A Poetics of Violence: Representations of Violence as Storytelling and World-Building Tools of the Theater

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A POETICS OF VIOLENCE:
REPRESENTATIONS OF VIOLENCE AS STORYTELLING
AND WORLD-BUILDING TOOLS OF THE THEATER

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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PROGRAM IN ENGLISH

BY
RICHARD GILBERT
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have heard that dissertation writing can be very lonely. I have not found it so. I have been helped and supported at every step by a variety of people, and I owe them all a great debt. First, I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee. Dr. Verna Foster, my committee chair, has been a mentor, a debate partner, a cheerleader and a ferociously detail-oriented critic, depending on what was needed at each moment. Dr. James Knapp brought his impressive intellect and relentless good cheer to my aid at every turn. Dr. Chad Eric Bergman, standing astride the twin spheres of theory and practice, has kept me focused on productions as they actually exist. Additionally, I would like to thank the rest of the faculty and the staff at the Department of English for their support and for the environment of collegiality and inquiry that made it possible for me to be a productive member of the community. I am also grateful for all the late-night debates and mid-day writing sessions that my fellow graduate students in the English department shared with me. It was, in large part, those debates that forged my raw ideas into tempered theories, and the writing sessions that got those theories out of my head and onto the page.

There is another large group to whom I am also deeply indebted, and that is the Chicago theater community. So many directors and other artists have answered my questions and given me access to their notes, their scripts, and their thought processes. So many more have sat over beers with me listening with generosity while I spun out theories, and then called out problems
for me to deal with. And of course, I am grateful for all the folks I have worked with, who hired me to design violence for shows that gave me a chance to put my theories into practice. There are too many to name, but special thanks have to go to Akvavit Theatre, where I am a company member and The Backroom Shakespeare Project where I am a stakeholder. Both companies do bold and exciting work and inspire me to get this work right. My business partners, David Barefa and Victor Bayona, have been instrumental in my work for many years. Without their support as friends and their talent as artists, this work would never have even begun.

Finally, I have to thank my family. My parents were the ones who inculcated in me both a love of art and a desire to understand how things work. My wife Libby supported me both literally and figuratively through many years of graduate school, and has spent more hours than anyone else patiently listening to me expound my latest version of a theory and then—with her own expertise in the theater—acutely pushing back against anything that did not make as much sense as I thought it did. Without her, I would truly be lost.
There is certainly an enormous element of violence in drama, and it is not, as in some other arts, extraneous, but something that is inherent in the form itself.

Martin Esslin, *Brief Chronicles*
PREFACE

This project was born out of the work I have done over the course of more than two decades (and still do) as a professional violence designer. That work as an artist, and as a collaborator with other artists, is foundational to my understanding of how theaetmakers tell stories on stage. It also led to my graduate study. As a violence designer and fight choreographer I tend towards the analytical. It is not my approach to give actors choreography and leave them to make sense of it themselves— I prefer to show them not only what their character is doing but why. For the directors who like to work with me, that is part of the draw. Presumably, for those who do not, the same is true.

Indeed, the very term “violence designer,” which my colleague David Bareford and I coined in 1998, originates in the same impulse. The term has gained some traction outside of my immediate sphere of influence, but it is still less common than “fight director” or the most common “fight choreographer.” To me, the latter terms convey the wrong idea. Certainly choreographing (choosing the moves a fighter will perform) and directing fights (teaching the actors to do them) are big parts of the job, but neither is the key part. The key job of the person responsible for representing violence in production is to make decisions about how the violence will be represented. Violence is a central element in a lot of plays, and playwrights write scenes of violence for dramaturgical reasons. Violence designers make choices. We think carefully about what the audience can see and what they cannot, about what weapons a character will use and how they will use them, about whether a character attacks aggressively or bides their time
waiting for their opponent to make a mistake, and about an uncountable variety of other elements. In making these choices, the designer is doing interpretive work, like any other designer does when deciding what the set will look like, what the audience will hear, or what the characters will wear. Just like the set, sound, or costume designer, the violence designer is helping build the fictional world and tell the story.

It was this sense of responsibility for a facet of world-building which led me back to theory, and to graduate study of literature. I had been teaching stage combat for a long time, but on several occasions, I had been called on to teach aspiring violence designers how to do the design work. While those classes were well-received, I knew that I was missing something. I had ideas about how stories are told, and I knew what worked and did not work, but I needed a vocabulary with which to articulate those ideas and a stable framework on which to develop them. Violence designers read a wide variety of things. We read combat psychology books written by actual combat practitioners like prison guard Rory Miller’s *Meditations on Violence* or retired Army Colonel David Grossman’s *On Killing*. We read historical combat manuals ranging from the anonymous *Tower Manuscript I.33* (one of the earliest Western books on swordplay) to Jack Dempsey’s *Championship Fighting*. Some violence designers do read more scholarly work, seeking Rene Girard’s ideas about violence, or the scant scholarship on theatrical violence. But those works that can be found do not explore how the actual staging tells stories. While everything we read about violence can contribute to our own understanding, there is no real scholarly theoretical work on how violence works on stage to tell stories. This project is my attempt to fill that lacuna.

In developing a “poetics of violence,” I am obviously following in a long line, starting with Aristotle. *Poetics* continues to surprise me every time I read it. It is simple, brief, and not
particularly demanding, but it is also subtle and richly based on Aristotle’s extensive experience as an audience member. He is not describing eternal rules for making plays (regardless of what the neo-classicists thought), he is describing commonalities and principles that he observed in the plays that he saw and read. My project is similar, as are my tools. Throughout this dissertation I will discuss, as much as possible, plays upon which I have worked as a designer. There are some plays that I have seen but not had the opportunity to design which were so effective in production that I want to share what the designers did so well. There are others whose violence is so iconic or important that I would be remiss not to discuss them. But wherever I can, the choices I will focus on will be ones that I was involved in making. Those, after all, are the ones where I can make the most confident claims about what the production was endeavoring to do. The fact that my object of study will frequently be work that I helped create does make my project somewhat unusual. Such a critical object is unusual, but not unique. I am no Margaret Atwood, nor Bertolt Brecht, but both of them are influential critics of their own work.

I have worked mostly in the twenty-first century and the last few years of the twentieth. Of course, a dissertation on violence will be full of references to plays written before this period, some of them long before. Sophocles and Shakespeare have shaped the way contemporary artists think about violence in indelible ways, but I am not writing about the production of Attic or early modern plays. When I talk about Macbeth, I will mostly talk about specific Macbeths. Productions of Macbeth on which I have worked. The production of these plays in the twenty-first century makes them not solely early modern plays, but also contemporary ones. Shakespeare was, after all, the most produced playwright of 2019 here in the United States, as he has been every year for as long as anyone has been keeping track.
The theater is a collaborative project. No play is ever made by a single person—even a one-woman show will have a director, designers, and technicians. And of course, the audience. The presence of the audience at the time of the performance is what makes live theater “live.” I am writing this introduction in the Spring of 2020, after months of isolation that forced theater artists to try to create art alone and online, and the successes have been inspiring. But even the most successful project is made by a group of people, keenly aware that we are trying to make up for the missing presence of the audience, who are what makes an activity “theater.” From the performer’s side, recording a project may feel like making a film, but the difference between a taped performance streaming at will, and a “live online” event where a group of people, together and simultaneously, experience that work of art is notable. Theater needs a group, and the audience is part of that group.

In my life in art, I have been part of many such groups, and I move from one group to another. Sometimes I am a designer, very occasionally a performer, often an audience member, and sometimes a scholar. For many projects, I have been a member of several of those groups. My membership in multiple groups will be especially true of many of the productions that I will discuss in this dissertation. When I am a member of a relevant group, I will endeavor to make that clear. I write the word “we” a lot, and when I do I am claiming membership in some group of people.

The group with which I most profoundly identify is my company, R&D Choreography. Founded in 1996 by my dear friend and colleague David Bareford and I, R&D has been my artistic home ever since. In 2011, R&D welcomed Victor Bayona as a new partner, not long before David moved out to the Pacific Northwest and stopped being an every-day collaborator, though he continues to contribute in meaningful ways to the conversations we began decades ago.
and which we will never be done developing. Victor brought new perspectives and skills to the group, but in the core understanding of how violence tells stories, he is on exactly the same page.

In 2019, longtime intern Nicolas Cabrera joined the team as an associate. Nic’s keen interest in historical martial arts, especially from the African Diaspora, has once again brought new perspectives and expertise to our continuously developing core principles. Along the way we have had other interns. Chloe Baldwin and Alex Scheckleton, both doing their own work as actors and violence designers now, contributed to my evolution as an artist while, as a mentor, I was helping guide theirs. So when I talk about how “we” designed a show, I mean the outstanding artists at R&D Choreography whom I have been privileged to work alongside. There is very little on the subject of representations of violence where my own views have not been vetted by, tested against, and synthesized with the thoughts of the artists who have at one time or another been part of the company.

In the theater, art is made by committee. Production teams meet and hash out what the story is and how it will be represented before actors are even cast. When rehearsal starts, those actors join in the process of doing interpretive work. Great actors try out our designs, and while trying hard to make it work, they also unfailingly let us know when it is not telling the story the way they need it to. So the production team becomes yet another “we.” Production teams are often narrowly considered to be the director and the designers and sometimes the stage management staff, but often the playwright is part of the team, especially in a premier, and in a broader sense the actors, the theater management, and even folks like the marketing team regularly contribute to the group agreement on how the play will do its work.

I am always an audience member for any play on which I have worked. Indeed, a major source of enjoyment on opening night, for me, is to watch other people watch the play. Hearing
gasp and seeing audiences recoil or lean in tells me what effect my work in representing violence has had. Of course there are other ways to try to understand how audiences react. Recent reviews are far less likely than older ones to actually discuss what a play meant and how the reviewer knew that based on the production choices. Nonetheless, it is still valuable to read them and glean what information is available; though they are a specially-trained audience, critics are audience members. But my favorite way to know what audiences think is to be in the middle of one; to see what we think.

Being an audience member for so many plays gave me a rare opportunity to watch how audiences use representations of violence to understand the fictional world. As a result, my work as a violence designer began to change as I developed theories about how violence tells stories. In the course of my work, I would teach actors and directors about cultures of violence, and explain how the violence in a play contributed to the production. During my graduate study, I developed those theories into this dissertation. Violence onstage generates shock, and shock has a particular and powerful ability to alter the audience’s relationship with the fictional world. Examining the way shock is generated and the use it is put to can give scholars and practitioners alike a set of tools for understanding what work the violence is doing.

My purpose with this project is to share with other scholars this set of tools for analyzing representations of violence, based on what practitioners think and do, but couched in a language that makes it useful for doing academic work. The final “we,” then, is this group. We, the people who dig deeply into what happens on stage and try to make sense of it after the fact. Some scholars I have contact with only through the books and articles they have written, while others have been my colleagues and teachers. I am excited to share my own expertise, just as I am...
excited and gratified to have shared the expertise of so many others who have shaped the way I think about theater.
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CHAPTER 1

REPRESENTATIONS OF VIOLENCE ON STAGE

Representations of violence on stage create a certain kind of shock for audiences. In order to understand how that shock works and what dramaturgical work it can do, I will need to establish a few concepts that will be central to my theory of how representations of violence work. These concepts are: the theoretical underpinnings of representation itself, the core distinctions between modes of representation (mimesis and narration), and what exactly I mean by violence.

The important terms of this dissertation—representation, mimesis, narration, illusion, and, of course, violence—do not admit of bright line, “necessary and sufficient” sorts of definitions. The terms have been used, refurbished, bent to new usage, and reclaimed by each generation of scholars intent on answering their own particular questions, just as I will bend them to my use in understanding exactly what happens when we sit in a theater. In such a situation, the journey of defining is more important than the destination of definition; when we work through what these ideas might mean, or can mean, or have meant to others, we are doing the real work of defining—wrestling with the concepts themselves, not until we have decided what is and is not immanent in each term, but until we understand the concepts well enough, through enough different lenses, to make confident use of them.
Representation and The Fictional World

The central concept by which I theorize representation in theater is the “fictional world”—an idea which I first encountered in Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy Stories” but which also underlies Keir Elam’s semiotics of the theater, and which seems to well describe how theater, and indeed fiction of all kinds, works. The basic concept is that the events described in a work of fiction refer to, and indeed create, a fictional world.

This seemingly simple and intuitive idea has several fruitful implications. First, it helps us escape a basic problem with which theater especially seems to struggle: the issue of what we mean when we say something was (or seemed) “real.” Playgoers frequently describe the shows they have seen as having seemed real—we see reviews and letters going back centuries in which the actors are praised for having made the audience feel as if they “were really there.” But where is the “there” in question? Obviously, despite anecdotes to the contrary, nobody watching a violent act on stage really thinks it is happening; we may cringe or even cry out (and why we do so is one of the important questions which I hope to explore later in this dissertation) but nobody ever calls 9-1-1. That said, the overwhelmingly common response that a particularly good play “seemed real” must be explained, and the “fictional world” helps to do just that. The basic idea is that when we say that what we saw seemed real, we are talking about the fictional world. That is, we mean that the world of the play seemed like it could be a real world, not that we think we are watching a documentary.

The concept of a fictional world also underlies Paul Ricoeur’s powerful model for how fiction can impact the real world—how audience members shift their world-views as a result of experiencing fiction. By Ricoeur’s account, audiences come to a play with a pre-configured world view, one that represents their understanding of the world based on all of their experiences.
up to that point. The play presents them with a different world (what I have been calling the fictional world) for their consideration. After seeing the play, they reconfigure their view of the world in light of what they have seen (53). The difference between their pre- and post-show understandings of the world might be slight, but as long as there is any difference at all, we must say that the play had an effect on them.1 Again, audiences do not make Ricoeur’s “revision” because they think that the fictional world is the real world—that is, they are not updating facts about the world based on the fiction—but because their experience of the fictional world introduces ideas which they then apply to their experience of the real world. This process might be conscious, the result of a critical viewing and deep consideration, but it might equally likely be a subtle, unconscious effect of experiencing the fiction.

Of course, there are other ways to conceptualize what is “real” about the theater, perhaps the most familiar being Coleridge’s now ubiquitous “willing suspension of disbelief” (Biographia chapter XIV). Coleridge was writing about the fantastical, which he felt might strain belief, when he came up with this way of thinking about how we treat fiction. His formulation suggests the possibility of an interesting psychological effect in play in the theater—audiences are not fooled by the illusion, but they choose not to acknowledge the falseness of what they see (“Notes on the Tempest” 65).

There is a kind of psychological gymnastics going on for audiences who are treating the world of the play in some ways like and in some ways unlike the world they inhabit outside the

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1 Ricoeur is not actually talking specifically about plays, he is talking about any narrative, including non-fiction ones, but for the purposes of readability I am going to stay with drama terms. Likewise, Ricoeur uses the term “mimesis” to refer to the different constructions of the different worlds. So mimesis₁ is the world-view that you start with, mimesis₂ is the narrative work, and mimesis₃ is the synthesized world-view. Again, in order to prevent confusion, I am not going to use his language here, since I am about to launch into a long section trying to define mimesis, and Ricoeur’s usage would just muddy the waters.
theater. Nonetheless, I find the expression “willing suspension of disbelief” to be an unsatisfying and inaccurate description of the theatrical experience. The history of audience response shows few spectators who claim that they “had no trouble suspending disbelief.” Instead we see generation after generation of theatergoers who seem to feel that “they were there” or that a certain actor “was Hamlet.” That sort of language sounds much more like the audience members actually believed in what they were seeing. And yet, at the same time that these audience members claim to have believed, they did not act as if the things they were believing in were actually happening. Once again, nobody calls 9-1-1.

The phenomenon these people are describing is the fictional world. Bert O. States both assumes and describes this world in *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*, where he talks about “that lostness in the world of the play that we somewhat narrowly refer to as the willing suspension of disbelief … the actor takes us into a world within the world itself. At bottom, it is not a matter of the … mimetic or the representational, but of a certain kind of actual” (46, emphasis in the original). This “lostness” of States’, which has by his account a kind of actual existence, is eloquently laid out by Tolkien:

> “Willing suspension of disbelief” … does not seem to me a good description of what happens. What really happens is that the story-maker … makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is “true”: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. If you are obliged, by kindliness or circumstance, to stay, then disbelief must be suspended (or stifled), otherwise listening and looking would become intolerable. But this suspension of disbelief is a substitute for the genuine thing, a subterfuge we use when condescending to games or make-believe, or when trying (more or less willingly) to find what virtue we can in the work of an art that has for us failed. (52)
Tolkien offers a compelling account of how audiences’ belief in the secondary world is cultivated. When reviewers discuss believability they are really talking about what, following Tolkien’s conception, I might call consistency: things happening in a way that accords with the audience’s understanding of the way the secondary world works. That is to say, the events of a play (both what happens and how it happens) need to be consistent with the rules of the secondary world in which the play takes place in order for us to believe that those events could take place in that secondary world.

Keir Elam’s theatrical semiotics also relies on the “possible world” theory. By his account, when we say that something seemed real, we mean that the fictional world in which the play took place seemed like a possible or believable world—one which could be real (90). Like Tolkien, Elam’s explanation of what makes a fictional world believable puts the emphasis on consistency—that the fictional world follows its own rules. This idea that fictional worlds have rules and that audiences have access to those rules is also crucial to my understanding of theater. What we see in the theater gives us information that allows us to understand what is happening in the fictional world.

Staged representations of violence, then, are descriptions of elements of the fictional world of the play. The violence only exists in that world, which is why these are representations, not simply presentations. The job of a representation, therefore, is to describe the violent event in order that the audience can understand what they are supposed to imagine is or was happening in the fictional world. The audience then conceives an internal, personal understanding of the event, based on their interpretation of the representation. Each audience member will have a slightly different idea of exactly what the fictional world’s state is, but if the representation is successful,
their different ideas will all be similar enough that the story being told is essentially the same story.

Semioticians like Elam conceive of the events on the stage in the real world (which, following both Elam and Tolkien, I will call the “primary world”) as a kind of code for communicating to the audience the state of the fictional world. This encoding is what connects the representation (the thing happening on the stage) to the world-state that it is intended to describe. In Saussurean terms the representation is the signifier and the world-state is the signified. This code is constantly in flux, and Elam points out that part of the fun of watching a play is recognizing bits of code which have been used before in the same way (which we generally call “theatrical convention”) while another part of the fun is figuring out what the new bits of code that we are seeing for the first time mean. Some of those new code uses will become conventional themselves, if they are particularly effective or useful to theatermakers (31). The important point about the use of code, that is to say about representation, is that the representation is a description of events in the fictional world, it is not an event in the fictional world itself. Of course, in the primary world, representations are events; when an actor in the primary world is speaking, the speech is obviously really happening—the event is “an actor saying a line.” However, we are not literally seeing something happening in the fictional world—when an actor sits down, they are taking action in the real world, but they are describing action in the fictional world. In practice, we use language which tends to confuse this: we might say “The Marquis is sitting down” … but this is a shorthand: we really mean “Jose is sitting down so as to communicate to the audience that in the fictional world, his character the Marquis sat down.” Of course it is a useful shorthand because it is easier to say, we understand what we mean, and at the same time it reminds us that we want the audience to feel the description is so
apt that they blur the lines between events and descriptions of events, between the fictional world and the real world.

Put another way, the audience never sees what is supposedly happening in the fictional world happen in the primary world. No matter how realistic an illusion on the stage is (and I will address both illusion and realism at some length later), it is still a representation, a description of a different event in a different world. In his provocative essay “When We Talk of Horses: Or, what do we see when we see a play?” Dan Rebellato contests a number of extant ways of understanding how dramatic representations are understood by audiences and presents an intriguing alternative: that theater acts as a special kind of metaphor. I want to pick up that idea—that representation is a metaphor, rather than an icon. Rebellato is contesting conceptions of representation articulated by Kendall Walton, Gregory Currie, and Bernard Williams. Though different in their details, all three argue for thinking of the relation between the representation and the fictional world as being one of similarity (each argues for a different kind of similarity), all of which collapse when looking at how we actually watch plays. To pick up one of his examples, when we watch a modern-dress production of Oedipus we are neither ignoring the jeans that the actors are wearing, nor replacing them with robes, nor imagining that ancient Thebans were wearing jeans. Rather, if we see the representation as a metaphor for the events in the fictional world, we imagine the state of the fictional Thebes in light of what we see on the stage, thinking about it in terms both of what is happening, but also of what it might mean that the characters are wearing jeans—we allow ourselves to extend the metaphor. Ricoeur’s theory explains, as none of Rebellato’s interlocutors can, why the jeans are important: our reconfiguring of our worldview in light of the play is different because of the modern-dress costume design than it would be with a different design. We are not seeing Oedipus in blue jeans, we are seeing
an actor in blue jeans representing (which is to say, in Rebelatto’s terms, as a metaphor for) Oedipus. Only when we are freed from the misapprehension that what we are seeing on stage is ever what is happening in the fictional world, are we able to examine how the two happenings might be related.

Conceiving of representation as metaphor answers one common criticism of Elam’s semiotics; that the model is insufficiently complex—if it were really a “code,” there would be only one way of decoding it and every audience member would get the same exact interpretation, which we know is not the case. Patrice Pavis proposes a more nuanced semiotics, and one more in line with Ricoeur’s understanding of interpretation, in Languages of the Stage, arguing that the semiotic system is too complex to imagine a play as a message encoded for an audience to decode—rather, the production team proposes an initial interpretation, and then the audience creates their own (70).2 Unfortunately, that line of reasoning makes analysis difficult; we cannot say for certain (as Elam seems to have hoped we eventually would be able to) what a given bit of code means, since its meaning is going to be a little different for each viewer. However, following Rebellato’s metaphor model, we could still analyze some of the ways in which the metaphor works, without reducing it to a solvable machine. That is to say, while the total system

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2 Pavis’s semiotics do run up against the bogeyman of intent, as indeed does any semiotics: if we are trying to understand drama as a means of signification, it seems disingenuous to claim that we are not, therefore, implying that there is a message, and in semiotic terms, a sender who intends to send it. With Pavis specifically, the issue is further complicated by the disjunction between “sender” and “receiver,” with the sender (in this case the production team) suggesting what they think the message of the play might be, leaving the audience to create their own interpretation, though presumably one included or constrained by the interpretive choices made by the production. There are, of course, two “senders”—the playwright and the production team. The team is also the first receiver (as the playwright is the first sender)—that is, they attempt to discern the playwright’s intentions, and then, by Pavis’s account, they present their interpretation of those intentions to an audience who may or may not interpret the performance in the way that the producers suggested (and make no mistake, “suggest” here is another way of saying “intend”). As Sol Worth and Larry Gross explain, “In order to recognize the structure which defines a communication event—as distinguished from a natural event—we must bring to that act of recognition an assumption of intention. We must assume that the structure we recognize is, in a sense, ‘made’ performed, or produced for the purpose of ‘symbolizing,’ or communicating” (quoted in Ben-Chaim 98).
is complex, and each individual element affects all the others, it is still possible to broadly discuss what each element is contributing—what that “bit” of code might represent, and how.

These “bits of code” are what I am calling representations—meaning anything done by the production to describe for the audience the state of the fictional world of the play. The fictional world, in being described by representation is, of course, also being created by representation; the only existence it has is what it is given by representations. Likewise, the rules of the dramatic world are also only established by representations. Here I mean both the kinds of representation that are appropriate to this instance of the fictional world (what we often call “style”—I will discuss style in greater detail in chapter 5) as well as the natural laws by which the world of the play operates. These natural laws (natural, that is, to the fictional world) might mean things like whether ghosts are real in a production of *Hamlet*, or whether and how prophecy works in a production of *Macbeth*, but also whether, in this world, being angry, or being the good guy, is enough to make you a great fighter (two relatively common tropes that distinguish the fictional worlds in which they pertain from the real world). Representations simultaneously create and reify the fictional world rules. That is to say, everything that happens on the stage tells us about the world, and when an audience member absorbs a representation (after the first moments of the play), they are fitting it into a world which previous representations have already constructed. If it fits seamlessly, then it would be accepted easily. If it does not seem to fit, then one of two things happens: either the consistency of the world is broken and the representation (and the art, following Tolkien) fails, or else the audience member’s understanding of the rules will change to create a world in which the new information does fit—following the method of world-reconstruction suggested by Ricoeur. The audience
member would, under the influence of the new information, revise their existing view of how the world works.

If a representation gives us information about both the state of the dramatic world as well as the rules of that world, then a failed representation could conceivably fail in either regard. That is to say, a representation might fail to communicate the state of the fictional world, or it might fail to communicate it in a way which accords with the audience’s understanding of the rules of the world. To illustrate, consider the death of Tybalt in Act 3, Scene 1 of *Romeo and Juliet*. A well-staged fight will provide a great deal of information about the characters; for example, depending on how it is staged, we might get the sense that Romeo got lucky, or that his anger gave him the prompt that he needed to defeat Tybalt. But at the very minimum, we need to understand that Tybalt has died. If audience members are unclear on that outcome, then (unless this is a very odd production concept indeed!) the representation of violence (that is, the staged fight) will have failed on communication grounds. Communication of the state of the fictional world (Tybalt dead) is not enough, however. The representation also tells us about the rules of the fictional world—the physics and the psychology and all the other structural elements which make the world believable. So if Tybalt has, heretofore, been shown to be an excellent fighter, and Romeo as not very good, but in the fight Romeo is able to kill Tybalt in a way which makes it seem like he is suddenly the better fighter, then each audience member is forced to one of two options. The first option is that they figure out how the result makes sense; one audience member might interpret the representation to mean that in this particular instance of the fictional world of *Romeo and Juliet*, righteous anger is a powerful prop to skill, while another might think that Tybalt, feeling guilty at having killed Mercutio by taking advantage of Romeo’s interference, *let* Romeo kill him. If an audience member cannot find a way to fit the new information into the
world as they understand it, then for them, the representation will have failed. Again, this is personal; it is what might lead to a discussion during the intermission where one audience member complains that it was totally unrealistic that Romeo could kill Tybalt, only to have their companion explain that they thought Tybalt let Romeo kill him.

I am making no claim here about what the imaginary production team intended; I was, after all, describing a hypothetical representation, in an imagined production. Perhaps the violence designer was trying to convey that passion trumps skill—a reasonable alternate reality in which to set a production of Romeo and Juliet—or perhaps the designer simply did not think about the implications of their choreography. If the representation failed for many audience members, then I would argue that in the former case it would have been a poor execution of the design, while in the latter case, the design itself was at fault. In later chapters I will discuss specific representations in terms of such design decisions, but for the moment the important thing is the range of possible responses to the design, following Pavis: the production proposes an interpretation, and audiences create their own, influenced by the production’s. If an audience interprets the fight as a bad design (that is, if they failed to justify what they saw in terms of the rules of the fictional world), then they are thinking about the production instead of believing it, and unless that was the desire of the production team, (perhaps in a Brechtian production), the art has failed.

I see my project in this dissertation as an attempt to “decode” some of the specific bits of code that have been used, or might be used to communicate that violence occurred or is occurring in the fictional world. Through this process of decoding, I will develop a theory of how the codes of violence work which should apply not only to the conventional codes (of which
there have been many, some of them still in use, others not currently in vogue) but to any new
codes that might be developed in the future. This project, then, comprises a poetics of violence.

**Mimesis, Narration, and Illusion**

There are two primary ways in which violence is represented on stage: mimetic illusions
and narration. Each works differently to help the audience form their mental image of the violent
event, and each has advantages and disadvantages depending on the particular effect which is
most important to the play. The usual distinction between mimetic illusion and narration tends to
be that under mimesis the actors act out the violence, while narration has the actors using verbal,
linguistic descriptions to represent events happening elsewhere or earlier. However, if I am going
to work through how different ways of representing violence do different kinds of dramatic
work, a more nuanced understanding of mimesis and narrative is necessary.

In *The Republic*, Plato distinguishes between *mimesis* (the Greek word for imitation) and
*diegesis* (the Greek term for narration):³

Of poetry and tale telling, one kind proceeds wholly by imitation—as you say, tragedy and comedy; another, by the poet's own report—this, of course, you would find especially in dithyrambs; and still another by both—this is found in epic poetry and many other places too, if you understand me. (Book 3, 394c)

Aristotle picks up the same distinction when he discusses the “differences in the manner of
imitating” where he claims that “the same objects … may be imitated either in narration
[diegesis] … or in a mode in which all the characters are presented as functioning and in action”
(47). So, for Aristotle, imitation (that is, *mimesis*) can include narration, while for Plato, they are

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³ I will continue to use the term narration because *diegesis* has come to be associated with its use in film studies where it is a synonym for “the fictional world”; “diegetic music,” for example, is music whose source is “within the diegesis.” This usage is a perfect example of the linguistic issues I am discussing, since in a sense, they are talking about music pretending to be other music—what I might call *mimetic* music.
separate modes. Already, the definitions were starting to slip. To limit the confusion I am going to stick with Plato’s distinction between the two: when I talk about mimesis, I mean actors pretending to be the characters taking action in the fictional world, and by narration I mean actors telling us in words about what happened in that world. It will not be easy; the slippage is real, and I am sure to slip myself—but it is in fact the slippage itself which in which I am most interested.

The word *illusion* and its relationship to representation and mimesis need to be made clear. When I use the term illusion, I am talking about stage technique; anything that a production team does in order to communicate, mimetically, what the audience is supposed to understand has happened in the fictional world. All stage combat is illusion, as are sound and lighting effects, amongst many other techniques. Illusion is the tool by which mimesis is accomplished on stage: there is no illusion until the play is produced—illusion is solely in the realm of the stage, while mimesis (and representation) can exist on the page.⁴

Having set out the initial distinction between mimesis as acting out and narration as describing, that distinction immediately becomes confused. I have already argued that when actors are engaged in mimesis, they are not showing actions, they are taking actions whose function is to describe other actions that other beings (their characters) are to be imagined having taken in the fictional world. The very term *mimesis*, meaning “imitation,” supports this claim—the actors are imitating the actions of their characters. But if that is the case, then one could, in a

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⁴ For the most part, when I use the term illusion, I will be referring to realistic illusions, but realism is not a quality of illusions, per se—realistic illusions are simply the most common and the easiest to visualize. In Chapter 5, I will discuss stylization at greater length, but for the moment, I will simply point out that my definition of illusion does not require realism; anything the production team does in order to mimetically represent events in the fictional world is an illusion.
sense, see this mimesis as a kind of narration. As I said earlier, when Jose the actor sits down, he is saying (in gestures rather than words) “and then my character the Marquis sat down.”

On the other hand, when a character narrates an event that has already happened, that act of narration is itself mimetic. A narrator is often also an actor playing a character—the messenger who arrives to announce the moving wood in *Macbeth* for example, is narrating what they saw, but is at the same time, mimetically representing the character giving the report. Even the ostensibly external narrator of a chamber play, or the Chorus of *Henry V*, is a character only pretending not to be part of the play.

Recognizing that the “acting out v. describing” distinction is not as clear as we might like is important if we want to examine specific representations. How would we categorize a representation where a murder is indicated by a character entering with a bloody weapon? That seems mimetic, since the stage blood is physically present, pretending to be real blood, and the actor is there, onstage, pretending to be a murderer. On the other hand, the violent act itself is not mimetically represented; rather, the audience is being *told* that it happened by that physically present visual code, which in this sense is a sort of non-verbal narration.

Part of the reason such a representation seems to be related to narration is one of time—that is to say, by the time the character is entering with the bloody weapon, we are being told that the murder happened a moment ago, as opposed to the sorts of representation which could tell us that it is happening now—which suggests that we might be able to distinguish between mimesis and narration chronologically. Perhaps mimetic representations are those which present the illusion of the violence *as it is happening in the fictional world*, while narration tells us about things that have happened in the fictional world’s *past*. If this distinction holds, it might explain why narratologists seem less interested in mimesis than narration (and therefore less interested in
drama than other genres): because narratology, as a discipline, is interested in sequence and time, and in the difference between story (the order in which events happened) and plot (the order in which the events are represented). For Ricoeur, mimesis is as much about the ordering of the narrative as it is about imitation per se, and while I want to keep using that term in the more narrow sense, his sense of mimesis is akin to how narratologists like James Phelan conceptualize narrative; that is, they ascribe that same interest in sequence to the very nature of narrative.

It might be valuable to add the chronological distinction to our concepts of mimesis and narration. Consider an actor looking offstage, or into the middle distance, as if “seeing” an act of violence, which they are describing to us, in the style perhaps of an “eyewitness” news report. This would most likely be described as a narration. However, if we think about time and sequence, then perhaps we might consider it mimesis, since the event is happening in “real time”; if not before our eyes, then before the eyes of the actor, who is themself before our eyes. We might not see the act itself, but we are privy to (some of) the effects of that violence on the world as it is happening. The effects of the violence are always of interest, but are presented directly in mimesis, and that is what is happening in this case: not the effects on the victim, like blood spurting from a wound (though that might be transmitted through language, which is to say narratively) but the effects on another character, in this case the observer.

If the actor playing the observer widened their eyes and took a quick inhale, to indicate that they were watching something horrific, we could say that the actor is creating a mimetic illusion of someone watching an act of violence. Does this constitute a mimetic illusion of violence, or does the violence itself need to be shown? If, as I argued earlier, representation is what the production does to communicate the state of the fictional world, then this example would certainly be a mimetic representation because the act of violence is communicated
(represented) to the audience through clearly mimetic means, even though the act itself was not shown to the audience.

What is happening here is a kind of “offstage violence.” While offstage violence is often conflated with narration, the two are only occasionally overlapping. Certainly, when a narrator tells us that something has happened, it is usually the case that we do not also see it onstage, though there are definitely counterexamples even there; some plays both show and tell about certain events, and even if the text does not, it is not unheard of for a production to do so. For example, in the 2017 Oak Park Festival Theatre production of Macbeth, the opening battle was narrated by the Bloody Captain and simultaneously enacted by the rest of the cast. However, in cases like that, there are two separate acts of representation, and the narrational one does not put the act of violence on the stage. Narration, by this account, always represents violence that is not onstage. However, the converse is not true: offstage violence is by no means always narrated.

Indeed, much of what we think of as offstage violence is very much mimetic. In the Chicago Shakespeare Theater 2008 production of Edward II, directed by Sean Graney, most of the murders were represented by having the victim dragged into a “side room” with plastic sheeting hanging in the doorway, and then a gout of blood was sprayed on the sheeting: as powerful a mimetic illusion as one could ask for that someone has been killed just offstage. In a sense, that actor who I posited earlier—the one who is “watching” an act of violence, and from whose expressions we can gather what is happening—serves the same purpose as the sheeting with the spray of blood. Both are presenting mimetic illusions—showing the effects of violence to communicate that the violence has occurred (though practitioners would call one a special effect and the other acting). Such an illusion raises the broader question of what it might mean to be “offstage” in the first place. Again, this is a distinction which is usually quite clear in practice,
but in theory becomes very hard to pin down. The stage itself is a physical object in the practical theater, and things can happen on it or not. However, defining the theoretical difference is not as simple as saying “everything we can see is onstage and everything we cannot see is offstage.” We think of something that happens in the wings as being offstage, but is there really a difference between a person dragged into the wings to be killed and the same person dragged behind a couch? In these terms, I think there is not; if one is offstage, then so is the other.5

Part of the theoretical problem is that we very powerfully privilege sight over hearing (and we practically ignore the other senses in almost all theater). An act of violence that we can see but not hear (for example, a murder that we see on the other side of a window) is clearly still onstage, while one we can hear but not see (someone dragged offstage and then we hear a gunshot which cuts off the screams of the victim, or a blackout gunshot) seems somehow not to have been “staged” at all. But that privileging of sight over hearing obscures the more important distinction. Perhaps offstage violence is that which an illusion is created to show the effects of but not the act itself. Under such a rubric, the blood spray on the wall, or the cut-off screams or the person watching a murder that we cannot see but they can, are all examples of mimetic illusions of offstage violence. The person dragged behind the couch is generally killed in such a way that we do see the action of the violence, just not the actual impact, making that onstage violence. Of course, like any theoretical distinction with bright edges, it might lead to some situations which contradict the common-sense usage: two people who fall behind a couch and one emerges with a bloody knife I would consider, by this usage, to be offstage violence. A gunshot might well be worth considering to be onstage violence, since the shooting itself is the

5 For the moment, I am using terms that would be appropriate to a proscenium theater—these make it easier to discuss than talking about a black box or a promenade space, but the principles are, I think, the same.
violent act, and that act is mimetically represented for us, though by hearing and not sight. These, however, seem to me to be edge cases. I will return to this aspect of mimesis in my chapter on offstage violence, Chapter 4, and will delve much more deeply into exactly these questions. It suffices for now to add “onstage/offstage” to our growing catalog of possible distinctions between mimesis and narration.

A more conventional way in which we might distinguish between mimesis and narration is that narration performs representation through language, while mimesis does not. So, when a character narrates an act of violence, they are transmitting the events of the fictional world through the language code. On the other hand when we create a mimetic illusion of a fight, the fictional-world events that we are representing are encoded in the physical actions of the actors. Associating narration with language and mimesis with action does have the benefit of a fairly clear distinction, and one which is closely related to the common usage of showing versus telling. However, such a conception becomes slippery almost immediately: even during a fight, it is rare for the actors to use no language whatsoever, though in that case, the burden of the representation seems primarily carried by the action. On the other side, when two characters are having a conversation, is that mimesis or narration? We would probably not call it narration, despite the fact that while the actors are engaged in mimetic representation of the characters’ conversation, we generally consider the conversation—that is, the language—to be the site of the communication (mediated, of course, through intonation, pacing, and all the other mimetic tools of the actor, but we still primarily privilege the words). If the conversation were strictly about relating events to each other that happened in the past, we might then start to discuss it as narration, especially if the mimetic receiver of the information was transparently not the real
target of the communication—a hackneyed trope that *TV Tropes* calls “As you know, Bob”
dialog (As You Know).

The existence and ready recognition of that trope introduces another possible distinction
between narration and mimesis. Perhaps a distinction might be based in who the target of the
communication is: narration is directly targeted at the audience in the primary world, while
mimesis has as a direct target another character within the fictional world. Of course, like the
others, this distinction collapses on consideration. For one thing, in the end, all communication is
aimed at the audience, so there is really a spectrum of “indirectness.” Certainly the Chorus of
*Henry V* is performing narration, by this account—speaking directly to us. But the Bloody
Captain in *Macbeth* who narrates the battle in which Macbeth and Banquo vanquish the
Norwegians is technically speaking to Duncan, so is more mimetic, though I think most people
would agree that the battle is being narrated, not mimetically represented. On the other hand, the
spray of blood in Graney’s *Edward II* was not targeted, *as communication*, at any character
within the fictional world; as communication, it is only and wholly for the audience … but it still
seems to me that it was a mimetic illusion.

It might seem odd that I tried to make a clear distinction between mimesis and narration
before going to some length to demonstrate that the borders between the two are profoundly
porous. However, while acknowledging and indeed taking advantage of that porousness, I also
find great value in continuing to make the distinction. For the practitioner in the rehearsal room
as well as the academic in the seminar, the usage is clear enough most of the time. As long as we
are aware of the problems, we can make use of the general sense of the distinction. That is, we
can talk about violence as narrated, as mimetic, or as somewhere in between.
What I come to, with this string of possible but ultimately unsuccessful attempts at distinction and definition is what I offered at the beginning of the chapter: a discussion of several important ways that mimesis and narration can be, and have been, conceived. Each aspect of the distinctions between them which I have brought up—saying versus showing, past versus present, and targeting an audience in the world of the play versus directly targeting the audience in the primary world—contributes to our understanding of what is actually happening on a stage, and each will be a useful way of thinking about some aspects of some representation, while the overall concepts of mimesis and narration remain useful ways to discuss what are obviously different kinds of representation, even if exactly how they differ is not always obvious.

**What is Violence?**

Violence itself is a highly contested term; scholars who study violence tend to broaden rather than narrow the definition, so that systemic violence is a field of study for political scientists, the cultural violence of patriarchy and Capitalism for feminist and Marxist theorists, and further afield, following Foucault and Derrida, language becomes an arena for violence. Unlike our previous terms, however, these contestations have important political valences. What we “count” as violence is serious business in the social justice realm; changing our culture to recognize new kinds of violence as violence is vital for progress.

But if we broaden our definition that far in discussing drama, everything that happens on stage will count as violence, and the term will become useless for my goals. Where, then, to draw the line? For the purposes of this project, the kinds of violence that I want to discuss have these characteristics: they involve physical force, they cause or threaten physical harm or pain, they have a motive, and that motive is to impose the aggressor’s will on someone—usually, but not always, the victim.
I am looking at what counts as violence from the point of view of a theorist, demarking the object I wish to study, perhaps somewhat arbitrarily. But at the same time, I feel that my definition aims at the common-use sense of the word, as audiences use it—the kinds of violence that I am describing (intentional, physical, painful, coercive) are the ones that, for the most part, audiences react to as violence. Of particular, though limited, interest is the study described in *Defining Violence* by a research team led by David E. Morrison at Leeds University. Morrison’s team went at the task of understanding how consumers of violent media define violence through studying a broad sample of people engaging with examples of televised violence. Many studies exist of the effects of televised violence, which I will discuss in greater depth in Chapter 2 as I tackle the concept of shock, but Morrison’s study is a rare attempt to understand what viewers think “counts” as violence. The study showed clips from violent television shows and films to groups of viewers and then asked them how violent the clip was, and what about the clip made it violent. The participants were then given the opportunity to edit the clips to make them “less violent” and a lot can be gleaned about what the participants did to try to decrease the level of violence, and how effective they thought they had been. Of course, Morrison’s study is hardly a final word on what constitutes violence, or even on what audiences define as violent. The study is relatively broad socioeconomically, but still constitutes a group of British viewers in the late twentieth century. These are viewers of movies and television, not of theater. None the less, *Defining Violence* does present us with some very interesting, and often surprising, ideas.

Morrison interviewed a wide range of people, broken into a handful of similar demographic groups, and unsurprisingly there was a wide range of opinions between the groups (and considerably less, but still some range within the groups). However, across all the groups, there were some interesting trends. Almost all participants seemed to think that context matters.
That is, they thought that some representations were more violent if they knew that the victims had not “deserved” the violence, though of course different people had different metrics for determining whether someone deserved it or not. The study presented a definition of violence that took this into account. An act became violent “because the violence was considered unjustified either in the degree or nature of the force used, or that the injured party was undeserving of the violence. The degree of violence is ... made even stronger if the violence inflicted [is] considered unfair” (133). For those audience members, at least, the motive has an effect on the way the violence is perceived. Karen A. Cerulo, in *Deciphering Violence*, makes a similar observation. While her project explores how the *sequencing* of a story of violence impacts whether that violence is perceived as normal or deviant, she begins by pointing to these same contextual elements: undeserved harm is more “violent” than that viewed as “deserved” (6). Again, this context depends on the audience—Morrison et al.’s study found that most groups found scenes of spousal battery to be less violent if the victim had “provoked” the violence with verbal attacks.6 The group of police, notably, did not feel that way—for them, the violence was unacceptable no matter the provocation (65). The less valid the motive for violence is perceived to be, the more violent the act is. I read this to be because audiences do not perceive violence itself to be legitimate, and so the less legitimate an act is, the more it is “violence.” While this is unsurprising, it is worth remembering as we continue to examine representations of violence.

Another trend amongst these viewers was that in efforts to reduce the violence, the participants often trimmed aspects of the representation—reducing the sound, or cutting out

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6 Morrisey et al.’s respondents often used the phrase “less violent” to mean less *disturbing*. For them, at least, violence was disturbing, and things they were not disturbed by they did not consider violent. I am taking a broader view than that, but the broader point—that context affects reception—seems to stand.
some of the more explicit moments of physical contact. However, these efforts often were unsuccessful or of more limited success than they would have thought, by the participants’ own accounts. More broadly effective was to eliminate evidence of the effect of the violence on others. Of particular interest were audiences’ responses to a scene of domestic violence from the film *Ladybird, Ladybird*. Several different groups commented on how a large part of the impact was that the audience could see the victim’s children watching the abuse. Of course it is not surprising that editing out the reaction shots from the children watching the domestic violence made that violence less potent, but in the scene from the gangster film *Deep Cover*, where a gang leader beat a member of his gang to death for informing, editing out some of the reaction shots where other criminals were flinching at the degree of brutality also made the scene less brutal—it is not just the innocence of the observer that makes their watching effective, it is simply our ability to watch them react which intensifies the act they are reacting to. Clearly, watching someone else watch violence is powerful. This evidence leads me to think about the effects of violence as being the essential aspect of representations—the spray of blood is more evocative than the descending knife. Think about the old Adam West *Batman* television show—we see the punch being thrown, but replace the reaction with the ubiquitous “POW” graphic, resulting in a level of violence sufficiently low for young children.

Both Morrison et al. and Cerulo are working within the same general conception of violence as physical force as I am. Broader ideas of violence are politically important, of course, and though I am not directly engaging with such conceptions in this project, I do want to point out one aspect of violence on which broader conceptions are based: such conceptions imply the recognition that coercion and violence are intrinsically linked. In light of that linkage, I want to limit the object of study to force or the threat of force. I include the threat of force because most
acts of violence that use literal force are also implying a threat of further force for coercive purposes. When Teach hits Bobby in Mamet’s *American Buffalo*, he intends to cause injury, but obviously that injury is not itself the goal:

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BOB. I don’t know anything.
TEACH. You don’t, huh?
BOB. No.
DON. Tell him what you know, Bob.
BOB. I don’t know it, Donny. Grace and Ruthie . . .
TEACH grabs a nearby object and hits BOB viciously on the side of the head.
TEACH. Grace and Ruthie up your ass, you shithead; you don’t fuck with us, *I’ll* kick your fucking head in. (I don’t give a shit . . .)
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*Pause.*

You twerp . . .

*A pause near the end of which BOB starts whimpering.*

I don’t give a shit. (Come in here with your fucking stories . . .)

*Pause.*

Imaginary people in the hospital . . .

`BOB starts to cry.`

That don’t mean shit to me, you fruit.

BOB. Donny . . .

DON. You brought it on yourself.

TEACH. Sending us out there . . . who the fuck knows what . . .

BOB. He’s in the hospital.

DON. Which hospital?

BOB. I don’t know.

TEACH. Well, then, you better make one up, and quick.

DON. Bob . . .

TEACH. (Don’t back down on this, Don. Don’t back down on me, here.)

DON. Bob . . .

BOB. . . . yeah?

DON. You got to see our point here.

BOB (*whimpering*): Yeah, I do.

DON. Now, we don’t want to hit you . . .

TEACH. (No.)

BOB. I know you don’t.

TEACH. No. *(85-86)*

Teach is using that violence as a threat; the clear implication is that if Bobby doesn’t tell him the truth, he will do it again. Whether we believe him or not, Don says as much when he claims that they don’t want to hit Bobby, and Teach agrees. The use of force in cases like that is really a
threat of force. Coercion is always the goal of a threat. Thus, if the whole point of some acts of violence is to threaten further violence, it makes sense, when discussing violence, to discuss physical acts that threaten harm but do not do harm. So for example, pointing a weapon at someone is an act of violence, even if no attack is then carried out. Of course, there is a slippery slope here—a purely verbal threat, while definitely violence by many people’s accounts (including the law—this is the technical definition of assault), is not physical, and therefore not a mimetic illusion of violence. Is it, though, a narrative representation of violence? I would not be tempted to think so, but then again, if the character making the threat is describing an act of violence, how is that not a narrative representation of violence? The only difference between a character saying, “If you do not obey, I will kill you,” and one who says, “He did not obey, and so I killed him” (which, I would argue, is a very clear example of a narrative representation of violence) is that, in the fictional world of the play, it hasn’t happened yet. So, looked at another way, is not the act here one of creating a subworld in the fictional world? A world that, from the point of view of the inhabitants of the fictional world, is propositional, and therefore “fictional”? It would seem so—this tertiary world even works, in a Ricoeurian sense, the same way for the secondary world as the secondary world works for the primary; that is to say, the victim of the threat is shown this possible world (the one in which the threat is carried out) and invited to re-configure their world-view (their view of the “reality” of the secondary world) in light of the tertiary world. It is by this reasoning that I include purely non-physical threats as violence, as long as the consequences threatened are themselves physical force.

Physical violence that is not a threat is usually aimed at a more direct imposition of will. Claudius’ murder of old Hamlet is not a threat—he murders him in order to physically force the King to stop doing two things: being the king and being Gertrude’s husband. Often, multiple acts
of violence occur in sequence moving from threats to direct coercion. For example, Paris wants to stop Romeo from entering Juliet’s tomb. He begins with a threat of force:

Stop thy unhallowed toil, vile Montague!
Can vengeance be pursued further than death?
Condemned villain, I do apprehend thee.
Obey and go with me, for thou must die.

Romeo replies in part:

Put not another sin upon my head
By urging me to fury. Oh, begone! (5.3.54-63)

Romeo is not coerced by the threat, but makes his own—the sin he wants Paris to keep him from committing is Paris’ murder. When neither threat is successful, they move to the use of force to directly impose their wills: their fight is Paris trying to physically restrain Romeo, who kills Paris in order to get past him, just as they both threatened. Even “self-defense” is an attempt to control the other person’s actions: the “defender” wants to impose their will on their assailant to the extent of stopping that assailant from hurting them.

It makes sense to think of violence in terms of its perpetrator’s goals, in the theater no less than in the real world. The question “what does my character want, that they do this” is one which actors ask themselves constantly; Stanislavski made that question the central one in his system of acting. In seeking to understand what violence does for the drama and the dramatist, we must follow Stanislavski and consider what the violence is doing for the characters within the drama. For violence on stage is not a description, merely, of a kind of action—say, “one where someone gets hurt.” An accident with a knife while cooking, or a fall down the stairs, could cause injury, but while a violence designer might well be called on to plan and stage such accidents, I would not consider either one an act of violence. In order for an action of that (or
any) kind to be violence, I argue, it has to have been intentional—that is, it has to have a purpose within the dramatic world.

It may seem that this requirement of a motive, in attempting to exclude accidents, also excludes an important kind of violence which we are seeing more and more both in our world and on our stages; what we colloquially call “random violence.” But random violence is rarely actually random. A shooter in a mall may not seem to want anything, but if that were true, why would we be constantly struggling to “understand” these people? In plays like Alex Lubischer’s Bobby Clearly, Manny Tamayo’s Incident on Run #1217, and Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins’s Gloria, this sort of seemingly incomprehensible act of violence is explored at length, and while audiences respond viscerally to the event, the meat of all three plays is spent following characters through their own attempts to find meaning in it. More conventional terrorism, as explored in plays like Deborah Brevoort’s Women of Lockerbie, Bennet Fisher’s Damascus, and Ayad Akhtar’s Invisible Hand, clearly has a motive, even if it is sometimes hard to unravel exactly what that motive is. Unpremeditated crimes of passion like the beating in Akhtar’s Disgraced come from somewhere and happen because of something that the violent character wants; they are coercive. Even the psychologically mystifying animal torture in Equus has a purpose, and Dysart’s whole program in treating Strang is to discover that purpose. Strang claims that he blinds the horses in an attempt to stop Equus from “seeing his soul.” While it may be madness to try to impose your will on a deity, it is not random.
CHAPTER 2

THE VALUE OF SHOCK

Representations of violence create a sudden change in the audience’s affective experience of the fictional world. I call that sudden change “shock,” and I call the thing that shock is changing “aesthetic distance”: the degree to which an audience member is absorbed in the fictional world of the play. In this chapter I will describe how distance and shock work, and offer an explanation of why they work this way as well as reflections on some of the extended consequences. I will describe how different kinds of representation create different shocks, and how shock informs, and is informed by, spectator sympathy. Finally, I will put my theory of shock to use in readings of two recent productions.

Aesthetic Distance

We often use the concept of distance to describe our degree of absorption within a play—or, to be more precise, within the fictional world created by the play. We see it in common phrases, like “That moment took me out” or “That was too close to home”—in the former case, something on stage increased distance, in the latter there was not enough. Though the concept is fairly old, the term was coined, and rigorously theorized, by Edward Bullough in his article “‘Psychical Distance’ as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle.” Bullough’s article was published in the British Journal of Psychology in 1912, and others have done a lot of work with

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1 As in Chapter 1, many of the writers whom I will be discussing in this chapter wrote not just about plays, but about works of art in general. To prevent confusion, I am going to continue to refer to plays, except in direct quotes, or where I think it would be unfaithful to someone else’s argument.
the idea since. However, while the concept is of seminal value to many later dramatic theorists who use the concept in somewhat different ways, I think Bullough’s own particular version of the theory is underappreciated. Daphna Ben Chaim, in her excellent book *Distance in the Theatre: The Aesthetics of Audience Response* reads Bullough onto Brecht and Artaud in interesting ways, and I think she is making an excellent point in doing so; both theatermakers—to whom American theater owes a great deal—are working with distance in ways that Bullough had already laid out.

Bullough’s basic claim is that psychical distance is a unique human capacity that allows for a mental space between an experience and our ability to relate that experience to our own selves. As Bullough put it, “This distance appears to lie between our own self and its affections, using the latter term in its broadest sense as anything which affects our being, bodily or spiritually, e.g. as sensation, perception, emotional state, or idea” (89). If there is too little distance, we cannot appreciate something as art—it is too “close” to us. If distance is too great, the work cannot hold our interest.

Bullough believed that it is the individual audience member who is the source of distance; we create it ourselves as part of the act of observing. That is, when we view something aesthetically, we are creating distance, informed by both our own initial world-view and the play we are watching. Bullough uses the example of a man who believes that he has cause to be jealous about his wife witnessing a performance of *Othello*. While such a spectator would “more perfectly appreciate the situation, conduct and character of Othello … in point of fact, he will probably do anything but appreciate the play” (93).² The man’s initial world-view (which

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² Ricoeur, as I glossed him in Chapter 1, is useful here again. If, as he argues, each audience member enters the theater with an initial worldview, or state of existing in the world (mimesis¹), encounters the art (which presents
includes believing that his wife is unfaithful) sets up his experience of the fictional world of *Othello* in such a way as to make it significantly harder for him to create distance. For the rest of this dissertation, I will frequently discuss what *artists* do to “control,” “affect,” or “create” distance for the audience, but this kind of language, though useful, is not precisely correct; it is always and only each individual *spectator* who creates distance. Artists generally focus on their own work’s contribution to the process, since it is not usually within the capacity of the artist to affect the initial conditions of the audience (but see the end of footnote 3 below). Artists tend to work as if assuming a sort of “average” audience initial worldview, while knowing that such a thing does not actually exist. When we ask “who is our audience?” what we really are asking is “what is the initial worldview that the plurality of our audience will be most likely to hold?” Going forward, when I discuss what artists do to “create,” “open,” or “close” distance for the audience, I should be taken to mean “what they do to try to influence how and to what degree individual spectators create, open, or close distance for themselves, in response to what they see, from a base of their initial worldview.”

Bullough, writing in 1912, believed that there was an “ideal distance” for art: as close as possible (for maximum absorption) without being so close that the audience is unable to appreciate it (93). Of course that ideal, which is the underpinning of realism, no longer completely dominates theatrical production. The first half of the twentieth century saw an explosion of theoretical approaches to theater that directly challenged this ideal: Brecht wanted mimesis\(^2\) and leaves with a new state (mimesis\(^3\)), then what we are seeing is that the spectator’s jealousy is a significant part of his initial state/worldview, which inflects how the narrative he sees in the theater affects him. Note “worldview” is not a perfect word for this. Ricoeur uses the word “mimesis,” because he too had trouble finding an existing word for it, but as I said earlier, I am going to continue to use mimesis as Plato does, so I will go on talking about the “initial worldview” to describe the way a spectator sees the world and their place in it prior to watching a play.
to open the distance widely enough to force engagement by critical analysis, while Artaud, and later Grotowski, favored closing distance so as to force near-total absorption. The influences of those two approaches are felt in much contemporary theater; artists in production meetings regularly talk about the techniques that Brecht and Artaud pioneered to control the audience’s distance from the play. Of course—at least in the United States, where realism is still the default production assumption—we see the remnant of Bullough’s ideal distance even in the use of techniques like direct address or environmental theater. Such techniques might, under Brecht or Artaud respectively, have been used to shock audiences into extreme opening or closing of distance, but by the beginning of the 21st Century, they had become conventional enough that audiences no longer find them shocking. That said, they are still used to make more subtle adjustments in distance. This conception of distance, which we have from Bullough, and the techniques to apply it, which we have from practitioners of the twentieth century, have become standard instruments in the dramaturgical toolbox.

Many critics argue or assume that distance is created by our knowing that the play we are watching is not “real.” Distance itself, by such an account, is simply the degree to which we are aware of the work being fiction. The claim is that it is knowledge of fictionality which allows us to see the play as something which cannot affect us directly; that when we know that what we are

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3 When I use the term “techniques” I broadly mean “things a director might tell actors or designers to do, or a teacher might instruct actors, directors, or designers to do.” So direct address and voiceover narration are staging techniques, as is, more broadly, environmental theater. A publicized blog written “by a character” that treats the fictional world as real is a marketing technique. A right cross is a stage combat technique. All of these are techniques in that they are things artists do for a reason: to create a specific kind of illusion. All of these can be seen as having the purpose of affecting distance—voiceover and direct address tend to be used to open distance, while environmental theater, the blog, and the realistic stage punch all tend to be used to close distance. Interestingly, a blog like the one I just mentioned is a liminal case for my understanding of Bullough and especially Ricoeur—is it a part of the play, working upon the audience’s initial condition? Or is it an attempt, before the play, to control the audience’s initial condition? Of course, a given spectator might not encounter the blog until after seeing the play, in which case it would work differently, though interestingly.
watching is not actual, we are able to look at it as an aesthetic object. By this account, if distance collapses, we would forget for a moment that we are watching a play, and thus we get so absorbed in the world of the play that we can be viscerally affected by it. This conception fits reasonably well with the concept of the fictional world viewed as metaphor which I have been espousing: presumably our recognition of the play as a metaphor is required for us to be able to interpret the metaphor. However, some basic implications of such a conception make it untenable; for one thing, it implies that you cannot have an aesthetic experience of a non-fictional event. That is, if knowledge of fictionality were the sole source of distance, we could never have distance (and therefore an appreciation of their aesthetic nature) from real-world phenomena, like a sunrise. Nor could we distance ourselves from a biographical work of art. Further, if distance were the same as awareness of fictionality, it would mean that when we were being viscerally affected by a play, or other work, we were somehow forgetting that it was fiction, which—though often used as hyperbolic praise for particularly effective art—is demonstrably not what is actually happening, as I discussed in Chapter 1.

Conceiving of distance simply in terms of awareness of fictionality, however, is not what Bullough describes; Bullough’s explanation, though more challenging, provides a much more productive conception of distance. By Bullough’s account, it is not knowledge of fictionality which creates (or is) distance, but rather distance which allows us to understand that something is fictional in the first place. For Bullough, humans generate distance to protect themselves from phenomena, including but not limited to art, in order to appreciate qualities of that object other than the practical. That is to say, it is a quality of the mind that it can generate this distance, and it is this capacity, perhaps unique to humans, which allows us to appreciate things as aesthetic
objects. His first example is not an artistic one at all—it is a fog at sea, which while we are inside it is terrifying and dangerous, but if viewed from a distance can be seen as quite beautiful. While many theorists since Bullough have picked up his language, they have reversed this one core idea of his, mistakenly making awareness of fictionality the cause—rather than the effect—of distance, leaving us with two versions of the relationship between distance and awareness of fictionality; versions that are, in fact, opposites.

In *Distance in the Theatre*, Ben Chaim outlines a fairly extensive history of the idea of aesthetic distance, starting with Bullough and proceeding to Sartre, Brecht, Artaud, and film critics Christian Metz and André Bazin. In her efforts to reconcile the many different views of distance, Ben Chaim drops Bullough’s version (that distance creates awareness of fictionality) in favor of the more popular version (that awareness of fictionality creates distance), but I would like to revisit it. The virtue of Bullough’s version is not merely that it allows for viewing non-fictional objects aesthetically (though it seems that should be enough) but also that it allows for a more reasonable explanation of what happens as distance collapses—when we are “too close” to something, that does not necessarily mean that we have forgotten that it is fiction, as it would have to if distance and knowledge of fictionality were the same thing, or if knowledge of fictionality were the source of distance. Bullough’s version allows for a world where we could be affected viscerally by an object even though we know that it is fictional—which seems like a much better explanation, and one in line with my conclusions from Chapter 1. Ben Chaim overstates other theorists’ acceptance of her version; she argues that for Brecht, “increased distance is an increased awareness of the fictionality of the work” (32). But I would counter that while Brecht uses increased awareness of fictionality in order to increase distance, that does not
mean that Brecht thinks (or that we should think) that increased awareness of fictionality is the same as distance.

In my view, the relationship between awareness of fictionality and distance is not unidirectional; distance is not the same as awareness of fictionality, nor is it solely the result of awareness of fictionality, but awareness of fictionality, which requires distance, can also be used to increase distance. There is a kind of feedback loop at play here. Distance allows us to understand that the events of the play are not actually happening to us, and with that knowledge we are able to remind ourselves “it’s only a play”—further increasing distance.settling this dispute is important to my argument because I am claiming that representations of violence in drama necessarily alter our aesthetic distance from the fictional world. If I accepted that distance is the same as (or is only ever the result of) awareness of fictionality, then I would have to be saying that representations of violence necessarily alter our awareness of fictionality, which I do not think is true. I do think that a representation of violence might, in opening distance, make us more aware of the fiction, possibly because the body on which the fictional violence is being inflicted is that of an actor, and the distinction between actor and character is an aspect of fictionality. However, that is merely one effect that opening distance can have; it is not a definition.

I have been using the term “absorption” in a particular sense, as related to my usage of “distance.” Bullough never used the word absorption, but the way that I use it—which I have adapted from Michael Fried—is nicely compatible with Bullough’s conception of what happens as distance decreases. If we think of absorption as our belief in the fictional world, where we

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4 See Fried, Absorption and Theatricality for an extended exploration of how absorption might work.
think of that world as one which exists but which we do not inhabit, then absorption is what increases as distance decreases. As long as any distance exists, we view the fictional world aesthetically, that is, as though its events cannot affect us. The more absorbed we are in the fictional world, however, the closer to affecting us the play can get, to the point where we imagine that it could. Our ability to imagine that the play could affect us is the basis of our affective responses to theater and the way we form attachments to fictional characters as if we knew them in the real world. Such responses are typical of close distance.

I do not want to imply that increasing distance makes personal responses unavailable. While it may be tempting to see close/far as meaning the same as personal/impersonal or emotional/intellectual, Bullough is careful to note that “distance does not imply an impersonal, purely intellectually interested relation … on the contrary, it describes a personal relation, often highly emotionally colored but of a peculiar character … [in that] it has been cleared of the practical, concrete nature of its appeal” (91, emphasis in the original). What that means is that greater distance does not separate us from being emotionally affected by the work; quite the contrary, it can facilitate our being emotionally affected because the distance prevents our fear of a physical effect from occluding our attention; that is what distance is for. We may have a very personal response to what we are seeing, but that response is still tempered by our ability to view the object and our response to it in objective, rather than subjective, terms. When I say we are not viewing the art subjectively, I mean that we are not subject to its concrete effects, but subjective/objective is not the same as emotional/intellectual or personal/impersonal. The important point is that our relationship with art can be objective while still being intensely personal, and that we can bring a mix of intellect and emotion to it. The personal nature of the
relationship is vital if we want to believe, as I do, that theater in general, and violence in particular, can have powerful effects on us as audience members. Effects that are both intellectual and visceral, and which can therefore produce the changes in worldview which Ricoeur describes and by which the theater can do its cultural work.

What I find so useful about Bullough is that he accounts for a common experience in the theater: the way our attention moves in and out, sometimes deeply absorbed in the fictional world, sometimes as if looking in at it from the outside. What is happening there is that we are shifting distance, and it is important that this occurrence is common. Let us return to Dan Rebellato’s article, “When we Talk of Horses,” which I touched on in Chapter 1. Rebellato’s title is a reference to the opening of Henry V, where the chorus asks us to “Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them/Printing their proud hoofs I’th’ receiving earth” (Prologue). Rebellato claims that he does as asked when watching that particular scene in that particular play … but he never does it any other time. When being specifically asked to create a literal visual image of the fictional world, he does, but otherwise, when watching a play, he mostly just pays attention and understands from watching the events on stage what is supposed to have happened in the fictional world—this is what led him to his metaphor theory. In viewing theatrical representation as metaphor, we are accepting the idea that the experience of watching a play includes, along with some sense of absorption in the fictional world, sufficient distance from the fictional world to recognize the production as metaphor and to interpret the metaphor. So in Henry V, in that moment of being asked to do something unusual, Rebellato’s relationship with the chorus has changed somewhat; he is thinking about the play, choosing to visualize something he normally would not, because he is aware that an actor, addressing him directly, has asked him to. His
absorption in the fictional world of the play is reduced in favor of a more distanced moment of experience in the non-fictional world of the theater space. In fact, when we think about this moment in terms of intentional control over distance, Shakespeare’s ironic cleverness is evident: what is happening in this moment is that the Chorus appears to be asking us to adopt an unusually close relationship with the work—to close distance so much that we actually see, with our minds’ eyes, the narrated but otherwise absent horses. But the effect that this has is actually to open distance: the request itself makes us think not about the fictional world, but about how theater communicates that world, how theater works. In apologizing for the stage’s inability to create perfect mimetic illusions, couched as a weakness, the Chorus is actually taking advantage of one of the theater’s strengths: the way our relationship with the fictional world shifts back and forth so easily.

Combining Bullough’s distance with Rebellato’s idea of representation as metaphor gives us a robust description of how we engage with what we see on the stage. Using the events on the stage as guidance, we construct a fictional world with which we engage through a combination of imagining what that world must be like based on what we see on the stage and interpreting what that fictional world might mean for us in the real world. Changes in distance are, effectively, shifts in how much of our focus is on the events that we imagine to be happening in the fictional world and how much is on the events physically happening on the stage, or, put another way, shifts between the creative work of constructing the world and the interpretive work of understanding what it means. Talking about such shifts as distance frames the phenomenon as a spectrum of absorption along which we are constantly shifting.
The shifting of distance itself carries meaning—when we talk about the experience of seeing a play, we will sometimes talk more about the world itself, and sometimes more about what the play was “about.” That is to say, we will sometimes focus on the close distance aspects of our experience, and at other times on the more distant. In exploring how violence tells stories in drama, these constant shifts in aesthetic distance will come into play; my argument is that representations of violence do part of their work through deliberate control of these shifts—what I am calling “shock.”

**Shock**

This project originated in part from discussions about what we call “shock value”—a particular association of shock with violence which carries a principally negative connotation in media criticism. Thinking about what shock value might actually be led to my thinking about shock as a way to understand representations of violence. Shock value is an under-theorized critical concept—it finds far more use in popular criticism of media than it does in scholarly media criticism. All too often, the term is trotted out by a reviewer simply to mean “more violence than I personally like,” a usage I do not find particularly interesting or useful. I intend to propose a more useful definition and to explore how, and to what effect, violence can shock.

Before I can offer such a definition, however, we need to work through the basic questions of what shock is, and equally importantly what it is not, and to look at the ways in which the term “shock value” has been used.

Defining shock is challenging because shock is a visceral sensation, not always susceptible to a completely intellectual interrogation. That said, let us try to come to grips with what that sensation comprises. To begin with, the concept of shock value clearly has to do with
audience response; if we say that a representation of violence is shocking, we mean that someone was shocked by it. We might say that one spectator was shocked while another was not, but something cannot be shocking if no one was shocked. Shock *value*, on the other hand, is about the representation, not the audience—or, more specifically, it is about the artist’s intentions for the representation; when we say that something exists “purely for shock value,” we are explicitly talking about *why* the representation is the way it is. Trying to understand shock value is an exercise in working out what value shock might have to the practitioner.

What, then, is the nature of the visceral response, “shock”? Often, the word “shocking” is used to mean “extremely surprising,” but while shock *can* be surprising, and one can be shocked by a surprise, one can still be shocked by violence even in a war story or a thriller where it can hardly be unexpected. At other times “shocking violence” implies an extreme *degree* of violence, but again, a war story’s violence might be objectively extreme without being shocking. Another quality of shocking violence is suggested by the responses of the subjects of Morrison’s study which I discussed in Chapter 1. Recall, they found violence to be more shocking if, in context, it seemed unjustified, implying that when we are shocked by violence, there is an element of outrage—that is, we have the feeling that the violence is somehow wrong. That observation connects shock with distance, since if we are thinking about context and justification, we are, essentially, asking why the violence is the way that it is, and as I showed earlier in this chapter, asking questions about why something was represented the way it was (as opposed to being absorbed in the fictional world being represented) is a function of increased

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5 Obviously there is a pacifist position which sees *all* violence as wrong. For most people, however, violence can be justified in some circumstances. Violence, by Morrison, et al.’s account, is more shocking the less justified it seems.
distance. This line of reasoning seems to imply that “shock” involves a sudden increase in distance. Ben Brantley, chief theater critic for the New York Times, seems to support the idea that shock opens distance; in a series of columns on shock in the arts, he argues that “shock happens, still, and it’s usually a good thing, in that it forces us to rearrange our thoughts and reconsider conditioned responses … in such cases your first response is ‘You’re putting me on’; then ‘No, you’re serious’; then, with wonderment, ‘Hey, you’re, uh, the real thing’” (“Can Art Still Shock?” Sept 19). Such questions are characteristic of an increase in distance.

On the other hand, some critics talk about the way in which shocking violence can immerse us, will we or no, in the world of the play. Brantley’s reviews in the aforementioned column actually focus on distance; he writes about how a production of Sarah Kane’s Blasted “never allowed her audience any distance from her genuinely bleak worldview.” In his review of Philip Ridley’s Mercury Fur, which he called “savage and utterly gripping,” Brantley wrote, “rarely does a play leave me shaking these days” (London Theater Journal). Descriptions like “gripping” and “leave me shaking” seem to imply that, for him, the violence in those productions closed distance.

My claim here is that representations of violence always create these sudden shifts in distance, either drawing us in or repelling us. In many years of watching audiences watch fights, I sometimes see spectators lean far forward in their seats, viscerally affected by a particularly effective representation, their empathy for the characters sharpened to the point that they gasp or tense their muscles as the character they identify with hits or is hit. Meanwhile other spectators sit back or turn away, still viscerally affected, but for them that visceral effect serves to increase distance.
At this point I want to distinguish between “shock value” and “gratuitous violence.” It is reasonable to criticize an artist who one feels has represented violence just for the purpose of audience titillation when the violence did not serve the story—what I would usually call “gratuitous” violence. Worse yet, an artist might be unconcerned with their audience, and simply have represented violence because they themselves like violence; this criticism, especially in terms of violence against women, has been levelled against writers like Tracy Letts, and it is one that has to be answered by any artist who makes regular use of extreme violence. But gratuitous violence and shock value are qualitatively different; gratuitous violence does not have a purpose that serves the storytelling, while shock value means that the violence’s storytelling purpose was to shock. Gratuitous violence, by this account, has no shock value; violence will create shock, but if that shock does not serve the storytelling in some way, then it has no value. Distinguishing between gratuitous violence and shock value could be a way of understanding the pop-culture criticism of violence that exists “purely for shock value.” That specific phrase is rare in professional theater reviews, but it is not uncommon in amateur film blogs. Consider this criticism of the 2006 film Seed in a horror film column entitled 10 Horror Films That Exist Purely To Shock and Disgust, by Jesse Gumbarge:

A woman gets her head bashed in with a hammer in an endless sequence, just for the fun and shock value of it. A prolonged hatchet attack on an elderly woman is perhaps the film's most nauseating moment. And that's just the tip of the bloody iceberg! This is it—no message, no plot, no rhyme or reason. Gore and nastiness are plentiful, but they're just painfully gratuitous rather than truly shocking.

(Gumbarge)

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6 There is an ongoing discussion of the potential damage that representations of violence can do to those who consume them. For a good sense of where that discussion is, see Barker and Petley, Ill Effects: The Media Violence Debate.
Gumbarge is arguing that the acts of violence had no purpose—no value. For Gumbarge, that is not a “true shock,” which implies that there exists such a thing, and that it has some sort of value—it was this movie specifically whose shocks were not “true.”

What I find exciting here is that the term shock value might be ready for rehabilitation. While desperate handwringing about shock value seems misplaced, the term itself could have utility. We could use it to discuss what is gained by a given shock: what the shock value of a given representation of violence might be for a playwright or production.

**Embodiedness and Empathy**

So far, I have been arguing that representations of violence, in particular, create shock, without proposing an explanation of what makes such representations different from the host of other representations which the theater comprises. What is it about representations of violence specifically which might trigger a change in our absorption in the fictional world? I propose that it is because theatrical representation is enacted by bodies, and acts of violence are enacted, generally, on bodies. The embodied nature of theatrical representations of violence generates a particularly potent form of empathy, which can reduce distance significantly and suddenly.

Every theatrical representation is an action that stands in metaphorically for another action. In the case of violence, the metaphor is one of a body being forcibly altered. The violence, whether enacted or merely threatened, refers to a direct effect on the body of a character, physically affecting that body in a way which we imagine to be painful or injurious. Because actors are physically present in the theater, representing the field of the effect with their own bodies, what we see—especially in realistic mimetic illusions—is the painful or injurious effect being visited on the body of an actor. An audience’s natural response to this effect is to
identify themselves with any body they are watching and to imagine that feeling as if it were literally affecting their own bodies—an effect we usually call “empathy” (literally “in-feeling” but more commonly thought of as “feeling with”). Empathy with a fictional character is a function of very close distance, since generating distance is our ability to view an object as unable to hurt us and being presented with evidence of that object hurting someone else challenges our ability to create distance from the object. That is to say, when we see harm being done to a body, it makes it harder for us to behave as if what was affecting that body could not affect our own. So then, for example, seeing an actor’s body (representing Gloucester’s body) react to the pain when Cornwall plucks out Gloucester’s eyes can make us cringe as we think about what that would feel like. This is the basic effect which I have been calling “shock”: an audience member seeing an act of violence represented on stage experiences a sudden surge of empathy, rapidly closing distance.

Revolusion

As I have been arguing, sometimes shocking acts of violence can open distance, instead of closing it. While many theatrical practices can—and indeed are designed to—open distance, if shock opens distance, it does so in a unique fashion: shock opens distance by closing it. Violence can close distance very suddenly. Sometimes too suddenly and too much. When a representation of violence is sufficiently shocking, audience members have been known to faint or vomit. Physical reactions like that are examples of complete collapse of distance—that is the spectator’s

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7 Various scientific explanations for this effect have been proposed. While it is not my intention to delve into physiology, I have been following recent research into “mirror neurons”—a proposed mechanism by which a person watching another person’s experience triggers the same bodily response as the person experiencing it. This feeling is familiar to anyone who has cringed when watching someone else get kicked. The scientists studying these mirror neurons are literally researching the physiological explanation of empathy.
body literally being affected by the work.\textsuperscript{8} However, actual examples of such physical reactions, though much touted by press and publicity, are rare. Much more frequently, when it seems we are in danger of being too close to a work, we experience what I am going to call “revulsion”—we oppose the efforts of the work to draw us further in, and instead create a sudden increase in distance; we take ourselves away from the work and thereby out of danger. That is, we protect ourselves from such over-close distance by actively creating distance for ourselves. Extreme examples of these two possible responses can be seen in audience reactions to the 2014 Shakespeare’s Globe production of \textit{Titus Andronicus}. According to an article in the \textit{Independent}, “two to four people per performance either fainted or left feeling queasy” (Clark). This experience was so common that, according to the article, the house management had to develop a procedure for helping audience members to exit the theater with the least disruption to the show. Fainting is certainly an extreme closing of distance, while one would be hard put to find a more extreme version of actively choosing to open distance than actually leaving the theater during a performance. Less extreme ways in which we open distance for ourselves are surely more familiar and common—looking away, drawing back, or something as small as crossing our arms and leaning back in our chairs are all ways to actively create distance from a disturbing representation.

Technically, all distance is “actively created,” in the sense that it is created internally; we are the only ones capable of opening distance, since the ability to create distance—to consider

\textsuperscript{8} To simplify my earlier discussion of distance, we can think of opening or closing distance as a continuum. One endpoint is where distance “collapses,” where there is no distance, and the experience is physically affecting us. The other end of the spectrum is “breaking distance,” where distance opens sufficiently that we are no longer able to connect to the world of the play at all.
something aesthetically rather than as something which can physically affect us—is innate to us. However, I am making a distinction here between distance that we create in concert with the work, and distance we create in opposition to the work. By the former, I mean distance created at the suggestion of the production (as might be the case with Brechtian theater, for example). By the latter I mean cases where the production is trying to draw us in but we resist its suggestion. Revulsion could thus be understood as what happens when a representation which works to close distance ends up, for a given spectator, closing distance too much, and as a result that spectator recoils, opening distance for themselves, and therefore producing the opposite of its initial effect. Note that revulsion, though always working in opposition to the production, is not always working in opposition to the intent of the artists. Artists could want to cause revulsion—it is one way they might choose to open distance: by intentionally closing it too much. In a production which does this in order to make a point to the audience, I would want to discuss the shock value. If done simply because they can, we would be discussing gratuitous violence.

Revulsion is not the only possible distance-changing effect which the embodied nature of violence in the theater can have. If the violence is represented in a way which encourages an audience member to think about the effects of representation on the body of the actor rather than the character, that would open distance. Likewise, thinking about the means of representation rather than the subject of representation is an opening of distance. For representations of

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9 Shock is not the only thing that can open distance by trying to close it. For example, for people who don’t like audience participation, being directly and aggressively addressed by an actor can have a similar effect—something designed to bring audiences closer to the work instead ends up opening distance. Likewise, if an audience member’s initial worldview is deeply politically opposed to that presented by the play, distance would be harder to close. In a way, we could think of bad theater as working similarly—a production might want to create absorption but just be so poorly executed that the audience cannot engage with it; this too would be opening distance in opposition to the work.
violence, that could mean simply wondering how an illusion works—like a spectator at a magic show, wondering how the tricks work instead of experiencing wonder—or it could be a spectator considering what harm if any is being done to the actor. None of these is revulsion; revulsion is when the shock closes the distance so effectively we open it back up to protect ourselves. In both the case of spectators wondering how a violent illusion was accomplished and the case of audiences worried about the safety of the performers, any empathy created by the representation has already failed to close distance at all.

It might seem that concerns about the safety of the actor would be a prime issue in regards to staged violence, but I can find no recent example of audiences or critics discussing that as a distancing problem. That said, there is a particularly pernicious stage combat myth which claims that audiences do get “taken out of the play” by such concerns. Many choreographers teach that stage combat illusions should never be too realistic because we do not want the audience to worry about whether the actor was hurt. On the face of it, this sounds ridiculous—after all, no director would tell an actor not to cry too convincingly because they do not want the audience to worry that the actor is actually sad. Audiences know that they are at a play; even the most realistic illusion, when integrated into a play, is seen as a metaphor for events happening in the fictional world. My view is that this concern (which I have only ever heard from fight choreographers) is, in fact, unique to such specialists, perhaps because experts view their subject matter differently than laymen. That is to say, when a fight choreographer sees an illusion the mechanics of which they do not understand—that is, when something seems dangerous to them—one possible assumption they might make is that it *is* dangerous. That can create distance for the choreographer as they worry for the actor; a worry that is exacerbated by
the fact that actor safety is their professional responsibility. Non-experts are more likely, if they notice the means of illusion at all, to assume that the successful illusion works in a way that is safe, even if they do not know what that way is. As I said, I do not think that such concerns are common amongst audience members. The reason I include it here is that, even if it never happens with a lay audience, for choreographers it works as I have explained it: distance is created when those choreographers are thinking about what is happening to the bodies of the actors, rather than the bodies of the characters which those actors are representing.

While I have not seen any evidence that violence creates concerns about the actors’ bodies, I have seen that concern expressed in regards to one of the other big sources of shock in the theater: intimacy. Sex or nudity on stage can create a shock similar to violence, and in the United States, where sex is a bigger taboo than violence, the shock can be even more potent. As with violence, sex is a quintessentially embodied act. Because of this similarity, I want to look at a pair of columns written by critics about onstage sex, with the idea that what they say about shocking sex will also be true of shocking violence. Intimacy and violence are certainly different in many ways, and some of the concerns about intimacy do not apply to violence. For example, audiences often seem to be embarrassed by nudity, whereas they are rarely embarrassed by violence. But even there, there is a parallel which I feel is useful; the embarrassment seems to me to be a function of embodiedment. A naked character is represented by a naked actor, and the embarrassed spectator is shocked all the way into revulsion by empathy—imagining the embarrassment they would feel if it were their body. As Richard Schechner argues, “little overt sexuality is permitted onstage because the audience knows that what happens to the character also happens to the actor” (qtd. in Bennet 153). The point I want to focus on in this section is that
some critics seem to discuss nudity and onstage sex in terms of distance, while claiming not to be shocked, per se, but rather to have other concerns which create distance. I want to interrogate those claims in light of the way in which I am framing shock; even though there are differences between sex and violence, the critical discourse around sex will illuminate specific aspects of my theory of how embodiment creates empathy and shock.

In an article railing against onstage nudity in *American Theatre Magazine* in 2003, John Istel argues that it is the danger to the actor which makes certain representations unacceptable: “Unlike loud sound, direct address or scene titles, both fire and nudity can threaten the performer’s safety. And that immediately suspends an audience’s suspension of disbelief—or, put another way, takes spectators ‘out of the play’”(6). Istel is using Bullough’s language of distance, assuming essentially what I am arguing—that certain categories of representation always change distance, and by Istel’s account, they completely break distance, making any absorption in the fictional world impossible. Istel’s criticism matches what critic Chris Jones said in a 2013 *Chicago Tribune* column about sex on stage: “regardless of the nudity question, it sure is exceedingly difficult to watch a sex scene without thinking such questions as … ‘How does that actor feel about doing that?’ or, yet more distractingly, ‘Were they somehow talked into doing that against their better judgment?’ Only rarely does the truth of a scene survive” (1). For Jones, then, being forced to consider potential infringements of the integrity of an actor’s

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10 Note that Istel explicitly calls out fire and nudity as things that create absorption-destroying concern for actors—but does not mention fights. I see this as more evidence that normal audiences (including critics) do not find their absorption in the fictional world disturbed by too-realistic violence.

11 For Istel, opening distance is a categorically bad thing—again by his account, absorption is the only goal that theater can have; even as he references Brecht, he rejects the possible value of Brecht’s work. I disagree with that position, of course, but Istel’s tastes here do not affect the utility of his observations.
body completely breaks distance. So for both Jones and Istel sex always opens distance; this is definitely an effect of the embodied nature of theater, but it is not shock. When shock opens distance, it is through revulsion; that is, because extreme concern for the bodies of the *characters* as represented by the bodies of the actors brings the spectator so close that they are forced to open distance for themselves. The effect Jones and Istel claim to be writing about is different: by their account, they are not at all “too close” to the intimacy, rather they are so concerned for the bodies of the *actors* that they cannot be absorbed in the story of the characters.

Interestingly, at the end of the column, Jones proposes ways in which a production might mitigate the breaking of distance, and these are directly applicable to violence. They also belie Jones’s claim that he is not shocked by intimacy:

> It helps when there is some visual distance to frame the experience; when you don’t have other audience members as a backdrop; and when the sex session really, truly has something radically distinctive to say. (1)

Again Bullough’s language appears: Jones’ first proposal is that physical distance from the actors can mitigate the aesthetic distancing of the actor’s body. This is not a radical thought, of course: most audience members would presumably be less disturbed by a nude actor that they see from the second balcony of a big touring house than in a small storefront where the actor is close enough to touch. Bullough would agree. But, if more distance can solve Jones’s problem,

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12 It is possible that the political moment in which Jones was writing made onstage intimacy too close for him; Jones is a Chicago critic who is part of the discussion of abuses and power imbalances that is the Chicago theater community’s ongoing attempt to negotiate the #metoo movement’s important reforms. In 2013 one could reasonably fear that young, vulnerable actors were being coerced into performing nude scenes or sex scenes that they did not want to do. We are only now realizing just how common it was, and that only now is it becoming less so. But that would mean that concern over actor safety in sex scenes is, like the concern of fight choreographers for fighters on stage which I discussed earlier, primarily a concern of professionals, and not one common to audiences. In this case, it is the critic who is the professional, making his response inapplicable to the majority of his readers. However, in a post-Weinstein world, that concern might well be filtering into the general theater-going community. While politically, I would be happy if that were the case, ultimately, it does not affect my argument.
then it is not, after all, concern for the actors that is his problem; why would *more* distance fix a problem of too much distance? Similarly, why would not seeing other audience members make him less worried about the safety of the actors? Apparently, at least some of the time, Jones is shocked by intimacy after all. If that is the case, then his response would be an example of revulsion; it would not be that the representation was leading him to consider danger to the actor, but rather that in an attempt to distance himself from a representation that felt uncomfortably close, he reflexively turned to consider that danger.

When Jones talks about audience as backdrop, he is describing a common element of Chicago storefront theater. In those venues, spectators are often in a position to watch not only the play, but the other audience members’ reactions to the play. Small spaces, theater in the round, and especially cabaret or promenade style productions, where the conventional division between audience and performer collapses almost completely, all offer a kind of distance shifting. On the one hand, it is harder to shut out the awareness of the audience that forces us as audience to become more aware of fictionality—seeing audience members cannot help but remind us we are at a play. On the other hand, Artaud—and even more so Grotowski—were trying to collapse distance by dissolving the very distinction between audience and performer, and so plays staged this way appealed to them as distance-*closing* techniques.

Of course, as with any convention, once we get used to the presence of the rest of the audience we begin to include them as part of the experience of the play, and information gleaned from watching them begins to inform our interpretation of the play. Punchdrunk’s wildly successful *Sleep No More* leans into this awareness of the audience, performing in a sort of extended, dispersed promenade style, with parts of the show happening simultaneously in dozens
of rooms all over the venue, and audience members free to go wherever they want, see whatever parts of the performance they want, from whatever angle. Punchdrunk’s particular slant is to have the audience all wearing masks, which at once removes the ability to observe their facial reactions but strengthens their presence by making them part of the show. When watching (experiencing?) *Sleep No More*, we are watching a sort of ghost story being performed for ghosts. My point is that in theater that shocks, being able—or being forced—to watch people watch the play is another aspect of embodiedness, in the sense that the bodies of a significantly present audience become part of the performance.

This “meta-spectatorship”—wherein an audience is encouraged by production choices to include other spectators as part of the performance—could conceivably open distance as the meta-spectator is paying attention to events in the world of the theater rather than in the world of the play. However, in practice, meta-spectatorship is often used to close distance, in a powerful form of the embodied shock which I have been discussing. A spectator watching the physical signs of the effect of the representation on the bodies of other audience members sees that the representation is capable of having a direct effect on people, which closes distance for the meta-spectator. That is, if you are being shocked, watching other people also being shocked will increase your own shock. As an example of this feedback loop radically intensifying shock value, I want to discuss Actors Revolution Theatre’s 2006 production of William Mastrosimone’s *Extremities*, for which R&D Choreography designed the violence. It was one of the most immersive productions I have seen, and it was my first experience of this kind of intensification of the shock of violence due to the overt presence of the audience.
Extremities is set in a living-room where a woman defends herself against a would-be rapist and turns the tables on him, tying him up in the fireplace and torturing him. The play includes some brutally painful violence and sexual assault, which in most productions is shocking and sometimes revolting. However, the set for the Actors Revolution production allowed for a violence design which significantly intensified the discomfort that the violence engenders; the whole black-box space was transformed into the living room, with enough room for a single row of audience seating lining the walls of the living room, except for the two doors and the fireplace. This proximity to the violence meant that it was much harder for the audience to distance themselves. And more than simple proximity, the audience was inside the living room, rather than outside looking in, which created a sense of complicity in what was happening. Rather than keeping to the center of the small space, we staged the violence so that much of the fighting was placed on the edges of the room, very close to the nearest audience members (and still not that far from even the farthest audience member). This meant that at any given moment, part of the audience was watching a brutal act of abuse happening within arm’s reach while other audience members were watching that abuse happen at the very feet of one of their fellow spectators.

The audience became, in Jones’ terms, a backdrop for the violence. While audiences were processing the events in the fictional world, they were also watching other people in the audience processing the same information, and the reactions of the rest of the audience become part of the experience. Reactions varied; some audience members cringed and looked around, as if embarrassed that they did not know what to do. The desire to do something implies that they were experiencing the work at a very close distance. Other people sat, stone-faced, arms crossed,
perhaps concerned about what they looked like to other audience members. These audience members were creating distance for themselves, exactly as I suggested might happen in a situation where the distance got too close, and triggered revulsion. Watching other people watch the violence informs our own processing of what we and they are watching. In post-show discussion, some people said that they were forced to examine their own feelings—silently wondering how someone else could sit there within arm’s reach of an atrocity without intervening. Certainly, that kind of introspection is not indicative of absorption: a post-show discussion will always be distanced from absorption in the world of the play, as long as the spectator in question knows the play is over. But what they were discussing after the show is how absorbed they were during the performance: so absorbed that the line between characters in the play and spectators in the audience was blurred, if not erased entirely.

Empathizing with the Aggressor

So far I have been primarily discussing empathy with the victim of violence, that is, empathy as a response to a representation of violence generated by the embodied nature of the representation where the empathized body is the one upon which the violence is being enacted. Empathizing with the victim is the natural reaction, absent context; it is the body of the victim that is being altered so it would make sense that it is that body with which we identify. But that is hardly the only way it happens in theater. Often, we empathize with a character committing violence. The essential factor in determining the object of audience empathy will usually be empathy’s cousin, sympathy. As an artist, I find myself frequently talking about creating

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13 These two terms get defined differently by different people. For my purposes I am using what I think of as the least technical definitions—empathy is feeling something because you think that the object of empathy feels it,
illusions in terms of which characters the illusion will create sympathy for and how much. A particularly empathy-inducing illusion of harm visited upon a character towards whom we already feel sympathy will dramatically increase our sympathy for them. On the other hand, if we are sympathetic to the character inflicting violence, that sympathy might wane slightly if the violence they inflict creates too much empathy for the victim. The possibilities are too complex for discussion in the abstract; concrete and detailed discussions of this important consideration will, in fact, fill out the remainder of this dissertation. For the moment, let us just think about a few basic examples.

In the genre of the Western, it is canonical that the audience needs to hate the villain enough that by the end, we are happy to see him mercilessly killed. Why? Because if we do not have sufficient antipathy towards him, then such a brutal end might generate sympathy for him, thanks to the brutality being embodied. That is to say, the shock of the killing might shift sympathy in a way that could undermine the project of the work. A violence designer on a play in the Western genre should carefully consider the kind and character of the shock they are generating in that final killing to avoid such an undermining. Consider Oklahoma, where many audience members might already be skeptical that Judd “needs killing”—choreographing his death without making Curly into a murderer right at the end takes careful attention. On the other hand, in the Henry VI cycle, when Rutland is killed by Clifford, the production team usually wants a shift in sympathy; the audience initially feels awful for poor Clifford, who saw his father killed before his eyes a few moments earlier. The audience might be expected to be cheering for

while sympathy is feeling a favorable attitude towards the object of sympathy. In short, empathy is “feeling as” while sympathy is “feeling for” another.
Clifford right up until he slaughters the pre-teen Rutland, at which point the audience’s sympathy shifts suddenly and they are left to realize the futility and injustice of their previous desire for vicarious revenge … hopefully driving home that theme of the piece. An artist designing the violence in that scene would, again, want to carefully tailor the shock to do the work they intend.

It is easy to imagine cases in which we sympathize with the aggressor—protagonists of plays, with whom we are generally in sympathy, often attack other characters—and my theory of shock has to account for that. To be clear, when I refer to one character as “the aggressor,” I specifically mean in any given moment or for a specific illusion; in many fights on stage, several characters take aggressive actions. Sometimes one character will be the initial aggressor, and their victim will turn the tables and win the fight. So for example, in a reading of Act 3, Scene 1 of *Romeo and Juliet* as a whole, we would usually call Tybalt the aggressor, but in analyzing how the violence works, more specificity is required. If we were discussing the moment where Romeo kills Tybalt, for example, then I would refer to Romeo as the aggressor—one with whom, hopefully, we feel sympathy.

Obviously, there are many different possible scenarios, in some of which there is no bright line differentiating one character as aggressor and the other as victim. That said, on a move-by-move basis, it is usually clear that one person is inflicting violence on the other. Of course, even at that micro-choreographic level, there are exceptions, especially in realistic, choreographically dense fights.\(^{14}\) I have often choreographed two characters hitting each other

\(^{14}\) Choreographic density refers to how many “moves” an actor makes per unit time. A less dense fight often has the fighters “taking turns,” so that one character makes an attack, and the other responds, and then they switch. In real fights, both combatants are generally trying to act as frequently as possible, not waiting for their opponent to respond. In videos of knife attacks, for example, we often see that a victim is stabbed a dozen times in a few seconds—usually before they realize they have been hit the first time. This is one of the things that makes a fight seem realistic on stage, if it can be replicated.
simultaneously (something that happens in real fights all the time, especially with less experienced fighters who focus more on offense than defense). Nonetheless, I am going to continue to use the terms “aggressor” and “victim” as the best terms available, and as clear enough to make the point: sometimes we identify with a character who is hurt, other times we identify with a character doing the hurting.

Empathy with the aggressor results from some combination of the audience already being sympathetic to them and, often more importantly, unsympathetic to their victims. This circumstance means that we are already identifying with the aggressor when the act of violence is represented, and so rather than imagining what it would feel like to be hit, we imagine what it would feel like to be the one doing the hitting. Such an identification with the aggressor is still an embodied response—we are imagining what is happening to the body of the character as if it were happening to us, as demonstrated on and by the body of the actor. Our identification with an aggressor can be generated in different ways. In the simplest example, it is possible that we already think of the victim as a villain, and want them to suffer violence. If we have been anxiously awaiting their getting what they deserve, then we will easily identify with a character who gives it to them. In such a case, it is antipathy towards the victim that leads the audience to identify with the aggressor; this is the effect that I referred to earlier in Westerns. Alternately, we might watch a character getting hurt, and develop empathy (and therefore sympathy) for them based on that, and then continue to identify with them as they rise up against their attacker and strike them down. In such a case, it is sympathy with the aggressor that leads the audience to identify with them. There are, again, many possible ways in which a play could be set up so as to encourage the audience to identify with the aggressor; in some of the readings of plays which I
propose in later chapters, I will track who the audience is likely to identify with, and why, based on this concept.

**Non-Realistic Illusions and Non-Mimetic Representations**

So far in my discussion of embodiedment, I have been talking primarily about realistic, mimetic illusions. The same arguments which I have been making would still apply to non-realistic illusions or to non-mimetic representations. In Chapter 1, I worked through these definitions, promising that they would come up again, and they are important here because different kinds of representations of violence are embodied in different ways, and thus will create different kinds of shock, that is, different experiences of empathy and revulsion.

Let us first consider stylized (non-realistic) mimetic illusions. Such illusions are also embodied, of course—the violence is done to the body of the character, with the actor’s body still the canvas on which the metaphor is drawn, and the metaphor will still resonate with the audience as each audience member empathizes with the pain based on their own embodiedness. The difference is that the appearance of the effect of the violence on the body of the actor is less obviously similar to what the effect on a spectator’s body would be in the real world. There is still a resonance between the bodies of character and spectator; the effect on the character is the same as the effect would be on the audience member, if the violence happened to them. I will give close readings of mimetic representations of violence in Chapters 4 and 5, along with further exploration of the different character of the shocks they provide, only partly depending on whether the illusions are realistic or stylized. For now, the point is that they are embodied, and so still generate shock, though of a different character.
Let us also consider narrative representations of violence—ones where the violence is described by a character in speech, rather than being mimetically enacted. It is true that in narrative representations the body of the character upon whom the violence was visited is usually not present, and is not being damaged even if it is. However, even a narrative representation represents bodies doing damage to other bodies and when it is effective can still generate empathy.\textsuperscript{15} It is this phenomenon of a purely verbal description creating an effect on the listener which Hamlet marvels at in the Player—“What’s Hecuba to him or he to her, that he should weep for her?” (2.2.478). As an audience, we recognize that the Player was weeping for her, and his narrative description of her anguish hopefully affected us, too. My third chapter will discuss narrative representations and the different quality of the shocks they provide. For now, the point is that narrative representations of violence do have actors’ bodies creating the representation, and the violence they are representing is still imagined to have been done to the bodies of characters in the fictional world.\textsuperscript{16}

In both non-realistic and non-mimetic representations, however, the embodiedment is not as obvious and direct as it is in a realistic mimetic illusion. We might expect either to be potentially “less shocking” than realistic mimetic illusions. On the other hand, that expectation is why we sometimes say that narrative or stylized representations of violence can be “more effective.” The danger with realistic mimetic illusions is that, as I have theorized, there is a tension with embodiment: such illusions create empathy, but they also risk slipping into

\textsuperscript{15} The body of the victim is not always absent; for example, a character can narrate a violent experience they themselves have had in the past, or a character can relate the death of another character over that character’s corpse.

\textsuperscript{16} This is true even if the characters enacting the violence are not, or even have never been, onstage. The representation is being done by whoever is narrating the story, since the narration is the representation.
revulsion if the viewer is presented with something they can too easily see affecting them personally. A stylized or narrative representation does not offer a realistic enough illusion to trigger revulsion as readily, but can still offer a deeply empathetic experience.

I will test this theory of shock by examining the use of shocking violence in specific productions of two plays; Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’s *Gloria* (2015) and Danai Gurira’s *Eclipsed* (2009). I am basing my readings on the productions that I have seen in Chicago: Pegasus Theatre Chicago’s 2018 production of *Eclipsed*, for which R&D Choreography designed the violence, and Goodman Theatre’s 2017 production of *Gloria*, for which my sole involvement was as an audience member. Note that I am reading these specific productions and the choices that were made in each; different productions might make different choices which could lead to different readings.

**Gloria**

The first act of *Gloria* is essentially an office comedy set in a magazine office which is a thinly fictionalized version of the *New Yorker*, where Jacobs-Jenkins worked early in his career. We meet a group of assistant editors who are desperately trying to position themselves for advancement without, it seems, any of them doing any actual work. Dean staggers in, hung over because he was the only person who went to the housewarming party thrown the night before by office-weirdo Gloria. Kendra breezes in even later, having spent the morning shopping (“research for a story,” of course) and in short order heads out to Starbucks. Ani tries to co-opt a colleague’s column on a singer who just died, and Miles, the intern, who showed up before any of them, takes advantage of his last day to try to do some networking with Dean’s boss, Nan; at first it is with Dean’s approval, but that approval quickly turns to jealousy as Nan seems too
friendly to Miles. Lorin, a middle-aged fact-checker who is stuck in his soul-killing job, keeps trying to get the assistants to quiet down so that he can get some work done. The whole act is funny, poking fun at millennials’ work ethic, at the publishing industry, and at American work culture more broadly.

The last thing that happens in the first act, however, completely changes the tone of the play: Gloria comes in and shoots most of the office staff, and then shoots herself. She spares only Dean, presumably because he went to her party, and she fails to kill Nan, who locks herself in her office. Kendra survives by virtue of having left the office to get coffee. The violence is sudden and shocking. In the Goodman production, the violence illusions were extremely effective. The play calls for a shock, and the Goodman’s production came through with a mimetic representation of violence designed to maximize that shock. The gunfire was properly loud, and when Gloria comes onstage, shooting Miles and then, spectacularly, shooting Ani in the head, there is blood everywhere, including an impressive illusion of an exit wound; the back of Ani’s head spraying blood on the glass door of Nan’s office before Ani drops to the floor behind a desk, leaving just the blood on the door and wall as evidence of her existence. After shooting everyone she can, Gloria finishes the act by shooting herself.

The pacing of the shooting was designed to maximize shock—Gloria moves quickly, not leaving time between shots for the audience to register each one before the next one comes off, but she does not run; rather, she makes long strides while maintaining a relaxed, intentional posture. That kind of movement is more frightening than a run; Gloria was not panicked, she was intent. The audience, like the characters involved, have no time to understand what they are
seeing as it happens—by the time the audience began to process what was happening it was all
over, and the house lights were coming up for the act break, to a stunned silence.

The second act is about aftermath, and is set some time after the incident. Kendra and Dean meet for the first time since the shooting. Each is working on a version of the story for publication. Each has put their own spin on the events, as they deal with their different versions of survivor’s guilt while trying to cash in on the notoriety of the shooting, and they are still competing—ostensibly over how they will appear in each other’s books, but more deeply, about whose story it is, and who should get to tell it. Nan decides to write her own version of the story. Lorin is still shaken, but is also appalled that Nan, who barely knew Gloria (and who barely remembers him), feels entitled to tell Gloria’s story, though he himself is trying to get away from the story entirely. This act is completely different in tone. While there are occasional laughs, the mood is generally more somber. The issues are more serious. The two acts are not unconnected; the shooting creates a sharp change in tone, but the play still represents a single action. The shooting certainly changes the characters’ lives, but the play is still about them, the characters, and who those people are is not changed by their violent experience, merely illuminated by it.

What is the work being done by that shooting? The violence there is certainly surprising, but more importantly, it is shocking. The violence was brutally represented, and while the production had not made the characters completely sympathetic, I suspect that most spectators would not have said that the violence was justified; these are the ingredients for shock, as I laid them out in my first two chapters. As far as I could tell from both reviews and from observing audience response at intermission and during a post-show talk-back, most audience members seemed to experience revulsion; the violence was so shocking that we were forced to distance
ourselves. They were not shocked entirely out of the play, but the distance was opened significantly—forcing the audience to think about what the play was doing, rather than living, as it were, inside the fictional world. The violence’s placement—becoming the climax of the first act, leading directly into the act break—was certainly calculated to intensify this effect; the audience is forced to open distance, and then immediately released from the fictional world, so that the distancing of the shock is carried into the intermission.

As an audience member, I found myself sitting through half the intermission, replaying the entire act as I re-evaluated *what kind of play this is*. I was not alone—I had the pleasure of eavesdropping on other theater-goers who were having the same conversation. Reviewers as well found the intermission conversation interesting; Kevin Greene, writing for *NewCity Stage*, also reported on “the people I overheard in the lobby after the mortifying first act describing what they saw as ‘interesting.’ How impressively capable we are of managing trauma. Or perhaps, more frighteningly, how great is our capacity to detach and defer emotionally” (Greene). Greene is responding to exactly the kind of shock I am talking about—shock that opens distance, forcing (or at least leading to) a more objective relationship with the art. Greene seems to be critical of the audience—he describes our capacity to distance ourselves (in his words, “detach and defer emotionally”) as “frightening,” disparaging the audience for their reaction. My read of the situation, even as Greene describes it, was that the audience was *deeply* attached—so deeply that they were forced to manage that attachment in the ways that he describes. As Bullough argues, both objective and distanced responses can still be deeply personal, and the popularity of the play, along with Greene’s own glowing review, suggests that the production created exactly that kind of objective but personal response.
That the play must shock to work as he wants it to is clearly important to Jacobs-Jenkins; the Goodman production, in cooperation with Jacobs-Jenkins’ wishes, issued a sort of “gag request” to critics. Lawrence Bommer, writing for Stage and Cinema, actually quoted the request in his review: “In the hopes of maintaining the integrity of the experience of Gloria for our patrons, the playwright [MacArthur “genius” winner Branden Jacobs-Jenkins] and the director [Evan Cabnet] respectfully request that those writing about the show please refrain from including revealing aspects of the plot” (Bommer, brackets and their contents in the original). This is an unusual request and resulted in reviews that were not nearly as effective as usual, either in terms of their value as dramatic criticism or as marketing, since most reviewers shied away from any details about how powerful the play was, and some completely avoided any discussion of the events and themes in act 2, as well as the shooting, making the play sound like a light comedy. In my view, avoiding “spoilers” was unnecessary, but rather was the result of the production team’s mistakenly conflating shock and surprise. I had read the play before seeing it, and so I was not surprised, but I was definitely shocked. For me, and for many people I heard talking at intermission or at the talkback after the show, the shock did its job of making the audience think about how we handle trauma, which is one of the themes of the play. While the violence in Gloria is both shocking and surprising, it is the shock, not the surprise, that does the work.

Eclipsed

In Eclipsed the violence is shocking, but not surprising. The play tells the story of the four wives of a Liberian warlord during the second Liberian civil war (1999-2003) against Charles Taylor. Women, in the world of the play, are a commodity—spoils of war taken by
powerful men for themselves or for less important soldiers to share. The wives have no names at first, and even when their old pre-war names are mentioned, they still usually refer to themselves and each other by their order of marriage, Number One, Number Two, and Number Three, which is also their ranking within the hierarchy of the ever-present but never seen CO. The newest wife, at first simply called “The Girl,” becomes Number Four. In some ways, the position of wife to the “CO” (Commanding Officer) is a privileged one; the wives get first pick of some of the other spoils of war, for example. But there is conflict between the wives as well, as they jockey for small privileges, seeking in their own ways to create an identity separate from their jobs of cooking for and having sex with the CO. Wife Number Two has managed to take some agency by becoming a soldier herself. The Girl eventually joins Number Two and learns to kill, explicitly to free herself from the CO’s sexual appetite.

Since the play is set in a war zone, we are not surprised that there is violence, both outside the group of the CO’s wives, and within. When The Girl goes off with Wife Number Two to become a soldier, the audience is presumably rooting for her—she is, after all, taking ownership of her situation in a way which seems positive. But when we see The Girl in her first firefight, it is deeply disturbing. During a raid, Number Two coerces The Girl into shooting a group of villagers who may, or may not, be Taylor supporters. The Girl questions what these particular villagers did to deserve being killed and asks why they can’t simply let the villagers run away. Number Two browbeats her into shooting and teaches her to be able to murder people by explicitly training her to dehumanize her victims. The Girl reluctantly agrees and shoots the villagers. We based our violence design for that show in the theory of shock which I am
developing here; in walking through the decisions that the team made, I hope to show the value of that theory.

Part of our discussion with director Ilesa Duncan was couched in terms of what we wanted the shock to do. While we anticipated that audiences thinking back on the moment afterwards would discuss the political and social issues addressed by that encounter, in the moment of watching it, we wanted the audience to shudder, imagining what it would be like to be faced with that dilemma themselves. The challenge was to make sure that audience empathy was with The Girl, but that the audience did not sympathize with her killing the villagers—we should be appalled at her actions, but still empathize with her situation. That required some shock, but not too much, since we did not want spectators to feel revulsion. One way we balanced the shock was to put The Girl at the center of the visual focus—not precisely centerstage, but not far from it. The villagers whom she was shooting needed to be offstage, since they weren’t part of the cast.\(^\text{17}\) The victims being offstage worked well for our purposes since, as I have said, watching the effects of violence on the subjects is especially shocking, and if the audience was watching even unnamed bodies being hit by bullets, our focus—and our empathy—would shift away from The Girl. Designing the scene required careful thinking about who exactly the violence would create empathy for.

Earlier, I outlined the difference between representations of violence which create empathy for the victim and those where we empathize with the aggressor. At first glance, it seems like that is what is happening—we are empathizing with The Girl, who is the one doing the killing. But our empathy with her doesn’t seem to have the same quality as the empathy I

\(^{17}\) I will go into some depth looking at the effects of offstage and partly-offstage violence in Chapters 4 and 5.
described earlier, where we want her to do the violence, and so when she does, we feel with her. Instead, it seems to have the same quality as empathizing for a victim—something horrible is happening to The Girl, which we are imagining happening to us. What we realized, in doing this kind of analysis, is that The Girl is the central node of a bilevel chain of violence in this scene. She is the perpetrator of a shooting, killing the anonymous villagers, but she is also the victim of Wife Number Two’s violent threat—she is coerced into shooting these strangers through the threat of force; not that Number Two is directly threatening to harm her, but the clear threat is that if she cannot bring herself to kill, she will be sent back to her life as the CO’s sex slave.

What we needed to do as designers, then, was to keep the focus on The Girl as victim of the coercion, while not appearing to forgive her for killing the villagers. To represent this delicate arrangement, we chose to have The Girl take aim and then look away before firing. Here we were taking advantage of a real phenomenon; many novice shooters unconsciously look away or close their eyes just before pulling the trigger. As she looks away, her rifle drifts slightly, and Wife Number Two roughly pushes it back to target. The Girl, rebuked, fires and Wife Number Two jerks her hand away from the barrel, leaving the audience looking, over the stock of the rifle, at The Girl’s mortified face. This staging showed both The Girl’s reluctance to shoot and the violence underlying The Girl’s relationship to Wife Number Two. In this way, the shock was being generated by sympathy for The Girl, creating empathy in spectators watching her body go through these several responses to the violent threat.

Another consideration in the staging was to decide where “offstage” the villagers would be placed. That is, where The Girl’s aiming point should be. Because of the design of the set, the best spot to place The Girl and Wife Number Two was slightly right of center, where they could
use a piece of stage architecture for “cover” while shooting. An obvious option, then, would be to have target offstage left. However, this was unsatisfactory in two ways—first, it is not a very dynamic stage relation; it is somewhat “flat.” Further, the theater we were producing in had no stage left wings—the exterior wall of the theater was the edge of the playing space on that side, which would make it harder for the audience, looking at The Girl pointing her rifle at a wall only fifteen feet away, to imagine a distant target. We considered having her face directly into, or above, the audience, but decided that would be unnecessarily disturbing for the audience, creating distance in an undesirable manner. What we settled on (after trying these various options) was to fire above the audience and across, targeting a point on the house left wall that was behind and past the audience and in the dark, so that it would be neither shooting a blank wall nor shooting the audience themselves. One virtue of this arrangement was that when The Girl’s aim began to drift, her rifle (the ubiquitous and also frighteningly large AK-47) was drifting towards the audience, which created a small additional shock.

It is, of course, hard to know exactly how successful these choices were; reviews of the show mostly do not discuss the violence. However, we can view that critical silence as a success if the goal was to create a shock that closed distance without collapsing it, rather than opening distance. After all, if the purpose of close distance is to encourage absorption in the fictional world and the emotional state of the characters, then if the violence design were successful we would expect reviews to talk about the difficult choices that The Girl faced, while reviews that talked about the violence would indicate a design failure. The violence in the shooting scene was designed, as I said, to draw attention away from the victims of the killing, and focus on the pressure brought to bear on The Girl to be a killer. In fact, reviews did talk about that pressure in
exactly the way we wanted them to; *Picture This*'s review proclaimed that “as much as these women appear to have some control of their lives, it becomes clearer and clearer they don’t have much say in the matter. The choices they make are not ones made freely, but rather what minimal choices they can make” (Bugajski). The theater review website *The Fourth Walsh* reads “Morayo Orija (Rita) and Adhana Reid (Maima) offer opposite opinions on how to reclaim life’s dignity. Orija teaches a hesitant Prentiss to spell her name. Reid teaches a damaged [Girl] to kill” (Walsh). Of course, the moment of choice for The Girl is supported by other production elements, and is central to the script, so the violence is only one part of the interpretive machine. That said, it seems as if the violence design did its part.

What I presented here is my reading of each of these specific productions; different productions might make different choices which would lead to different readings. The point is that thinking about what the shock value of a particular representation of violence is can inform a critic’s reading of a production and thinking about the shock value can inform a production team’s decisions. It is to these two uses that I intend to put the idea in the final three chapters of this dissertation.

The rest of my dissertation will be engaged in a process of working out how specific representations of violence function within the framework which I have theorized in the last two chapters. I will take as my assumptions the ideas I have presented. First, representation as a metaphor for actions taking place in a fictional world. Second, my conception of violence as a specific category of represented actions characterized by the intentional harm or threat of harm in order to force or coerce a change in the state of that fictional world. Third, an audience relationship with the fictional world characterized by aesthetic distance. And fourth, a quality of
representations of violence, called shock, which is their ability—granted through the embodied natures of both theatrical representation and acts of violence—to rapidly decrease aesthetic distance through empathy (and possibly open it through revulsion) and thus radically or subtly alter sympathy. Under this set of assumptions I will explore specific examples of representations of violence, using actual performances in some cases and theoretical performances of plays in others, to tease out the dramaturgical value of the violence to the play, with special—though not exclusive—attention to the shock each generates, in hopes of better understanding the poetics of the violence, and thus providing a functional framework for analysis of shock, and violence more broadly, to critics and practitioners alike.
CHAPTER 3

NARRATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF VIOLENCE

Why Narration?

When we think of theatrical representations of violence, we tend to imagine mimetic action: swashbuckling swordfights, brutal beatings, or gory murders played out onstage by actors with athleticism and power using stage blood and other special effects. These mimetic representations are a mainstay of the theater and have been for much of its history. However, narrative representations of violence are extremely common in the theater, so we must not overlook narration as a way to represent violence.

There are many reasons why a dramatist would choose to have an act of violence narrated rather than enacted mimetically. Some of these reasons are cultural: Attic tragedy, though rife with acts of horrific violence, rarely represented those acts in view of the audience. However, even for cultures that enjoy mimetic representations of violence, narration is still an important tool. Shakespeare was certainly not shy about staging devastating damage to the bodies of his characters; in the Shakespearean canon, eyes are gouged out, tongues torn, hands and even heads removed. And yet many of Shakespeare’s most powerful representations of violence are narrative. The same is true of twentieth- and twenty-first century playwrights. Martin McDonagh, as much a fan of brutal bloodshed as any Jacobean, leavens even his ferociously realistic enacted violence with narrations, some of which are as chilling—that is, as shocking—as anything he shows on stage. To understand why, we should consider the different character of
the shocks that narrative representations deliver to an audience. Narrative violence is capable of doing many different kinds of dramatic work.¹

Before we look at the various kinds of work that narration is particularly well equipped to do, I want to discuss the essential qualities of narration. In Chapter 1 I demonstrated that we do not have a bright-line division between narration and mimesis on stage. That hasn’t changed, and it is going to be important to recognize that what I am discussing as narration has mimetic aspects. In the chapter on mimesis, there will be aspects of narration that carry over from this chapter. I choose to view such fluidity as a virtue of the theater, not as a problem.

Limiting Shock

As I suggested in Chapter 2, one virtue of the character of narratively delivered shock might be that it brings less risk of the revulsion which accompanies over-closing distance through empathy. We might say that narration can limit the degree of distance-closing which the shock of a representation of violence delivers. In a play like *Oedipus the King*, that could be seen to be the principle virtue. A moment ago, I said it was a cultural effect that fifth-century Greek theater did not usually put acts of violence in direct view of the audience, but rather reported them—few Attic tragedies clearly stage violence, but the existence of scenes like Ajax’s suicide in *Ajax*, or Aegisthus’s beating in *Electra* shows that the preference for narrative violence was a matter of aesthetics or production practicalities rather than a religious or legal prohibition. In *Poetics*, Aristotle offers a possible explanation of why that cultural habit existed in the first place. His central claim is that through pity and fear tragedy effects the purgation of those

¹ In this chapter, I will continue to discuss specific productions as well as playscripts. However, I will have less recourse to productions which I personally have been involved in, since as a violence designer, it would be odd to be asked to design a narrative representation; traditionally that is the work of the actor and director. Violence designers generally design illusions, which are mimetic not narrated.
emotions (VI). If the goal of tragedy is catharsis, then there is presumably an ideal level of distance. Much like Bullough (who was obviously familiar with Aristotle), Aristotle would want the minimum distance required for the maximum cathartic effect without the collapse of distance which would, presumably, ruin the effect as audiences suffer revulsion and either succumb to physical effects of the violence, or protect themselves by creating excess distance, neither of which would accomplish catharsis.

Aristotle’s favorite play, Oedipus, features some extremely effective violence represented through narration. At the end of the play, after the strange twists of fate (and plot) are unraveled and Jocasta and Oedipus are faced with the knowledge of what they have done, they visit horrific harm upon themselves as described by a courtier:

How, distraught with anger, she passed through the hall
And threw herself instantly upon her bridal bed,
Ripping her hair out with fingers of both hands;
…
How, after this she perished: that I still don’t know.
For Oedipus burst in. His shouts prevented us
From watching all her troubles to the bitter end,
For we were watching him as he wandered about.
…

He, roaring fearfully, as if
some force were leading him, then hurled himself against

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2 I am ignoring the argument which could be made here that since Aristotle considered spectacle to be the least important aspect of drama, he was arguing against staged violence’s effectiveness. I ignore that argument because I read Aristotle differently—in my view, Aristotle was not claiming that spectacle was not important to theater, merely that, as he says, “Spectacle, though fascinating in itself, is of all the parts the least technical in the sense of being least germane to the art of poetry … in the realization of the spectacular effects the art of the property man counts for more than the art of the poets” (VI). That is to say, Aristotle, writing for poets about how to write a tragedy, did not consider spectacle to be that important for a writer.

3 Of course how my argument here works depends in part on how I think Aristotle meant “catharsis”. I find Leon Golden’s argument on the term compelling: that what Aristotle means is a moment of insight, or “intellectual clarification (26). Working with that definition, Aristotle would be saying that tragedy uses incidents arousing fear and pity to give audiences insights to those emotions. Under that meaning the insight, though intellectual, is gained by arousing the emotions in the audiences—an effect of close, but not too close, distance. However, even for those who subscribe to the “purgation” theory of catharsis, the same logic would apply, since presumably, the therapeutic effects of tragedy would require maximal absorption without falling into revulsion.
the double entrance, bent and burst the hollow doors
and plunged into the room. And there we saw his wife
inside, hanging entangled in a noose of woven cords.
On seeing her, the poor wretch, bellowing fearsomely,
released the strangling rope. And then, poor thing she lay
upon the ground. What followed was fearsome to see.
He tore from her and from her robes the long-pinned, gold
brooches that kept her garments draped, then raised them up,
then struck and orphaned the moving orbs of his own eyes …

…
Not once, but many times
he chanted his lament and raised his hands to strike
clear through his eyelids. Blood-red globules soaked his beard,
pulsing, not oozing rheum of murdered eyes, but a dark rain
of gore plumped-out like hail that wholly drenched the man. (183-184)

Audiences are, one hopes, deeply sympathetic to both Jocasta and Oedipus for their respective
losses. That sympathy, though existing already from their previous actions in the play, is
intensified by the twin acts of violence—the Queen’s suicide and the King’s self-blinding.
Certainly, part of the audience’s sympathy arises from their understanding of the tragic situation,
but it is the characters’ responses to being in that situation—the hanging and the blinding—
which generate the visceral response, creating the deep empathy for which the play is justly
famous. The narration is explicit, and full of potent images: the description of Oedipus’s blinding
is gory—he strikes “clean through his eyelids”—language like this is calculated to evoke
empathy, as the audience imagines what that must feel like, imagines the gore dripping down
their own faces in “a dark rain of blood-red globules.” The image of the queen “ripping her hair
out with fingers of both hands” is easy to visualize in its detailed specificity. The image is rich in
symbolism because the violence is explicitly described as being done lying on the bed she shared
with both Laius and Oedipus; symbolism that is clear both to the audience and to the
participants. Sophocles’s technique of supporting imagery with symbolism continues when
Oedipus bursts through the door and finds her. She is not only hanging, but hanging in a tangle
of woven cords, evoking both the weaving that is “women’s work” even for a queen, and also a marionette—for is Jocasta not the puppet of the gods? The sense of helplessness evoked by the tangled-up-puppet image increases the pathos, and therefore the effectiveness of the violence, because of the apparent injustice. While I am not making any claim about what an ancient Greek audience would have felt, my experiences seeing the play and teaching it to undergraduates leads me to believe that a modern audience tends to be sympathetic to both Oedipus and Jocasta. Some spectators might cast some doubt on their choices, but they do not usually hold either character to be entirely responsible—the situation is not wholly their fault. Thus the violence done to them seems more shocking to us than it would be if they were wholly to blame, as I have previously demonstrated.\(^4\) The combination of graphic images with symbolism sets the audience up to have the cathartic reaction which Aristotle advocates, or at least to visualize these characters’ bodies coming to harm in ways which we imagine being enacted upon ourselves, and shudder in gratitude that it was them and not us.

As I argued in Chapter 2, it is embodiedness which makes that shudder happen. The courtier himself tells us that such sights are shocking: “Seeing this pain is such a fearsome thing/For humans, the most fearsome sight/That I have ever seen” (185). Even though the audience does not see the bodies killed or maimed, being told about it is enough. In this case, those two bodies—Jocasta and Oedipus—have been present for the whole play. The bodies of the actors playing them have metaphorically represented the bodies of the characters to us. The audience knows them; there has been plenty of time to become familiar with them and to become sympathetic to them. If my theory is valid, then when the audience is told about the harm those bodies inflict upon themselves, spectators’ own bodies should react with empathy. Narration

works brilliantly here. Because the whole play has led to this action, and because the plotting is so powerful and intricate (as Aristotle argues), the audience is primed already for a powerfully cathartic experience. If they saw the hanging, or perhaps worse, the self-blinding (especially if it were represented by a realistic mimetic illusion), the audience might not be able to maintain sufficient distance to be moved aesthetically—they might instead experience revulsion.

Narration, on the other hand, can protect the audience to some extent from crossing their own individual border between empathy and revulsion. When an act of violence is narrated for an audience, they tend to imagine the action only to the degree to which they are comfortable doing so. This variability is a kind of “shock absorber” which allows the same representation to vary in intensity for different audience members.

Of course the degree of shock experienced will always vary from one audience member to another; some people are more sensitive to suggestion than others, and for some people, even a verbal account of a woman killing herself might be too “close to home.” That is, such an audience member might, on hearing the description, fashion for themselves an image by which they themselves are revolted. But for the most part, Sophocles could reasonably expect that the narration would move his audience to fear and pity, without collapsing distance completely.

**Putting the Focus on Non-Participants: Theoretical Macbeths**

Narrative representations can be used to do more than just avoid revulsion. Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* opens with one exciting and important battle and closes with another. While the final battle is staged and features several exciting fights and some great speeches by the characters involved, the opening battle is narrated. Obviously, Shakespeare is not shy about staging great battles, whatever protestation (too much, methinks) the Chorus of *Henry V* makes in the prologue to that play. The battle that opens *Macbeth* features two of its primary characters: Macbeth
himself and Banquo. The deeds they do together in that battle set up the events of the play. So why not open with the action?

One possible reason would be to limit shock in the opening because the audience does not yet, at that point, have sympathy for Macbeth. While sympathy for him wanes over the course of the play, the audience needs to admire him at first, at least so that there is somewhere for sympathy to shift from. If the play opens with a battle featuring these two expert killers plying their trade, it is conceivable that the audience could sympathize with their victims. The narration sets up audience sympathy for Macbeth through the naked admiration exhibited by both narrators and narratees. Thus the audience hears about Macbeth’s killing of “The merciless Macdonald—worthy to be a rebel/For to that the multiplying villainies of nature/Do swarm upon him” and that “Brave Macbeth—well he deserves that name … unseamed him from the nave to th’ chops” (*Macbeth*, 1.2.9-22). This image is shocking, so could potentially create empathy with the victim. However, because the narrator tells us that Macbeth is brave and Macdonald is a villain, the deed instead encourages the audience to empathize with Macbeth, the killer, by the mechanisms I described in Chapter 2 in the section on empathizing with the aggressor. A few scenes later Macbeth tells his wife, “I have bought golden opinions from all sorts of people/Which would be worn now in their newest gloss/Not cast aside so soon,” (*Macbeth*, 1.7.32-35). Though he will cast it away almost immediately, he should at that point in the play still have the golden opinion of the audience.

Limiting shock to keep audience sympathies in the right place is a compelling reason, but in my view there is another even more compelling reason that the play opens with a narrated battle. Of course, there is no way to know for certain what Shakespeare’s reasoning was, but we can at least look at what the play does by narrating instead of showing. Through the narration the
audience learns of the heroic deeds of Macbeth and Banquo, the rebellion of Macdonald, the opportunistic attack of the King of Norway, and the treachery of the Thane of Cawdor. Exposition which the audience needs in order to make sense of the rest of the play, certainly, but which they might have gotten through mimetic enactment instead of narration.

In looking to see what narration can do more effectively than mimesis, narratologist James Phelan’s definition of narration is going to come in handy, despite the fact that narratology often ignores or gives short shrift to drama. Phelan defines narration as “somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion and for some reason, that something happened to someone or something” (Phelan et al. 33). This definition will be useful as a sort of list of elements of narration, each of which might be relevant to a discussion of any given act of narration: narrator, narratee, occasion, purpose, and object.

The first two parts of Phelan’s definition seem particularly relevant to the opening battle in Macbeth. Somebody telling somebody else: Phelan wants us to ask who narrates the battle, and to whom they are telling the story. There are two different narrators in the second scene of Macbeth: an unnamed “Bloody Captain” and Ross, each of whom is coming from a different part of the battle. Neither is a particularly important character, though in consideration of violence, it is worth noting that the Captain is seriously wounded (“But I am faint, my gashes cry for help”) and has to leave, making way for Ross who finishes the story (1.2.42). The King comments on the wound, seeing it as a badge of honor, “So well thy words become thee as thy wounds/they smack of honor both” (1.2.43-4). Ross is not described as being injured, which might throw doubt upon his own honor. He is reporting on the successful end of the battle, so while that difference between the narrators could be brought out in performance, it could equally be left alone. If Ross is uninjured but covered with the blood of his foes, that would tell a different tale
than if he were clean and uninjured. Another choice the producers might make is to have him badly injured, but with wounds already dressed—perhaps with his arm in a sling or his throat bandaged and a rasp in his voice. The point is that while in mimetic representations we only get information about the active participants, in narrative representations, the identity of the narrator can give us a great deal of information about the context of the violence. Each of the costuming choices I have just suggested tells the audience something different about Scotland as it exists in the fictional world of Macbeth. Note that already we are seeing a blend of mimesis and narration; these costuming choices are various ways to mimetically represent the character who is providing the narrative representation of violence. As I argued in chapter 1, narration cannot usually be achieved in the theater without mimesis. So much for the narrators. In my view, an even more interesting question is who the story is being told to.

In one sense, the audience for the narration within the play is the audience of the play. That is how exposition works—someone may be telling someone else, but the purpose is to convey the information to the audience in the theater as much as to the audience within the world of the play. However, the reason that Phelan makes a point of it right away in his definition, putting the narrator and narratee before the events being narrated, is that it matters who is telling the story, and it matters who the story is being told to within the fictional world. In Macbeth, the fictional audience is King Duncan and his sons Malcolm and Donalbain. While production choices can make more or less of the issue, in any production the audience will see that the royal family is not directly involved in the battle. Their sympathies, from this first moment, will start to align based on this non-participation. When they hear that brave Macbeth “Like Valor’s minion, carved out his passage/Til he faced the slave;/Which ne’er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him/Till he unseamed him from the nave to th’ chops/And fixed his head upon our
battlements,” the audience might be expected to compare this bold action to the King’s doing nothing to aid the battle but receive reports (I.II.19-23). If spectators are told that Macbeth is what “brave” looks like, they might look for a different adjective with which to mentally tag the King and his sons.

A production might work to minimize this in several different ways. Perhaps Duncan is very old—too old to fight, even for a Scotsman. That might excuse him, but it would throw more blame on his sons; if he is that old his sons should be at least young adults—why are they not fighting? Alternatively, the scene could be set up as a command post, with messengers coming and going, maps laid out on tables, and so on. Such a choice could mitigate the problem of sympathy somewhat, but the very fact that such choices have to be made to mitigate the problem demonstrates that the problem exists; part of what Shakespeare gains by representing the battle narratively is that he can show mimetically that Duncan, Malcolm, and Donalbain are not fighting in it. There is a contrast here to the final battle of the play, where the leaders of both sides—Macbeth and Malcolm—are fighting. Macbeth may be a violent, corrupt sociopath who sends murderers to kill women, children, and his best friend … but he does fight his own battles.

**Narrating Mimesis**

Contemporary directors will often look for ways to make narration more “exciting,” and sometimes that results in the decision to replace narrated violence with enacted. While as a violence designer I enjoy the opportunity to choreograph an extra fight, as a dramaturg of violence I think it is important to discuss why the violence was written as narrative and how those purposes might be achieved through the violence design. Such considerations are especially important in cases where one dramaturgical function of the narration is to limit shock, since switching from narration to mimesis will generally increase the shock. If the function of the
narration within the text was to take the focus off the perpetrators and victims of the violence and put it on the narrators and in-world audience of the narration, as I argued it is for Act 1, Scene 2 of Macbeth, then the shock created by the representation needs to be controlled in some other way. Shock is so effective because it transports us rapidly closer to the perpetrators or to the victims of violence—to the bodies which are being affected. If the attention is to be directed elsewhere, the focus on those bodies has to be minimized.

To return to the example of Macbeth, a staging of the opening battle which replaced Scene 2 would have to take into account what, in that scene, the director wanted to preserve, and the staging would then have to represent it mimetically. Obviously, at minimum, the facts of the battle itself would be represented: Macbeth and Banquo heroically defeating the enemies of King Duncan. From the narration we know that those enemies are McDonald and the King of Norway, supported by Irish mercenaries. If the production team decided that the specific identity of the enemy was important, then some way to mimetically represent that information would need to be found. Perhaps their heraldry would be sufficient, if the audience could be expected to recognize the Norwegian flag. Or their battle-cries might include their identity (“For Norway!”). However, it would be worth discussing whether it really matters at all who the enemy are. The information is necessary to the narration, but perhaps not to the play itself. That is to say, in the narration, identities need to be spelled out so that the narrated events can be imagined, and also because realistically, that is how narration would go—you could not have a battle-messenger arrive to say, “Macbeth killed some people, then some other people came and attacked, but Macbeth killed them too.” But in fact that narration, though it would not make sense in words, is really all the story requires us to know, and if mimetically represented could make perfect sense to an audience. Macbeth and Banquo are brave and deadly.
In my view, the major issue to consider in replacing a narrative illusion with a mimetic one is that a mimetic representation of the battle will necessarily put the focus squarely on the heroes of that battle—if a director still wants to include some characterization of Duncan and his sons, it would have to be creatively done, or else moved to scene 4 where the audience would now see the king for the first time. In Chapter 4, I will discuss just such a production, and how the narrative functions were met. On the other hand, it is possible for mimetic illusions to support—rather than replace—narrative illusions.

In summer of 2017, Oak Park Festival Theatre produced Macbeth. Director Barbara Zahora decided she wanted more spectacle for the opening, and would get it by staging some of the battle. As violence designer for the production, I was part of the production meeting discussion on how to execute this plan. Zahora did not want to dispense with the text of the narration nor the scene of the report, but rather she wanted to both tell and show the action. We decided to intercut the narration with action with the intent of creating the illusion that the action was not explicitly happening in the fictional world, but rather that what the audience was seeing was mediated by the king’s imagination. That is, we wanted to give the audience the impression that the fighting was not “real” within the fictional world but was simply Duncan trying to visualize what he was being told. To create this impression, we created a spatial separation between the battle scene and the scene of narration, placing the King and messengers on a level eight feet above the main deck and all the way upstage, the battle scenes were enacted on the main deck by the rest of the cast. The action intercut with sharp freezes whenever the king was asking what happened next, but the switches between the Captain or Ross speaking and the fights

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5 I briefly discussed this production in Chapter 1.
were more fluid because their words were generating the action, while the king’s were interrupting it.

The resulting stage picture allowed the costumes to do even greater work. One way in which the distinction between Macbeth and Duncan that I suggested earlier might be brought out is in what they look like. If Duncan, receiving his messengers, is dressed in clean, comfortable clothes, perhaps including a long robe which would be impractical in battle, while the Bloody Captain is in battle harness, covered with blood, dirt, and soot, then that distinction is brought to the audience’s attention quite clearly. Ross can go either way: he could be dressed somewhat like the Captain, to simplify the divide between those who fight and those who do not. On the other hand, if the production wants the audience to question his courage, he might also be relatively clean. The same options exist for Malcolm and Donalbain; if they are dressed like their father then they also appear as non-combatants. If, however, they are dressed for battle but still not fighting, then perhaps the audience might assume that the boys wanted to fight but their father forbade it, reminiscent perhaps of the Dauphin in Henry V. In the Oak Park production we had a lot more characters on the stage. With the costume and makeup design, where everyone who was anywhere near the fight (including Ross) was bloody, disheveled, and dirty, the King’s clean, white, fur-edged robe stood out quite noticeably.

The design of the Oak Park Macbeth allowed the play to open with exciting, crowd-pleasing swordplay, while at the same time keeping the focus of the scene on Duncan. The stylized nature of the freezes in the action controlled the degree of shock by drawing the audience’s attention not to the impact on the bodies of the combatants, but to the chaos of the battle, and to the difficulty that the narrators had of conveying that chaos in words. The production successfully melded narration and mimesis into the same representation.
Whom Do We Believe? Narrative and Mimetic Violence in The Pillowman

In his 2003 play The Pillowman, Martin McDonagh uses both mimetic and narrative representations of violence, skillfully switching to whichever will give him the effect he wants. In the primary fictional world of the play, the set only ever represents one location: the interrogation rooms of a jail in an unnamed modern totalitarian state. The play opens with the interrogation of the main character, Katurian, by detective Tupolski and officer Ariel. Katurian writes children’s stories, most of which involve the gruesome murder and/or torture of children. The police are investigating the disappearance of three children, who seem to have been murdered in ways inspired by Katurian’s stories, and Katurian is the prime suspect because only one of his stories has ever been published. Katurian’s older brother Michal has also been arrested. Michel has an intellectual disability which the audience later finds out was generated by long-term torture inflicted on him by their parents as part of a bizarre experiment in raising Katurian. It turns out that Michal is the one who murdered the children, emulating Katurian’s stories.

In The Pillowman, McDonagh uses narration in a different way than I argued that Shakespeare did in Macbeth, taking advantage of another important difference between narration and mimesis; the two kinds of representation generate belief differently. That is to say, if we think of mimesis as showing and of narration as telling, what counts as “evidence” is different in each. With narration, the audience gets their information second-hand, mediated by the teller. So, if the audience is being asked to trust the story they are given narratively, what they are being asked to do is to trust the teller not to lie to them. On the other hand, when audiences see something acted out before them, it is not a matter of trust—or if it is, the question is “do you trust your own eyes?” Which, for the most part, people do. Of course, whether we should or not
is a different question—a question Shakespeare seems to be fascinated by. In *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Othello* the plots hinge on characters seeing something and being given a false interpretation of it; the trick works in both plays because the men being tricked are insufficiently skeptical of what they see “with their own eyes.” As the plots of those two plays show, with mimesis the problem of trust is really a problem of interpretation—we know what we saw, but we need to determine what it means, and failure to interpret correctly can be much more damaging, since doubting would be doubting ourselves. Such self-doubt is usually harder than doubting someone else’s story, and the villains of both *Much Ado* and *Othello* take advantage of this effect, telling their victims what they will see and offering a ready-made interpretation before the fact. When the victim sees exactly what the villain said they would see, the interpretation offered by the villain slips by their critical faculties.

This difference is thematized in *The Pillowman*; several of Katurian’s stories are told during the course of the play, usually with actors acting out some of the central actions of the story in a surreal, secondary fictional world. That is, a world within the initial fictional world that the play establishes. The primary action of the play never leaves the jail, but when the stories are related by a character in that primary fictional world of the jail, the audience gets to see a secondary fictional world where the stories are taking place. Spectators are left to wonder if they are seeing inside the imagination of the teller or if they are seeing what the person being told is imagining, or, for some of the stories—because they are presented as “true” stories—if it is actually a flashback. What this uncertainty does, especially for those stories presented as the true history of one of the characters, is confuse the question of what is true. Obviously, a real flashback would ostensibly be more trustworthy, but McDonagh never lets us get that certain.
The two most involved examples of this dramaturgical phenomenon are Katurian telling what turns out to be the autobiographical story of Katurian and Michal’s childhood, and then later telling the story of “The Little Jesus,” one of his tales in which a girl is tortured to death by her parents because she tries to emulate Jesus. In the first example, Katurian narrates while he and his parents act out the story. The text sets out the way the representation is to work, alternating between stage directions describing the mimetic part of the tale and the narration provided by Katurian:

*Katurian, sitting on a bed amongst toys, paints, pens, paper, in an approximation of a child’s room, next door to which there is another identical room, perhaps made of glass, but padlocked and totally dark. Katurian narrates the short story which he and the mother, in diamonds, and the father, in a goatee and glasses, enact.*

*Katurian. Once upon a time there was a little boy upon whom his mother and father showered nothing but love, kindness, warmth, all that stuff…. All the seeds of creativity were implanted in him from an early age and it was writing that became his first love … The first part of his parents’ experiment had worked.*

*The Mother and Father, after caressing and kissing Katurian, enter the adjoining room, and leave our sight.* (31)

The scene tells the story of how Katurian’s parents raised him to be a writer by pouring support and encouragement on him but hiding his elder brother’s existence from him. When Katurian turned seven years old, his parents began to torture the brother every night next door to Katurian, which ostensibly had the effect of turning his writing dark and twisted while still improving him as a writer. Eventually, the brother manages to slip a note under the door revealing his existence to Katurian, who breaks in to the room only to find that it was, apparently, all fake; there was no brother. Katurian went on to become a writer before eventually returning home to find his brother’s corpse and discovered that the torture, and his brother’s existence itself, were not fake after all.
Narratively, this story/scene of the Katurian brothers’ history is interesting not only because it is partly enacted, but because it is not clear in the text who the person “being told” is. The whole story is a complete scene, beginning with lights up after a blackout at the end of the previous scene which ended with Katurian alone, and ending with Katurian still alone in the jail cell, with no other characters from the jail involved in the scene. The only other characters the audience sees during the scene are within the tertiary world of the story being told. So the audience is left to wonder who the story is being told to—it might simply be the audience themselves, or Katurian might be telling the story to himself, or perhaps the scene represents Ariel reading Katurian’s story, imagining Katurian as the narrator. We later find out that Michal has also read the story (though Katurian had tried to hide it from him), and this scene could be where Michal reads it. These readings all appear to be available, and it is not by any means certain that which was chosen for a given production of the play would be clear to the audience. The lack of an obvious or certain narratee for the story again introduces the question of truthfulness. If the audience is being told the story directly—that is, if this is a communication directly to the real audience in the theater—then either Katurian somehow knows that the audience exists (a meta-theatrical element which is indicated nowhere else in the play), or else the communication is directly from the play itself, which would argue that the audience really ought to trust it. But that trust is broken near the end of the story, as Katurian, after finishing

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6 This dramatic issue, of how a true monologue works, who is being addressed, and who is doing the narrating (the character? The actor? The playwright?) is obviously a thorny one, and one over which a lot of ink has been spilled. While I find the question fascinating, answering it is a different project. For the present purposes, I am going to say that it is possible for the play to be telling the audience something directly, and that such privileged communication—much like the information gathered from, say, the set which might directly tell the audience what time period the play is set in—is usually received by audiences without skepticism.
the story, says that that is the way his written version ended, but that he left out the “real” ending:

Katurian’s story, ‘The Writer and the Writer’s Brother’ ended there in fashionably downbeat mode, without touching upon the equally downbeat but somewhat more self-incriminating details of the truer story, that after he’d read the blood-written note and broken into the next-door room it was, of course …

*The Child’s corpse sits bolt upright in bed, breathing heavily.*

… his brother he found there, alive, as such, but brain-damaged beyond repair, and that night, whilst his parents were sleeping, the fourteen-year-old birthday boy held a pillow over his father’s head for a while … (34)

This revelation, as I said, calls into question whether we can trust the narration at all, though if this is Katurian telling … someone … the story, Katurian’s confession that it wasn’t fully accurate and his subsequent fixing the inaccuracy might be seen to generate further trust, in the way that admitting you lied seems like a kind of impressive honesty. Note, too, that the revelation invalidates the reading that this is Ariel reading the story, since later on Ariel does seem to have read the written version of the story, but does not know the true facts of it until Katurian tells him. On the other hand, it is possible that what is happening in this scene is Ariel reading (or re-reading) the story, but after he kills Katurian, by which point he will have known the truth. Under that reading, the narrator is “really” Ariel, and the narration which I quoted just now is Ariel commenting on the written story.

*The Pillowman* is definitely interested in how we believe what we are told—Katurian himself, within the play, explains to his brother how unreliable narration is:

KATURIAN. They had this box full of toes. No, hang on. They said they were toes. They didn’t look *that* much like toes. They could’ve been anything.

Shit, man. *Pause.*) And they said they’d tortured you too, his hands were all covered in blood. Are you saying he didn’t touch you at all?

MICHAL. No, he gave me a ham sandwich. Except I had to take the lettuce out.

Yeah.

…

KATURIAN. Why are we being so stupid? Why are we believing everything they’re telling us?
MICHAL. Why?
KATURIAN. This is just like storytelling … A man comes into a room, says, ‘Your mother’s dead.’ … what do we know? Do we know that the second man’s mother is dead? … No, we don’t. All we know is that a man has come into a room and said to another man, ‘Your mother is dead.’

…
KATURIAN. A man comes into a room, says, ‘Your brother’s just confessed to the killing of the three children and we found one of the kid’s toes in a box in your house.’ What do we know?
MICHAL. Aha! I get it!
KATURIAN. Do we know that the brother has killed three children?
MICHAL. No.
KATURIAN. No. Do we know that they found a kid’s toes in a box in their house? No. Do we … Oh my God …
MICHAL. What?
KATURIAN. We don’t even know that there were any children killed at all.
(39-40)

This conversation happens in the scene immediately following the “Story of the Writer and the Writer’s Brother,” further problematizing the audience’s faith in Katurian as a narrator, both in that story and in later ones. The skepticism generated is, in my view, one of the themes of the play, and as such, it underlies the way the violence is represented. McDonagh is using the mix of narrative and mimetic representations of violence to reinforce this theme.

Such a use of the difference between narrative and mimetic representations is not a direct application of shock, but shock is certainly relevant to McDonagh’s usage of violence in both narrative and mimetic modes within the play. The violence in the play is deeply shocking—when Katurian says that he held a pillow over his father’s face until he died (and then, a moment later, over his mother’s after first waking her up so that she could see what he did), and as he acts it out simultaneously, the audience will be shocked into a closer distance with the fictional world through empathy, as I have described. Note that here audience sympathy might be quite confused. The parents are monsters, and the audience may be glad Katurian kills them; a spectator who feels that way will empathize with Katurian’s actions. On the other hand, some
spectators might be appalled by a child killing his parents, and for those spectators, the shock will consist of empathy generated by the harm done to the parents. For some audience members, the shock will work both ways at the same time. Further, while the shock closes distance, the narration paired with the mimesis might create distance, as the audience wonders what really happened, why they are being told about it in this particular way, and what is going on. In my view the play demonstrates a primary virtue of using a narrative representation because *The Pillowman* is about a storyteller and the way we process stories. The shocking violence forces the audience into close distance, but the confusion about who to sympathize with and what to believe complicates the audience’s reaction to the shock in a way that complements the confusion about those questions brought forward by the plot.

**Things Not Said: Ruined**

Another virtue of narrative representations of violence is that a narration can represent violence without being explicit. A mimetic representation is never “vague,” even if it is obscured in some way.\(^7\) A narration, however, can give only part of the story, or can leave things unsaid, in a way which implies that the thing not being said is important. “Things not said” is a wide category, with many variations which do slightly different work, so the examples I am going to work with here are just that: examples.

Lynn Nottage’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 2009 play *Ruined* uses “things not said” to represent events which are so horrific that not only would mimetic representations of them be unbearable for most audiences, but even explicit narration would bypass empathy right into revulsion, in a way which the playwright might expect would overwhelm the play’s other work. Narration, in this case, can be tuned to be even more gentle by implying, rather than saying, what

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\(^7\) Mimetic illusions do have somewhat analogous tools, which I will discuss in Chapters 4 and 5.
has happened. Mimesis has a tool to do the same sort of thing: stylization. But stylization is hard to use in a thoroughly realistic play or production, while narration has realistic, common tools to do it, including euphemism (a form of metaphor) and implication.⁸

*Ruined* is set during the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo and deals with the effects of that brutally violent and destructive conflict on the women of the region. All of the action takes place in a bar/brothel in the back country. The madam, the extremely competent Mama Nadi, by turns commodifies and protects the bodies of the young women in her employ. According to director Kate Whoriskey’s introduction to the Theatre Communications Group edition of the play, *Ruined* developed in small part out of a discussion of Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and while during the research phase Nottage eventually dropped the idea of the play being an adaptation of Brecht, some elements of Mother Courage’s character can indeed be seen in Mama Nadi, as well as some plot points, like her refusing to abandon her business for a chance at married happiness (Nottage, ix).

The plot of the play revolves around Mama Nadi’s attempts to negotiate the difficult situation of being essentially at the mercy of the various groups of soldiers (government forces and rebels) while running her business which caters to both. Nadi’s business relies on serving both military factions without allowing them to come into contact or even admitting to either that the other is also a customer. In addition to the soldiers, Nadi needs to keep the miners and locals satisfied, all while taking care of her prostitutes and trying to maintain a life for herself.

In the first usage of the title term, “ruined,” Christian—a black market trader from whom Mama Nadi gets both girls and non-living goods—has brought Sophie and Salima to Mama. Salima is to be a prostitute and Sophie a singer and waitress. Mama is anxious to have Sophie,

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⁸ See the section in chapter 5 on stylization.
who is very pretty, until Christian tells her that she cannot be a prostitute because she is “ruined”—a term the audience eventually realizes means that she was sexually abused by soldiers with such brutality that she is no longer able to have sex. Mama is outraged not by the brutality, but by Christian’s temerity in bringing her a girl who cannot be a prostitute. Nadi does not want to take Sophie, but Christian bribes Mama with practically-impossible-to-acquire Belgian chocolate. Mama softens after talking to Sophie a little, and agrees to take her in as a waitress—partly because Sophie understands arithmetic, and therefore can take care of the accounting which Mama cannot. Mama clearly knows what “ruined” means already, but while it is clearly something unpleasant, the audience is not immediately given the exact meaning.

Christian describes what happened to Sophie:

CHRISTIAN. Look, militia did ungodly things to the child, took her with … a bayonet and then left her for dead. And she was—
MAMA (Snaps). I don’t need to hear it. Are you done? (13)

This exchange is enough to give us a very vivid visualization of what happened, without spelling it out, and of course it is deeply shocking. Nadi and Christian’s unwillingness to use explicit language forces the audience to visualize for themselves what happened, which does not make the violence any less shocking, since the images are mentally constructed anyway, and can sometimes make it more so, since people’s imaginations are not limited by the language of the narration.

The most interesting, and perhaps the most powerful, virtue of narrative representations of violence is that it makes the effect on the narrator become part of the representation. Nadi and Christian’s hesitancy to speak explicitly implies that they are shocked—that what happened to Sophie is too close to them. Because that shock response is embodied by the actor, metaphorically representing the character, the audience will experience this “second hand”
representation of violence with shock as well. That is to say, while mimesis shows us the effect of the violence on the characters involved, narration shows us the effect on the narrator and narratee(s), and being privy to those characters’ reactions to the violence which they are discussing allows those reactions to shock the audience. So, in this particular example, when Christian starts to be even partly unequivocal, Nadi is explicitly (in the text) uncomfortable. Christian begins by using the euphemistic language “took her,” but once the explicit “with a bayonet” is added, Nadi immediately stops him with some vehemence (the stage directions say she “snaps”). The audience will presumably be somewhat surprised by Nadi’s emotional response in that moment because heretofore she had been portrayed as tough and pragmatic. One might expect that a first-time audience would react to Nadi’s snapping as further evidence that what happened was horrific; later in the play it is revealed that the reason Sophie’s “ruining” hits Nadi so hard is that Nadi herself was “ruined” long ago. The shock is perfectly clear to someone reading the text, but in performance it should be extremely powerful because of the embodied shock created as an actor’s affect is forcibly changed before the audience’s eyes by the acts of violence which are being described to the characters (and, simultaneously, to the audience). The way this type of representation works is similar to the concept of meta-observation which I developed in Chapter 2. The principle is the same—that watching someone else’s response to violence can inform a spectator’s own response to it—but in this example, it is not other audience members’ responses that create the shock, but the responses of the narrator and narratee.

We see the same effect in a slightly different form later in the play when Sophie and Salima are talking about a soldier with whom Salima had had sex the night before.

SOPHIE. Did that man do something to hurt you?
SALIMA. You know what he say? He say fifteen Hema men were shot dead and buried in their own mining pit, in mud so thick it swallow them right into the ground without mercy. He say, one man stuff the coltan into his mouth to keep the soldiers from stealing his hard work, and they split his belly open with a machete. “It’ll show him for stealing,” he say, bragging like I should be congratulating him. And then he fucked me, and when he was finished he sat on the floor and wept. He wanted me to hold him. Comfort him.

SOPHIE. And, did you?

SALIMA. No. I’m Hema. One of those men could be my brother. (31)

In this case, Salima’s description is so matter-of-fact that the audience could be deeply shocked by the flatness of her affect. Audiences know about trauma responses, and so they understand that the affect does not indicate that she is unaffected—quite the contrary; the affect indicates emotional scarring. Written (and especially performed) with this flat affect, the speech invites spectators to empathize with Salima’s experience of trauma because they know what the flat affect means in terms of the character’s physical reaction to her apparent physical experience. That is, when a spectator sees the actor playing Salima describe a traumatic experience with a flat affect, they are being invited to imagine themselves having suffered the kind of shock that would result in that flat affect. This is a form of the shock generated by all representations of violence; the embodied reaction to a narrative representation of violence by a character who is narrating or being narrated to, creating empathy in the audience. Note that this reaction is to the mimetic part of the narrative representation; it is seeing the actor play their character’s physical, embodied, reaction to hearing or telling the story which can trigger an empathic reaction in the audience. This shift of focus from the act to the recounting of the act again highlights a difference in focus between a narrated and a mimetic representation of the same violence. If the violence Salima is describing were mimetically represented, the audience would be reacting to the act itself. With a representation narrated the way this one is in Ruined, the audience is
presented with a mimetic representation not of the trauma itself, but of a victim in the grip of post-traumatic shock. Empathy with shock is, of course, a kind of shock.

Salima later narrates the deeply disturbing events around her own capture and repeated rape, along with the murder of her baby daughter by soldiers. The description is long, fairly detailed, and heartbreaking. It is not as clear in this case that her affect is flattened, though the stage direction suggests that, right before she tells the story, “a calm washes over her.” There is plenty of room for an actor to play this moment in different ways, and of course different performances will generate slightly different kinds of shock. Regardless, the narration will be shocking, both because of the described harm to Salima’s body, and the physical presence of the actor’s body representing it. Again, there is a complicated duality at play as audiences react to two simultaneous aspects of embodiedment; they are empathizing with the immediate response of the character to the narration, represented mimetically by the actor, and at the same time they react to the narratively represented violence which they imagine being visited on the body of the narrator. In other words, the body of the actor is representing a character who is simultaneously both narrator and victim.

While euphemistic narration of violence can still be shocking, implication is even deeper in the realm of “things not said.” A narration which implies violence but does not explicitly describe it is still a narrative representation of violence, since its purpose is to communicate the facts of the violence to the audience, however subtly. Even more than euphemism, narratively implied violence can be deeply shocking while at the same time allowing our imaginations full rein. Nottage makes excellent use of narratively implied violence in a scene between Christian and Mama.9

9 Violence can also be mimetically implied; see Chapters 4 and 5 for a discussion on the topic.
CHRISTIAN. Have you heard? Pastor Robbins been missing for a couple days.
MAMA. The white preacher? I’m not surprised. He’s gotta big fucking mouth.
The mission’s better off without him. The only thing that old bastard ever did was pass out flaky aspirin and maybe a round of penicillin if you were dying.
CHRISTIAN. well, the rumor is the pastor’s been treating wounded rebel soldiers
MAMA (concerned). Really?

Mama’s sudden concern alerts the audience, if they were not aware already, to the danger inherent in the pastor’s actions. The implication is that Pastor Robbins has been murdered by government forces (which turns out to be the case as the audience is later explicitly told).

Tension is increased without any violence being explicitly described at all.

Not all the violence in Ruined is narrated. As the play progresses, the relative safety of Mama Nadi’s begins to deteriorate—at first, she maintains control, but as the war heats up in the immediate area, so does the tension. The audience hears not-so-distant gunfire at one point, and eventually the tension culminates in a violent attack.¹⁰ However, the vast majority of the violence is represented narratively, and in that we see yet another virtue of narrative violence—its ability to build tension. Because narrative violence is a representation of things happening somewhere else the audience gets a sense of being surrounded by violence as the play progresses.

Just outside, just over the hill, just down the road … things are dangerous. As the audience sees Jerome Kisembe, the rebel leader, and Commander Osembenga, the government leader, missing each other at Mama Nadi’s more and more narrowly, and as each narrates what he will do when he catches the other, spectators are primed for the mimetic violence of the attack—it is more effective because the narrative violence has given the audience a sense of a world where violence is endemic. Purely mimetic representations would have a different effect—if the audience sees constant fighting, they will get the sense that violence is common in the fictional world (one

¹⁰ See Chapter 4 for a discussion of offstage gunfire and its mimetic or narrative nature.
could argue that this is what the opening fight of Romeo and Juliet is supposed to do), but the narrative violence in Ruined allows spectators’ tension gets ratcheted up as the audience does not see any real violence until the very end. The change from narrative to mimetic is a change from violence situated “out there somewhere” to the violence suddenly being here and now.

Nottage’s play is an extremely powerful meditation on the effects on women and society of war and violence. Nottage uses a lot of narrative representations and a very few mimetic ones to represent the violence in the play and each is shocking in its own way. The shocking nature of the violence permeating the environment is part of the point of the play; Nottage wants the audience to be shocked by the appalling nature of life during civil war, and she derives significant value from shock, and especially from the many ways in which she deploys narrative representations of violence to engender that shock. The shock contributes significantly to making her point, since it brings us into deeper sympathy with the women whose lives are disrupted if not destroyed by war (the men in her play also suffer from the war to a greater or lesser degree, but the focus is on the women).

**Threats**

Thus far I have been exploring how narration can be used to limit shock, reducing the empathy-creating effect that representations of violence have, but it does not always work that way. Narrative can be utterly shocking. One particular kind of narration which works best when it shocks most is the threat.\(^1\) Threats fit very nicely into Phelan’s definition of narration, and every part of the definition becomes important. The character issuing the threat is telling the character being threatened, on some occasion and for some reason, that something violent will

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\(^1\) While I am talking here about a verbal threat of physical violence, as I discussed in Chapter 1, there are other kinds of threats, which would still be considered violence, and might even be considered a form of narration. However, for the purpose of this discussion I am talking about the most basic form of the concept.
happen to them (if they do not do as they are told). This last bit may seem to be a departure from the technical definition which Phelan offered; in Phelan’s lexicon, narration is generally about the past. However when Phelan says “something happened” he means an event occurred which changed the state of the fictional world. When a character makes a threat (“Talk or I will kill you”), they are describing a fictional world—one that is in the future of the world in which the subject of the threat lives, and which is counterfactual to that world. The threat is that the threat-maker will take action to turn the fictional counterfactual future into a (to the character) actual, factual, present. Put another way, the threat-maker is telling a story about a fictional world in which the threatened action is “something that happened.” So in the threat “Talk or I kill you,” the threat-maker is describing a fictional sub-world in which the victim has been killed, and is saying that if the victim doesn’t talk, the threat-maker will force the victim into that world.

The anatomy of a threat is subject to analysis using Phelan’s definition of narration. The threat-maker is obviously of vital importance; the nature of the threat-maker will inform the nature of the threat. Likewise the recipient of the threat is important. A well-constructed threat is tailored to a weakness, real or perceived, of the subject of the threat, and the substance of the threat can therefore give us valuable information about both the maker and subject of the threat, as well as how well the maker knows the subject. That is to say, when we analyze a threat’s content, we learn what kind of things the threat-maker thinks will be effective as a threat. The better the threat-maker knows their victim, the more well-chosen we might expect their threat to be. A threat that is directed against a weakness in the subject will generally be more effective. So, for example, even if Lady Macduff is personally brave, the threat to her children might well defeat her courage. In a poorly chosen threat we can still learn something about the threat-maker;
at the very least we learn that they do not know—or care to account for—what their victim fears, and thereby we might learn something about what the threat-maker fears.

The remaining two elements of Phelan’s definition of narrative are “on some occasion” and “for some reason.” The setting of a threat is almost always significant, sometimes deeply so. A threat-maker will often take pains to set up the situation. In some cases a threat is only delivered after an earnest of intention is shown. For example, a noir detective will often get beaten up before being threatened to show that the thugs are serious. In other cases architecture plays a part; from Henry V’s throne room to the Oval Office, seats of government are designed to intimidate guests, giving more power to the host’s threats. Or consider the single lightbulb and table of the classic interrogation room. The purpose of that setting is to intimidate, to make the subject of the implied or actual threats used in that space more receptive to them. So ubiquitous is the image that plays which open with that set, like Martin McDonagh’s The Pillowman or Jennifer Haley’s The Nether, take advantage of it to set the tone of their plays, to their audience’s immediate discomfort.

The “reason” for the threat is the final piece, and when we analyze dramatic scenes of threatening, one subject of our analysis is to determine what the threat-maker hopes to accomplish. In many cases, of course, it is explicit in the threat itself—in our earlier example, the reason for the threat is to get the subject to talk. On the other hand, sometimes the threat-maker is acting with more subtlety, saying they want one thing while actually working to get something else. Or the threat might be bluff—the threat-maker might be unable, or unwilling, to actually carry it out, resulting in another variation on purpose.
Henry V at Harfleur

In Shakespeare’s Henry V, King Henry makes an extremely powerful narrative threat in his speech to the Governor of Harfleur.

If I begin the batt’ry once again,
I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur
Till in her ashes she lie buried.
The gates of mercy shall be all shut up,
And the fleshed soldier, rough and hard of heart,
In liberty of bloody hand shall range
With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass
Your fresh fair virgins and your flow’ring infants.

Therefore, you men of Harfleur,
Take pity of your town and of your people,
Whiles yet my soldiers are in my command,
Whiles yet the cool and temperate wind of grace
O’erblows the filthy and contagious clouds
Of heady murder, spoil and villainy.
If not, why, in a moment look to see
The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;
Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
And their most reverend heads dashed to the walls,
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused
Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry
At Herod’s bloody-hunting slaughtermen.
What say you? Will you yield, and this avoid,
Or, guilty in defence, be thus destroy’d? (3.4.7-43)

The play of sympathy in this scene is fascinating—and important to my reading of how the threat itself works, as a narrative representation of violence. Ostensibly the audience is rooting for the English, but the shocking violence, focused on the bodies of the French victims of the action, ought to (if my theories are valid) decrease sympathy for Henry. Fathers’ heads dashed to walls, infants on spikes, “defiling … shrill-shrieking daughters” … these are indeed shocking images and one would expect that, in performance, Henry would do all he could to paint the picture as vividly and disturbingly as possible. We might expect that empathy created by the shock of this
violence would incline audience members towards sympathy for the French. And, in a way, it does. Hopefully most spectators would not want such brutality visited on innocent French non-combatants. Such sympathy could be mitigated if the audience already dislikes the victims, but that is not the case here. The audience may despise the Dauphin, but the citizens of Harfleur are no monsters—so how does Henry avoid censure for the horrific violence against them which he describes? Henry’s threat is extremely clever in this regard. By couching the threat the way he does, he is able to position himself as trying to save the townsfolk from such a fate, and the governor as the one who would be responsible if it were to happen.

Henry, in asking, “What is it then to me?” (which he does twice to emphasize the point), is making it as clear as he can that the responsibility for actualizing the world of the threat does not lie with him, but with the governor. “Take pity of your town and of your people”—this is a brazen claim, since most people would say that it is Henry who has the option of granting pity. Henry, however, refuses this reading and puts the responsibility squarely on the governor. “Will you yield, and this avoid/ Or, guilty in defence, be thus destroyed?” (3.4.42-3). By Henry’s account, if harm comes to the town it is the Governor who will be guilty of the outcome.

“Don’t make me do this” is a fairly common move for threats, but Shakespeare is using it in an uncommonly nuanced fashion. In claiming that he is about to lose control over his soldiers, Henry makes the move more convincing, both to his in-world audience (the governor) and to the audience of the play in the theater. When we hear someone say, “I don’t want to have to do this,” we are—usually—at least somewhat skeptical. After all, they could just not do it. Henry’s purpose is to move the responsibility for the consequences of resistance from the threat-maker to
the subject. In the case of *Henry V* we know that soldiers, especially English soldiers, really *are* hard to control, and devastatingly destructive once control is lost. If the history of the Hundred Years War taught France anything, it is this. The French characters in the play have not forgotten the *chevauchée* that the Black Prince led through France a generation earlier; they talk about it, and about how Henry is “a stem of that victorious stock” (2.4.62-3). Henry works hard to remind the French that English soldiers have devastated the French countryside over the previous hundred years with phrases like “We may as bootless spend our vain command/ Upon the enraged soldiers in their spoil” and “the filthy and contagious clouds/ Of heady murder, spoil, and villainy” (3.4.24-25, 31-32). These are not idle words; huge swathes of France were turned into wastelands, and a generation of young people slaughtered.

Moving the responsibility for the potentially devastating results of defying Henry’s threat from Henry to the Governor works on two levels. On the one hand, Henry is avoiding responsibility within the world of the play. But in the real world, in the theater, moving the responsibility in this way works to weaken the ethical judgment which might decrease audience sympathy for Henry, who is, after all, the hero. We might say that such a judgment is unlikely if (as happens) the violence remains propositional. That is, the argument could be made that while an audience might judge Henry harshly if he actually participated in, or even ordered, the sacking of Harfleur, they should let him off the hook to some degree because he does not (have to) carry out his threat. However, such an argument would not work if the theories which I am presenting here are valid. The violence *is* represented, even if it remains propositional. The actor playing Henry stands on stage and narrates these awful acts of violence. Under my theory, being

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12 A much less literary descendent of this same form of threat that is still familiar today is the schoolyard bully seizing his victim’s hand and, while using it to beat the victim, shouting, “stop hitting yourself.”
the agent of such terrible violence ought to make Henry unsympathetic, unless the audience deeply believes that the French deserve to be treated that way.\textsuperscript{13} So Shakespeare is being very clever here—framing the sacking of the city in such a way that Henry can claim that, by offering the option of surrender, it is he who is offering to \textit{save} the town from the horrors that the governor’s resistance is threatening it with. Couching the threat this way allows the audience to be shocked by the violence and still praise Henry for his victory because the violence would not have been his fault, but the Governor’s. I do not mean to claim here that the effect of the framing of the threat in this way is the \textit{only} thing which can mitigate the brutality of the violence being represented. Certainly in some productions, the threat is clearly a bluff, and because the audience does not think that Henry would actually follow through, they also do not judge him as harshly. But my point is that the narrative framing \textit{does} have the effect for which I am arguing.\textsuperscript{14}

Examining this long and detailed threat for its narrative components (\textit{someone} telling \textit{someone else} on some \textit{occasion} for some \textit{reason} that \textit{something happened}) is revealing. Of course, the threat-maker is King Henry himself, but right away we see that one aspect of the threat which makes it particularly effective is that Henry is not threatening to carry out the violence personally. His threat is that he will set into motion events which he himself cannot control once started. His soldiers, he claims, are yet in his command, but they will not stay that way long if fighting resumes. This aspect of his threat is so effective because he does not need to prove, or even suggest, that he himself is ruthless enough to do things which are sufficiently

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Some critics and audiences, especially those of a pacifist or anti-statist bent, no doubt \textit{do} lose sympathy for Henry in this scene.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Again, different productions can alter how much we let Henry off the hook, and different critics and audiences with their different relationships with violence will read the scene somewhat differently. But my subjective experience as an audience member has consistently been that Henry does not suffer for making this threat, even though what he is threatening is truly horrific.
\end{itemize}
brutal to cow the governor. Quite the contrary, he seems to be claiming that he personally is as horrified by the possibility of uncontrolled pillage as the governor is. Henry’s goal is to make it less likely that the governor will think that the threat is a bluff; Henry might not want to destroy the city, but his claim is that once the assault resumes he won’t be able to stop it, even if he wanted to.

One of the characteristic dramaturgical strengths of narrative violence is that narrative always has an audience. The governor of Harfleur, the citizens, and any of Henry’s soldiers who are with him, are all subject to the effects of his rhetoric. The governor is obviously the direct target of the threat—in Phelan’s terms the one being told something. However, there are other people listening on the French side, and Henry’s threat impacts them as well by providing additional pressure on the governor to yield to the threat. Henry is telling the governor, and the other French, that if things go the way Henry claims that they will, these witnesses should hold the consequences against the governor for resisting. The threat is well-chosen in other ways as well; Henry is not threatening direct harm particularly to the governor, which might make him more stubborn, rather than less. Instead, the threat is directed against the weakest of those who the governor is supposed to be protecting: women, children, and the elderly.

The occasion of the threat is clearly significant—Henry is standing before shattered walls, with the way into the city almost open to his army. He reminds the governor who he is dealing with; not the Prince Hal from *Henry IV*, but, as he says in the speech, “a soldier/a name that in my thoughts becomes me best” (3.4.5-6). Not only is Henry himself a soldier, but he leads

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15 The stage directions vary in different versions, but the Folio has Henry accompanied by all his train, and the editors of the Norton add other Frenchmen to the Governor’s side. The point remains that whoever a production puts on stage becomes a part of the in-world audience, and that production decision has consequences, which I am working through in this section.
an army of English soldiers, and it is these who will carry out the consequences of the threat:

“the blind and bloody soldier with foul hand” whom the governor will regret loosing on his city,

“the fleshed soldier, rough and hard of heart, [who] in liberty of bloody hand shall range,” if

Harfleur must be taken by escalade instead of by surrender (3.4.11-12). The French know the
English _routier’s_ reputation for both voraciousness and ferocity; as the Constable of France says
later in the play, on the eve of Agincourt, “Give them great meals of beef and iron and steel, and
they will eat like wolves and fight like demons” (3.8.135-6). The occasion, in the narrative sense,
includes the work Henry has done already to support the threat by breaching the walls and
making his repeated assaults; the same threat, made at the beginning of the siege, would not have
been effective. As it turns out, the timing is even more fortuitous, or at least the governor claims
that it is. His response, in yielding to the threat, is to blame the Dauphin, implying that if the
town still had expectation of relief, they might hold out, but that without it, they “no longer are
defensible” (3.4.50).

The “reason” that Henry makes the threat could be simply as he states it: he wants the
town to surrender, without the horrors (and, to be practical, the damage to the otherwise valuable
town) of a sack. In performance audiences might see the extent to which that is the whole story.
It is possible to stage the play so that the audience sees a different side of the English army than
the governor does; perhaps making the threat a different kind of bluff—not that Henry is
_unwilling_ to carry it out, but that he might not be sure that he is _capable_ of carrying it out. If the
English are completely exhausted, Henry might be forced to rely on a threat of the consequences
of a victory which he could not actually deliver. In a different staging, perhaps the English seem
exhausted at first, but as Henry unfolds the threat, the soldiers are revived by the prospect of
unrestrained rape and plunder. In such a production, the threat is not a bluff; the only way for Henry to win is to let his demon-soldiers off their leashes. And he intends to win.

On the other hand, if—right from the start—the governor sees bloodstained English soldiers champing at the bit to follow through on the threat, that would reinforce his reaction to Henry’s words. Henry would, in such a staging, be using the effect of the presence of his troops and their affect to impress a sense of urgency upon the governor (“this is the latest parle we will admit”)—creating an effect on the governor’s body with which the audience would empathize. That is, the goal of such a staging would be to try to focus the audience’s attention on the governor’s horror at the images in the narration. If the staging succeeds in this regard, the governor’s horror will be more powerful because he will see the violence mimetically reflected in the excited anticipation of the soldiers, and the audience’s shock will be more powerful because they will see that the governor himself is shocked.

The narrator, the narratee, the occasion and the reason are necessary narrative elements for the functioning of the threat. The core of the threat, though, is the “something that will happen”—the violence represented by the narration. What Henry delivers is a horrific account of a world that, to the characters in the play, is fictional—it does not yet exist—but which Henry is claiming easily could exist if his demands are not met. And to make the threat as effective as possible, to lay out the stakes of the decision to which Henry is putting the governor, he makes the consequences explicit. What will follow such an escalade is graphically spelled out, and the violence being narratively represented is deeply shocking. Shakespeare has Henry invite the governor, and so also the audience, to visualize soldiers “mowing like grass your fresh-fair virgins and your flowering infants.” The imagery here is visceral: mowing like grass evokes a sense of a specific kind of movement, bodies falling like blades of grass. Flowering infants
could, literally, mean “about to grow,” with the implication that they will never have the chance, but with all the references to blood that soak the speech, even within the same sentence, the phrase also evokes the “flowering” of blood that a stab-wound generates, to give us a mental image of babies with blood flowing, flowerlike, from where the “naked infants [would be] spitted on pikes.” As always, what makes these images so shocking to an audience is the embodied nature of the threat.

Not all the threat is about bodies—Henry does threaten a loss of property as well: “I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur/ till in her ashes she lie buried” and “Impious war/ Arrayed in flames … do … all fell feats/ Enlinked to waste and desolation” (3.4.8-9 and 15-18). And perhaps this is compelling to the governor—the text does not indicate how much more he is invested in his wealth than his people—but for the audience, those images, however destructive, do not have the same shock value as the images Henry paints of personal violation of old men and young women. Pillage is bad, but rape and murder are far more shocking because the audience empathizes with the bodies, not with the goods. The threat against the weak citizens rather than the soldiers defending the city is more effective both for the governor who is sworn to protect them, and also for the audience, since once again violence is seen as more shocking when inflicted on those who cannot protect themselves, and on those who did nothing to deserve it.

To give examples of my theories on the threat against Harfleur, I will have to rely on filmed versions of Henry V. I have not designed this scene myself, of course, since violence designers are not called on to design narrative violence, and I have not seen any live productions recent enough to discuss them. I often use films as examples and they usually work as well as stage productions as long as the differences are accounted for. However, the phenomenon I am describing here—the way the effect of narrative violence works on the in-world audience of the
narration—is sometimes hard to see in because film has a capability that is not available to the stage: the closeup. A film director can force the audience to look wherever that director wants them to look. In the theater, the audience can look wherever they want. Some film directors take advantage of this capacity when shooting the Harfleur scene to keep the focus entirely, or at least primarily, on Henry. For example, in the 1979 BBC film starring David Gwillim, director David Giles barely lets us see the English soldiers, and we do not see a French face, including the Governor, until the Governor speaks (Giles). Others are even less useful—The 1944 Olivier version cuts the entire speech (Olivier). The RSC’s 2016 “Live from Stratford” version, starring Alex Hassel, is also unhelpful for examining the way the in-world audience is used, since director Gregory Doran has Henry give the speech alone onstage. The one interesting effect of this choice, for my purposes, is that Hassel plays with the lack of an in-world audience. He gives the speech as if unsure whether anyone is listening, making bigger and bigger threats as he gets more and more embarrassed and desperate, which makes for a rare reading of this speech as funny. Eventually he is done, and turns to leave, and so is startled by the appearance of the Governor above him, and by the subsequent surrender.

The Hollow Crown version—produced by the BBC in 2012, directed by Thea Sharrock and starring Tom Hiddleston—is a little better. The camera spends time on the English soldiers listening to Henry, and it is quite clear that this is no bluff; at one point we are shown Exeter looking at York, both of them grim and determined, but not exhausted. When Henry begins to get graphic Exeter looks at Bedford and the two share a glance which reads to me as if they think Henry is going too far, or as if they wonder if they will be ordered to carry out this threat. When

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16 Being alone on stage could, I would argue, be viewed as the theatrical equivalent of the movie close-up, since it does as much as can be done to force the audience to watch the lone actor.
the governor looks at the English soldiers, as Henry says he “shall not leave the half achieved Harfleur,” he sees their grim determination, and he visibly shrinks a little. The presence of those dour faces heightens the power of the threat.17

Perhaps the best film versions for my purposes are the Branagh (2002) and the Dromgoole (Shakespeare’s Globe, 2012). Both present plenty of in-world audience to the film’s audience. In the Dromgoole version, starring Jamie Parker, there is nearly always a soldier in the shot behind Henry, and each of them looks shocked, weary, but not beaten—as in the Hiddleston version, the audience learns from those faces that Henry is not bluffing. The responses are more varied, however, than in other versions. Fluellen is frankly astonished at Henry’s brutality. The common soldiers look on in grim determination, while Exeter takes an involuntary step forward as the Governor speaks, making him seem to be anxious for a fight—like a “greyhound in the slip” to recall the earlier speech before the breach. In Branagh’s version the unnamed soldiers are clearly exhausted; they listen, stonefaced, to the speech but barely react. We do see responses from some of the named characters, however. Pistol’s lips twitch with the ghost of a smile when Henry says, “while yet my soldiers are in my command.” Erpingham’s eyes widen in apparent amazement at Henry’s talk of murder and rape. The Governor does not miss these reactions from Henry’s troops; we see his eyes widen slightly, he gets pale and licks his lips as the speech goes on. In the last lines of the speech, there is some very interesting camera work, starting with a cut from dead-eyed soldiers to the Governor on the line “look to see the blind and bloody soldier, with his foul hand” at which point the rest of the scene is a basic shot/reverse shot sequence, cutting between Henry and the Governor, cutting to Henry on “defile the locks of your shrill

17 Granted, the staging of the Sharrock version is quite odd in other ways; the whole scene happens in a city street, and the Governor is brought in by Exeter and thrown on his knees, making one wonder why it was necessary to have this scene at all, since they had clearly already captured Harfleur.
shrieking daughters [cut to Governor] your fathers taken by the silver beards/ And their most reverend heads dashed to the walls” [cut to Henry] through the naked infants and mad mothers all the way through “what say you? Will you yield” [cut to Governor, who licks his lips nervously] and this avoid, [cut back to Henry] or guilty in defence be thus destroyed?” The shot cuts one more time back to the Governor who, after hesitating for a moment, blames the Dauphin and surrenders. A final cut back to Branagh allows him to briefly close his eyes and sigh with relief—though it is open to interpretation whether he is relieved because he was bluffing and his bluff was not called, or because he was not sure whether his exhausted soldiers would be able to carry the town. Whichever way a given audience member reads that sigh, though, the moment is powerful, again thanks to narration’s ability to show the audience what the narrator thinks about the violence they are representing.

**Conclusion: Shocking Narrations Are No Accident**

Throughout this chapter I have been looking at various ways in which shock works in narrative representations of violence. In some cases, I showed how the narrative nature of the representation ameliorates shock, in others how it focuses it, and in yet others how it modifies the nature of the shock. Sometimes the shock is a secondary consideration, but it is always present and always has some effect, since even narrative representations of violence *are* representations of violence.

Without making an argument about what specific playwrights or designers were trying to do, or whether their utilization of narration controlled shock in these precise and effective ways was conscious or intuitive, I find the consistent effects of narration and shock to be a useful way to analyze what they ended up doing. I would, in fact, be surprised if any of these artists were articulating their process in the terms I use here, since as far as I know, these terms are new. I
hope that this project provides this tool not only to critics for analyzing past work, but to artists who might find it useful in developing new work. These tools are ones I have been beginning to use myself in my own work over the last few years, and I believe I had been unconsciously using them for years before that. In the next chapter, I will look at some examples of that kind of conscious application in my own work designing mimetic representations of violence.
CHAPTER 4
OFFSTAGE VIOLENCE

In Chapter 1, while exploring ways to differentiate between mimesis and narration, I offered the intriguing example of “offstage violence”—that is, violence which we do not see directly, but which is represented mimetically rather than through language. Offstage violence is ubiquitous. Consider acts of violence like the murder of Lady Macduff in Act 4, Scene 2 of Macbeth. That scene is often staged with Lady Macduff being dragged offstage screaming and the cries suddenly cut off so that the audience knows she has been killed. In that staging, the audience does not see the violence, but they know that it happened through what they do see and hear, rather than through a narrative description. In some scenes, offstage violence is represented with a single gesture, like the splash of blood on a wall or the gunshot from the wings of which Ibsen was so fond. A character entering with a bloody knife or exiting and then re-entering with a new wound, or a character entering with a dead body are clear examples of violence being represented as having happened offstage.

We call these kinds of representations “offstage violence,” but it is important to distinguish them from narrative representations of violence, even though those are also representations of acts of violence which themselves occur offstage. Of course, the two are both ways to tell the audience that an act of violence has occurred elsewhere, and so we could think of what I just called offstage violence as a kind of narration—one where the audience is told what happened non-verbally. But as I argued earlier, that is getting into a semantic, rather than a
functional, distinction between “showing” and “telling.” Following such logic to its end, any kind of showing would really be a way of telling in that sense. At that point there is nothing interesting or useful in the distinction. While we must acknowledge the porousness of the borders between mimesis and narration, we must also accept that those borders do have value. Theater practitioners do not generally consider offstage violence to be narrated violence, and for the most part, the converse is also true—practitioners do not talk about narrated violence as being offstage violence either. That is to say that the scenes that I examined in Chapter 3, like the opening battle of Macbeth or the finale of Oedipus, are usually not called offstage violence.¹

What makes something offstage violence is that the production creates a mimetic illusion, sensible to the audience, which implies that violence is happening, or has just happened, in a part of the world which is itself not mimetically represented by the production. Note that, even though the violence is not directly seen, offstage violence still falls into the broad category of “mimetic representation” because the illusion that communicates the violence having happened in that offstage location is mimetic, not narrative. In almost all cases, the implied location is spatially close to the part of the world which is represented on the stage. However, it does not appear that proximity is a rule of offstage action so much as an artifact of the way in which spatial representation works. An offstage act of violence that happens far away would be difficult to represent on stage in any way other than narratively since all the mimetic illusions we usually use to represent offstage violence involve something moving from the unrepresented offstage area to the represented onstage area, whether that something be sound, blood, or an actor.

¹ I performed a totally unscientific poll on social media, and the overwhelming majority of responses from practitioners were that offstage violence does not include narrated violence. Theater academics were, unsurprisingly, more open to the idea of narration being a kind of offstage violence.
Which parts of the world are being mimetically represented is a more complicated issue than it might first appear. Many contemporary “kitchen-sink” dramas do not even put a kitchen on stage, but there will often be a door that the audience knows leads to the kitchen. Is that kitchen space one that is represented? Does the answer change if a character onstage has a shouted conversation with another character who is “in” the kitchen? Of course, the existence of the door and the interaction that is made possible by that door mean that the kitchen has been represented in some way, but mostly we would say that no, the kitchen is not represented; it is, in fact, offstage.

The term offstage has a fairly common practical usage; what is offstage is that part of the theater space which is not visible to the audience—the wings, the backstage area, and actor-crossover areas are all “offstage.” When an actor says they are “going offstage,” that is what they mean. On the other hand, there are areas which are not literally on a stage, but which we do not treat as being offstage. For example, an actor entering down the aisle of a traditional proscenium theater would generally not be considered offstage, especially if they were speaking as they entered. As soon as the audience can see them and they begin to act, they are “on.” The key point is that we can see the actor. That same character entering from backstage is still offstage, even if they begin delivering their lines before they enter. That difference clearly demonstrates that it is not solely that the actor begins to act that makes their location “onstage”—they have to be both playing their character and be in sight of the audience.

Implicit in this conception of what is and is not “offstage” is the privileging of sight over the other senses, especially sound. Much violence that occurs offstage, whether represented narratively as in Oedipus or mimetically like Lady Macduff’s cries being suddenly cut off, represents the violence through hearing, not sight. On the other hand if we see but do not hear a
killing we would rarely call that “offstage violence.” A representation where the violence is seen but not heard is, of course, possible. Here I do not mean something like an assassin slipping into a room and silently killing someone. In that case, the audience heard everything there was to hear; there was no implied sound which they were unable to hear. In fact, the sounds they did not hear were essential to the fully mimetic illusion of a silent assassin. For an example to be analogous to the offstage gunshot, which is heard but not seen, there would need to be sounds that an audience would expect the violence to make but which they could not hear. An example that substitutes seen-not-heard for heard-not-seen would require the audience to see something that should make a sound but which the audience cannot hear.

In 2017, Akvavit Theatre in Chicago produced *Ghosts and Zombies*, Gustav Tegby’s adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s *Ghosts*. The production design presented a room in the big house with a wall of windows upstage looking out into the darkness. At one point, one of the characters leaves, and is immediately attacked and killed by zombies, clearly visible to the audience, but in silence, as if we could not hear through the wall, and over the background sound of heavy rain. None of the characters inside see what the audience sees because they are all facing away from the windows, so they do not know what happened to the absent character. We would not usually refer to this as offstage violence, since the literal definition of offstage clearly means parts of the theater that we cannot see.

On the other hand, there is a common form of unseen violence that is usually referred to as a “reveal”—where an act of violence (usually a fatal one) is committed in a way that the audience cannot see it, and the result is revealed later by allowing the audience to discover that the victim is dead at a dramatically effective moment. A classic example of this would be a scene in darkness where the audience hears a struggle, and then the lights come up revealing that
someone is dead. Another staple reveal is to have a character sitting in a chair with their back to the audience, when another character (usually talking to them first) realizes something is wrong and then turns the chair around so the audience and the character can see that the victim has been shot or stabbed. Yet another classic reveal is the character standing still until the proper moment and then falling forward onto their face to reveal the knife sticking out of their back. All of these reveals technically happen on the physical space of the stage, yet they are “offstage” in the sense that the actual violent act is not performed where the audience can see it. I cannot, of course, redefine a word like “offstage” that is in such common and agreed-upon usage, but nonetheless, these example show that our practical definition of offstage being based on sight is open to theoretical challenge.²

Why do we privilege the visual? If we can hear something which we cannot see, how is that less “onstage” than something which we can see, but not hear, like the set? That question intersects a current debate in the world of theater practice of accessibility: to a sighted and hearing audience member, the borders of the stage are much different than for a blind or a deaf audience. It is beyond the scope of this project to explore that intersection, but it is worth thinking about as we discuss how an audience responds to action on and off the stage, and action that they can not see or can not hear.

Of course, when we talk about something “happening offstage” we are not actually using the word “happening” in the literal sense of something occurring in the world of the theater—that is, the real world, as opposed to the world of the play. Certainly it can also mean that, but very rarely is an offstage fight actually choreographed and performed where nobody can see it.

² Etymology is not always germane, but it is interesting here. The word theater comes from the Greek word Theatron, or “seeing place.” But we usually call those gathered in the theater an audience (those who hear) rather than spectators (those who see). The tension between seeing and hearing is certainly not new.
The usual expectation for an offstage swordfight, for example, is that the actors will bang weapons together or into the floor or walls to make the sounds of a fight, but we do not expect them to actually have any choreographed violence happening onstage. Literally speaking, what is happening with offstage violence is that the audience is being mimetically presented with something which is not the violence, but by which the audience is given to understand that the violence has occurred. Of course, this is also what is happening with realistic mimetic illusions of violence like a fake punch; the audience is shown an illusion which is, of course, not an actual act of violence, but by which they are given to understand that in the fictional world of the play, an act of violence has occurred. The difference between an onstage fight and an offstage fight is that they are designed to represent the same thing (the act of violence having occurred in the fictional world) but they use different illusions to do it.³ Onstage violence represents the violence by using an illusion designed to directly show the violence. Offstage violence represents the violence by presenting an illusion of something other than the violence that nevertheless represents the violent act’s having occurred in the real world. Often, but not always, the illusion is that of a result of the violence; for example, when we see a bloodstained knife in someone’s hand, that illusion tells us that violence happened because blood on a knife is a result of stabbing someone. In the next chapter I will explore at length the workings of both realistic and stylized onstage illusions. I will return to this concept at that point because a stylized illusion can be viewed in similar terms by which I am viewing an offstage illusion. That is, a stylized illusion can be understood as something which does not look like the represented violence but which nevertheless represents the violent act’s having occurred in the real world. In semiotic terms, as

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³ Both the offstage and onstage violence are “illusions” by the definition which I developed in chapter 2—something happening on stage in the real world by which the audience knows what has happened in the fictional world.
described by C.S. Peirce, realistic mimetic illusions might be considered *iconic*, in that they represent what they do by looking like the thing they represent. Stylized illusions and offstage violence could both be considered *indexical*; as Peirce explains it, “An Index is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being affected by that Object” (102, italics and capitalization in the original). To return to my example, the blood on a knife represents a murder because the blood is the effect of the murder.

The reason that it is important to have a clear sense of what we are talking about when we discuss things “happening” “offstage” is that without clarity it will be impossible to explore why things might be happening offstage. Playwrights, directors, or designers make deliberate choices to place a representation of violence offstage in order to create specific effects. Some of these effects are relatively straightforward, while others are more subtle.

Perhaps the most commonly sought effect of placing violence offstage is to reduce shock. Much like narration, offstage violence can be used to keep audiences from having to watch bodies being acted upon in violent ways. In general, offstage violence is somewhat less distancing (that is, it is more shocking) than narration because what we do see on stage is still embodied. On the other hand, offstage violence is usually less shocking than onstage violence. Of course, I am not proposing an absolute scale—a gruesomely staged offstage killing could be more shocking than a gently designed onstage illusion, and as I argued earlier, it is possible for a narrative representation of violence to be shocking enough to spark revulsion. However, in general offstage violence is less shocking than onstage, and so some theatermakers put it to that purpose.

A more interesting but still relatively straightforward virtue of offstage violence is its capacity to create tension. Offstage violence is often said to be potentially more fearsome. The
mechanism is fairly well accepted—what we imagine can be more powerful than what we see.\textsuperscript{4}

But tension is different than fearfulness. Fear is a function of close distance in that fear results when distance is close enough that the audience begins to feel as though the violence might affect them. Thus the fearfulness of a representation is one effect of shock. Tension is released when we see an act of violence, but when the sight of the act is withheld from us, tension is increased, because that is what tension is—the waiting for the thing, the result of its being withheld. Driving up tension is a particular strength of offstage representations of violence. Again, consider the type of offstage violence where the victim is onstage, goes (or is taken) offstage and is killed. Because the audience \textit{almost} sees the violence, the sense of the violence being withheld is particularly present and effective.

One way in which tension can be significantly ratcheted up is to \textit{repeatedly} fail to show something which the audience is anxious to see. Tension is not always tied to negative emotions, but it is always tied to withholding. So, for example, sexual tension results from withholding the consummation of a romantic relationship, and the more times an audience is teased with possible consummation only to have it withheld again, the greater the tension.\textsuperscript{5} In the same way, each time a representation of violence is suggested but then withheld, the power that the withheld violence has over the imagination of the audience is increased. Serial withholding of violence is common in horror movies, especially ones that rely on tension rather than on jump scares or on gore. Such films will often withhold the actual revelation of the monster until well into the film.

\textsuperscript{4} Once again, I use \textit{TV Tropes} as a measure of how common a trope is. Their entry for this usage of offstage violence is called, unsurprisingly, “Nothing is Scarier.”

\textsuperscript{5} Continual building of sexual or romantic tension like this is common in television shows. This can be a problem for the format of a television series; some series have managed to keep that tension going for several seasons, but if it goes on too long, it can become tiresome—consider \textit{Remington Steele}, for example. Also, if that tension was the only thing holding the series together, then when it finally is resolved, the show can founder.
using a consistent method of withholding (that is, staging the offstage violence in the same way each time) so as to increase the power of the payoff each time we don’t quite see it. Plays can do the same thing.

For example, in Calamity West’s 2017 stage thriller, Hinter, nearly all of the violence is offstage. The play is set in the hinterland of Bavaria after World War I, at a small family farm. Hinter is based on a historical unsolved crime where a family of six was found murdered in their barn. The stage setting of the play is the kitchen of the house so we never see the bodies. During the investigation, characters regularly exit to the barn, first to discover and then to investigate the bodies. One function of the barn being offstage is that it makes that location more mysterious, driving up tension, as the audience becomes more and more anxious to know what is in there and what happened.

**A Gazetteer of Offstage Violence: And Then There Were None**

Offstage violence, by definition, obscures exactly what is happening. That can be a goal in and of itself. Mystery plays (that is, modern whodunnits, not Medieval religious plays) make frequent use of offstage violence in order to make it harder for the audience to figure out what is going on (which is part of the enjoyment of a mystery, of course). When we do not see what happened, it is easier to make that event ambiguous, or even to make it intentionally misleading. As I argued in chapter 3, unreliability is also one of the important qualities of narration—when someone tells us that something happened, that is only as reliable as the person doing the telling, while when we see the violence happen we usually believe what we see. Even more potentially misleading is when we do not quite see what happens. Aficionados of mysteries know that you should never assume someone is dead if you do not see the body, and even then, be skeptical.
"And Then There Were None", Agatha Christie’s 1934 stage adaptation of her immensely popular novel, is a fruitful exemplar of offstage violence. There is a series of murders, most of them offstage in one way or another. For the most part, I will be discussing the playscript of *And Then There Were None* rather than a production of the play. The reasons for this departure from my usual methodology is that Christie is very specific in her script about how the murders are to be staged, at least in terms of how, and in what way, they are “offstage.” She constructs her mystery using the characteristics of the various kinds of offstage representation very much as I have conceived them, so it is useful to discuss how those choices by the playwright work.

The plot of the play has been imitated so many times that it is now cliché. Ten strangers are gathered in a house on an inaccessible island by a mysterious and absent host, and accused of being murderers. Then one by one the guests are killed. Each murder takes a form related to the nursery rhyme, “Ten Little Soldiers,” which is prominently displayed in the house. The ten verses each describe the way one of the soldiers dies, starting with “Ten little soldier boys went out to dine / one choked his little self and then there were nine” and proceeding in that fashion until the last verse, “One little soldier boy sitting all alone, he went out and hanged himself and then there were none.”

As the murders commence, the group tries to figure out which one of them is the murderer, with increasingly fewer possibilities as more of them die. Once there are only two people left, each is certain that the other is the murderer. The twist, which is still astonishing to anyone who does not already know the story, is that one of the murders was faked by the

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6 The publication history of the play is complicated. The nursery rhyme is different in different versions of the play. The original title of the play referred to a racial slur used to refer to black people, and the rhyme followed suit. That title was replaced by a different racial slur referring to Native Americans, and the rhyme was changed to match. The current title, and the Ten Little Soldiers being soldiers, is the end of a long evolution for the work.
murderer pretending to be a victim. In the “happy ending” version that Christie originally wrote for the stage, the last two characters, Vera and Lombard, survive, while in the novel, Vera shoots Lombard and then hangs herself. The two versions are not significantly different for my purposes in this chapter, however, because that climactic scene is represented onstage. What interests me are the eight previous killings: Marston, Mrs. Rogers, McKenzie, Rogers, Emily, Wargrave (faked), Armstrong, and Blore.7

These eight acts of violence present a very particular set of requirements for their representation. The killings have to be different because each death needs to match the way the soldiers die in the nursery rhyme and they also need to be staged differently in order to keep the audience interested. But not only the events in the fictional world need to be different, so do the modes of representation. Christie uses this difference in mode to create doubt and to mislead the audience so that the twist ending will achieve its payoff at the proper time and not before. And Then There Were None features each kind of violence that I described at the beginning of this chapter. Three of the killings are narratively reported. The other five are varieties of offstage killings. Of these, one happens just offstage so that the audience can hear the action, though it is later narrated to explain what we heard, and the other four are a variety of reveals.

The killings begin with Marston, who drinks poisoned whiskey. This first death opens the action with what we would usually consider a mimetic representation of violence; the audience sees Marston choke and gasp then fall dead (“one went out and choked himself”). Starting with a thrilling and mysterious representation makes sense because mimetic illusions create the most shock. But the act of violence itself—the putting poison in the drink—is not seen. In a sense the

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7 I am using their names here as they are listed in the script. The men get their last names, the unmarried women get listed by their first names, and the married woman is listed by her husband’s last name. This was the (awkwardly sexist) convention when Christie was writing, nearly a hundred years ago.
poisoning is done offstage; not in a different location that is not represented, but at a time that is
not represented. Of course the audience cannot be allowed to see the poisoning or they would
know who the murderer was. Having the act of killing and the death of the victim be far enough
apart in time that we can see the latter without seeing the former is a particular virtue of poison,
of course.

The second to die is the servant Mrs. Rogers, who is also poisoned. Unlike Marston, Mrs.
Rogers dies in her sleep (“one overslept himself,” according to the rhyme). The audience learns
about Mrs. Rogers’s death the next morning, when the guests gather for breakfast and one guest
tells the others what happened. Rogers himself is not in the room during the report, and briefly
becomes the object of some speculation as to having been the murderer, but that suspicion is
quickly discarded. Rogers and his wife are not central characters, so suspecting him does not
drive the plot forward. I would argue that their unimportance is also one reason that her death is
narrated; for one of the reasons that I described in Chapter 3—at that point in the play the
audience is less interested in what happened to the victims than they are in the reactions of the
people being told about it—the survivors are more central characters than the Rogers are.

General McKenzie is the next to die, and his is the first really strikingly creative
representation. McKenzie does not take the deaths and the accusations well—he seems to suffer
a break-down and storms out of the main room to sit outside looking out to sea (that is, facing
upstage). The stage directions say that he “Goes out on balcony and draws up chair and sits, the
back of his head down to shoulders is visible through window. His position does not change
throughout the scene” (59). McKenzie sits unmoving for several more pages. Other characters do
interact with the General during that time; Emily tries to talk with him and he does not respond.
Rogers tells him breakfast is ready, again to no response. Armstrong and Wargrave both move
past him as they enter or exit, and then eventually Lombard tries to get him to come in, at which point it is discovered that McKenzie has been murdered—he was sitting there for an indeterminate amount of time with a knife in his back. How exactly this is staged would determine whether the murder would qualify as a reveal or as narrated violence. When he discovers McKenzie dead, Lombard does tell everyone, “Good God! One got left behind—there’s a knife in McKenzie’s back” (64). If he shows this to the audience in some way, that might make it a reveal rather than a narration, but even as narration it would be unusual, since McKenzie is actually on stage when his death is narrated, as well as during the actual murder which happened, unseen, sometime in the preceding five pages. The fact that McKenzie could be killed in front of us, without anyone seeing it happen, is frightening—it raises the stakes for both the characters and for the audience. When Marston died, the audience did not see the actual act of poisoning (and thus did not see whodunnit), but in that case we presume that the poison was put in the glass or in the bottle when nobody but the murderer was in the room. McKenzie’s death is far more chilling because it presumably happened right in front of us, and we missed it. This lapse is what is actually being revealed, either when we see the knife or when we are told about it. The same is true for the characters—they also are clearly shaken by having missed the murder, which took place under their very noses. As an audience we empathize since we had the same experience.

The next to die is Rogers, killed with an axe while chopping wood (“One chopped himself in half, and then there were six”). Like Mrs. Rogers, her husband’s death is reported, and quickly glossed over. The discussion of what happened and what they should do about it is more important than the man who was killed. Again, the focus is on the survivors, which is appropriate for a narrated death.
It is during the discussion of Rogers’s death that Emily is killed, and her death is similar to McKenzie’s, though the mechanic is taken even further. Emily dies of poison delivered by a hypodermic syringe (“a bumblebee stuck one”). She is onstage when the killing happens, not even obscured like McKenzie on the balcony, but sitting on the couch in full view of the audience. Once again, several pages go by between her last line or movement and the discovery by Lombard that she has been killed. He picks up the syringe which was apparently lying next to her on the couch and displays it for the rest of the guests (and, of course, for the audience of the play). It is as if, with McKenzie, Christie was warning the audience to watch carefully, and with Emily’s death she shows that no amount of careful watching is sufficient.

In a sense, Emily’s death, though it happens in full view of the audience, is a kind of “offstage” death. There is no actual mimetic action of her being killed; the only thing the audience actually sees is the reveal that she is dead. As I argued earlier, not being able to see is the essential characteristic of “offstage” violence. Once again, in practice I would not refer to Emily’s as an “offstage death,” but in theory her death does function the same way as any other offstage death of the “reveal” variety. Of course, it is possible to stage the play so that the murderer does perform the action of killing her, but it would be a dramaturgically risky choice, since if anyone in the audience actually sees it then, at least for that audience member, the mystery would unravel immediately and the effect of the “magic trick” would be spoiled. On the other hand, some choreography, or at least blocking, is certainly called for in this killing—if I were designing the violence, I would work with the director to make sure that there is enough movement in the room over the course of the several pages during which Emily is still that the
The audience cannot remember who did and did not walk by her. The 2019 Chicago production, directed by Jessica Fisch for Drury Lane in Oakbrook, demonstrated that this technique still works. Reviewer Catey Sullivan explained, “Fisch doesn’t cheat: Some of the murders take place in plain sight, the weapons visible, should anyone know where to look. But you won’t know because Fisch’s powers of misdirection are so well honed. A hypodermic needle that was right there the whole time won’t register in your field of vision until it’s too late. It’s impressive” (Sullivan).

The next representation of violence is Wargrave’s faked death, which is a classic of the mystery genre—chaos in a blackout with a gunshot and a reveal. Vera goes to get cigarettes, and then a moment later screams. The group grabs the candles that provide the only light (the generator having run down) and rush out, and then there is a scramble of offstage noise, with the stage itself in darkness, and a gunshot. When the group returns, bringing their candles with them, Wargrave is revealed onstage with a gunshot wound in his forehead. One of my arguments in this chapter is that offstage violence is so effective because when we do not see the actual killing, we are more easily misled. It is vital that we see the body for this particular death, because the inverse is also true—when we do see a body, we more thoroughly accept that the person in question is really dead. So the way this death is staged is perfect for us as an audience—we do not exactly see what happened, so we can fill in for ourselves the mysterious murderer shooting the judge, but we do see the body so we do not question whether Wargrave is dead or not. There are several levels of misdirection in play, beyond the reveal itself; many audience members

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8 In this theoretical production, there would ideally also be a discussion about how to make the play fun for people who already know “whodunnit”. Perhaps Wargrave could do something almost imperceptibly subtle, like stumble slightly, or pause to check his breast pocket for his glasses, while standing near Emily, so that those familiar with the plot could enjoy “spotting him.” Again, it would have to be sufficiently subtle that no one who did not already know would pick it out as suspicious.
would already have assumed Vera would die as soon as she exited alone, since separating from
the group had already been fatal in a few cases. Again, it is variety that facilitates the
misdirection—Christie is very clever about keeping the deaths different enough that the odd
things which might have been clues do not stick out enough for anyone (characters or audience)
to see them in time.

Doctor Armstrong is the next to die and in many ways his death is the exact opposite of
the Judge’s. Armstrong’s death is reported; in the morning Armstrong is missing and the
remaining three (Lombard, Blore, and Vera) discuss what happened:

VERA. What exactly did you find?
LOMBARD. One shoe—just one shoe—sitting prettily on the cliff edge.
   Inference—Doctor Armstrong has gone completely off his onion and
   committed suicide.
BLORE. All very circumstantial—even to one little china soldier broken over
   there in the doorway.
VERA. I think that was rather overdoing it. A man wouldn’t think of doing that if
   he was going to drown himself.
LOMBARD. Quite so. But we’re fairly sure he didn’t drown himself. But he had
   to make it appear as though he were the seventh victim all according to plan.
VERA. Suppose he really is dead?
LOMBARD. I’m a bit suspicious of death without bodies. (86-87)

Note that Christie, through Lombard, says exactly what I have been saying—that seeing the body
is important if one wants an audience to believe that the murder has occurred. Armstrong’s death
being reported rather than mimetically represented creates exactly the skepticism that Christie
needs. The evidence for Armstrong’s death is so circumstantial that not only the audience in the
theater, but the characters in the story, are rightfully skeptical. Christie’s trick here is to make
this death so suspicious that we ignore the actual fake death which we just missed a few pages
previously. Even the nursery rhyme supports skepticism. Armstrong supposedly drowned to
fulfil the verse, “a red herring swallowed one.” Because the “red herring” is mystery jargon for
something seemingly relevant which is there to obfuscate actual clues, the remaining guests see
that verse as more evidence that Armstrong is the murderer and has faked his death. Of course, Armstrong really is dead. When his body washes up on shore after Blore’s death, it foments the climax as the two survivors, Lombard and Vera, who both assumed it was Armstrong that was the killer suddenly realize that they were mistaken. By then, however, the red herring has already had its effect. Neither of the two characters, nor the audience, goes back to re-examine whether perhaps some other death was faked. In retrospect the audience will realize that Armstrong was the red herring—the object set out to distract from what is really happening. This combination of a fake death where we see the body and then a real death where we do not does an admirable job of misleading the audience by leaning on the predilection of audiences to believe their eyes.  

Wargrave’s final victim is Blore, whose death is the most typically “offstage” of all the deaths in the play. Blore runs out the door, tripping a wire that drops a large bronze statue on him. The audience does not see the actual crash, but they hear it and hear Blore’s death scream as well. This bit of violence creates what horror fans call a “jump scare.” As it leads quickly to the climax of the play, it serves to drive the tension up, yet another use to which Christie puts offstage violence in her play.  

*And Then There Were None* provides not only a fairly exhaustive catalog of ways to represent violence offstage, but also a catalog of various purposes to which such representations can easily be put. Of particular value going forward is the variety in terms of what the audience does and does not get to see. Whether or not the audience sees the body on which the violence is enacted has significant dramaturgical power. Reveals, whether on or offstage, allow the

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9 The trick does work. Despite the myriad revivals and adaptations, audiences are still fooled. Chris Jones wrote, in his *Chicago Tribune* review of the 2019 revival at Drury Lane, “The reason *And Then There Were None* has survived lies in how well Christie switches it up. You think you’re ahead of the play only to find the wily author actually is ahead of you” (Jones “And Then”).
production to control what gets seen when. These tools get used in a wide variety of ways in production.

The Bloodiest Violence You Never Saw: Edward II

In 2008 Chicago Shakespeare Theater produced Christopher Marlowe’s Edward II, adapted and directed by Sean Graney. Almost all of the violence in the production was onstage, which was a significant feat for two reasons. First, the play features a great deal of violence, even for an early modern history play. Second, the Chicago Shakespeare Theater production was staged in the particularly Chicago version of promenade style where the audience wandered wherever on stage that they wanted, with instructions to let the actors displace them if they needed a path or a playing space. The main space on the floor of the Carl and Marilynn Thoma Theater Upstairs was left mostly open, with no audience seating. There is a balcony around the playing space where audience members could pay extra to sit and look down on the action, but the majority of the audience was on stage with the actors, often as little as a foot away, and surrounding the action from whatever angle was most interesting to them.

Graney’s version focused almost entirely on the political struggle and the gender politics. According to a podcast interview on theatreinchicago.com with Graney, he cut about two thirds of Marlowe’s text in order to make the play short enough to do without an intermission (Graney, et al).

Graney did not, as it turns out, cut much at all of the violence, leaving the play with its considerable body count. Most of the violence takes the form of state-sponsored violence—legal executions or sanctioned assassinations. The killings were each staged in the same way; there

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10 The full title of the play was The Troublesome Reign and Lamentable Death of Edward II, King of England, with The Tragical Fall of Proud Mortimer. I will continue to refer to it as Edward II.

11 Graney, who has staged many promenade productions, feels strongly that it is a disservice to the audience for a promenade production to have an intermission.
was a doorway on the stage which led to an area that was not visible to the audience, covered with translucent plastic sheeting, and in which the executions took place. Each victim would be dragged, led, or guided (depending on how they took their fate) into that space, through the sheeting. What could occasionally be glimpsed behind those curtains as they parted to admit the next victim was dirty pale tile lit with flickering fluorescent lights, reminiscent of a public restroom. The victim would enter the room, and a moment later, there were the sounds of killing and a spray of blood on the inside of the plastic sheeting.

Graney was not worried about whether the illusions could be made realistic—his productions had featured plenty of effective stage combat in the past. Graney explained to theatreinchicago.com that the original motivation for putting almost all of the violence offstage was to deal with stage blood. Apparently, the administration of the theater—having never produced a promenade show before—was very concerned about getting blood on the audience if the violence was done realistically onstage. But Graney wanted blood; he said that, “after about the fourth time I promised I would not get blood all over the audience’s coats, I [made] a deal where we’ll just concentrate all the use of blood in one area” (Graney, et al). Though Graney moved the violence offstage for purely practical reasons, the staging quickly took on new interpretive qualities. That area where the violence was concentrated was originally just a tent, but after seeing that location beginning to do work in rehearsal, Graney realized it should be a bathroom, and the designers turned that concept into an extremely effective set design.

Placing the violence offstage had several results. First, there is a connection between offstage violence and state-sponsored violence. Societal violence is almost always “offstage” for most members of the society which inflicts it. Of course, as I write this, during the aftermath of the police murder of George Floyd in May of 2020, I am keenly aware both that it is more
offstage for some members of society than others, and that it can move onstage for others with shocking speed. Nonetheless, in twentieth-century America most state-sponsored violence happens where we cannot see it—modern societies generally do not make large public spectacles of capital punishment.

Violence being represented offstage can make that violence less personal, since what the audience saw in *Edward II* was not one person killing another, but an anonymized spray of blood. Because that kind of violence can be less shocking, it makes it easier for an audience to identify the murders as executions—violence whose purposed coercion is aimed not at the victims themselves, but at the rest of society, as the perpetrators use the violence to try to create the society that they desire. *Edward II* is, especially in Graney’s version of the script, a struggle between two potential Englands—the King’s, which accepts homosexuality and rejects some of the privileges of the nobility, and Mortimer’s, which does the opposite. Both ideologies use the same tool—murder—to advance their agendas. The killings are not formal beheadings or hangings with pomp and circumstance, but ignominious throat-slittings in a squalid public bathroom; both sides are trying not only to kill, but to dishonor the other. Their victims’ fates must not only be seen as inevitable, but as sordid. The equivalence of the two sides is brought home by the image of the proponents of either side meeting the same pathetic yet gruesome end.

The ability of offstage violence to create tension is certainly at play in *Edward II*, as the audience is repeatedly not shown something that we want to see. Each trip to the dirty, blood-streaked restroom, each time someone is dragged to an unseen death, tension increases. The long series of offstage killings has a spectacular payoff in *Edward II*. The ultimate act of violence in the play is the death of Edward himself, and that killing breaks the pattern. Rather than being carried offstage, the King is killed centerstage, surrounded by the audience. The death is
astonishingly brutal, of course—Edward is held down and sodomized with a hot poker. Marlowe
did not invent that death, merely lifted it from Holinshed, but it still rivals any revenge tragedy of
the period for gruesomeness. The scene was wildly shocking in Graney’s production for several
reasons, not least of which of course is the horrid nature of the act itself, and its obvious
metaphorical relation to homosexuality. Every other act of violence having been offstage
intensified the effect of Edward’s death being represented by an onstage illusion. The promenade
staging, whose exigencies had prompted all the earlier murders to be offstage, gave this final
murder an immediacy that would have been impossible in a more conventional proscenium
staging. The audience (at least those who were on the main floor) were gathered around, pressed
together as those in the back tried to get closer and those of us in the front tried to push back a
little. As with Extremities, which I discussed in Chapter 2, audiences who are positioned to see
each other watching the action can often feel complicit in it—we ask ourselves why the other
people are not intervening, and that leads to us asking why we do not intervene. That feeling can
be heart-pounding when the audience is pressed tightly in a standing mob.

Graney’s Edward II made spectacular use of offstage violence; a usage as far from shock
reduction as I can imagine. Despite the concept’s origin in the realities of production, in the end I
would be hard-pressed to conceive of an onstage mimetic representation which would have been
more effective, not only in terms of telling the story and bringing out the political themes, but
also in terms of generating both shock and tension. Offstage violence can do all of those things.

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12 The metaphor carries the same meaning for a modern audience as it did for Marlowe’s. In our society where, four
hundred years later, homosexuality is still sometimes punished with death, the metaphor is still extremely powerful.
A Sound Design Can Be Offstage Violence: *Lonesome Hollow*

Lee Blessing’s 2012 play *Lonesome Hollow* presents a chilling example of the effectiveness of offstage violence. I saw the Chicago premier by Idle Muse Theatre Company in 2013 at the tiny Side Project space in Rogers Park. The offstage violence in *Lonesome Hollow* is subtle. Throughout the play there are occasional gunshots in the distance, starting a mere seven words into the play. The gunshots are offstage violence; that is, they are a representation of something violent happening in a part of the fictional world which the audience cannot see. Nobody in the play reacts very strongly to the shots, from which reaction the audience is given to understand that the gunfire is normal, at least for them. It is this normalization of distant gunfire which works so powerfully on the audience, as the meaning of the gunfire gradually becomes clear and it is anything but normal.

The play is set in a near future America with two major dystopic themes: the proliferation of private prisons and a puritan reformation of the criminal justice system. The action of the play takes place in a private prison for sex offenders—a village in the remote countryside called Lonesome Hollow. The main character, Tuck, was an art photographer who took nude pictures of teenaged children and who was imprisoned for sleeping with a sixteen-year-old model. One of his fellow inmates, Nye, is a serial predator who abused pre-teen boys whom he stalked on the internet. The differences between these two kinds of crime are explored in the play to some degree, as is the mindset that lumps them together so that the two men are incarcerated together in Lonesome Hollow.

In the years leading up to the action of the play, the America of *Lonesome Hollow* gradually passed stricter laws with harsher penalties and less oversight of the penal system. By the opening of the play, the private company running Lonesome Hollow has essentially free
reign to treat the prisoners however they like. While they maintain an illusion that inmates can “get out,” in fact nobody ever does. In the few years since his arrest, art photography like Tuck’s has become illegal. His books have been outlawed in the US. The audience eventually learns that his books are still popular in Europe, creating the dramatic possibility that he might escape to there, though that hope turns out to be chimerical. The ultimate impossibility of escape is part of what makes the prison system so terrifying. This inevitability is one of the primary themes of the play—Blessing is painting a picture of what it would be like to be stuck inside a system that you cannot escape and that purposes your misery and eventual death.

The administrators of Lonesome Hollow make liberal use of drugs and torture to punish the inmates, and they give or withhold privileges like cigarettes or other mild drugs to motivate them towards “good behavior.” Inmates can move around the village with varying degrees of freedom depending on their status (earned through cooperation, of course). But one of the most effective ways that the owners of Lonesome Hollow maintain control over the inmates is the promise of parole and release, which is dangled but never realized. Inmates do disappear sometimes, though, and the disappearances are tied to the distant gunfire. In that opening scene when we first hear the gunfire, Tuck and Nye refer to it as “hunting season,” which, since we do not yet know what is going on, seems innocuous enough and seems to explain why they are not unduly concerned. Later in the scene, however, we learn that the two are incarcerated and that “locals” patrol outside the fence with rifles, and shoot anyone who manages to get past the fence. When I saw the show, I found myself deeply disturbed by the exchange wherein it becomes clear that what Nye called hunting season was an open season to hunt people. It is a chilling scene regardless of the victims’ status as sex offenders. Nye himself questions the legality to one of the prison officials, but she shrugs off responsibility, saying “It’s not like we’re shooting anyone. If
dedicated citizens choose to patrol outside our fence, there’s not much we can do about it” (15). Nye accepts the narrative without further challenge.

As in Edward II, the use of offstage violence in linked to state-sponsored violence, but there is more than that going on here. There is something psychologically devastating about the inmates’ acceptance of this narrative; the idea that it would be acceptable to the general society of America that inmates could be murdered by civilians with impunity gives the inmates a very clear (and depressing) indication of how their lives are valued. The inmates themselves seem to internalize that lack of value, which keeps them more docile—this demoralization seemed to me as an audience member to be as chilling to the inmates as the direct fear of getting shot. Of course, when the play was written most Americans (or, at least, most white Americans) did not yet view the state of the country as one in which a majority would passively accept the casual murder by agents of the state of other citizens, even incarcerated ones, as an acceptable status quo. The play was billed as a cautionary tale, not a description of how things really are or were.

In the final act of the play the violence is the subject of a twist; the audience learns that the offstage gunfire is a trick—there are no locals with guns, it is just sound effects created by the administration in order to inculcate hopelessness and a damaged sense of self-value in the inmates. After all, private prisons make a profit on each inmate and the administrators would not needlessly lose that profit center. When inmates “disappear,” they are not really getting shot trying to escape, they are simply being moved to a different facility—a regular occurrence designed to support the illusion of escape attempts ending in murder by mythical locals.

As an example of offstage violence, the gunshots are particularly interesting. Not only is the gunfire offstage violence from the perspective of the real audience in the theater, it is also offstage violence from the perspective of the inmates, within the world of the play. Put another
way, the gunshots are a mimetic illusion of a mimetic illusion. The fake offstage sound effects in the theater represent fake “offstage” sound effects in the prison town itself.

The effect of this representation of offstage violence, and the revelation that it is only a representation within the world of the play, is a fairly distanced one. The visceral, close-distance response to distant gunfire should be only slightly shocking for most audience members. The way the characters react to the violence is what does the work—encouraging the audience to think about what the gunfire means. And the fact that we believe the shots to be real within the world of the play says a great deal about the real America in which we are living. In some ways it is more distressing to find out that nobody was getting shot because it gets the audience thinking about how believable it was that Americans would accept the use of private murder for sport as a security system. The play uses this more distanced representation of violence to criticize the prison industrial complex by showing the result of such a system becoming as powerful as it has. At the same time the audience can see how it could easily happen as described in the play; each step in the political path that brought about the world of the play, as described by various characters, is clearly taken in the interests of “protecting the people” until civil rights seem to have vanished entirely. Audience members who are appalled by the idea that the murder of even pedophiles would be tacitly sanctioned by the society and government of the fictional world are asked to think about whether they themselves or someone they know has ever opined that such people should be shot.

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13 Obviously, this is not uniformly true—many people have been traumatized by guns, and will have an unusually strong reaction to any gunfire, even in the distance, but for those audience members, the illusion will not work the way it is intended. That is, if they are being directly affected by the sound, they will have a harder time creating the distance required to think about what they gunfire implies.

14 One of the powerful things about the play when I saw it in 2013 was that a movement toward conservative values and towards unrestrained profit from private prisons seemed frighteningly possible. Rereading it in 2020, I see that I was not frightened enough.
Of course the gunshots are only a small design element contributing to this theme of the production—the discussions between the characters did the heavy lifting, generally speaking. Nonetheless, such small design elements support that dialog. In her review of the Idle Muse production, Katy Walsh said, “These debates seem one-elected-official-away from this fiction becoming our reality. Scary! To match this apocalyptic tone, Composer Matthew Nischan provides a haunting and ominous soundtrack. It was still playing as I exited Lonesome Hollow and walked down Jarvis. I felt like the woman in a movie who escapes from being imprisoned in the asylum, walking away as the credits roll to the end song” (Walsh). Walsh did not mention the gunshots specifically, but—without meaning to take any credit from Nischan—the gunshots were part of the soundscape which Walsh credited for informing both her mood and her thinking of the production as frighteningly possible.

Lonesome Hollow’s gunshots highlight one of the basic uses for offstage violence which I described at the beginning of this chapter; the unreliability of the representation. The twist clearly requires the audience to be fooled, but it equally requires the inmates to be fooled. In essence, the administrators of the prison are taking advantage of the same virtue of unseen gunfire that Blessing himself is taking advantage of—that if we do not see it directly, they can imply any source at all for the shots. The lie—that inmates are being shot—is even more effective because once we find out it is not true, we somehow end up feeling worse, not better, because our susceptibility to being misdirected is itself chilling.

Almost, but Not Quite, Seen: Saved

Edward Bond’s 1964 play, Saved, features an extraordinarily shocking representation of violence. The violence in the play further pushes the borders which I have already stretched in terms of what is and is not seen, what is and is not “offstage.” The play deals with the poverty,
boredom and existential despair of life in London in the 1960s for mostly young people living on public assistance. In the central act of the play, several young men stone a baby to death, apparently because they are bored and because they can. The violence is astonishing even by contemporary standards, and when the play was written, it was wildly controversial. So much so that the Lord Chamberlain, the national censor of Great Britain through 1968, refused to permit it to be performed without significant changes, including cutting the stoning of the baby, which Bond refused to do. It took the National Theatre declaring itself a private club theater for the 1965 season in order for the play to be produced at all (Peña 112). Reviews at the time were mixed - Punch’s Jeremy Kingston called the stoning “One of the nastiest scenes I have ever sat through,” while a group of important artists came to its defense. Laurence Olivier argued that Saved was a play “for grown-ups, and the grown-ups of this country should have the courage to look at it” (both qtd. in Ellis).

The stoning in Saved is a very powerful example of a kind of liminal onstage/offstage violence. According to the stage directions, the audience never sees the actual stones hitting the infant—the baby is ostensibly inside the pram, which explicitly has its top up so that the audience cannot see inside it. This particular case of what the audience can and cannot see is the reason Saved is so interesting to my argument. Because it is a space that the audience cannot see, the inside of the pram is, effectively, “offstage.” That is to say that while, from a practitioner’s perspective, the violence in Saved is quite clearly “onstage,” in theory, throwing a rock at a baby inside a pram whose interior is not visible to the audience is no different than throwing a rock at someone hidden behind a set piece, or offstage entirely.

Interestingly, reports from the original production are unclear in terms of how exactly the illusion was staged. Critic Maddy Costa, in a 2011 article in The Guardian, interviewed one of
the actors from the 1965 production, Ronald Pickup. Pickup described the scene as tough to do because of the "horrible, infinitesimal detail of how accurate you had to be, partly because you didn't want stones bouncing off the pram into the audience" (Costa). On the other hand, the Daily Telegraph reviewer, W.A. Darlington, wrote of that premier production that he felt “no sense of horror, no dramatic illusion. I knew there was no baby in the pram, just as I could see there were no stones in the actors' hands. My only emotion was a cold disgust at being asked to sit through such a scene” (qtd in Ellis). Further, Costa says that “despite photographs proving otherwise” another actor, Tony Selby, “is adamant that his character ‘never threw a stone’” (Costa). Costa attributes this discrepancy to forgetfulness (her interview was done 46 years after the production), but there are other possible explanations. Perhaps Selby was not sufficiently accurate, or for some other reason was not given stones to throw, while Pickup was. Such a choreographic solution to the vagaries of actors’ physical abilities is not uncommon. It is common practice for a designer to see that some actors are more capable than others and to use a kind of magician’s sleight of hand by not using the same illusion for each actor. Even if all the actors had good pitching arms, I might choose to vary the scene by, for example, having the first couple of stones thrown somewhat carefully at the pram, using a real stone. That would read as tentative. Then, as the group of ruffians gains confidence, they start throwing more ferociously, but without actual stones. That way, the audience, who had seen the first stones, would tend to assume that if they didn’t see the later ones that they had simply missed it (“it was so fast!”). Of course that would require a mechanism for making the pram shake as if it were being hit, but that is an easy challenge to solve. If something like that were done, it might also account for Darlington’s claim that no stones were thrown.
Darlington’s comment is worth examining even if he was wrong about what he saw. He recognized that the production asked him to sit through a very uncomfortable scene. However, at least in his review, he does not examine why he might have been asked to sit through it. That is, he did not ask what the shock value of the scene might have been for the playwright, as Costa did in her analysis of the production. For Costa, the violence in *Saved* exposed “our capacity to deny the violence in human nature” (Costa). Darlington did make an implicit claim about how the representation works, though; in expressing his emotional response immediately after discussing the lack of mimetic believability in the way the illusion was staged, Darlington is essentially claiming that the two are related, implying that he might have felt differently with a more realistic illusion. Whether he actually would have felt differently about a different illusion is unanswerable, but his reaction is a clear example of an audience member creating distance for themselves to protect themselves from discomfort.

The goals and effects of Bond’s choice to hide the victim of the violence are compelling. There is, of course, a powerful taboo being broken in the stoning to death of an infant. There are more violent acts represented on stage with great regularity, with more gore or more ferocity or longer duration—but the stoning in *Saved* is particularly appalling because of the nature of the victim. As I have established, one characteristic that contributes to the level of shock inherent to a specific act of violence is the degree to which the victim deserves what happens to them. Since our society deems “infant” and “innocent” to be practically synonymous, the stoning of the infant is as shocking as any act of violence could be in terms of that criterion. A related criterion which increases the shock of an act of violence is how powerless the victim is to prevent it; this is another aspect of “unfair” violence being more shocking. That is, when an act of violence is described as “unfair” it generally means violence which was undeserved. But it can also mean
violence which could not be resisted—while we cheer when David defeats Goliath, when it goes the other way, people find that unfair and therefore more shocking. A baby is almost by definition helpless, and so once again, nothing could be more shocking based on a victim’s ability to resist than killing a baby. Peter Billingham describes the image of the pram from *Saved*: “this materialist stage property, with its correlating semiotic readings of domesticity, vulnerability and innocence, transmuted into a meta-theatrical totemic object of ‘shock’ and reactionary moral judgement” (31). Billingham goes on to argue that the shock has paralyzed critics, preventing other potentially fruitful readings. But he does not deny that the source of the effect was the shock, and he recognizes that innocence and vulnerability are key to making that shock work.

With these considerations, we could predict that the scene would be shocking to the point of revulsion for the audience, and indeed some audience members were apparently so shocked that they left the theater. Revulsion does seem to have been part of the intent. According to Costa, Bond was not looking for the kind of sympathy which I argue that maximum absorption creates. Rather, he was trying to make a point that was more likely to be accomplished with distance, which revulsion provides. Costa, based on interviews with Bond, says that the playwright considered the real shock of the play to be “an accusation that lay beneath the surface of the play: that the violence of Auschwitz and Hiroshima was not locked in the past but embedded in the fabric of British society, ready to erupt from a frustrated underclass” (Costa). Bond himself, in his Author’s Note on *Saved*, explains the point he hoped to make with the violence in the play. “The victims of unjust social relations may act violently to make these

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15 These evaluations of shock being related to the victim’s perceived helplessness and innocence are partly based on the work in *Defining Violence* which I discussed in Chapter 1.
relations more just … they may merely react violently because of an … unidentified discontent. When this happens, their victims may be innocent …. This persecution of victims by victims results from a culture which must surely be one of the most abject intellectual conditions the human mind could achieve” (15-16). Bond wants his audience to see that the murderers themselves are the victims of a systemic violence which his play is criticizing. The audience must be appalled by the young men, and we are, but on some level we must also both identify with them and recognize our own complicity in the violence under which they suffer.16

That is the kind of Brechtian self-examination which requires significant distance.17

According to Costa, “When he started writing Saved, Bond didn’t intend the baby to die: the young men were merely going to ‘set fire to something in a park. But what drama does is push things to an extreme’” (Costa). The key here is that Bond found something more “extreme”—more shocking—than setting property on fire, in order to trigger the revulsion that can create enough distance for the critical reading for which Bond argues in his Note.

However, even considering that he had no intention of bowing to the sentiments of the censor, Bond still did some work to mitigate the shock. Most importantly, he does not let the audience see the stones hitting the child. Of course, there is no child in the pram, and it would have been a significant staging challenge to actually put a sufficiently realistic representation of a

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16 Whether Bond’s intentions were realized is, of course, an open question. We might argue that Darlington’s comments in his review are evidence that, at least for him, they were not, though Darlington might have just needed more time to process than his review deadline offered him—we only know what he thought at the time of writing. On the other hand, Olivier’s comments argue that he, at least, did get the point. As for other audience members, it is hard to tell—both Darlington and Olivier are specially trained in interpretation. I like to think that the enduring acclaim for Saved is evidence that Bond did succeed with at least some audience members.

17 Billingham, in his book, argues that Bond’s work “represents … an important and ultimately separate development from Brecht” (26). I do not quarrel with Billingham’s claim, for indeed Bond is working with a different set of tools than Brecht developed. Nonetheless, as I argued earlier, shock is distancing, and can be used to create the critical distance which Brecht and Bond were both seeking.
child on stage to make a fully mimetic illusion in view of the audience work. But had the production succeeded in doing so, the violence might have been too shocking—as I showed in Chapter 1, another criterion for determining the level of shock is that seeing the effect of violence on the body of the victim is the most shocking part of a mimetic illusion of violence. Bond kept that final piece of the violence hidden from the audience, and as a result the shocking violence seemed to do what Bond wanted it to, at least for many audience members; shocking enough that the revulsion effect is triggered, but not so much revulsion that critical faculties cannot be engaged.\(^\text{18}\)

As always, any given production might make different performance choices which would affect how the violence affects the audience. Future productions could use the analyses of shock which I have proposed in order to consciously tailor their staging to produce the shock effects they desire. At the same time, the staging that the script suggests, and which was (as far as I can tell) used in the premier production, provides evidence that my proposal is a reasonable description of the way representations of violence are already employed by one of the canonically “most violent” of twentieth-century playwrights. The pram scene in *Saved* works exactly according to the principles of shock which I have proposed. Bond’s play follows the strictures I have laid out in several carefully considered ways to manage the shock in order to make it almost but not quite unbearable for audiences.

**The Progression From Offstage to On: Disgraced**

Ayad Akhtar’s 2013 play *Disgraced* features a single moment of particularly shocking violence. *Disgraced* explores themes of racism, Orientalism, stereotyping, and especially

\(^{18}\) Obviously, for some audience members the revulsion was too much; they left the theater. But most stayed and the conversation Bond claimed that he wanted was begun for at least some of them.
identitarianism. Akhtar uses the violence as one way to pose the question of identity. *Disgraced*, like *Saved*, is a play where the violence is performed onstage, but where the questions I am raising about how offstage violence works come into play. In this case it is the stage directions for the violence that raises those questions. In the stage directions, Akhtar implies that the violence might be done offstage, because he is concerned that an onstage illusion might not successfully shock the audience. The nature of that concern, and the series of design decisions that it is situated amongst, gives an insight into the way the playwright thinks about mimetic illusions of violence and how violence, hidden or not, can tell stories, making *Disgraced* a fitting play with which to end this chapter.

The plot of *Disgraced* is fairly straightforward. Amir, a second generation Pakistani-American, is in line for a partnership at a prestigious Jewish-owned law firm. Amir’s wife, Emily, is a painter whose new work experiments with Islamic art forms. At the beginning of the play, Emily convinces Amir to do some pro-bono work to help a Muslim cleric who is being tried for financially supporting terrorists, though Amir is reluctant to do it. In the next scene, months later, Amir and Emily are having a dinner party with Amir’s African American colleague Jory and her Jewish art-dealer husband Isaac. During the party, the apostate Muslim Amir opines that Islam is a fundamentally violent religion which encourages domestic violence. At the end of the evening Amir discovers that Jory has gotten the partnership which he had hoped for because the Jewish partners did not like his support of the Muslim cleric. He also learns that Emily had an affair with Isaac. Angry at these two events, Emily and Amir have a heated argument which ends with Amir viciously beating his wife. The violence raises the question of whether he had, despite his apostasy, been unwittingly subject to what he had earlier claimed is a fundamental character of Islam. Audiences have to decide for themselves whether Amir is an abusive man, or
if his Islamic upbringing “came through” in this moment of extreme stress. In an interview published in the 2013 Back Bay Books edition of *Disgraced*, Akhtar explicitly discusses why it is important to him that the violence be ambiguous.

I want [the violence] to mean different things. It’s obviously playing into certain Islamophobic tropes. I want the audience to be so fully humanly identified with a protagonist who acts out in an understandable but tragically horrifying way, that no matter what text you put on top of it, you cannot dissociate yourself from him. So even if you put that Islamophobic text on top of it, it doesn’t change his humanity. (Akhtar 92)

Akhtar’s language in this interview can be viewed as assigning to the representation of violence the ability to create shock—the sudden closure of distance that creates empathy even as the violence of the act itself is horrifying.

The stage directions which Akhtar includes in the Back Bay version are particularly interesting and relevant to a discussion of offstage violence.

*All at once, Amir hits Emily in the face. A vicious blow.*
*The first blow unleashes a torrent of rage, overtaking him. He hits her twice more. Maybe a third. In rapid succession. Uncontrolled violence as brutal as it needs to be in order to convey the discharge of a lifetime of discreetly building resentment.*
*(In order for the stage violence to seem as real as possible, obscuring it from direct view of the audience might be necessary. For it to unfold with Emily hidden by a couch, for example.)* (Disgraced: A Play 75)

Akhtar is not the most prolific writer of stage directions; where many contemporary playwrights seem to want to direct (as well as cast and design) their plays through their directions, Akhtar tends to be much more sparse. In the introduction to this edition Akhtar stresses the collaborative nature of theater-making, “A play is a blueprint, a workman’s plan drawn for a group of collaborating artists, and it must … spur the actors and the director and the designers handily to tell the playwright’s chosen tale” (Disgraced: A Play vii). And yet, the parenthetical note on how to stage the violence is telling. Akhtar is concerned that a mimetic illusion might not be sufficiently
realistic, and so argues that one hidden from the audience’s view might be best. Of course as I have argued throughout this chapter, “behind a couch” would not usually be considered “offstage”, but it fulfills the definition: a mimetic illusion which implies that in an area that we cannot see, something violent is happening, without our being able to see the violence itself.

Ordinarily it would be a challenge to discover what prompted this stage direction. The first printed edition of the play, in which the direction appears, was published just after the third major production of the play, which was in London. According to Akhtar’s interview in the Back Bay edition, the play underwent significant re-writing before the London production. So the stage direction might have been added as a result of an unsatisfactory illusion in one of the earlier productions. However, sometimes the stage directions are added by playwrights to describe the way the play was staged in an early production. If that were the case, we could infer that the violence in previous productions was performed in the way that the stage directions indicated, and was effective. This photo from the Lincoln Center production seems to fairly clearly indicate that the violence was mimetically performed on stage, though of course publicity photos are often staged differently than the play, sometimes before the play has even begun rehearsing.

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19 The play premiered in Chicago in 2012 at the now-defunct American Theater Company, then moved to Lincoln Center in New York. The London production opened in 2013, after the play won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize. Then the play moved to Broadway, and eventually back to Chicago in 2015 for a run at the Goodman. Many other productions around the world followed.

In the Dramatists Play Service edition, which was published in 2015, the stage directions are identical except that the parenthetical direction suggesting that the violence be offstage is omitted (Acting Edition, 45). Presumably, something happened in between the editions which changed Akhtar’s mind about the need for this direction.

Other than the London production, the rest of the first seven productions of the play were all directed by Kimberly Senior. She kindly agreed to discuss the staging with me, and was able to shed some light on the staging. In a personal correspondence she said,

The first production at American Theater Company the violence changed almost daily. At one point it was even offstage. At Lincoln Center it was partially masked by a piece of furniture and some of that was due to the skill set of the actors. In London the actor playing Amir was terrific at throwing fake punches!! So we worked from there and then evolved that storytelling in the Broadway productions - with that same actor. (Senior)

Akhtar’s stage directions seem to have been based on that experience. Writing after London but before Broadway, he had seen that if the actors could not do what was needed, then putting the violence offstage or masking it in some way could solve the problem. But it seems that by the
time the acting edition came out, Akhtar had been convinced by the success of the London and Broadway productions that onstage violence could deliver the goods. What was important was that the violence “convey the discharge of a lifetime of discreetly building resentment” and different productions solved the problem in different ways (Disgraced: A Play 75). Senior eventually settled on one particular way to solve the problem once she found a performer who could do the work, and a designer who could create the illusion that she wanted. Again in her words, for the Broadway production, “We had an incredible choreographer—Dave Anzuelo from Unkle Dave’s in NY. He was very interested in the storytelling that it wasn’t simply a moment of domestic abuse but centuries of violence and oppression unleashed. It was very much front and center and not masked at all” (Senior). In my experience, it is not uncommon for directors or playwrights to—at least initially—shy away from onstage violence on the grounds that the illusion will not be powerful enough. In the end, then, the brutality and violence and frustration that Akhtar wanted for the moment was provided by a well-designed onstage mimetic illusion.

For the purposes of this chapter, I have been conceptualizing offstage violence as a matter of what the audience can and cannot see. In a sense, then, almost all onstage violence, to which I will devote my final chapter, will have elements of the “offstage” about it. After all, stage combat—the creation of mimetic illusions of violence—often relies on tricking the audience into thinking that they saw something which they did not. I have also developed another quality of offstage violence - purpose. When anything is hidden from the audience, it behooves us to discuss why that thing is being hidden. As is so often the case, I do not advocate a hard line of definition. If I did, I might say that if the goal is to create an illusion of the violence happening in front of the audience, then it is onstage violence, while if the goal is to create an illusion of something else which nonetheless represents the violence having happened, that is
offstage. But while that definition would be useful at least a good deal of the time, it will fail at others. As the examples of Saved and Disgraced show, such a hard line of definition would obfuscate an important aspect of how some illusions tell stories by fooling audiences into thinking they saw an act of violence, when in fact they saw only part of, or the implication of an act of violence. Moving forward, I want to be mindful of these questions of what we can and cannot see, and why, in any analysis of a mimetic illusion.
CHAPTER 5

MIMETIC REPRESENTATION

In the preceding chapters, I have presented a comprehensive set of concepts with which to understand and analyze how representations of violence are used in production to tell stories. The concepts range widely, and so are used in different ways, but they come together to form a constellation of thought. Representation works as a metaphor for events in the fictional world. Shock is generated by narration and mimetic representation, under the eyes of the audience or hidden from them; each way of representing violence does different work, by creating empathy and thereby encouraging sympathy at the very least, but also performing other dramaturgical functions. It remains to put these concepts to work.

This chapter will consist primarily of analyses of specific mimetic representations of violence in individual productions. Most of them will be productions for which I and my partners at R&D Choreography designed the violence, while a few will be productions I have seen whose violence design was particularly powerful. I will often argue about what I think that a playwright or a play is doing through the violence, and how an audience might receive that, but I am primarily interested in the physical audiences of actual productions, and specific productions might vary from the way the violence is described in the playscript on which the production is based. When I argue about what Black Theater Workshop’s Vodou Macbeth was doing, I am talking about that specific production, which made significant changes to the text in order to
present the reading which the director wanted. Because of those changes, the violence design worked in a way that is peculiar to that production, and which would not have worked in any of the ten other productions of the play which I have designed, let alone the uncountable other productions that have been staged. It is almost certain that the design of that production was unlike any production that graced the Early Modern stage.

As a result of my focus on mostly smaller contemporary productions there is little scholarship available on these shows. I have extensively examined the reviews, and while many times the violence is mentioned, it is only in passing, or in praise that—while gratifying personally if it was my own work—is not useful to my project. Where anything can be gleaned from them, I have included them. There is, of course, plenty of criticism that discusses the violence in the more famous plays, like *Titus Andronicus* and *Macbeth*. Yet even where violence is discussed in regards to those two particularly violent plays, the focus tends to be on the dramaturgical use of the violence for the script, not how the mimetic representations might function in production. Sarah Kane, one of the in-yrface movement’s most famously violent playwrights, lamented this lack in an interview with David Benedict of the *Independent*, saying that there is, “no real debate in this country [England] about how you represent violence in art. We don’t know how to talk about it, we don’t know how to deal with it” (qtd in Woodworth, 14). I do not see that the conversation has progressed in the two decades since.

I have broadly divided the chapter into two sections. I will lead off by discussing several productions that utilized “realistic” violence and then I will look at a variety of stylizations. Through this division I will highlight the variety of kinds of work that violence does. For fights, once again, must do dramaturgical work. Roland Barthes makes the same argument, though in terms of costume design, in “The Diseases of Costume.” His argument is that costume designs
need to support the *geste* (Brecht’s term) of the work, and that costumes too focused either on historical accuracy or on being beautiful will fail to do the job that a costume design should do (Barthes, 41-45). As he says, “First of all, *the costume must be an argument* … it was not there only to be seen, it was also there to be *read*” (46, italics in the original). The same, I would argue, should apply to mimetic representations of violence—that is to violence designs. So through this chapter I will be looking at the various ways that violence designs might support the *geste* of the performances for which they were designed.

**Realistic Illusions**

Realistic illusions of violence are certainly the most common in the American theater. From a simple shove to a swirling melee with ten actors, seeing violence performed before us is an integral part of many theater-going experiences. Such fights comprise the day-to-day work of the theatrical violence designer. And in each case, including the most subtle or simple violent illusion, the designer’s job involves making interpretive choices—choices that create meaning and define the characters and the fictional world. In this section I will look at three productions and detail the character-defining and world-building work that the violence design did in each, and how the concepts of shock and sympathy were put into play and informed the choices that were made.

**Titus Andronicus at Haven Chicago**

The variety of kinds of choices a violence designer is required to make can be quite wide, especially in a show with a lot of violence. My first exemplar production is such a play—*Titus Andronicus*. In February of 2020, Haven Chicago produced *Titus*, under the direction of Artistic Director Ian Damont Martin. R&D Choreography was hired to do the violence design. The decision-making process for this production started, as is ideally the case, months before
rehearsals actually began, in production meetings where the design concepts of the show were hammered out. Martin’s plan was to cast the show almost entirely with actors of color. The only white actors in the show would be the Goths, and Aaron the Moor would be Latinx. Martin’s concept with this was not simply to replace white faces with black ones. That is, he was not merely offering “what if the Romans were black” as the takeaway. Rather, in casting this way he was opening up several subtle readings. In Martin’s approach, I see a practical application of what Rebellato was describing with his example of Oedipus in blue jeans—Martin does not want the audience to be thinking that the Romans were black, and he certainly did not want them to either ignore their skin or imagine that it was white—he wanted audiences to watch the play in light of the black actors.

One reading which the production makes available is that while white culture claims descent from Rome, it is black culture that can represent some of Rome’s best communitarian values, though it also suffers from some of Rome’s worst self-destructive flaws. The Goths, on the other hand, represented white culture, which in this case meant suggesting the danger of worshiping the ability of the individual and the importance of one bloodline over the good of the community. Martin hoped to foreground the differences between the two ideologies by opening the play with an extra-textual mimetic representation of the war between Romans and Goths, where the two ideologies could be seen in the way the two cultures fought.

As violence designers, we needed to support this metaphorically potent overlay of race onto the play. We decided that the fights—especially the opening battle—would feature African martial arts, but not as a one for one replacement of Roman fighting. Instead, the fighting would present our own slightly out of sync overlay of African fighting arts on both the historical Roman and Gothic ones. Our first decision was to arm the Romans with the iconic Roman weapon, the
The gladius is a short sword, primarily designed for stabbing and—in a legion—carried by soldiers who also carried the scutum; an enormous shoulder-to-shin shield. For the historical Romans, the scutum dictated the way the gladius was used. However, without the shield, the gladius can be used quite differently, and we took advantage of that; the gladius is about the same dimensions as a machete, one of the principle weapons of African martial arts, and so we could use machete techniques with the gladius and combine the martial traditions of Rome and Africa. We carried on that commitment to African martial arts in our choice for the Goths as well. The axe is the traditional weapon of the Goths, used both for throwing and in hand to hand combat. We decided instead to arm them with the short spears called *iklwa* that were made famous by the Zulu, but having armed them with African spears, we choreographed the actual fighting so that the Goths used those spears in a more European way.

The macro-scale choreography\(^1\) of the opening battle was also a ground on which we could try to bring out Martin’s concept. We quickly dispensed with the idea of trying to stage an actual close-order melee, where a large group of fighters faces off against another large group, for two reasons. First, because it was impractical; there were only five fighters on the Goth side, including Tamora, and only a few more on the Roman side. Second, and more importantly, we wanted to explore a whole sequence of smaller fights each of which would contribute, through its design, to the audience’s initial understanding of the character of the two cultures. These fights would be interspersed amongst movement and dance, collaboratively choreographed by the movement and dance choreographer, Leon Evans.

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\(^1\) Here I am distinguishing between the individual moves that a fighter makes, which is what we usually mean by “the choreography” and the macro scale choices about who is fighting in what combinations, and in what physical movement pattern on the stage, and then also how each individual fight contributes to the overall story.
Each fight in sequence told a piece of the story. The first conflict featured a Goth launching himself across the stage with his spear while a Roman waited patiently, deflected the flying thrust at the last moment, and in the ensuing grapple, slashed the Goth’s throat so suddenly that the fight was over before the audience had really registered that it began. This fight gave the audience the impression that the Goths are flamboyant and heroic but incautious, while the Romans are cunning and strategic. Because of the relative lack of context (this fight happened before a word was spoken, in the first minutes of the production) audience members would not have developed sympathy for any of the characters or even sides yet, which left them to sympathize with either fighter. For an audience member whose worldview is heavily influenced by race, they might favor either the Black Roman or the White Goth, and then they will view the fight in that context, cheering on the killing or empathizing with the dead Goth. Other audience members might view the fight without being deeply influenced by sympathy, and take in the action for the information it contains about the fighters.

The next fight featured Aaron fighting a Roman. We armed Aaron with a kukri—a relatively exotic Afghani knife that marked him as different from both Romans and Goths, and which has a long history with Western Imperialism. Aaron fought in a flamboyant but deceptive fashion, tricking his opponent by backing away, making the Roman overcommit himself and then stepping into, rather than away from, the attack. This choreography foreshadowed Aaron’s behavior throughout the play; plans within plans resulting in the destruction of people who thought they were winning.

In this fashion, we choreographed each short fight to reveal something else about the world. Alarbus kills two Romans who come at him from different sides through his skill and ferocity, and then two Romans fight together, side by side and supporting each other, to kill
another Goth. Alarbus sneered at this Goth for losing—seeing the difference between the two fights as a reflection of his own personal and individual prowess rather than the teamwork exhibited by the second pair allowing them to defeat an individually superior foe, which again supported Martin’s concept of the two cultures.

Several more fights followed, showing the Goths losing more than they won, until Tamora herself viciously slaughtered a Roman (played by the actor who would shortly take on the role of Saturninus) who had killed one of her Goths, allowing the audience to see her in action, avenging her people. Finally, the last moment of the montage featured a Goth fighting his way through Roman soldiers to Titus, who slew the Goth with a single stroke. Throughout the battle montage, slain soldiers would rise and rejoin the mass of fighters on each side and cheer on the ones actually fighting at any time, but with Titus’s final sword stroke, all the actors fell down together at the same time as the Goth he was more literally killing, ending the opening movement montage by establishing Titus’s complete domination of the war.²

These are the kind of interpretive choices which violence designers make when planning out the way violence will be mimetically represented. In this particular case, the work was aimed at supporting the story that the director wanted to tell in terms of the themes he was interested in bringing forth by revealing the character of the cultures in conflict. We can think of such work as a kind of world-building being done by the violence design.

The Vodou Macbeth

In 1999, the Black Theater Workshop in Columbia Missouri produced Macbeth under the direction of Clyde Ruffin. R&D Choreography was hired to do the violence design. The

² This final moment is clearly a moment of stylization, but since the production used almost entirely realistic fighting, it works well to make my point here. I will discuss stylization later in this chapter.
production concept was to set the play in a magical version of the Caribbean. Swords and axes were replaced by spears and machetes, instead of wearing armor the men fought bare-chested, and the “witches” became bokur: vodou witches.³

One of the principle questions that designers need to answer in order to plan the final battle between Macbeth and Macduff is the same for every production: what is the nature of the magic, and the witches’ prophesy? Answering this question led the production team of Ruffin’s Macbeth to the choices which we made for this production and set up the dramaturgical work that our violence design would accomplish. There are many ways that the magic in the play can be read. One reading is that the witches can see the future but not influence it; that everything that happens is completely predestined. Macbeth even considers this option when he says that if fate wants him to be king, he shouldn’t have to do anything—though he immediately discards that thought under Lady Macbeth’s pressure. But the total predestination reading robs Macbeth (and everyone else) of agency; under such a reading, what happens is completely inevitable, and if Macbeth cannot help doing evil, that in some ways makes him less evil.⁴ A more interesting reading, and one that is not uncommon in contemporary productions, is that there is little or nothing magical about the witches prophesy. Under such a reading, which I would call the “self-fulfilling prophesy model,” Macbeth would never have betrayed Duncan if the witches had not put the idea into his head. Likewise, it is the act of telling Macbeth that he is invincible which makes him invincible, until he thinks he can be defeated and promptly is. This phenomenon is familiar to a modern audience thanks to modern sports psychology; when someone thinks they

³ Ruffin’s was hardly the first all-black Macbeth. The term “Voodoo Macbeth” is generally used to refer to the 1936 Federal Theater Project’s production, under the direction of Orson Wells.

⁴ That is, such a reading might make Macbeth seem somewhat less evil to a modern audience who grew up under liberal humanism. Individual viewers will, as always, vary in how they commit their sympathies.
cannot lose, that gives them the confidence to win. In the case of Macbeth, his confidence lasts until the terms of the prophesy seem to have been met. Once Birnam Wood “comes” to Dunsinane, and Macduff reveals that he is not born of woman, Macbeth’s confidence leaves him and he “chokes.” That reading is popular, and fits a twenty-first century sensibility, in that nothing supernatural is necessary. For a director who is less interested in the nature of evil, that reading can make the play more about the importance of sticking to your own principles in the face of pressure from others.

However, in the Caribbean setting that Ruffin was developing, belief in spirits and the black magic of the bokur makes the supernatural an important part of the play and makes some readings more available as other readings become less supportable. For example, if bokur are an acknowledged part of the world, it would be less surprising that Macbeth believes them, and that he and Banquo accept their existence without much question. The way vodou works had an even more significant role on the dramaturgical decisions that the production had to make about the magic in the final scene. What we decided was that the witches are not prophesying that Macbeth will not be harmed except by one not of woman born, but instead are enchanting him so that he can not be harmed. They give him a charm bag to wear around his neck during the scene where they tell him that. In the final act, when he is fighting Young Seward, we designed the fight so that it seemed as though Young Seward ought to have won, but Macbeth was “lucky”—he slipped just as Young Seward launched a strike that should have killed Macbeth so that

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5 Note this is a particularly modern problem in the first place: the text itself does not in any way support the reading that magic and witches are not real: in the text, nobody ever questions whether witches or prophesy exist. However, many modern directors have struggled to deal with the fact that a modern audience begins with the assumption that magic does not exist, and so they feel the need to either set up the fictional world as one in which magic is real, or else distance the production from the magic.
Seward’s machete passed harmlessly by him; a narrow miss, but enough, and Macbeth then capitalized on the freak accident to kill Seward.

Once Macduff entered, the nature of the magic became even more explicit. Macduff fought much harder than Macbeth, partly because he was driven by rage and partly because Macbeth had begun to rely on his supernatural luck. In a machete fight, naked aggression can be decisive—even more than it usually is in a fight between men in armor wielding heavier swords—and we designed the fight so that it was clear that Macbeth was getting the worst of the fighting for the first few beats.

There are several ways that choreography can show the audience who is winning, and in this case we used one of the simplest; what I sometimes call “the balance of initiative.” Any given move in a fight almost always has one character initiating an action (whom we call the agent) and one reacting to it (the patient). One of the most common mistakes that novice choreographers make is to consistently alternate which character is the agent and which is the patient. This results in something that we often call “turn-taking,” where one person attacks, the other defends, and then the character who just defended makes their attack, which the initial attacker responds to with their own defense. This taking turns does not look realistic, because it is not. In a fight like that, agent is synonymous with attacker, and patient with defender, which is an over-simplification. A character who closes a line of attack by adopting a certain guard might force their opponent to change their guard in response—the former is the agent, and the latter the patient, despite neither making an attack.

More importantly, in a real fight, the agent, by forcing the patient to respond to their action, has what we call the initiative. They have the time, while the patient is responding to their previous action, to begin a new action, which again, the patient has to respond to. A real fighter
does not want to take turns—they would like it to always be their turn, over and over again, and not to ever give their opponent a turn, while the opponent is trying to break that cycle and “gain the initiative.” Gaining the initiative in a real fight is hard and requires a response movement in a shorter time than the movement to which it is responding. Fighters rarely take turns move by move, but rather one character will hold the initiative for a few moves in a row, until their opponent either seizes the initiative, or more likely, breaks distance to end the exchange and “reset,” hoping they will have more luck in the next exchange. In a fight between closely matched opponents, the initiative should be balanced; that is, sometimes one character will hold the initiative for a while, and at other times, the other will. Since it is very hard to hit an opponent when you do not have the initiative, a character who is not able to seize the initiative is likely to be beaten. To make it clear that one fighter is doing better than the other, a choreographer can shift that balance, which is what we did in the fight between Macbeth and Macduff. That is, we choreographed the fight so that Macduff had the initiative almost all the time, and Macbeth was, over and over, barely escaping an exchange without being hit.

After yet another lucky escape, Macbeth began to say the line “Thou losest labor” (5.7.38). Then suddenly, in the middle of the line, Macduff knocked Macbeth down and hacked him repeatedly with a machete, apparently killing him. This sudden action was a surprise, especially for those who knew the play, since it happened in the first press of the fight, after Macduff’s line “I have no words. My voice is in my sword” (5.7.36-37). Anyone familiar with the text would have been startled to see Macbeth killed before so many of the famous lines that no doubt such audience members were waiting to hear. No mention had yet been made of Macduff being untimely ripped, no “Lay on, Macduff.” Just Macduff massively overpowering even Macbeth’s supernatural luck and hacking him apart. And, for a long moment, that was it.
Then, when Macduff was almost at the exit, Macbeth rose from the ground with the smooth
flowing to his feet that has sometimes been associated with zombies. He laughingly finished his
line about Macduff wasting his efforts, and disclosed that he bears “A charmed life, which must
not yield to one of woman born.” As he said that line, he indicated the charm bag that protected
him. To prove his point, Macbeth discarded his machete and attacked Macduff with his bare
hands, easily knocking aside Macduff’s attacks, as if immune to harm, and eventually taking
Macduff’s machete away from him and slamming him into a wall. From that point on, the rest of
the lines before Macbeth’s death were significantly cut. Macduff figured out what the charm bag
was and as he ducked the follow-up cut from being slammed into the wall that would have
decapitated him, he let his off-hand pass inside the cut to find the charm bag around Macbeth’s
neck and yank it off. As he escaped, Macduff recovered Macbeth’s fallen machete and the fight
continued, this time with Macbeth fighting desperately as Macduff launched an attack which
resulted in a furious exchange of machete blows, causing sparks to fly as the two hacked at each
other with dizzying speed. But in the end Macduff eviscerated Macbeth and stepped back—at
which point Macbeth and Macduff have their final exchange of dialog, deeply cut down to just
get out the information that Macduff was from his mother’s womb untimely ripped. Macbeth
then gets only the barest few lines of his last speech, gasping out the lines as his blood surged out
of his belly through his fingers so that by the time he says, “Lay on Macduff./ And damned be
him that first cries hold …,” he is dropping to one knee, and then croaks out his last word,
“enough …” before falling dead (5.7.57-64).

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6 There is some question as to whether zombies are really a part of the Vodoun religion, but in the popular
imagination they are related, and so we used a quality of movement that is associated with zombies.
The production process was both collaborative and iterative, in that the initial cutting and production meeting discussions suggested the possibility of designing the violence this way, and then once we committed to this design, the director further cut and re-arranged the text to support the reading that the violence design was pursuing. Here is the text as presented in the Norton, followed by the eventual performance cutting used in the Black Theater Workshop production.

**Fight scene as it appears in the Norton edition**

*Enter MACDUFF*

MACDUFF. Turn, Hellhound, turn!

MACBETH. Of all men else I have avoided thee.
But get thee back. My soul is too much charged
With blood of thine already.

MACDUFF. I have no words.

My voice is in my sword, thou bloodier villain
Than terms can give thee out!

_Fight. Alarums._

MACBETH. Thou losest labor.

As easy mayst thou the intrenchant air
With thy keen sword impress as make me bleed.
Let fall thy blade on vulnerable crests.
I bear a charmed life which must not yield
To one of woman born.

MACDUFF. Despair thy charm,

And let the angel whom thou still has served
Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother’s womb
Untimely ripped.

MACBETH. Accursed be the tongue that tells me so,

For it hath cowed my better part of man.
And be these juggling fiends no more believed,
That palter with us in a double sense,
That keep the word of promise to our ear
And break it to our hope. I’ll not fight with thee.

MACDUFF. Then yeld thee, coward,

And live to be the show and gaze o’th’ time
We’ll have thee, as our rarer monsters are
Painted upon a pole and underwrit
“here may you see the tyrant”

MACBETH. I will not yield,

To kiss the ground before young Malcolm’s feet,
And to be baited with the rabble’s curse.
Though Birnam Wood be come to Dunsinane
And thou opposed, being of no woman born,
Yet I will try the last. Before my body
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on Macduff,
And damned be him that first cries, “Hold, enough!”

Exeunt fighting. Alarums.

Black Theater Workshop’s version, cleaned up and cut by Clyde Ruffin

Enter MACDUFF
MACDUFF. Tyrant, show thy face!

[Macbeth hears his voice and stands frozen with horror. Macduff moves toward him]

I cannot strike at wretched kerns, whose arms
Are hired to bear their staves: If thou beest slain
And with no stroke of mine
My wife and children’s ghosts will haunt me still.

[Macbeth turns to exit]

Turn, Hellhound, turn!

[Macbeth stops and turns to face him]
MACBETH. Of all men else I have avoided thee.
But get thee back. My soul is too much charged
With blood of thine already.
MACDUFF. Then yield thee, coward,
And live to be the show and gaze o’th’ time
We’ll have thee, as our rarer monsters are
Painted upon a pole and underwrit
“here may you see the tyrant”

[They fight]
MACBETH. I will not yield,
To kiss the ground before young Malcolm’s feet,

[Macbeth attacks furiously]

Though Birnam Wood be come to Dunsinane
Yet I will try the last.
MACDUFF. I have no words.

My voice is in my sword.

Fight. Alarums. [the stage is filled with leaves]
MACBETH. [while fighting] [Thou losest …]

[Macbeth seemingly slain, Macduff makes to exit, Macbeth rises]
Thou losest labor.
I bear a charmed life which must not yield
To one of woman born.

[Fight. In the fighting, Macduff rips charm bag from Macbeth’s neck In the following fight, Macduff is eventually dealt a mortal wound]
MACDUFF. [holding up charm bag] Despair thy charm,
And let the angel whom thou still has served
Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother’s womb
Untimely ripped.

MACBETH [dying]. Accursed be the tongue that tells me so,
And be these juggling fiends no more believed,
Yet I will try the last. Lay on Macduff,
And damned be him that first cries, “Hold, enough!”

[Macbeth dies]

Of particular note is that the scene began with lines taken from what, in the Norton, is an earlier part of the scene where Macduff is alone, but which here are spoken directly to Macbeth. More important is the relocation of the exchange where Macduff tells Macbeth to surrender and Macbeth refuses. These lines normally come after the fight begins, and after Macbeth learns that Macduff is his prophesied killer. In most of the productions which I have seen or worked on, Macbeth is changing his mind during that line—when he says, “I’ll not fight with thee,” he is suddenly afraid and refuses to fight. Then when Macduff says that his only other option is to yield, Macbeth summons up the courage to defy Macduff, usually out of stubbornness and pride—essentially changing his mind again. The flip-flopping within the course of a few lines runs the risk of making Macbeth read as weak in his final moments.

In this production, however, Macbeth is not changing his mind. He started the scene by saying that he didn’t want to kill Macduff and had, in fact, been avoiding him especially because he felt bad for having killed Macduff’s entire family. Macbeth knows already at the beginning of the scene that he might lose the battle—Birnam wood, after all, has already come to Dunsinane. But in the Ruffin production, when Macbeth says that he does not want this fight, he does not know that Macduff is immune to his protective charm, and Macduff does not even know the charm exists. Thus, Macbeth is not suddenly afraid—he still thinks he personally cannot be killed. So when he initially says that he does not want to fight Macduff, he doesn’t mean “I will not fight”—he means “I will not fight with thee.” He is making an offer; a last chance for
Macduff to walk away from the fight, which Macduff refuses. The offer that Macduff refuses has higher stakes in this production than it usually does, since in most productions, the exchange happens after the revelation of the prophesy, and so Macduff knows that the prophesy is on his side. If he is destined to kill Macbeth, it is not as brave for him to refuse the offer and insist on a fight. So for both Macbeth and Macduff, this re-ordering of the text makes them stronger. The final moment of the scene, as read this way, gave the actor playing Macbeth a really powerful death scene; a moment entirely missing from the standard text in which his death is offstage. When he says that he will “try the last,” he is literally dying, and when he finally chokes out his last line, the very last word, “enough,” was given, by the staging of the fight, a new double-meaning; through the delivery of the actor the audience could discern that, in that final moment of defiance, it might be Macbeth himself who has finally had enough.

The fight in the Black Theater Workshop’s production did dramaturgical work in several ways. To begin with, the fight fit in with and supported the vodou aesthetic and further developed the fictional world. As I argued in chapter 1, everything that happens on the stage helps the audience construct the fictional world, and seeing the magic in action defined the world more specifically. It might seem late in the play for world-construction to be happening; one might imagine that by the final scene, if the world was not sufficiently constructed the production had not done its job. However, that kind of thinking reflects a misconception of how world-building works. In truth, the play world is being constructed right up to the final curtain, creating a final conception of “what they saw” for the audience, and that conception does the aesthetic work as a complete whole. The characters who inhabit the world are part of that

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7 Here I am following Barthes, who argued in “Literature and Signification” that the theatrical sign-system has a “final meaning which is, one may say, retrospective, since it is not contained in the last speech and yet is not clear until the play is over” (262). This idea—at once simple and profound—that each piece of information in the “density
construction; we learn important things about both Macbeth and Macduff in that final fight. As I argued above, in this production the violence design makes the characters both stronger, which can increase sympathy for both.

Empathy and sympathy are complicated in this scene because Macbeth himself is so complicated. He is, by this point in the play, clearly the villain and we would expect most audience members to be rooting for his death. For them, there will be visceral satisfaction in seeing Macbeth’s body hacked apart, and corporeal identification with the hero Macduff as he does it. At the same time, at least some audience members might be expected to still feel some sympathy for Macbeth while other audience members might have some sympathy for both characters. In each case, the shock response creates empathy, dramatically deepening sympathy for any character with whom an audience already sympathizes in this crucial final confrontation, and making the storytelling more intense.

When Macbeth was seemingly killed but then rose like a zombie, the moment was both shocking and surprising; and each reaction did different work. The shock does its normal work of increasing audience investment in the characters, while the surprise was designed to encourage the audience to re-evaluate the rules of the world. Before that moment, it was still within the realm of possibility that the magic was not real, especially once they saw Macbeth apparently killed. When he stood back up, the magic of the witches’ charm became undeniable. The cutting and re-arranging made available a reading which would be an enormous stretch, if not impossible, using the Norton text of *Macbeth*. On the other hand, the reading that this production put forth would have been impossible without a violence design that supported and expanded it.

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of signs,” as Barthes sees the theater, comes together only at the end, has stuck with me for years and informs both my theory and my practice.
The #BLM Tommy

Directors use all sorts of tools to accomplish the kind of (re)interpretive work that Ruffin brought to his production of Macbeth. Mimetic representation in general seems particularly open to interpretation since acting and design work are interpretive in ways that texts can only suggest. Indeed a major virtue of the theater is the ability to use the staging of a play to pick out different readings of the play, including some which are not necessarily supported by the text, without changing a word of that text. To take a truly overdone example, a costumer can immediately tell an audience that Julius Caesar is actually about a current, not an ancient, political situation, by putting the characters in suits instead of in togas.8

In 2015, the Paramount Theatre in Aurora, Illinois mounted a production of The Who’s Tommy, a 1992 musical based on rock band The Who’s 1969 rock opera and their 1975 film. R&D Choreography was hired to design the violence. The musical tells the story of Tommy Walker, the “deaf, dumb and blind kid [who] sure plays mean pinball” as the most famous song in the show, “Pinball Wizard,” declares (Townshend). The play recounts Tommy’s rise to fame as a pinball player, the cult-like following he gathers, and his own eventual enlightenment once his cult deserts him. The musical opens with a prologue that explains how Tommy became disabled. Tommy’s parents married and conceived Tommy just before the father went off to fight in WWII. His plane was shot down over Germany, and he was presumed dead. Four years later, Tommy’s mother has a new lover, and they are at home (with Tommy already put to bed for the night) when Captain Walker returns, having been rescued from a POW camp. A fight ensues during which Captain Walker shoots the lover to death. Realizing that Tommy, whom they had

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8 To be clear, I do not think that this particular representation is generally necessary—even in the most traditional staging of Julius Caesar, it should be perfectly clear how relevant the play is. But the point remains that representations of clothing (or of violence) can be used to make a play more relevant to a contemporary audience.
thought was asleep, witnessed the whole thing, Captain Walker grabs the young boy and tells him that he didn’t see anything or hear anything, and he cannot say anything. From that point on, the boy becomes deaf, dumb and blind. Captain Walker is tried for murder, but since nobody else was there and Tommy will not (cannot) speak, Captain Walker is acquitted by reason of self defense.

When the album was written, and later when the play was first produced, the prologue was relatively uncomplicated. The dramaturgical purpose of the violence in the prologue is to set up the conditions of Tommy’s trauma and disability. The shock involved in the fight and the shooting is simply generated by our automatic sympathy for young children exposed to violence. However, the production process at the Paramount began with production meetings in the Fall of 2014 on the heels of the deaths of Michael Brown (shot to death by police in East St. Louis) and Eric Garner (choked to death by police in New York City). The #BlackLivesMatter movement was building, and the long history of police murder was just becoming a part of the wider consciousness. “Hands up, don’t shoot” was becoming a popular resistance cry, based on the posture (on knees, with empty hands in the air) that young men of color were adopting in a (too often vain) attempt to avoid being shot to death by police. In that environment, we realized as designers that the murder of an unarmed young man by another man in uniform, and his consequent acquittal by the legal system were too important to ignore.

Systemic violence like that under protest by the Black Lives Matter movement is not usually addressed by a violence design. However, thinking about how violence works within stories is one of the basic responsibilities of the violence designer. In this case, as designers, we were the ones who recognized the way these contemporary considerations mapped onto the action of the forty-five-year-old play and introduced the discussion in an early production
meeting. By that time, casting was unfortunately already complete; we would otherwise have advocated for the director to cast an actor of color in the role of the lover. But even with the lover being white, the relevance was clear in light of the political moment. We brought the discussion up in a production meeting, arguing that dealing with the issue was particularly vital considering that a large portion of the Aurora audience consisted of rich white suburbanites. In a production in a smaller storefront Chicago venue, we might have been able to leave it to the audience to see the parallel without focusing on it specifically, but we felt some urgency to make it as clear as we could for the audience of the theater at which we were designing. Since casting was already done, the onus fell even more heavily on the violence design to carry the contemporary political weight of the scene.

One could hardly describe a big commercial theater in Aurora as Artaud’s “Theater of Cruelty,” but Artaud’s manifesto is never far from the mind of anyone whose job is to tell stories through movement rather than text. In the second manifesto, Artaud says, “we shall require of the mise en scène and not of the text the task of materializing these old conflicts and above all of giving them immediacy; these themes will be born directly into the theater and materialized in movements, expressions, and gestures before trickling away in words” (124, italics in the original). His point is well taken, even if one does not completely subscribe to his dismissal of the text. Certainly language can be enormously powerful, and never more so than when that language is framed in song, as is the case with opera. Nonetheless, the music is another artist’s job, and because it is essentially set by the composer who wrote in the past, it cannot always respond to the moment of production. Choreography can, and indeed should. Our excitement in working on *Tommy* was rooted in this critical engagement for the same reason that Artaud was
fascinated by retelling classic tales, allowing their poetry to speak for itself, while the
“movements, expressions and gestures” were his to speak through.

The choreography in the prologue is informed by the given circumstances. Mrs. Walker and her lover are in the room at the start. Tommy must be able to observe the action. Captain Walker has to enter, kill the lover, and then—after discovering that Tommy saw it all—tell Tommy that he cannot talk about what happened. But within those strictures, the violence design can create sympathy very differently depending on the goals of the production.

A production concerned with making Captain Walker sympathetic (which seems to be the usual case in the videos of productions which I could find online) would have the violence initiated by the lover. In most such productions, Captain Walker enters, Mrs. Walker runs to him (abandoning her new lover), and then the lover breaks up the reunion and attacks Captain Walker. How sympathetic the production wants Walker to be would inform to what degree the lover provokes the shooting. In theory, choreography aimed at making Walker sympathetic could be fairly extreme. Imagine the lover attacking, Walker refusing to fight back, and the lover finally taking Walker’s gun (or even being the one who is armed in the first place) and the killing happening, perhaps even by accident, in the ensuing struggle over the gun. The imagination of the designer is the only real limit on what might be done to exculpate Captain Walker. In the productions I have been able to find video of, the lover usually rushes over and attacks Captain Walker before Walker “defends himself” with his gun.

However, since our intent was to focus on the injustice of police brutality, it was important not to make Walker too sympathetic by making the shooting justified. Making

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9 Of course, the film version is readily available, but in that version, the roles are reversed—Captain Walker is killed by the lover, who then becomes Tommy’s step-father. That character is given a name in the film (“uncle Frank”). Since that dynamic is sufficiently different, I am trying to stick with what evidence I can gather about the stage play.
Walker’s killing unjustified is a more logical reading of the story; if the killing was accidental or self-defense, then Captain Walker would not need to make sure that Tommy did not talk about it. In our design, Captain Walker entered as his wife was kissing her new lover. Walker rushed at them, flinging a chair out of his path, which “coincidentally” struck the bed on which Tommy was sleeping, waking him up so that he could see the whole fight. Walker threw the lover to the ground, beating him brutally. Mrs. Walker tried to intervene and restrain her husband, which infuriated him enough that Walker drew his weapon and shot the unarmed boy, who was kneeling on the ground in the “hands up don’t shoot” pose. The shock was generated in two ways: first by the violence being explicitly represented, increased as I just argued by the victim being completely undeserving of his fate. The second source of shock was the invocation of the systemic violence of police murder. We hoped that this more abstract source would be more shocking to the audience since it was invoking an existing cultural conversation in which many people already had a strong emotional investment.

The dramaturgical consequences of opening the play with such a stark reminder of where we were as a nation and what issues we were dealing with, especially with regard to figures of authority, were significant. The first act details Tommy’s development though a series of abusive situations from authority figures (including his doctors, the sexually abusive uncle Ernie, and his bully of a cousin) before finding his passion as a pinball prodigy. From that point, Tommy himself is the authority figure, as his fans become a cult following that he tried and ultimately fails, to lead. It is only when Tommy comes to terms with the fact that his followers do not see him as a person, but are just looking for someone to follow blindly, that he is able to abandon his fame and reconcile himself with his mother. That story is much darker when it starts with a less innocuous version of the inciting incident. There is a lot of social commentary throughout the
story, and having the relevance strongly pointed out right at the outset decreases the risk that the audience will be too enchanted with the beautiful music to see it.

Figure 2. Production photo from Paramount Theatre’s *Tommy*.

Tommy looks down in shock at the body of his mother’s lover. Actors (from left to right): Hillary Marren, Bryan Howard Conner, Peyton Owen, David Schlumpf.

**Stylization**

In theory a distinction between realism and stylization should be meaningless. Stylization, as a category, should include all theater since realism is, technically, just a specific style—one where the illusions are created in such a way that they most closely look (or sound) like what they are representations of. After all, some theatre might be described as “realistic” but there is no actually real theater—nothing that happens in the fictional world of a play is real in the normal sense of the word. As Bert O. States explains it, “what we call realism is no closer to reality than many forms of representation we would call stylized” (185). Rather, everything on
stage is an illusionary representation of events happening in the fictional world, and any set of aesthetic choices which serve to guide the artists in how the representation should look is equally a “style.”

There is an important distinction to be made between realistic plays and realistic illusions. When talking about illusions (that is, physical actions on stage which exist to tell the audience what is happening in the world of the play), “realistic” means an illusion which matches the way the same event would appear in the real world. Mostly, we use the term with mimetic illusions: a stage punch that gives the impression of an actor getting hit, for example. But we use the word “realistic” differently when it comes to talking about plays. A play can of course be realistic or not, but the literary term “realism” is used to talk about scripts, not about the mode of representation. While the two are related they are not the same. Saying that a play is “realistic” usually means that the play is set in a fictional world that is like the real world. To illustrate the difference, consider the related difference between expressionism and surrealism. The term “surrealistic” generally refers to what is being represented. That is, in a surreal play, the rules of the fictional world are unlike the rules of the real world. When we say that a play is expressionist, on the other hand, we are generally talking about the mode of representation. That is, when I say that *The Emperor Jones* is “expressionist,” I mean that while the play is set in a world like ours, it is written to be produced in such a way that what happens on stage will give the audience a sense not only of what the events *look* like, but also of the internal *feeling* of the fictional world. Realism, as a term, works in the same frame as surrealism does in that both are

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10 One could argue that artists like Grotowski, especially late in his career, were seeking a theater which was not stylized at all. In a sense, that was the very purpose of his “happenings.” On the other hand, one could respond that a) what he was doing was not really theater anymore, and b) he failed even there. With my great regard for his experimental brilliance, it does not really matter—the overwhelming majority of theater is not trying to do that, even in the most realistic plays.
discussing the fictional world of the play as described in the playscript, while “expressionism,” like “realistic mimetic illusion,” is a way to talk about production choices.

Often we use realistic illusions to communicate the world of a realistic play, but not always, and the converse is often not true. For example, the use of red ribbons for blood, which I will discuss at length in a moment with regards to Yukio Ninagawa’s *Titus Andronicus*, does not communicate that there is a world where fabric runs in people’s veins—it is a stylized illusion which is, however, a representation of a realistic fictional world. Contrariwise, even in a play set in a non-realistic world, we might use realistic violence and blood illusions. As Christine Woodworth argues in an article on Sarah Kane’s use of blood, “although *Blasted* veers away from realism formally, the use of blood in the Soho Rep production was highly realistic” (12). Woodworth argues that the realism of the blood effects, “situates *Blasted* in a larger historical context” (14). By her account, Kane is using the realistic blood illusions in a production of a play which is not itself realistic to generate a shadow of Jacobean drama, connecting *Blasted* to a theatrical tradition which carries significant meaning.

More often, realistic illusions are used to represent violence in non-realistic plays because the way violence works in that world is not what is non-realistic about that world. So the fictional world in a production of, for example, *Peter Pan* might include non-realistic elements like fairies and flying, while still having the swordplay operate according to the real-world laws of physics and biology.11 There are many other situations in which designers might opt to use realistic illusions in non-realistic plays; we might even use realistic illusions of violence to

11 Now, if someone designed *Peter Pan* without using Peter’s ability to fly in the combat, I would be deeply disappointed—but it is possible. Furthermore, there is a related usage of the word “realistic” which would include flying. That is to say that if the violence design included flying, but made careful consideration of how flying would work *if it were real*, and designed fights that made sense for a world where flying were possible, then we might still think of that as realism, or at least as “magical realism.”
communicate something non-realistic about the world. A good example of the latter is the Finnish play *Kokkola*, by Leea Klemola. *Kokkola*’s characters are strangely detached from the world and its events. Their detachment is evident in the language of the play, but also in the violence; there is a casual acceptance of people firing shotguns at each other or stripping off their clothes to have a naked slap-fight. Such casual acceptance communicates the surreal disconnect that the characters feel from their world and each other; one of the themes of the play is that modern life has created this kind of disconnect.

In the 2012 Chicago production at Akvavit Theatre, for which R&D Choreography designed the violence, we focused heavily on the disconnect between action and affective response, by making the actual acts of violence realistic, while the actors made their characters’ responses to the violence surreal. The way the characters accepted the violence as a perfectly normal interaction, and specifically one which does *not* have a bodily effect, contributed to the sense of disconnection. This production nuanced, rather than contradicting, my earlier claim about the importance of embodiedness to shock here. While the violence had no real effect on the bodies in this production, it was still being represented using actors’ bodies. As a result, we got a strange kind of shock which manifested through the dissonance between what the audience thought the response should be and the response that they saw represented. That dissonance was designed to inflect the way the audience understands (or the feeling that they are failing to quite understand) the fictional world. In one way that sort of dissonance is distancing; if the audience is trying to figure out what is bothering them, then they are thinking about the representation, not the world of the play. But cognitive dissonance can also close distance—it is weird enough that some audience members might find themselves disturbed without being able to put their finger on why. That was the reaction of several audience members to whom I spoke about the play.
Again, these are examples of realistic illusions used in non-realistic plays. The rest of this chapter will examine stylized illusions, in productions of both realistic and non-realistic playscripts. Stylization is used by different productions in different ways, and to accomplish different goals. These goals are often related to controlling distance, as I have been arguing that all representations of violence do. However, it would be a mistake to think that stylization always opens distance or reduces shock. To return to Sarah Kane, her use of stylized representations of violence in her later work was not at all about reducing shock. In an interview with Dan Rebellato, she discussed they goals of her stylized illusions in *Cleansed*, saying, “I think the less naturalistically you show these things, the more likely people are to be thinking: ‘What does this mean? What is the meaning of this act’ [r]ather than ‘Fucking hell, how did they do that?’” (transcribed and qtd. in Woodworth 19). Kane is not saying here that realistic or stylized illusions create more distance or are more absorbing. Rather, the difference she sees in in what kind of distance is created. Asking how the illusion was achieved and asking what it meant are both questions that can only be asked with distance. Stylization, by Kane’s account, can be used to change the kind of questions the audience asks.

Implicit in the term “stylization” is the concept of a “style,” which is a term that stage combat practitioners use in several distinct but related ways. When I talk about a stage combat “style,” I mean a set of techniques and a set of principles by which those techniques are deployed which work together so that a fight choreographed in that style tells its story in a particular way. For example, “swashbuckling” is a style of stage combat, as is the “gritty street fight.” In either style, certain moves are more common, as are certain ways of putting those moves together, which give the style its unique sensibility—allowing audiences to say “that was gritty” or “that was swash.” The different styles do different interpretive work, so that if, for example, the
opening brawl of *Romeo and Juliet* is in one style or the other, the audience will know they are in for a certain (and different) reading of the play.

A metaphor I like to use when teaching violence design is that a “style” is like a language. Each style has its own vocabulary and syntax by which it communicates the story of the fight to the audience. On the level of choreography, the vocabulary corresponds to the individual moves and the syntax to the logic by which they are put together. In fact, choreographers often call the syntax of a fight the “fight logic”—that is, the logic of why a fighter is doing whatever they are doing, and why one move is chosen instead of another or why one leads to another.

The language metaphor works both when discussing theatrical combat styles and also when discussing styles the way the word is used by real-world martial artists, who sometimes refer to different martial arts as “styles.” So martial artists would say that Shotokan Karate is a different style from Brazilian Ju-Jitsu and “Kung Fu” is an umbrella art comprising dozens of different styles, like Eagle Claw or Shaolin. To pick up my metaphor, many real (in the sense of actual, historical or currently practiced in the real world) styles of fighting have significantly different vocabularies. For example, a fight with fists in a bar in 1997 New York and a fight with a longsword on a battlefield in 1421 Italy would obviously have looked different; what we mean by “style” is exactly this difference. In these two examples, the vocabulary is somewhat different: the man-at-arms with the longsword would obviously have used some attacks that would not make sense with bare hands, and even when the longsword fight broke down to wrestling, the wrestling techniques would have been different—partly as a result of different training that the combatants have had, and partly because their goals are different—fighters in a bar fight are unlikely to be trying to actually kill each other, while the armored knights would
find that moves which would be fight-ending in a t-shirt have no effect on an enemy in a suit of steel. The *syntax*, however, is similar because both fights are happening in the same material conditions of the same laws of physics and bodies that bend or break the same way, which results in the same martial tenets by which opponents are defeated, like time, distance, and proportion.\footnote{“time, distance, and proportion” are, of course, how Mercutio describes Tybalt’s excellence in *Romeo and Juliet* (2.3.20). But modern fencers (and boxers) use similar language to describe the same tenets, and the concepts are found in every martial art I know.}

This universal quality of the way bodies work explains why the techniques in a medieval German wrestling manual look an awful lot like the ones in a modern Judo dojo. If a fighter wants to disrupt their opponent’s balance and throw them to the ground, it does not matter whether that opponent is a medieval German or a modern Japanese person. Likewise, it does not matter whether a fighter is countering the bayonet of an Israeli commando or the poleaxe of a fourteenth-century Italian knight. If they want to land a counter attack, it has to be “in proportion”—which is to say it has to happen in a shorter time than the attack they are trying to counter (though the “tempo”—the time it takes to make the move—is vastly longer in the latter than the former). The vocabulary (that is, the set of moves themselves) of the German wrestler is similar to that of the Japanese Judoka because both are sportsmen, not earnestly trying to kill each other. The commando fights more like the knight than he does like either the German or Japanese wrestler because their goals are different, so while they use the same syntax, they use a different (and more deadly) vocabulary.

While it might appear that I have digressed into yet a third definition of “style,” my point is that all the definitions have in common this idea of a set of techniques and logics by which this particular instance of the general form does what it does. Thus there are many styles which are all realistic, including but not limited to theatrical versions of real-world fighting styles. French
smallsword is a “style” of fighting, as is Jeet Kun Do, and onstage there are theatrical versions of those styles of fighting that one might see, so that “theatrical French smallsword” is a style of movement just as is “historical French smallsword.” At the same time, a gunfight represented by using whipped cream cannisters instead of guns would also be a “style” of theatrical combat. In each case, the “style” is the set of techniques plus the logics by which those techniques are connected (what I am calling vocabulary and syntax) which accomplish the goals of the style.

The goals of historical French smallsword and theatrical French smallsword are, of course, different. The former’s goal is the death or injury of the opponent and the social promotion of the duelist, while the latter’s goal is to communicate the action of a fictional fight to an audience. This particular example has an interesting blurring, however, because the social aspect of French smallsword is very important. As a dueling art of late French seventeenth-century aristocratic culture, both the vocabulary and the syntax of the style are informed by its social requirements. The goal of a duelist was never simply to kill as efficiently and safely as possible. In fact, winning the duel was not even the primary goal, according to François Billacois in his book *The Duel: Its Rise and Fall in Early Modern France*. Billacois argues that “The death to which one may put the other man in a duel is simply a secondary result of the essential re-establishment of honour” (205). Because honor required certain behaviors during a duel, and because those behaviors are clearly seen by onlookers, there is a sense in which historical French smallsword and theatrical French smallsword are more similar than most historical styles and their theatrical counterparts; the syntax of both involves at least some consideration of what

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13 Movie fans of the right generation might recognize this as the device (or close to the device) used in the wonderful children’s gangster film *Bugsy Malone* … except that I would argue in that film, the whip cream really does not “represent” bullets, but rather is the lethal ammunition. That is, *in the world of the film* whipped cream was realistically treated as fatal, and not as a stylization of gun violence. Though of course, it clearly served as a metaphor for gun violence.
spectators think happened. None the less, the theatrical style is also concerned with making sure that nobody gets hurt, while the historical style is designed so that at least (and ideally only) one person does indeed get hurt.

Historical French smallsword is somewhat unusual in this focus on the spectator, but not unique. Roman Gladiators come to mind, and of course modern bar fights between preening young men are more focused on impressing onlookers than on causing actual harm. Modern fencers also have a very clear performative element, especially in any match where there is a human judge. Such judges can only call hits that they actually see, and so many fencers learn to perform fencing technique in such a way as to make sure the judge notices their hits.

The opposite might be said of, for example, the way a ninja actually kills and the way a stage ninja would fight. In that case, they have opposite goals with regards to the audience; if the ninja even had an audience, they would want to be sure that that audience did not see what happened, and would use techniques and apply logic that would forward such a goal. Of course the stage ninja generally wants everyone to see what happened. Such examples notwithstanding, choreographers usually want theatrical versions of historical styles to look similar to their actual historical basis. After all, the fictional fight which the theatrical style is attempting to communicate is one wherein, in the fictional world, the characters’ motivations are much the same as the real fighters’ would be. Showing those motivations is an important part of the work of the theatrical choreography.

Having defined style, it remains to clarify “stylization.” As I said earlier, that word is rarely applied to playscripts; it is generally used to discuss illusions. In theater practice, a

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14 For a detailed examination of the phenomenon of social violence implicit in the kind of violence present in bar fights, see Rory Miller’s description of the “monkey dance” in *Meditations on Violence*. 
stylization is an illusion (or a style under which a set of illusions operate) which is non-realistic. Obviously there is a difference between style and stylized, in that by this usage, styles can be realistic while stylizations cannot. None the less, the root concept is still the same in that a stylization can be thought of as the application of a particular (non-realistic) style in order to do some specific dramaturgical work which realism could not achieve. While I have just argued that realism is merely another style, the argument could be made that realism is a special category of style. As I said in Chapter 4, we could view realistic illusions as iconic, and stylization as indexical. The indexical nature of stylized illusions brings up an important point; what is being pointed to has to make sense to the audience, but so does the reason for the pointing. That is to say, the most obvious way for a stylized illusion to fail is for it not to be clear what is actually supposed to be happening in the fictional world. But it is equally important that the audience understand at some level why the stylization is being used. For some audiences it might be enough that a stylization “looks cool,” but for many people, it would not be. To come back to Barthes and his argument about costumes from the beginning of this chapter, a stylized violence design exists to be read by the audience.

When practitioners use the world “stylized” to mean “non-realistic,” there should be no confusion. Quite the contrary; if theatermakers referred to realism as a kind of stylization, that would be confusing, and would also make the word “stylized” fairly useless since it would not exclude anything at all. Therefore, while it is important to understand the different usages, I will henceforth use the word “stylization” to mean illusions that, in various ways, do not try to look and sound just like the actions being represented by those illusions would look if they were really happening.
Stylization can do a lot of different kinds of work, and the rest of this chapter will be dedicated to four very different productions. In each case the stylized violence was both effective and powerful. Artists choose stylizations as ways to represent violence for a wide variety of reasons, so in each of these productions I will discuss what dramaturgical work each of those representations performed.

**Yukio Ninagawa’s *Titus Andronicus***

To begin my investigation of stylization, I will discuss a production where it is only the vocabulary, not the syntax of the violence, which is non-realistic. In June of 2006, The Royal Shakespeare Company hosted a production of *Titus Andronicus* directed by Yukio Ninagawa. Ninagawa was revered for, amongst other achievements, his astonishingly beautiful stylized versions of classical Western theater, and his *Titus* was very stylized indeed. R&D Choreography did not work on the production, nor did I even see it. However, the photographs of Lavinia’s mutilation are amongst the most powerful I have ever seen.

Figure 3. Hitomi Manaka as Lavinia in Yukio Ninagawa’s *Titus Andronicus*. 
Obviously, what Chiron and Demetrius do to Lavinia is deeply disturbing. The audience does not see her rape and mutilation in most productions; in the text it happens off stage. The re-appearance of Lavinia in 2.4, after she has been dragged off by the Goths in the previous scene, is the moment of shock, and the shock value of the gore design for any production of the play must be carefully managed. When Lavinia appears in the forest after her mutilation, her appearance needs to reflect what has happened to her. Some productions have edged towards the *Grand Guignol* with rivers of blood; such a production can be incredibly shocking, which helps set up the audience’s sympathies so that when Titus finally takes his revenge, there is no danger of the audience sympathizing with the Goths. However, bloodbaths like that can also be too much for many audience members.\(^{15}\) Even when audiences are not shocked into revulsion, the effect of the blood may have the opposite of the intended effect, becoming unintentionally comic. Critic Michael Friedman examines the issue in his contribution to the *Shakespeare in Performance* series on *Titus* where he shares the thinking of Gerald Freedman, the director of the Delacorte Theatre production in 1967. Freedman argues that “if one wants to create a fresh emotional response to the violence, blood and multiple mutilations of *Titus Andronicus*, one must shock the imagination and subconscious with visual images that recall the richness and depth of primitive rituals” (qtd in Friedman). So, for Freedman, shock was still essential, but it needed to be mitigated through stylization in order to get away from the Grand Guignol (which would be either revolting or ludicrous).

\(^{15}\) The *Independent* claimed that over 100 people, including their own reviewer, had fainted or left the theater during the Globe’s 2014 production (Clark).
Many different attempts to mitigate the shock of Lavinia’s appearance have been made.¹⁶ Ninagawa was not the first to use red ribbons for blood, of course—the technique is a long established one in Eastern theater, and has also been used effectively for a long time in the West, including by Peter Brook in his 1955 production of Titus starring Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh. According to Friedman, Brook was seeking to skirt the line between bathos and revulsion, and that it seems to have worked for at least some critics; “Edward Trostle Jones argues that Brook’s ‘stylized distancing effects’ allowed the spectator to ‘accept the horror of the play without experiencing total revulsion’” (qtd in Friedman). Ninagawa may have used a similar illusion, but I will argue that Ninagawa did more with his stylization choice than Brook did with the same device.

The image of Lavinia in which the red ribbons represent blood is certainly stylized, as we use the word in practice. Such stylized illusions can be used in some of the same ways that narration can to mitigate shock, as I discussed in Chapter 3. Peter Brook’s production was seen as doing exactly that: critics made a point of how he had dialed back the gore.¹⁷ As I argued in Chapter 2, a stylized illusion can generate powerful sympathy, partly because while audience members can still associate the injured body with their own, the stylization makes it less likely that they will slide into revulsion through over-identification with the injured body.

Many directors treat realism as the default style, and so only depart from realistic violence when they feel they need to limit the shock value. But, as with narration and offstage violence, limiting shock is not by any means the only function stylization can accomplish, and

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¹⁶ To be clear, not all stylizations aim to mitigate shock, nor do all attempts to mitigate shock utilize stylization. Stylization can be used that way. I will give examples later in this chapter of other usages of stylization.

¹⁷ “The only complaint that could be made against Mr. Brook was of squeamishness,” complained Evelyn Waugh, as quoted in Shakespeare in the Theatre: An Anthology of Criticism (Wells, 254).
thinking of stylization as merely a way to show violence without being too graphic belies the incredible power that stylized illusions can have. Ninagawa’s Titus did far more; the production’s stylization was at once shocking and also uncannily beautiful. Rather than simply not showing realistic violence by replacing it with less-realistic violence, Ninagawa replaced the realistic violence with something specific—in this case something uncanny and beautiful. Ninagawa himself claimed in an interview that he was trying to create a shocking beauty in an interview before the opening of Titus: “‘The air of my production may be completely different from a horror film,’ he says with a wry smile. ‘But I warn you: it is so beautiful, it'll be painful to look at it’” (Secher). The idea that beauty can be painful to look at is another way of discussing shock. The unearthly beauty of the actress playing Lavinia, Hitomi Manaka, is emphasized by the stark white costume and the vivid red strands contrasting with her fair skin and black hair. Audience sympathy is easily evoked by such beauty, and as I have been arguing, we are more shocked by violence against characters with whom we are in sympathy.

The uncanny quality of Ninagawa’s stylization is, itself, disturbing—the audience sees something which we recognize as representing a human body, but which is also recognizably not-quite-human. I see this phenomenon as related but not identical to the way I have been arguing that mimetic representations create shock. A stylized representation like the one in the Ninagawa Titus does create shock—the audience is certainly seeing a body that has been violated, and their visceral response can be triggered by that to reduce distance. But at the same time the stylization creates distance through estranging the visual experience.

As Erin Sullivan argues in her chapter in Shakespeare and the Seven Senses: Scenes from the Twenty-First Century Stage, “The effect was at once patently artificial and uncannily shocking: against the antiseptic white of the stage, and the contorted agony that constantly
emanated from the actors’ faces, these stark rivers of blood pointed ruthless to the unspeakable violence at the heart of the play. At the same time, in their strange, emblematic beauty, they released the production from the trappings of naturalism, setting it adrift in a mythic, dream-like world” (362). Sullivan is working in the same kind of language as I do when she talks about stylization being simultaneously shocking and artificial. In this production, by Sullivan’s account, the stylization is designed to open distance so as to create a specific audience response which is not exactly empathy, nor (contra Brecht) intellectual processing, but rather a sort of emotional processing.¹⁸

The point here is that Ninagawa’s production generated a different kind of reaction than that which shock generally creates, at least as I have described it so far. I have described the usual mechanism for representations of violence as the peculiar combination of shock, the embodied reaction to pain of other bodies—which closes distance—with revulsion, the fear that the violence could happen to the viewer—which opens distance if and when it has gotten too close to bear. Narration or offstage violence, I have argued, can be used to limit shock so that revulsion never triggers, which necessarily also limits how much distance can be reduced. Stylization can do the same, as I think it did for Peter Brook’s 1955 production of Titus Andronicus. But stylization can instead be used to create a different kind of shock reaction, where the shock is combined with estrangement. The difference between the shock/revulsion relationship and this shock/estrangement is temporal. While revulsion re-opens distance once shock has over-closed it, the estrangement of some kinds of stylization works simultaneously

¹⁸ Sullivan’s larger project in her chapter is to explore how the senses are activated to create response in what is often called “postdramatic” theater—which she takes to include any theater that puts the focus on the audience’s response to the sensorial experience of the production rather than a response to the text, as opposed to most most contemporary, “dramatic” theater which Sullivan claims focuses largely on the text itself.
with shock. That is to say, the violence can be shocking, bringing the audience close, while at the same time it is made strange. The estrangement opens distance before it can close so much that revulsion is triggered. The “making strange” in the case of Ninagawa’s Titus is through the “painful beauty” described by Ninagawa. According to Sullivan, Ninagawa’s intention was realized—what I am doing here is explaining how it was achieved; by the simultaneous closing of distance through shock and the opening of distance through beauty. The shock and beauty are in tension, creating the sensation that many people had to Ninagawa’s stunning painterly production.

**Lifeline Theatre’s Watership Down**

In the Spring of 2011, Lifeline Theatre opened the world premier of John Hildreth’s adaptation of Richard Adams’s novel *Watership Down*, directed by Katie McLean Hainsworth. The novel is an epic story of a group of refugees fleeing a disaster. The heroes survive many enemies, incomprehensible monsters, and hostile environments before finding, settling, and defending their new home. The story is like a mix of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Odyssey*, except that the protagonists are all rabbits. R&D Choreography designed the violence, which obviously needed to be highly stylized, since a “realistic” representation of rabbits played by humans is clearly not possible. But we hoped the stylization of the violence could do more than simply make up for the fact that realism was not feasible. The challenges that the stylization needed to overcome were intrinsic to the material; this was a play, aimed at adults, not children, which featured no human characters. The challenge with the animals was to make them clearly animals without making them “cute” or making the show childish. Hainsworth led the team from the outset with that clear mission. In the very first production meeting she declared a moratorium on the word “bunny” anywhere in the theater. They were rabbits, or lapines. The costume
designer, Aly Renee Amidei, helped set the tone by proposing that her costume design not contain anything overtly animal, at least for the rabbits. The bird might have feathers, but the rabbits would be in human street clothes, so that the costumes would work to differentiate between the different groups (the punk main characters, the militaristic rabbits of Efrara and the New Age rabbits of Cowslip’s warren) instead of indicating some sort of rabbit-ness. In the end, she did let some suggestive rabbit elements in, like the long ear-flap hat that one of the rabbits wore, but for the most part, the rabbit-ness was left primarily to the movement design (led by movement designer Paul Holmquist) and to the violence design team. Holmquist worked with the actors on movement choices which would suggest “rabbitness”—jumping, crouching, head movements and postures all based on how rabbits actually move.

Our research for the violence began with a problem. The way rabbits actually fight provided scant inspiration; the fighting is not very decisive, and—especially if done by a human—would look frankly cute and certainly not very brutal. The story, on the other hand, features violence that is brutal and decisive. Rabbits get injured and killed fighting with each other. And the word “cute” was another one that Hainsworth did not want to hear. We briefly explored the idea of incorporating human martial arts which feature a lot of kicking, like Muy Thai. Since Muy Thai is a very effective combat style and is very visually exciting, it would provide the decisiveness we were seeking. Muy Thai would also serve in another way; the stylization would make sense to the audience. That is, someone watching a martial art that they either recognize (it is a fairly well-known look) or at least understand to be foot-based would be able to easily connect that style to the characters since kicking is associated with rabbits.

After doing some exploratory choreography, however, we abandoned this avenue as being both too stylized, and at the same time not stylized enough. Too stylized in the sense that it
is too far away from the way rabbits actually fight; using a human martial art, even one that was stylistically tied to rabbits through the focus on kicking, would only serve to point out that the fighters were humans, not rabbits. On the other hand, using Muy Thai would also not be stylized enough—it would be too realistic a kind of combat. The goal was to make the fights exciting, tell the story, make us care about the characters, and as always, to control the degree and kind of shock that the audience experienced. In a show about rabbits, realism would not serve those goals.

Instead, we started to explore the way other animals fight. Cats ended up being our primary inspiration; they do kick a lot when fighting (more, in fact, than rabbits), but they also leap and wrestle, using movements that are sudden, committed, and ferocious. For the most part, combining the rabbit movements, poses, and body shapes that Holmquist taught the cast with cat-like leaping tackles and twisting grapples allowed us to create a combat style for the fights which was exciting while also being evocative of the non-human imagery in which we were interested. In particular, a fight between Captain Holly and Captain Campion worked very well; the two actors were agile and strong, and their fight—designed around airborne attacks and messy twisting scrums which ended with brutal kicks before they broke apart and then re-engaged with another leap—was spectacular, thrilling, and impressive.

However, for the final showdown between the heroic Bigwig and the terrifying General Woundwort, we did not want to use the same style that we developed for the Campion/Holly fight. We had two reasons to want to develop a different stylization. First, the characters were different. Bigwig is the biggest rabbit the audience sees until Woundwort appears. Woundwort is described as powerful, huge, and not moving like a rabbit. We needed to create a fight that would make Woundwort’s difference from normal rabbits as apparent as we could. Secondly, the two
actors (Christopher Walsh as Bigwig and David Skvarla as Woundwort) were both big men. Trying to make them move like the smaller and more agile actors who played Holly and Campion would be counter-productive. They would not have been as impressive doing it as the captains, and the climactic fight of the play might have ended up anti-climactic. Instead we needed to play to the strength of these actors, and the characters they were portraying. And in the case of Skvarla and Walsh, their strength was literally strength.

Focusing on the physical might of the characters led us to look for a different model than the cats we had been using as our models in the rest of the fights. The obvious place to go was to the bear. Both actors looked a little like bears, being over six feet tall and broad-shouldered. In a sense, this change of vocabulary created another “style” of fighting, but we also decided that, to raise the stakes from our previously mostly realistic fight logic, we wanted to shift to a more stylized syntax. This is a case where the goal of stylization was explicitly not to reduce the shock value, but rather to heighten it. We discussed other ways to increase the shock value, such as using blood (which we had hitherto not used in the show), but we feared that the realistic element, though often shocking, would increase audience distance, as audience members could easily start to wonder why blood had not been used before, retroactively reducing their enjoyment of those previous bloodless but thrilling fights and taking them out of the action of this climactic one. What we needed was a style which would highlight the fearsomeness of these two combatants and the horrific damage and pain that they were capable both of laying out and absorbing.

What we eventually created was a fighting style based on bears, featuring strong swipes with the arms and standing grapples. The characters engaged normally during much of the action, as they wrestled and struck blows that their enemy could shrug off or that did minor
damage. But for the big hits, we had the actors prepare the strike and then quickly step back from each other and each turn to face the audience, in the same spot on stage, each time—spots we referred to as the “wound marks,” that is, marked spots on stage where every wound would be enacted, no matter where on the stage the wound was supposedly happening. The actors would then play those hits in these wound marks, with the aggressor making the attack as if his enemy was between him and the audience, and that enemy, standing several feet away, facing the same direction, would react, again as if the attack were coming from directly in front of him. The actors would then, after the blow was completed and the reaction was registered, spring back into whatever position they should be in relative to each other; where they logically would be in the primary world of the play after the stylized moment was over.

Figure 4. Production photos from Lifeline’s *Watership Down*.

David Skvarla as General Woundwort and Christopher M. Walsh as Bigwig, just before a “breakout” moment. The red splash behind them is a projection.
The spots onstage where the big hits happened would need to be lit with “specials” (lighting instruments that are specially aimed and purposed for a specific effect, as opposed to instruments that would be used for different things at different times in the play). In this regard, the violence design was making requests of the lighting design, and so a separate discussion developed. The sound designer was also part of that break-out since we wanted the hits to be supported by specific sound effects; effects which again were not realistic—rather than impact sounds, we wanted something more viscerally potent. Both lighting and sound designers, once they understood the feel of the moment we were looking for, provided extremely powerful effects, including bright red lights and roaring sound effects for the moments of the big hits. Without these effects the violence design would not have worked. We returned to the idea of using blood in the end, but that too was stylized: blood sprays were projected on the upstage walls of the set whenever there was a major wound, bringing yet another designer into the creation of the violence.19

The violence was not in any way beautiful—as Ninagawa’s stylizations in Titus Andronicus were—but rather starkly awful. And the violence was certainly shocking, more so than a more realistic violence design would have been. In the words of critic Ada Grey, “We thought it was very creepy when blood came up on the screen. I thought there would be blood effects instead … It was scarier” (Grey).20

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19 The projections were not unique to the fighting moments—there was already a lot of projection work being done throughout the show to do other kinds of storytelling. We simply leaned into the existing projection design vocabulary to further enrich the violence design.

20 Ada Grey is my personal favorite Chicago theater critic. She was 8 years old at the time of this review, and had been reviewing plays for about 4 years.
The Simplest Massive Battle Scene: Lifeline Theatre’s *The Killer Angels*

Designers who want to maximize shock value usually try to create a representation which can make audiences feel like the violence is personal. Small, intimate acts of violence can be done in brutally realistic style to create that shock. Larger acts though, like battles, can be harder to represent in realistic ways that will create that same sense of shock, especially on the small stages which comprise the Chicago storefront community. Even on the largest stages, audiences never see realistic battles—and sometimes it is better not to try.

In 2013 Lifeline produced Karen Tarjan’s adaptation of the novel *The Killer Angels* by Michael Sharra.21 The novel is a slightly fictionalized account of the battle of Gettysburg, so unsurprisingly there was a great deal of represented violence. R&D did not work on this production, but I did have the opportunity to see it. While much of the violence was represented relatively realistically (though often only one side or the other was seen as much of the fighting was long-range musket fire) there was one breathtakingly effective piece of stylized violence, which was the way Pickett’s Charge was staged. Pickett’s Charge was a vitally important turning point in the Battle of Gettysburg, both in its impact and in the scale of the assault. Lifeline’s mainstage is barely 26 feet across and 21 deep without the set on it, so getting the emotional impact while keeping the physical scale to what is possible in that space is a constant challenge. The production team, including violence designer Greg Poljacik and director Matt Miller, rose to the challenge, using a mere six actors to represent the 15,000 Confederate troops who charged across the battlefield towards the Union position on Cemetery Ridge. Historically, many factors determined the result of that charge, and scholars endlessly theorize about how things might have

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21 This production was technically a revival—the world premier of the play was produced—also at Lifeline, but with an almost entirely different team—in 2003.
gone; had there not been a fence that was hidden from the starting point by a slight depression and which bogged down the charge by crucial minutes under full fire of the Union rifles and cannon, or had there been a handful more Confederate soldiers, or had any number of other small details gone a different way, the South might have taken the ridge, and the battle would surely have ended very differently. What did happen was that the Confederate forces, in a line over a mile and a half wide, ran the three quarters of a mile toward the Union position and were cut to pieces by Union artillery, then rifles, and as the distance closed further, muskets. Too few made it to the most vulnerable Union position (a fenced in area called “the angle”) to carry the attack, and nearly half of the attacking force was killed, while the rest were either captured or forced to retreat back across the battlefield still under fire. The film Gettysburg (Maxwell, 1993) is a relatively faithful adaptation of Sharra’s The Killer Angels. The film spent half an hour of screen time showing the charge, with dozens of cannon and thousands of actors. Many of the events of the charge were shown: the difficulty the Confederate troops had getting over the fence, the fact that some of the Confederate troops did make it to the angle and fought in a desperate hand-to-hand melee, the death of Confederate general Armistead, Union general Hancock’s nearly-lethal wound, and many more real moments of the action. The film shows the half of the Confederate forces who survived the charge, the capture of many troops, and the much smaller but not insignificant number of Union casualties. On Lifeline’s stage, however, none of those factual events was represented.

What the production team did with those six actors was brilliant. They created a stylization which managed to give the sense of the epic carnage and the insane courage of that doomed assault without attempting to portray the action realistically. The six actors began in two ranks facing the audience where they marched in place, as the sound and lights created the
environment of the artillery assault through which they were marching. The actors marched very slightly forward, and then, after a distinct sound of gunfire, one of the actors in the front row removed his grey rebel coat and dropped it on the ground and then fell back through the lines to the rear, where there was a coat rack with many identical coats. He took one off the rack, put it on, and joined the back row. As he was rejoining the regiment, another soldier “fell”—again, removing his coat, dropping it to the ground, returning to the rear, putting on a new one and rejoining the unit. One by one, soldiers continued to fall, and then two or three at a time as the sound of gunfire intensified. As the scene continued, the actors picked up the pace of their march, from a measured speed to a double-time march, and then to a ragged run. As they ran (still almost in place, with only a slight forward movement to allow for the cycling of actors from the front to the rear) more and more soldiers were “killed,” until by the end, there was a knee-high pile of coats on the ground, and the actors had all fallen back to behind the now-empty coat rack.

The effect of Lifeline’s representation of Pickett’s Charge was extremely powerful, and shows how stylization can be used by a show with a tiny space, a limited budget, and a small cast to represent a vast act of violence. The choreography created what Brecht would call a Gestus of war, and in the process the team developed something far more effective at getting to the essence of what was shocking about the act than is possible even for a realistic film with thousands of actors, shot on location, with a vast budget for special effects. I am not arguing that a film like Gettysburg is not capable of creating shock with those tools, but that the theater can still out-do that massive budget through creativity and a laser-like focus on what exactly they are trying to achieve. As with Ninagawa’s Titus and Lifeline’s Watership Down, the stylization distances the representation in a different way than revulsion does, at least at first. As an audience member
watching *The Killer Angels*, I found it heart-rending to see the utter carnage being represented, while at the same time I intellectually appreciated the *coup de théâtre* for the effectiveness of the representation itself, which made me think about what was actually happening, not just in that place in the fictional world, but more broadly about what it meant. Where *Gettysburg* focused on showing the audience what they would have *seen* if they had been there, *The Killer Angels* showed their audience the *consequences*.

**Expressionist Stylization: Akvavit Theatre’s *Goliath***

In 2019, Akvavit Theatre presented a pair of one-act plays under the combined title, “Family Drama.” One of the plays was *Goliath* by Norwegian playwright Maria Tryti Vennerød, a surreal tale of two quarrelsome brothers, David and Goliath (played by Samuel Pate and Jordan McGinnis respectively), celebrating the birthday of their mother Borgny (Kelly Levander), along with their as-yet-unborn sister Anette (Madelyn Loehr). The play features a scene where the long-suffering, least favorite child Goliath finally gives in to anger and beats his brother to death. Though, in the surreal logic of the world of the play, David does not actually die for several pages, and once he does, being dead does not stop him from speaking, any more than not yet being born stops Anette from reciting poetry or smoking a cigarette with her brother.

R&D Choreography designed the violence for this challenging work. A realistic representation of the violence did not suggest itself, because the play was not realistic in so many other ways. As is common with contemporary Nordic drama, the logic by which the world operated was decidedly surreal, creating a world where the dead and unborn talk, write poetry, and provide heroin for their living siblings. We decided that the play called for a violence design which would be consistent with that logic—a stylized fight.
Because the play did not respect causality in the same way that most people believe the real world does, we looked for a way to reinforce that “rule” with our design. What we decided was that McGinnis would never make any physical attack. Instead, he set up a rhythm by pounding his hands on the dining room table that he and Pate were standing on either side of. The basic beat created the tension of the threat of violence, and coupled with McGinnis moving around the table towards Pate it gave the audience the sense of that threat, as if Goliath were stalking David. As the fight progressed, each time Goliath was to be understood to be hitting David the strike was represented by McGinnis breaking the rhythm and creating a short, sharp new rhythm sequence of two to four beats, syncopated relative to the basic beat. The final beat of these syncopated sections would correspond with the moment of impact, and the contact itself wasaurally represented by Loehr shaking a cocktail shaker which she had picked up from the table (and which we had constructed so that, being full of nuts and bolts, it made a frightening crashing sound when shaken). Pate all the while played the fight as if it were, from his point of view, a realistic fight. So each strike resulted in his reacting as if David were actually being hit to show the impact of the strike on his body. Thus the three actors were each responsible for one aspect of the combined fight: McGinnis created the (stylized) sound and pattern of the attacks, Loehr the (again stylized) sound of impact, and Pate the visual/visceral, and more realistic, image of the damage being done.

Part of the point of the stylization was to express the fearsomeness and especially the futility of the violence from David’s perspective. There was nothing that David could do about being beaten up. His impotence works on two levels; in the real world on the stage, there was nothing to dodge or block, and in the world of the play he is so much smaller and weaker than Goliath. In this way, our staging focused attention on the inevitability of the beating. The
interstitial rhythmic thumping sounds were designed to increase the feeling of futility and inevitability, as they kept coming with no reprieve.

Figure 5. Production photo from Akvavit Theatre’s *Goliath*.

Goliath having just “struck” David. Actors (from left to right): Jordan McGinnis, Madelyn Loehr and Samuel Pate. Photo Credit: Karl Soderstrom, soderstromphotography.com

The shock value of the fight was not diminished by the lack of physical contact—many viewers said that they found the fight deeply disturbing. In my view, the reason it was so impactful was that shock is largely created by empathy with bodies being impacted. Because the audience did get to see David taking the beating, they did not need to see Goliath giving it—it is the effect on David that does the majority of the work. This effectiveness is the complement to the argument, which I made in Chapter 1, about the old Adam West *Batman* TV series. In *Batman*, we only saw the attack, not the reaction, and so shock is significantly reduced. In *Goliath*, we see the reaction, and that reaction is shocking even without seeing the attack be
made. The percussion generated by McGinnis significantly increased the shock; the drumbeat was constant and somewhat faster than a resting heartbeat, while the loud, resonant strikes of his hands on the table had a more direct effect on the audience than any stage combat he could have done—sound has a potent visceral effect, and the loud sound of striking is a direct assault on the senses. Associating that sound with the violence, as we did in this fight, can make audience members feel as though they personally are being attacked, which is a version of the very definition of shocking which I have been advocating.

The empathy that the fight generates for David is important because it encourages a switch in audience sympathies. Up to that point, Goliath had been the more sympathetic character; it was easy for the audience to like him even as he began to hit his brother, whose attitude towards Goliath had been arrogant and petty up to that point. But because of the visceral reaction to the beating which David received, audience members ended up sympathizing with David, nuancing their reactions to the characters for the rest of the play.

**Multiple Worlds in the Same Play: *She Kills Monsters***

Qui Nguyen’s 2011 play *She Kills Monsters* is particularly interesting in terms of the way that the violence design constructs the fictional world, or in the case of this play, fictional worlds. *She Kills Monsters* is set in a fictional world which has, in turn, a fantastical fictional subworld—that is, a world that exists in the play, which is fictional to the characters in the play. In designing the violence for Loyola University Chicago’s 2016 production of the play, R&D Choreography used a mixture of both realistic and stylized illusions to bring out the difference and the parallels between these two worlds.

*She Kills Monsters* is about a young woman, Agnes Evans, whose younger sister died in a car crash three years before the opening of the play, when the sister, Tilly, was fifteen. Agnes is
finally cleaning out Tilly’s old room and discovers that Tilly was an avid *Dungeons & Dragons* player. Having found a notebook wherein Tilly had written a “module” (a sort of script for a *D&D* adventure) Agnes decides to find one of Tilly’s friends who can help her play through the module, which includes a cast of characters from Tilly’s life, altered into “fantasy” versions of themselves. Along the way, she makes several discoveries about Tilly, which bring her closer to her sister, and in the end she begins to come to terms with her loss.

The play is interesting from a world-building perspective because it takes place in two different alternate worlds. There is the world in which Agnes is a high school English teacher and Tilly is dead, and there is the world of the *D&D* game, in which Tillius the Paladin is a mighty hero and Agnes is a neophyte. In the game world, Agnes and Tillius fight monstrous creatures in a literal quest for Tilly’s lost soul, mirroring the more figurative quest which the game represents for Agnes. I called the world of the game a subworld of the world of the school, and in some sense it is, since it is characters who exist in the world of the school creating the fictional world of the game. But that does not mean that the world of the school *is* the world of the play. Both the world of the school and the world of the game are equally parts of the world of the play.

Agnes and Tilly are not the only characters who exist in both worlds. Nearly every character in the game has an analog in what to Agnes is the “real” world. Tillius’ ally (and, we eventually learn, her lover) Lilith the Demon Queen is actually Tilly’s classmate Lilly, who was Tilly’s first crush. The diabolic succubi that Agnes and Tilly cannot defeat in the world of the game are the cheerleaders who bullied Tilly when she was alive. The movement between worlds, and indeed everything that happens in the game world, is mediated by the “Dungeon Master,”
Chuck, who—in the school world—was a good friend of Tilly’s. The overlap between the two worlds is not simple; Agnes travels between worlds and knows about both, but has trouble reconciling the two worlds. This trouble stems in part from the fact that the school world versions of all the other characters do not know that the game world exists. The ontological status of the characters within the worlds is complex; only Agnes is the “same person” in both worlds. All the other characters in the game, though based on analogues from the school world, are constructs created by Chuck, including Agnes’ sister, whom Chuck is roleplaying as best he can. Tillius (as played by Chuck) is different from the other NPCs because even within the fictional world of the game she knows that she is really Tilly, much as Agnes knows she is really playing a game, so that not infrequently, Chuck is roleplaying Tilly (as opposed to Tillius) in a conversation about her life as a teenager, something Chuck seems to know more about than Agnes does. How the characters make use of their individual knowledge of the two worlds would make an interesting approach to studying this play, but for the purposes of discussing the violence, it is enough to point out that there is a lot of slippage between the two subworlds.

The slippage between the school world and the game world is one of the primary features of the play, and therefore of the secondary world \( W_{(SKM)} \). The distinction between the two worlds is set up at the beginning, as is the potential for slippage. In a narrated prologue, Tilly is introduced before Agnes is, and is introduced by the narrator as Tillius the Paladin; our first actual sight of her is killing a “horde of Kobolds” (7). Because the play is going to require its

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22 In a roleplaying game, one player takes on the role of the “Dungeon Master” (sometimes called the Game Master). The Dungeon Master (or “DM”) is responsible for running the whole world of the game other than the “player characters” (or “PCs”)—playing all the enemies and allies and strangers that the players meet, and for narrating the events of the game world.

23 “Non-Player Characters”—what gamers call the characters who are controlled collectively by the DM instead of individually by a player.
audience to be able to accept the shifts from \( W_{\text{school}} \) to \( W_{\text{game}} \) and back as part of the nature of \( W_{\text{SKM}} \), that is one of the first conventions that gets set up. In the Loyola production, the illusions used to shift from one world to the next were not kept consistent. At first, the shifts were always accompanied by the presence of Chuck the Dungeon Master, at the table, with the game trappings, which made it clear how the characters move from one world to the other. Once that convention was established, however, it was almost immediately abandoned—Agnes moved directly from her friend’s office to the game world at one point, and at another she “summoned” Chuck’s mediation in switching, without the audience actually seeing him: all she needed was to verbally invoke his power in order to move from one world to the other.

This “changing of the rules” seems like it might work against the believability of the dramatic world. After all, I argued in Chapter 1 that what makes a world believable is that it is consistently following the rules by which it ostensibly operates. However, these shifts in Loyola’s *She Kills Monsters* worked because the slippage is *part* of the rule set of the play. That is to say, part of the design objective of the Loyola production was to evoke the affective experience of playing fantasy games, which themselves can fluctuate widely for the players from near-total immersion in the game world to fairly wide distance depending on the tastes of the participants and the seriousness of the current scene.²⁴

The school world and the game world have different rule-sets, and are therefore constituted by different kinds of illusions. The world of the school was, in the Loyola production, relatively realistic—along the lines of a situation comedy. Sets, while mostly suggested rather than fully realized, contained realistic furniture and props to suggest a more complete world. In

²⁴ There is an ongoing conversation amongst gamers which explores the “play styles” of various kinds of players, from those who favor in-depth, highly absorbed, roleplaying to those who enjoy solving puzzles to others who prefer to sit back and comment on the game from a seemingly “outside” position.
the game world, however, characters can fly, cast spells, and generally break the laws of physics; laws which pertain in the school world in much the same way that they do in the real world. In the Loyola production, the visual aesthetic of the game world was designed to communicate that it was, indeed, a game. Instead of realistic looking armor and weapon props, all the fantasy accoutrements were made from foam and cardboard, as if they were props made by the gamers with the limited budget but unlimited time and care of a high-schooler. Since most of the magical effects were primarily evident during the many fights, it was our responsibility as violence designers to come up with ways of representing the magic. To create illusions which would communicate all of the impossible magical abilities, we asked that the cast include a handful of kōken—black-clad stage hands who lifted characters that were to be understood to be flying, moved weapons that were being controlled with telekinesis, and generally facilitated the creation of the illusions of the fantastic. Of course, the kōken did not deceive anyone, but they impressed upon audience the supernatural qualities of the denizens of the world of the game. The different rule-sets of the two worlds needed to be established early in the play, but once they were, they also facilitated movement between worlds by a kind of code-switching. When kōken appear and a soundtrack begins to play, the audience knows that the action has moved to the game world.

Because combat is a central characteristic of Dungeons & Dragons, the violence design was called on to facilitate the audience’s understanding of these shifts. Fitting in with the overall production design, the violence also began by setting up rules which we started breaking as soon as they served their purpose. For example, the first fight that Agnes is involved in begins in “turn-based mode”—that is, much the way an actual D&D game works, each character takes their turn while the rest wait, unmoving, for their own turn. For this fight, we decided to utilize a reference to another genre; the video game, as opposed to Dungeons & Dragons’s native genre,
the table-top roleplaying game. We choreographed the monsters to run in and stand in place, “bouncing” slightly up and down on the balls of their feet, in sync with each other, as the characters do in video games like Mortal Kombat, when not specifically being given actions by a player. As each “turn” is described by Chuck, the characters enact it, to show how the action on the stage is really not “action” at all, but a story created narratively by the players at the table, based on the game mechanics, the players’ imaginations, and the rolls of the dice. So when it is a monster’s turn to attack, they hear Chuck say what happens: “The Bugbear strikes again … they miss” (27). Despite the different genre, the illusion told the audience what was happening in the game world more clearly than simply standing still would have done; it was an effective illusion, as well as an intertextual joke.25

That illusion is funny once, but it would be boring if it continued for long. After the humor had been played through, and after Agnes (and more importantly the audience) learned how the game works, the fight shifted into real-time and became much more like what we usually see on stage. This shift was part of the production’s design to express the affective experience of the game world that people who play roleplaying games seek out. That is to say, the illusion switched from conveying what an observer in the world of the school would see if they watched a game being played (that is, they would see people sitting a table playing a turn-based, paper and pencil game) to what the players are imagining to be happening in the game world: a swirling melee of heroic fighters, all moving simultaneously.

The choreography of the later fights in the game world stayed in the real-time mode but was significantly stylized in order to continue to help create a sense of that world which would

25 Obviously, this reference is more effective for people who recognize the referent, but even for folks who have not played those kinds of games, the bouncing has a “waiting” quality to it which, along with the explanation from the text, we thought would provide the necessary context.
be familiar to audience members who loved *Dungeons & Dragons* and yet still accessible to those who had little or no knowledge of the game. We chose specific monsters (some are specified in the script, but most are not) which we thought would be iconic favorites, and tried to model their most iconic powers, so that the faerie could fly and use magical charm powers, the mind-flayer could use telekinesis and mind control, and of course, the dragon at the end needed to breathe fire. None of these effects was accomplished purely by the choreography, of course; sound and lights and our kōken helped create the illusions of each power in a consistent stylization which helped the audience construct that world for themselves.

The play does not feature much violence taking place in the school world, but what little there is—an abortive tussle between Chuck and Agnes’s boyfriend Miles—we designed in a realistic style. Of course, the primary function of that realism was to once again distinguish the worlds from each other, but it had another, and more important, dramaturgical function. Where the fights in the game world were exciting and decisive, we choreographed the struggle in the prosaic world of the school to be likewise prosaic. The different qualities of the fights became a metaphor for the experience of young people, especially high school students; Miles misunderstands what kind of “roleplaying” Chuck and Agnes are doing together, and while he does not know anything about *Dungeons & Dragons*, he does “know it means I sorta really want to punch you right now” (38). Chuck does not want to fight, and Miles’s heart does not really seem to be in it either—the implication is that he feels he ought to fight to defend his relationship in some vague way; neither combatant is intent on really doing harm to the other. We
choreographed a typical status-seeking high school fight, with no clear victor and nobody seriously hurt.\textsuperscript{26}

In each subworld, the violence was carefully designed in order to help construct that separate world. In this regard, there is nothing unique about a play like \textit{She Kills Monsters}; in any play, the violence designer must design the violence to construct the fictional world. \textit{She Kills Monsters} simply has more worlds to construct than most plays. What makes the play an exemplar is that its two different worlds highlight the potentially different ways the design can realize those worlds. The interplay between the two worlds, both literally in term of production and metaphorically in terms of the meaning produced by the play, forces designers and scholars alike to think more explicitly about how world-building works. That thinking can then be applied more generally to plays that operate entirely in a single fictional world.

It is my hope that the same will be true for all of the plays and productions I have discussed in this chapter. The work that the representations of violence do in each is, in one sense, unique. And unique not only to that play, but to that individual production of the play. Each production offers new challenges to be met, and while artists sometimes do re-use ideas, we do not always want to, for several reasons. First, it sometimes feels like cheating; after all, we are sought out for our creativity. Second, we usually come up with several solutions to a given problem before settling on one—but that does not mean the discarded ideas were unexciting. Like any other creator, designers store those ideas away in a mental box where they wait for an opportunity to be deployed. Most importantly, it is rare that the same idea will do the same thing in a different production, and trying to make something that worked before fit new circumstances

\textsuperscript{26} Rory Miller, in \textit{Meditations on Violence}, describes this kind of fight as a “monkey dance” and explains its function in society and why it seldom results in serious injury. We based our design in part on his work.
can be more work for less effect than doing something new. So the eight examples in this chapter are by no means exhaustive. And yet, from those explicit and specific considerations, a methodology can be developed for analyzing the violence in any production.
CONCLUSION

Over the course of this dissertation I have presented a set of tools for understanding how violence does its dramaturgical work, and have put those tools to use in discussions of a handful of productions. Framing representation on stage as the cooperative construction of a fictional world by the audience, influenced by the interpretation of the play offered by the production team, establishes a basis for understanding what happens when an audience watches a play. Thinking about the audience’s relationship with that fictional world in terms of distance and absorption provides a framework for understanding how that relationship changes moment to moment. The purpose of all of these concepts is to be able to analyze the effects of that change in audience relationship with the fictional world by studying shock (the way in which representations of violence manage distance through empathy), and then the way that shock creates or alters audience sympathy for the characters generates a framework for analyzing the effects. This chain is at the core of my poetics: shock creates empathy and empathy determines sympathy.

Having machined those tools, I put them to use by looking at the different forms that representations of violence on stage often take, and examining how each of these forms does similar work. While the work being done is similar, each form of representation does that work differently. Narrative or mimetic representations clearly both have significant interpretive power, but apply that power in clearly different ways. Mimetic illusions are not all the same. Individual
decisions must be made about exactly what and exactly how much audiences see and what and how much is hidden, implied, or shown indirectly. Violence designers apply the toolset I have theorized while making these very subtle decisions in order to create a nuanced design that can very delicately tune audience response.

I believe that my articulation of these concepts is novel, so I do not expect that other designers are already consciously doing this work, at least not using this language. None the less, in my examination of the work of other designers, I can see that at some level the decisions are always getting made, consciously or not, and they are having the effects that I predicted. In the most effective examples of the art, I find it hard to believe that the decisions are entirely accidental, since they are doing the work so effectively. Some of these examples I have discussed in the preceding pages, but most years I see dozens of shows and over the years I have seen a lot of really powerful violence design created by other artists. That work has inspired me not only to do better work myself, but also to develop this poetics describing and explaining what I have seen. Indeed, I was well into my career before I realized consciously that these were the decisions that I was making. It took longer to begin to see exactly what effect those choices had.

Not every violence designer does think about their work at this level. Each violence designer works in their own way, and many have a very different process. For some, other considerations are foremost, ranging from wanting fights to “look cool” to prioritizing historical accuracy. For my part, those two considerations have significant value—I am deeply interested in historical combat arts and their place on the stage. And I certainly like the fights I choreograph to look cool! But coolness and accuracy (and realism more broadly) should all be sought within the framework of shock, distance, and sympathy. That is, it is my view that it is only important
that a fight look cool or be realistic when those qualities would forward the dramaturgical goals of the scene. To be clear, I think that historically accurate fights are cool, and also that both historicity and coolness often do forward the goals of the scene. Indeed, I have argued as much throughout this dissertation. But those goals need to be the focus. Goals that can be understood in terms of sympathy generated by shock.

There are, of course, some designers who do very little thinking at all, slapping fights together as quickly as they can without considering the dramaturgical requirements of the scene. Sometimes this is an economic restriction—especially for a storefront show with a small budget, many designers might consider the discussions and the homework necessary to work at this level of detail to not be worth their time. None the less, these are the considerations which are called for; not spending time on them just means the decisions are made without consideration, by luck or default, not that the decisions are not being made at all.

So one constituency I hope to reach with my way of thinking about violence design is other violence designers. Ones who, like me, were looking for a cohesive way to theorize their work. My approach is certainly not for every artist. As I said, every designer’s process is different, and while I have little use for those who are not concerned about dramaturgy, there are many artists who care deeply about the effects of their work, but who achieve those effects through a much less cerebral process. Indeed, I admire many such fight directors who achieve spectacular results which I can, after the fact, analyze by means of my poetics, but which they achieve by instinct.

As an academic work, this dissertation’s more obvious audience is other scholars. It is my hope that my fellow critics will find these tools valuable enough to include them in the wide panoply of methodologies for analyzing drama. My focus throughout has been on production,
and I envision the work I have done primarily as a way to understand things that happen on actual stages in front of actual audiences. Therefore, it seems as if this work would be most obviously useful to those critics who study drama through performance or at least with the sensibility that playscripts are, if not solely blueprints for, than at least essentially connected to, performance. That said, I do read scripts as literature myself, and find that my work here will also be useful in analyzing scripts, as I have done a few times in this dissertation. After all, playwrights make the first dramaturgical use of violence in the life of any play when they write it into the script, and often that use is very intentional indeed.

I pointed out in the beginning of Chapter 5 that few critics or reviewers have written about how representations of violence do dramaturgical work in production. As a result, reviewers who do comment at all on the violence in a play which they are reviewing tend to praise or criticize its effectiveness as spectacle, rather than writing about how the choices that went into the violence supported (or failed to support) the production. If my ideas gain currency, then I hope one place they might find use is with reviewers who are interested in writing with greater nuance about the violence they see onstage.

Farther afield, there is an ongoing conversation about violence in media—usually in television, movies, and video games. Thinking about shock value as the value of shock could be productive for those people, whether scholars or activists, involved in that conversation. Finally, I hope that I have provided another avenue of thought for those who, like me, are endlessly fascinated by the way that we engage in that most human of activities—the telling of stories.
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VITA

Richard Gilbert earned a Bachelor of Arts degree with departmental honors in Theater Arts at Brandeis University in 1990. In 2012, he returned to school, earning a Master of Arts degree in Humanities at the University of Chicago. He then came to Loyola University Chicago, where he earned a Master’s degree, and, in 2020, a Doctorate of Philosophy, both in English.

In the more than two decades between undergraduate and graduate school, Dr. Gilbert pursued his career as a violence designer. He moved to Chicago in 1996, and fell in love with the city, especially the vibrant storefront theater community. He co-founded R&D Choreography, a violence design company, where he is the executive director and one of the principle violence designers and teachers, and has designed violence for over three hundred productions.

Dr. Gilbert has taught stage combat classes at several universities, including full semester courses at Loyola University Chicago, Lewis University, and North Park University. He has also taught workshops and shorter courses at universities around the Midwest. Outside of theater practice classes, he has also taught composition, introduction to literature, and introduction to theater courses at Loyola University Chicago.

Dr. Gilbert is a company member with Akvavit Theatre in Chicago and a stakeholder with The Backroom Shakespeare Project. Akvavit’s mission is to produce contemporary Nordic theater. Backroom is a group of artists who produce Shakespeare’s plays in a bar, for free, with no director and one rehearsal. They seek to recreate the relationship that Early Modern actors had with texts, and which audiences had with the theater.