he creates with the audience. The identification of warm and cold control patterns in particular opens up routes for what

I hope is further study of this entity, spurred by the capacity of some cold-control dynamics to critique coercive power.

All in all, by virtue of sustained analysis of the MC as theatrical entity, this study offers an examination of the complex ways in which coercive social power may be encoded, enforced, built, and/or borrowed in unscripted performance forms that many regard as mere “entertainment,” understanding that decoding the performative languages of power is vital to positioning oneself with respect to its force. This analysis is intended both to combat the cultural tendency to dismiss non-elite, popular forms of theatre as lacking in intellectual and artistic worth, and to offer a critique of the elite forms of control to which popular theatre is often a vigorous form of protest.

## WORKS CITED

- Appignanesi, Lisa. *The Cabaret*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2004. Print.
- Argyle, Michael and Janet Dean. "Eye-Contact, Distance and Affiliation." *Sociometry*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Sep. 1965), pp. 289-304. Web. Accessed 13 Nov. 2014.
- Austin, J.L. "How to Do Things With Words." London: Oxford University Press, 1962. University of Texas, Department of Rhetoric and Writing, Digital Writing and Research Laboratory, n.d. Web. Accessed 23 Oct. 2014.
- Bank, Rosemarie K. "The Bowery Theatre as a Mode of Historical Information." *The American Stage: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present*. Ed. Ron Engle and Tice Miller. Cambridge, Eng: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993. Print.
- Bark, Ed. Photograph of television screen showing binary MC pair Alec Baldwin and Steve Martin sharing an orange Snuggie. "Limp Oscars fade away after less than dynamic hosting by Martin/Baldwin." *Unclebarky.com*. 8 Mar. 2010. Web. Accessed 17 May 2011.
- Bedno, David. Photograph of Roper as Chairman Codswallop performing "Why Don't Women Like Me?" *Facebook.com*. Facebook, Inc., 21 Dec. 2009. Web. Accessed 22 Nov. 2014.
- Berglund, Barbara. *Making San Francisco American: Cultural Frontiers in the Urban West, 1846-1906*. Lawrence, KS: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2007. Print.
- Brantley, Ben. "Old Chums Return, Where Club Is Home." *Nytimes.com*. The New York Times, 25 Apr. 2014. Web. Accessed 15 Oct. 2014.
- The Broadside Music Hall Revue*. Dir. Laura Brueckner. Perf. Bill Roper. The Great Dickens Christmas Fair and Victorian Holiday Party, San Francisco, 11 Dec. 2010, Performance and DVD.
- Brueckner, Laura. Photograph of *Cabaret* billboard at the Kit Kat Klub (formerly Studio 54), New York, 2014. JPG File.
- Brueckner, Laura. "The stage in the environmental area called 'Mad Sal's Dockside Alehouse.'" Photograph. Great Dickens Christmas Fair and Victorian Holiday Party, San Francisco, 22 Nov. 2010. JPG file.
- Butsch, Richard. *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990*. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000. Print.

*Cabaret*. Dir. Bob Fosse. Perf. Joel Grey. Allied Artists, 1972. DVD.

“Cabaret Upstage Guide.” *Playgoer Guides*. Roundabout Theatre Company, 2014. Web. Accessed 26 Jun. 2014

Campbell, Bill, perf. *Taming of the Shrew*. Adapt. and dir. D.J. Carlyle. Renaissance Pleasure Faire Drury Creek Stage, Devore, California, 2 May 1992. Performance.

Carson, Don. “Map of Dickens’ London.” *Dickensfair.com*. Red Barn Productions, 2014. Web. Accessed 2 Dec. 2014.

Caulfield, Michael. Photograph of Academy Awards hosts Steve Martin and Alec Baldwin with women in background. *Gettyimages.com*. Getty Images, 7 Mar. 2010. Web. Accessed 20 May 2011.

Cochems, Chris. “Chairman.” *Flickr.com*. Flickr, 18 Dec. 2010. Web. Accessed 20 May 2011.

“Complete Timeline.” *Reducedshakespeare.com*. Reduced Shakespeare Company. Web. Accessed 21 May 2011.

Copeland, Roger. “Cabaret at the End of the World.” *American Theatre*. January 1999: 24-28, 88-90. Web. Accessed 8 Nov. 2014.

Cumming, Alan. *Cabaret*. Dir. Sam Mendes for Roundabout Theatre Company. By Joe Masteroff, John Kander, and Fred Ebb. Studio 54, New York. 27 Jun. 2014. Performance.

Cumming, Alan. *Cabaret*. Dir. Sam Mendes for Roundabout Theatre Company. By Joe Masteroff, John Kander, and Fred Ebb. Studio 54, New York. 5 Sep. 2014. Performance.

Cumming, Alan. “Opening Night: Alan Cumming and Michelle Williams Bring *Cabaret* Back to Broadway.” *Theatermania*. YouTube. 5 Apr. 2014. Web. Accessed 25 Oct. 2014.

Cumming, Alan. “I Don't Care Much by Alan Cumming.” Canal de Illulus, *Youtube.com*. YouTube, 5 Jul. 2011. Web. Accessed 2 Nov. 2014.

Cumming, Alan. “Upstage Guide: Cabaret.” Interview by Ted Sod. Roundabout Theatre Company, 2014. Web. Accessed 23 Sep. 2014.

Davis, Janet. *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top*. Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2002. Print.

Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. 1967. London: Rebel Press, 2005. Print.

“Dependent Sub-departments: Ceremonies 1660-1837.” *Office-Holders in Modern Britain: Volume 11 (Revised), Court Officers, 1660-1837*. Ed. R. O. Bucholz. London: Univ. of London, 2006. 112-114. British History Online. Web. 6 Jan. 2011.

Dietrich, Marlene, perf. *The Blue Angel*. Dir. Josef von Sternberg. 1930. Amazon Instant Video, Amazon.com, n.d. Web. Accessed 6 Oct. 2014.

Duchartre, Pierre Louis. *The Italian Comedy*. New York: Dover, 1966. Print.

Duke, Charles R. “Nonverbal Behavior and the Communication Process.” *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (Dec., 1974), pp. 397-404. JSTOR. Web. Accessed 25 Nov 2014.

Eisler, Colin. “Apparatus and Grandeur: Five Portrait Drawings from Clarendon’s ‘History.’” *Master Drawings*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Summer, 1968). JSTOR. Web. Accessed 17 Jan 2011.

“Embarrass.” *Dictionary.com*. Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition. HarperCollins Publishers, n.d. Web. Accessed 28 Sep. 2014.

“Embarrass.” *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. Accessed 28 Sep. 2014.

Erdman, Andrew. *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals, and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004. Print.

Fortescue, Adrian; Reid, Alcuin; O’Connell, J.B.. *Ceremonies of the Roman Rite Described*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009. Ebook Library. Web. 15 Jan. 2011.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 1977. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. Print.

Frederick, David C., Robert Schafer and Leslie Dobbertin. “Effects of the Experimental Manipulation of Eye-Contact in Opposite-Sex Formal Dyadic Relationships.” *Sociological Focus*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Winter 1973), pp. 30-44. Taylor & Francis, Ltd., Web. Accessed 23 Nov 2014.

Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. 1992. New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.

Garebian, Keith. *The Making of Cabaret*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.

Garrett, John M. *Sixty Years of British Music Hall*. London: Chappell & Co., 1976. Print.

Goffman, Erving. *Behavior in Public Places*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963. Print.

Grey, Joel. "Before 'Les Mis,' 'Cabaret' Revolutionized the Film Musical." *NPR Weekend Edition Sunday*. National Public Radio, 24 Feb. 2013. Web. Accessed 20 Nov 2014.

Grey, Joel. "Big Think Interview with Joel Grey." *Bigthink.com*. The Big Think, Inc., 9 Sep. 2010. Web. Accessed 28 Nov. 2014.

Grey, Joel. "JOEL GREY & MICHAEL YORK Favorite CABARET Scenes, Comparing Casts & More!" *Boy Culture*. YouTube, 2013. Web. Accessed 26 Nov. 2014.

Grey, Joel. "InDepth InterView: Joel Grey." *Broadwayworld.com*. Wisdom Digital Media, 18 Oct. 2010. Web. Accessed 28 Nov. 2014.

Guglielmelli, Rosemary. Photograph of Bill Roper as Chairman Thaddeus Codswallop at the Great Dickens Christmas Fair and Victorian Holiday Party, San Francisco. *Facebook.com*. Facebook Inc., 2009. Web. Accessed 2 Dec. 2014.

Horowitz, Jason. "The guiding hand behind pope's pomp and ceremony." *Washingtonpost.com*. The Washington Post, 25 Dec. 2010. Web. Accessed 15 Jan 2011.

"Joel Grey, image in a distorted mirror shot – 'Cabaret' 1972" n.p., n.d. John Irving. Flickr. Posted 24 Mar. 2012. Web. Accessed 13 Nov. 2014.

Johnson, R.J. Photograph of *Broadside Music Hall Revue* cast giving the show's closing salute. Great Dickens Christmas Fair and Victorian Holiday Party, San Francisco, 19 Dec. 2010. JPG file.

Johnson, R.J. Photograph of Daniel Morgan as Chairman Obediah Feltrup at the Great Dickens Christmas Fair and Victorian Holiday Party, San Francisco. *Facebook.com*. Facebook Inc., 30 Nov. 2014. Web. Accessed 2 Dec. 2014.

Johnstone, Keith. *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*. 1979. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.

Kander, John and Fred Ebb. *The Complete Cabaret Collection*. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2014. Print.

- Kibler, M. Alison. *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1999. Print.
- Kilgarriff, Michael. *It Gives Me Great Pleasure*. London: Samuel French, 1986. Print.
- Krulwich, Sara. Photograph of Alan Cumming as the Emcee in the 2014 Roundabout production of *Cabaret*. *Nytimes.com*. The New York Times, 25 Apr. 2014. Web. Accessed 15 Oct. 2014.
- Laughlin, Sean. Personal interview. 2003.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans. Blackwell: Malden, MA, 1992. Print.
- Leve, James. *Kander and Ebb*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. Print.
- Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988. Print.
- Lewis, Robert M., ed. *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America, 1830-1910*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2003. Print.
- Mandell, Jonathan. "Cabaret Review: Second Cumming on Broadway." *New York Theater*, Wordpress.com. 1 May 2014. Web. Accessed 16 Nov 2014.
- Marcus, Joan. Photograph of Alan Cumming as the Emcee in *Cabaret*, surrounded by mute dancers. *Alancumming.com*. 2014. Web. Accessed 21 Nov 2014.
- Masteroff, Joe, John Kander and Fred Ebb. *Cabaret: The Illustrated Book and Lyrics*. New York: Newmarket Press, 1999. Print.
- McConachie, Bruce. "American Theatre in Context, from the Beginnings to 1870." *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*. Ed. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby. Vol. 1. Cambridge, Eng: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998.
- McNamara, Brooks. *The New York Concert Saloon: The Devil's Own Nights*. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002. Print.
- McNicholl, B.T. Telephone interview. 9 Oct 2014.
- Mizejewski, Linda. *Divine Decadence: Fascism, Female Spectacle, and the Makings of Sally Bowles*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992. Print.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Autumn 1975), pp. 6-18. Web. Accessed 14 Jun. 2014.

Oberdeck, Kathryn. *The Evangelist and the Impresario: Religion, Entertainment, and Cultural Politics in America, 1884-1914*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1999. Print.

"Origins of the Faire." *Forestfaire.com*. Red Barn Productions, n.d. Web. Accessed 21 May 2011.

"Oscar History." *Oscar.go.com*. Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, n.d. Website. Accessed 2 Dec. 2014.

Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Print. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Photograph of Alan Cumming as the Emcee in *Cabaret*, surrounded by mute dancers. n.p., n.d. *Justjared.com*. Just Jared, Inc. Web. Accessed 21 Nov. 2014.

Photograph of Alan Cumming as the Emcee, *Cabaret*, 2014. n.p., n.d. Perry Brass, *Huffingtonpost.com*. The Huffington Post, 8 Jul. 2014. Accessed 1 Dec. 2014.

Photograph of Edie, the "Mistress of Sensuality" of Cirque du Soleil's *Zumanity*. n.p. Lasvegas.about.com. Web. Accessed 5 Dec. 2014.

Photograph of Jim Sweeney ("Kingfish") and Eddie Dane, MCs of Oakland-based Hubba Hubba Revue. n.p. *Synthetikblog.telegr.am*. 16 Mar. 2010. Web. Accessed 2 Dec. 2014.

Photograph of Joel Grey as the Emcee, *Cabaret*, 1972. n.p., n.d. *Fanpop.com*. Fanpop, Inc. Web. Accessed 29 Nov. 2014.

Photograph of Master of Ceremonies William C. de Mille with Hans Kraly, Mary Pickford, and Walter Baxter at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Academy Awards ceremony. *Oscars.org*. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 1930. Web. Accessed 20 May 2011.

Pizzello, Chris. Photograph of host Seth MacFarlane at 85<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards ceremony. *APIimages.com*. Associated Press, 25 Feb. 2013. Web. Accessed 2 Dec 2014.

"Playbill: *Cabaret*, Broadhurst Theatre." *Playbill Vault*. Playbill, 1966. Web. Accessed 13 Nov. 2014.

"Playbill: *Cabaret*, Imperial Theatre." *Playbill Vault*. Playbill, 1987. Web. Accessed 13 Nov. 2014.

“Playbill: *Cabaret*, Kit Kat Klub.” *Playbill Vault*. Playbill, 1998. Web. Accessed 13 Nov. 2014.

“Playbill: *Cabaret*, Studio 54.” *Playbill Vault*. Playbill, 2014. Web. Accessed 13 Nov. 2014.

Prince, Harold. *Contradictions: Notes on Twenty-Six Years in the Theatre*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1974. Print.

Roach, Joseph. *It*. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2007. Print.

Roper, Bill. Personal interview. 10 Aug. 2010.

Roper, Bill. Personal interview. 7 Oct. 2010.

Roper, Bill, perf. *The Broadside Music Hall Revue*. Laura Brueckner, dir. The Great Dickens Christmas Fair and Victorian Holiday Party, San Francisco, 11 Dec. 2010. Performance.

Roundabout Theatre Company Store. Roundabout Theatre. The Broadway Store, 2014. Web. Accessed 16 Nov 2014.

Shearer, John. Photograph of host Ellen Degeneres at 86<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards ceremony. *APImages.com*. Associated Press, 3 Mar. 2014. Web. Accessed 2 Dec. 2014.

“Soundtracks for Pink Floyd The Wall.” *IMDb.com*. Internet Movie Database, 2011. Web. Accessed 20 May 2011.

Springhall, John. *The Genesis of Mass Culture: Show Business Live in America, 1840-1940*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print.

Stallybrass, Peter. “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed.” *Rewriting the Renaissance: the Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*. Ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy Vickers. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986. Print.

Tardy, Matthew and Jason Tardy. “AudioBody performs HotHands—Live with audience volunteer!” *Youtube.com*, YouTube. 4 Jun. 2012. Web. Accessed 23 Oct. 2014.

Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2003. Print.

Terrill, Mark J. Photograph of cross-dressed hosts Anne Hathaway and James Franco at the 83<sup>rd</sup> Academy Awards ceremony. *AP Images*. Associated Press, 27 Feb. 2011. Web. Accessed 22 Nov. 2014.

Terrill, Mark J. Photograph of Steve Martin and Alec Baldwin hosting the 82<sup>nd</sup> Academy Awards ceremony. *AP Images*. Associated Press, 7 Mar. 2010. Web. Accessed 22 Nov. 2014.

*The present state of the British court: or, an account of the civil and military establishment of England. Containing new and exact lists of all the officers of His Majesty's court and houshold, the army, and navy; and also of the several branches of the Revenue, with the Nature, Duty, and Business of every particular Office and Officer therein; their Attendance, Salaries, Fees, &c. To which is added, a List of their Highnesses, the young Princesses Houshold. To be published annually.* London, 1720. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. UC San Diego. 16 Jan. 2011.

Various Artists. *Cabaret: The New Broadway Cast Recording*. RCA, 1998. CD.

"Vaudeville." *American Masters*. Writ. Greg Palmer. Perf. Ben Vereen, Studs Terkel, John Lahr, and Bill Irwin. Public Broadcasting Service, 26 Nov. 1997. DVD.

*Zumanity, the Sensual Side of Cirque du Soleil*. Perf. Edie. Dir. René Richard Cyr and Dominic Champagne. New York-New York Hotel and Casino, Las Vegas. 18 May 2010. Performance.