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Abstract

This essay examines The Hayloft Project's theatre production *Thyestes*, first performed at the Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne in 2010. It takes as its starting point public criticism of the practice of adaptation as a derivative form. Contrary to this position, the essay applies recent theorizations of theatre as a hypermedium in order to argue that adaptation is an integral, structural component of theatre rather than simply an intertextual, representational strategy. In doing so, it positions Brechtian approaches to the medium as a historical precedent through which to consider the dramaturgical strategies at work in the production, and it extrapolates on Walter Benjamin's idea of citation as a formative interruption to critique scholarly conceptions of the practice as a "second," palimpsestic form. The essay thus extends the discussion of adaptation beyond the language of alteration and re-creation. Finally, it explores the misapprehensions that result from reading adaptation purely in representational terms in its discussion of adaptation in an Australian context.

Keywords

stage, australian, seneca, context, adapting, hayloft, thyestes

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Hayloft's *Thyestes*: Adapting Seneca for the Australian Stage and Context

Margaret Hamilton

Rosemary Neill, senior theatre critic for the *Australian* newspaper and vocal opponent of adaptation—or what she terms “derivative theatre” and attributes to a “radical shift from literary culture”¹—has provided a public platform for criticisms of reworkings of the canon. In a series of articles published in the newspaper in 2013, Neill rallied a number of leading playwrights to censure adaptation as the product of the auteur-director, effectively “squeezing out”² the national story on main-stage theatre.³ More often than not, Australian theatre director Simon Stone emerged as a contentious figure in this debate. Stone’s collaborative project *Thyestes*, awarded Best Adaptation for the Melbourne Stage in 2010,⁴ among other prizes, is a pertinent production to consider in relation to this discussion. *Thyestes*, created by Melbourne-based The Hayloft Project, not only exemplifies compositional practices that contest the protectionist rhetoric that has periodically characterized the local theatre landscape, but defamiliarizes the

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I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Joanne Tompkins and Ric Knowles for their belief in this essay, and to extend thanks to the anonymous readers for their generous input. Elly Michelle Clough from Belvoir Street Theatre kindly provided access to photographs, and David Akhurst patiently read through drafts of the text. I am indebted to both for their help.

¹Rosemary Neill, “Tepid Stage for Local Writers,” *Australian*, 10 August 2013, 22.

²Rosemary Neill, “Hooked on Classics,” *Australian*, 25 May 2013, 5.

³See also Rosemary Neill: “Drama as Directors, Writers Clash over Classics,” *Australian*, 25 May 2013, 7; “The Local Voices Being Swept Off the Stage,” *Australian*, 28 May 2013, 12; and “The Elusive Stage Provokes ‘Despair’ among Local Playwrights,” *Australian*, 22 June 2013, 5. *Main-stage* is defined here on the basis of membership of the Australian Major Performing Arts Group (AMPAG), the representative body of Australia’s major performing arts companies, including Melbourne Theatre Company, Sydney Theatre Company, Queensland Theatre Company, Black Swan Theatre Company, State Theatre Company of South Australia, Malthouse Theatre, Belvoir Street Theatre, and the Bell Shakespeare. See <http://www.ampag.com.au/about.htm>.

⁴In addition to the Green Room Award for Best Adaptation for the Melbourne Stage, The Hayloft Project received Green Room awards for Best Production and Best Ensemble in the category of Theatre—Companies in 2010. Melbourne’s Green Room awards constitute peer recognition for professional theatre productions and are presented by the Green Room Awards Association. The Hayloft Project also received the 2010 Melbourne Fringe Award for Best Performance for *Thyestes*.

representational mechanisms of theatre, and in doing so, foregrounds theatre as a site constituted by *medial* adaptation. In an Australian context, Hayloft's production is indicative of the central position that the practice of adaptation occupies in discussions concerning the conundrum of the "coming of age" of national self-expression. More than a measure of cultural selfhood, however, *Thyestes* constitutes a mode of performance that counters interpretations of adaptation, popular and scholarly, as "derivative" or "second." In this production, an insistence on reflexive dramaturgies pointing to "older" processes of (re-)mediation opens up the question of theatre's more recent conceptualization as a *hypermedium*, a theorization that recognizes theatre as a fundamental site of adaptation.

Hypermedium is an apt if perhaps perplexing term to apply to a theatre production that largely fails to deploy the type of onstage technology associated with the digital-performance era. It is a significant tool in this essay because it shifts the focus of the adaptation debate to the medium, theatre's relation to other media, and in the correlating term *intermedial*, spectator perception. Furthermore, *hyper-* is a prefix that encapsulates the acute specter of the atrocities of the ancient Roman arena in a production composed "after Seneca" and performed at a time characterized by the heightened experience of public retribution in the form of broadcasting executions on the internet. This essay's two sections argue that adaptation is an integral, structural component of theatre rather than simply an intertextual, representational proposition. The first addresses the theoretical implications of such a position through an analysis of Hayloft's *Thyestes* by conceptualizing theatre as a *hypermedium* dependent on dramaturgical strategies designed to conceal or expose operations of mediation. The essay situates Bertolt Brecht as a historical precedent through which to consider the production, extrapolates on Walter Benjamin's idea of citation as a formative interruption to critique Linda Hutcheon's broad conception of the practice as a "second," palimpsestic form,⁵ and extends discussion of adaptation beyond the language of alteration and recreation exemplified by Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier.⁶ The latter section of the essay returns to Neill in order to consider the misapprehensions that result from reading adaptation purely in representational terms in an Australian context.

Thyestes, commissioned by the Malthouse Theatre, had its premiere in the Tower Theatre in Melbourne in 2010,⁷ and the Sydney Festival and Belvoir Street Theatre presented the performance at CarriageWorks in Sydney in January 2012.⁸ Written by Thomas Henning, Chris Ryan, Stone, and Mark Winter, the published text⁹ and

⁵Linda Hutcheon, with Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013).

⁶Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier, eds., *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology of Plays from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁷*Thyestes* opened at the Tower Theatre, a studio-style performance space seating an audience of approximately a hundred, in The Coopers Malthouse Building in Melbourne on 16 September 2010. The Hayloft Project had been artists in residence at Malthouse that year. The creative team for *Thyestes* included Claude Marcos (set and costume design), Govin Ruben (lighting design), Stefan Gregory (sound designer), and Anne-Louise Sarks (dramaturg).

⁸This article is based on a performance of the production at CarriageWorks as part of the 2012 Sydney Festival, and an archival recording of the production at Malthouse on 9 October 2010 provided by Belvoir. *Thyestes* opened at CarriageWorks on 15 January 2010. It has since appeared at the Holland Festival (23–27 June 2014).

⁹Currency Press is Australia's oldest independent publisher, and the publication of the script as part of its Current Theatre series recognizes the significance of this production as a theatre text.

production credits acknowledge the Roman dramatist in the attribution of authorship as “after Seneca.” Hayloft’s *Thyestes* consists of the titular character, performed by Henning, and his legendary brother, Atreus, played by Winter. In order to expand “the limited timescale of the Seneca play to encompass the larger chain of retributive killings in the original myth,”¹⁰ as Stone explains in his director’s notes, Hayloft’s production added the characters Chrysippus (the illegitimate son of King Pelops and the half-brother of Thyestes and Atreus), Aerope (Atreus’ adulteress wife, the Princess of Crete), Pelopia (Thyestes’ daughter and the second wife of Atreus), and Aegisthus (Atreus’ adopted son and the offspring of Thyestes and Pelopia, the result of incestuous rape). All these roles were performed by Ryan. Hayloft’s approach is not unusual in the context of theatre history. Ancient Attic literary and theatrical tradition entreated competitive revisions of its myths through the tragic *agon* that concluded the Great Dionysia. Seneca’s first-century CE engagement with the Greek mythical family, the house of Tantalus, is the only surviving text of twenty Greek and Roman tragedies on the subject. If tragedy is thought of as staging myth, Hayloft’s production is not an attempt to capture the past—an impossible task, as Erika Fischer-Lichte’s study of the Berlin Schaubühne’s *Antikenprojekt I* and *II*¹¹ demonstrates—but rather a production that foregrounds the requisite condition of theatre as a medium that has from its inception refashioned and transmitted other media, as in stories and text.¹² In the production credits, Hayloft signals the gap that separates the translation of myth as it is imparted through Seneca’s drama; that is, through the medium of the phonetic alphabet, and performance as mode of communication.

The process of adaptation is consciously acknowledged from the outset of this production in the qualification of authorship as “after Seneca,” and the use of “after” has been a cause for consternation beyond this project. Australia’s highest-grossing playwright, David Williamson, for example, found the billing for the Melbourne Theatre Company’s 2013 production of *The Cherry Orchard* by Simon Stone, after Anton Chekhov, a “little shock[ing].”¹³ For Williamson, Chekhov, “one of the greatest writers

¹⁰ Thomas Henning, Chris Ryan, Simon Stone, and Mark Winter, *Thyestes (after Seneca)* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2012), 39. Chris Ryan is incorrectly listed as playing Atreus in the cast list.

¹¹ Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Between Text and Cultural Performance: Staging Greek Tragedies in Germany,” *Theatre Survey* 40, no. 1 (1999): 1–29. The *Antikenprojekt I* and *II* consisted of *The Bacchae* (1974), directed by Klaus-Michael Gruber, and the *Oresteia* (1980), directed by Peter Stein. In this article, Fischer-Lichte counters the idea that the presentation of Greek classics familiarizes the spectator with a classical text, and instead points to how these works are read through a contemporary lens and subsequently relate to the context in which they are performed.

¹² A performance translates stories or textual inscriptions into spatially and temporally defined, material theatrical signs and processes, and as such is not a mimetic form, but rather is constituted by “signs of signs.” See Erika Fischer-Lichte, “I—Theatricality Introduction: Theatricality: A Key Concept in Theatre and Cultural Studies,” *Theatre Research International* 20, no. 2 (1995): 88. Hans-Thies Lehmann applies Fischer-Lichte’s concept to argue that theatre is an “art form of *signifying*, not mimetic copying” (see Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby [London: Routledge, 2006, 167]). He exemplifies this point by referring to the fact that a tree in a performance, no matter how realistic in appearance, is a sign for a tree, and in this respect contrasts it to a tree in film, which functions as a photographic reproduction of the object.

¹³ Qtd. in Neill, “Hooked on Classics,” 5. Stone clarified that the program for *The Cherry Orchard* had been completed eighteen months prior to the creation of the production, and at that time, he had put forward the billing “*The Cherry Orchard* after Chekhov written and directed by Simon Stone.” Melbourne Theatre Company’s graphic-design department could not accommodate that title, and Stone indicates that his work ended up being closer to the original text than he had, in fact, intended. See Simon Stone interview with Michael Cathcart, ABC Radio National, “Books and Arts Daily,” 20 August 2013, available at <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksandartsdaily/love-him-or-leave-him3a-simon-stone/4898548>.

of all time," was "relegated to an afterthought."¹⁴ The billing of authorship as "after Chekhov" and Hayloft's *Thyestes* as "after Seneca" renders explicit the re-mediation¹⁵ of a dramatic text, and in this respect, it is not merely a perfunctory addendum. Instead, it concurrently locates and dislocates an established frame of reference and signposts theatre as a second-order art form, if the medium is comprehended purely as a representational mechanism. Once in the theatre, the spectator encounters the first of a series of electronic surtitles (and subtitles in the performance in Sydney) summarizing the plot and prefacing each of the twelve scenes constituting the production. Here, Hayloft explicitly emphasizes theatre as a medium that broadcasts other media in modified form; in this instance, text that is more typically re-mediated through the actor's body as intra-scenic dialogue and/or through the set. From the text that scrolls across the small, rectangular box containing the surtitle that opens the performance, the audience identifies the fictional context—"Scene 1/ Ancient Greece, Kingdom of Pisa"—and learns that "King Pelops has declared his bastard child, Chrysippus, heir to the throne. Enraged, his wife, Queen Hippodamia, convinces her sons Atreus and Thyestes to kill their half-brother Chrysippus."¹⁶ As in Brechtian theatre, these captions function as an anti-illusionistic technique that obstruct the progression of action, and in doing so, establish an episodic structure that contributes to the emphasis on scenographic exposition in the production.

Hayloft's deployment of this technique reinforces the legacy that Ulrike Garde details in *Brecht & Co.: German-speaking Playwrights on the Australian Stage*,¹⁷ an aesthetic lineage discussed later in this essay. More immediately concerning the question of adaptation is the co-option of this device, as one of a number of reflexive dramaturgical strategies that coalesce to produce a heightened experience of theatrical space, or what will be referred to in this essay as a *hyper-medium*. Chiel Kattenbelt defines *hypermedium* as distinct from *hyper-medium* on the basis that theatre constitutes a platform that has the capacity not only to incorporate all other arts, but all other representational media.¹⁸ More than incorporation, theatre adapts other art forms, and in doing so, re-mediate other media. In his discussion of the concept of *hypermedium*, Kattenbelt raises the question of transparency and immersion by citing Janet Murray's conception of "successful storytelling" as dependent on the "loss of consciousness of the medium."¹⁹ According to Murray, the story achieves its impact the moment the spectator can no longer discern print or film. In his analysis of theatricality, Samuel Weber similarly points to the foundational significance of this concept by pointing to Aristotle's discussion of sense perception in *On the Soul* (books 2–3).²⁰ Here, Aristotle reasons that sight is "affected by the medium."²¹ Weber deploys Aristotle's reflections

¹⁴ Stone interview.

¹⁵ I use *re-mediation*, as distinct from Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's *remediation*. The hyphenated term emphasizes theatre as a fundamental site of mediation and therefore subject to re-mediation. See Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

¹⁶ Henning et al., *Thyestes*, 1.

¹⁷ Ulrike Garde, *Brecht & Co.: German-speaking Playwrights on the Australian Stage* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).

¹⁸ Chiel Kattenbelt, "Theatre as the Art of the Performer and the Stage of Intermediality," in *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, ed. Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 37 (emphasis in original).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 34–35.

²⁰ Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as Medium* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2004), 100–101.

²¹ Aristotle, *De Anima (On the Soul)*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin, 1986), 175.

to clarify the Greek philosopher's understanding of the theatre medium as a spatial construction that facilitates communication between two points. He argues that for Aristotle, "the scenic medium allows mimesis quite literally to *take place*, but only to the extent that it fades into pure transparency."²² Ultimately, the medium is read as a subordinate to plot, contributing to the tradition of limiting considerations of adaptation to the discussion of intertextual narratives and the dramatic text.

Theatre, of course, as Kattenbelt notes and the reference to Brecht exemplifies, has a long history of countering the illusion of the stage as an imperceptible conduit of drama.²³ In the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this has manifested in media technologies designed to disrupt spectator immersion and render palpable the operation of mediation. Peter Boenisch identifies the ensuing effect of deconstructing the precepts of observation and linear communication as "intermedial" insofar as it is a consequence of spectator perception.²⁴ In contrast to the performances informing Boenisch's paradigm of intermedial theatre as a practice that urges audience members to "find their own paths through the pluri-focal networks of signs, worlds, messages and meanings,"²⁵ Hayloft's *Thyestes* directs attention to the typically transparent and "older" processes of adaptation fundamental to theatre, such as the performer's role as a *means* to character. In addition to the qualification "after Seneca" and the captions introducing each scene, Ryan's nongendered, multiple casting as Chrysippus, Aerope, Pelopia, and Aegisthus heightens and disrupts the transformation of the body of the "actor" into a unified sign (or character) beyond the performer's *original* presence, and as a stable marker of gender in his roles as Aerope and Pelopia. Improvisation further highlights the mechanisms of medial labor operating between stage and text. The emphasis in this production, however, is not so much recognition of theatre as a space open to the interaction and reaction of different media, as in Kattenbelt's use of *hyper-* as a prefix encapsulating the capacity of theatrical space to stage intermediality; instead, *hyper-* emerges as a conceptual tool to describe an excessive experience of theatrical space hinging on reflexive strategies that disclose adaptive processes historically specific to the medium.

It is on this basis that this essay uses the term *hyper-medium*, as distinct from *hypermedium*, as an expression indicative of Kattenbelt's theorization of theatrical space and as an appellation identifying a specific experience of theatre form. In doing so, the essay returns to Brecht and Benjamin to rethink adaptation in the context of main-stage theatre practice in Australia at a time when, internationally, the language of disruption and resistance finds expression predominantly in relation to intermedial performance and multiple acts of representation.

Hayloft's *Thyestes* immediately directs the spectator to the viewing conventions of the medium. Once the curtain lifts—a screen that scrolls up—the spectator encounters three male performers in an empty rectangular box-stage, positioned between two raked seating banks. The interior of the box is bleach white and contrasts to the black wall that frames the stage. As a result of the box's absent back wall, the audience gazes

²² Weber, *Theatricality as Medium*, 101 (emphasis in original).

²³ Kattenbelt, "Theatre as the Art of the Performer," 35.

²⁴ Peter M. Boenisch, "Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act: Theatre, Media, Intermedial Performance," in *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, 115.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

at its double across the traverse stage, which ensures that the audience in the bank of seating directly opposite functions as a visible backdrop (fig. 1). The stage design incorporates the Greek origin of the term *theatre* as designating a space of spectators (*theatron*). In this reconfiguration of a familiar spatial arrangement, the spectator confronts the material actuality of the interface of the medium of communication. Hayloft, in effect, amplifies the semiotic experience of presence by dispersing audience perception beyond the stage.²⁶

Hayloft's traverse stage sets up a dramaturgical framework that can be described as *reflexive* in Boenisch's sense of the term. On the basis of Slavoj Žižek's notion of *parallax view* and Hans-Thies Lehmann's concept of a *postdramatic fracture* separating the discourse of the text and theatre, Boenisch argues that text-based theatre that disrupts the spectator's singular mode of perception is able to "facilitate ultimately contemporary encounters even with classic texts."²⁷ He conceptualizes the dramatic text and its presentation in terms of Žižek's elaboration of parallax view as "the opposed sides of a Möbius strip;"²⁸ that is, as connected, yet constantly shifting perspectives that never meet in order to determine whether or not the dialectic gap separating text and production is visible for the spectator. The consequence of such thinking, if read in relation to adaptation studies, is a shift in focus from source or textual analysis to staging strategies that redirect attention to the medium and spectator perception. According to Boenisch, reflexive dramaturgies preclude a closing synthesis in so far as the rift of Lehmann's theorization establishes translocation or a continual movement between two points and, in effect, inhibits orientation.²⁹ In this respect, to return to Weber, the medium is unable to serve as a vehicle of Aristotelian transparency. In his analysis of German director Frank Castorf's adaptation of Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot*, Boenisch observes that rather than identifying with a dramatic fictional character, the spectator "experienced its own inescapable present involvement in the process of representation."³⁰ For him, "[o]ne was permanently pointed back to one's own *idiotic* spectating, in the original meaning of the Greek word: one's 'private, individual' action within that 'romantic world.'"³¹ Castorf's spectator encountered what Boenisch describes as the parallax between symbolic representation (in the form of drama and plot structure) and the materiality of the medium or theatre and the experience of the audience's presence in this context.³²

In Hayloft's production, the audience's cognizance of the "idiotic" process of spectating arguably produces "astonishment," and in this respect represents a development of Benjamin's conception of Brechtian theatre as a mode that obstructs identification with character in order to expose the "circumstances under which they function."³³ It

²⁶ It had not been possible to construct a singular seating rake in the Tower Theatre at Melbourne's Malthouse Theatre, and as a consequence the traverse stage emerged, Henning noted, as "an accident." Thomas Henning, personal communication (interview) with the author, 3 December 2013.

²⁷ Peter M. Boenisch, "Towards a Theatre of Encounter and Experience: Reflexive Dramaturgies and Classic Texts," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 20, no. 2 (2010): 164.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

³¹ *Ibid.* (emphasis in original).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Walter Benjamin, "What Is Epic Theatre?" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1968), 144–51, quote on 147.



Figure 1. Mark Winter and Thomas Henning in *Thyestes* by The Hayloft Project, CarriageWorks, Sydney (2012). (Photo: Heidrun Löhr.)

is not the sociopolitical circumstances of character, but the medial role of performer *and* spectator that is at issue. Furthermore, spectator consciousness of the reflexive framework constituting *Thyestes* is heightened by the incongruous experience of perceptual illusion. In *Thyestes*, the spectator is acutely conscious of the stage as a mechanism of optical deceit. Perhaps one of the most significant features of *Thyestes* is the illusion created by the curtain and the fluorescent lighting effects by Govin Ruben. The curtain consists of two black screens that scroll up and down on each side of the stage and seal off the platform at the end of every scene, temporarily cutting off one bank of spectators from the other. As a result of the bleached-out effect of the lighting, the spectator has the impression that the sides of the rectangular stage are stable and solid, even though objects, including a Ping-Pong table, appear and disappear on the minimalistic stage during the brief scene transitions that punctuate the production. In the production, *mimesis*³⁴ emerges as the experience of make-believe and the vanishing act integral to the stage design magnifies theatre as a medium of artifice and semblance, as opposed to the “real.” If *medium* is generally understood as “an agency or means of doing something,”³⁵ and this specifically infers the “means by which something is communicated or expressed,”³⁶ Hayloft points to the gap in perception required to invest in the fictional realm. *Thyestes* highlights the disjunction intrinsic to processing information, thus foregrounding the question of the visibility of the apparatus that is mediating communication.

³⁴ For a brief clarification of Aristotle’s discussion of *mimesis*, see Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 178–79.

³⁵ *New Oxford Dictionary of English*, cited in Boenisch, “Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act,” 105.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Each time the curtain scrolls up to reveal what appears to the audience as an ostensibly “impossible” set change, the spectator is subject to the *disruptive intangibility*³⁷ of scenographic composition, a term Boenisch uses to describe intermedial performance on the basis that it interrupts the unceasing stream of mediated information. It is, however, an enhanced experience of illusion that is not aligned to a confluence of media in performance, but rather sets up a dialectical relation to the performance of character that arguably has its origins in Brechtian defamiliarization. “Sterile minimalism” is how Henning describes the aesthetic of the stage in so far as it has that “nowhere quality to it” and is “just diseased.”³⁸ In distancing the Kingdom of Pisa as a largely blank, sparse stage space, Hayloft foregrounds not simply the process of theatricalization, but the adaptive practices intrinsic to the medium. Theatre is dependent on the medial labor of the performer; in *Thyestes*, this is heightened through the focus on the improvisational techniques and cross-casting of the small ensemble costumed predominantly in casual clothes. Winter, Ryan, and Henning are all dressed in jeans and T-shirts and an additional, single item of clothing: Winter’s duffle coat; Ryan’s hoodie and trainers; and Henning’s black suit jacket. Brecht’s conception of the performer in “Short Organum for the Theatre” (1948) provides a parallel in elaborating on the function of the performer in *Thyestes*. For Brecht, “the actor no longer has to persuade the audience that it is the author’s character and not himself that is standing on stage, so also he need not pretend that the events taking place on stage have never been rehearsed.”³⁹ In Hayloft’s production, the emphasis is on the “double reality” of the performer as a corporeal presence and artificial *signifying* mode of enactment rather than as a conduit of mimetic character.

It is immediately apparent that *Thyestes* is not based on the rhetorical language of Seneca’s drama. Scene 1, distinguished by contemporary verbal and cultural terminology, distances the Roman dramatist’s play and directs attention to devised text and the citational techniques of the actor. In the stark, empty room of the first scene, Ryan (Chrysippus) improvises a story to Winter (Atreus) and Henning (Thyestes) about his character turning up in Guatemala a month early to meet a girlfriend he met in Costa Rica; this story shifts to Atreus’ graphic accounts of his sexual experiences with an opera singer: “She’s got a strap-on. She pounds me like a goddam woodpecker. It’s unbelievable. It is all up in the prostate. I’m seeing things in fucking 3D”⁴⁰ (fig. 2). Throughout the twenty-minute, overtly masculine opening banter, Atreus registers a series of text messages and the three performers reference a local television series, as well as make comic comments on the “older” art form of opera:

[i]t went for fucking ages. The thing just kept going and going and going. I mean who has the time? . . . I came prepared. I kind of knew what I was in for so I brought my iPod and put the headphones up the sleeve of my jacket. Then I sort of tucked them into my ear . . . I met her in a fucking bar, where do you think I’d meet an opera singer? . . . I don’t know what it was called. Like *Don Giogiggy* or something . . . whatever it was called there were no horns or anything. No breastplates or spears.⁴¹

³⁷ Boenisch, “Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act,” 115 (emphasis in original).

³⁸ Henning, personal communication.

³⁹ Bertolt Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. John Willett (New York: Methuen, 1964), 194.

⁴⁰ Henning et al., *Thyestes*, 10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8–9.



Figure 2. Mark Winter, Thomas Henning, and Chris Ryan in *Thyestes* by The Hayloft Project, Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne (2010). (Photo: Jeff Busby.)

At the conclusion of this scene, Chrysippus selects Roy Orbison's "Anything You Want" on the iPod and as he sings along he fails to hear *Thyestes* cock a gun as the curtain seals off the stage from the spectator (fig. 3). In the published play, Stone points out that the performers "aim[ed] to improvise significantly on the text each night."⁴² The artistic team combines stage enactments developed in the rehearsal room with disjointed, fictional vignettes that counter the experience of temporal progression and emphasize the process of radically adapting and re-mediating (dramatic) text.

Here, the contemporary, conversational language not only bonds the mythical brothers (through the vernacular "bro"), seen playing Ping-Pong in the following scene, but the ensemble of performers also participates in the double and heightened act of performance. First, "the text [i]s subservient to the performer," as Henning explains, and "altered for the performer."⁴³ It is not the cast's role to illustrate a dramatic text; instead, Seneca's play functioned as material, a basic structure that, coupled with the broader myth, constituted the architecture that Hayloft built around the brothers' struggle for kingship. Second, there is no illusion that the player is identical to character. Ryan's cross-gender casting renders patent the corporeal presence of the male performer onstage as distinct from female character, and alludes to "the nature of the chorus and . . . the gender politics of classical theatre performance . . . entirely conducted by a male cast."⁴⁴ By the third scene of the production, the spectator is

⁴² *Ibid.*, iv.

⁴³ Henning, personal communication.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*



Figure 3. Thomas Henning and Chris Ryan in *Thyestes* by The Hayloft Project, CarriageWorks, Sydney (2012). (Photo: Heidrun Löhr.)

conscious of theatrical “pretending” as the familiar (and familial) image of the male figures bonding onstage through alcohol and banter transforms as Winter’s Atreus, dancing to Mary J. Blige’s “A Family Affair,” “gyrat[es] his groin to her.”⁴⁵ The “her” is Ryan, introduced as Aerope, the princess of Crete, through the surtitle that informs the audience that Atreus has chosen a wife. Here, the spectator is ostensibly confronted by the fictional, mythical female character of Aerope and the “real” body of the actor (fig. 4). Hayloft encourages the audience to register a double reality: the actor’s body (in the corporeal presence of Ryan) and the performer playing the princess of Crete. In Seneca’s text, Aerope, the adulterous wife, is central to the rift between Atreus and Thyestes, yet she is never mentioned by name; apart from a brief appearance from Fury at the outset of the play, Seneca’s text is constituted by an offstage female presence.

⁴⁵ Henning et al., *Thyestes*, 14.



Figure 4. Mark Winter and Chris Ryan in *Thyestes* by The Hayloft Project, Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne (2010). (Photo: Jeff Busby.)

Hayloft replicates this approach, but, in a contemporary context, distorts the matrix of intelligibility, underpinning not only heteronormative gender and sexual relations, but mimetic concepts of theatre as dependent on a belief in the truth of images.

In the final scene of act 1 (scene 6), the spectator is again confronted by Ryan as Aerope; here, the curtain scrolls up to expose the princess of Crete gasping as “he/she” performs fellatio on Winter’s Atreus, who sits in an armchair. A naked Winter in the role of the tyrant strolls menacingly around the stage as Ryan remains crouched in front of the chair. Atreus tapes Aerope/Ryan’s mouth with gaffer tape and steps into a pair of lace women’s underwear before returning to the chair. Atreus’ question to Aerope/Ryan—“You like Thai?”—renders darkly comic the references to food that underpin the horror of the myth, particularly in light of the preceding scene’s voice-mail message from Aerope suggesting schnitzel for dinner. Atreus looks through the scattered take-away menus on the floor of the stage and offers his wife a choice: “You pick. I’ll have a salad. No meat.”⁴⁶ After coaxing a terrorized Aerope into the armchair, Winter announces that he has a present for “her,” an action that was followed in the Malthouse production with a threat: “If you go anywhere near the side of the room I’ll put you through the fucking wall.” Atreus’ present is a dildo that he describes as “good workmanship. Must be German or something.”⁴⁷ Ryan, visibly a man, playing a woman, straps the dildo over his jeans and the scene concludes with Winter performing fellatio on Ryan, who has been pushed into the recline position in the armchair. Cross-

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

casting, as Julia Prest notes, sexualizes rather than desexualizes female characters, given that male sexuality has been historically tolerated as a less threatening expression.⁴⁸ In this respect, Hayloft capitalizes on the conventions of gender identity intrinsic to the medial labor of the performer.

Henning, however, complicates Prest's point in his explanation of the casting of a male performer in the female roles on the basis that

the total brutalization of every single female character in the text would come across really ugly if it was purely done by a female actor. . . . All the characters played by Chris are all the victim characters . . . but to have a woman play all those characters it really wouldn't fly for an audience. It would not be read as this is a representation of a text. It would be probably really easily read as this show is misogynist and disturbed.⁴⁹

Ryan's casting is not an example of Judith Butler's notion of drag as gender parody in so far as he did not attempt to overtly imitate female gender.⁵⁰ However, Ryan's casting clearly suggests discord between sex and gender, and it foregrounds—problematically, no doubt, for some spectators—gender as a socially constructed performance based on repetition and reenactment. More specific to the art form, Ryan's performance of female roles calls into question theatre as a transparent medium of identification. A *hyper-real*, distempered paradigm of perception emerges, in that Hayloft's *Thyestes* transforms Seneca's curse of the clans into what, in the closing stages of the production, becomes a cinematic engagement with sadistic menace and, more precisely, amoral and pulp-genre murder. Beyond the body of the performer that disturbs audience perception, the many references to contemporary culture ensure that the experience of theatre cannot be limited to the internal relations of the work. *Thyestes* attests not simply to the trans-medial flow of information, but constructs what Boenisch terms *dys-referential un-realities*⁵¹ out of data re-mediation.

From the outset, the *real* body of the performer remains not simply perceptible behind the body of the fictional characters of Seneca's play (and mythology); rather, it morphs into trademark images of contemporary celebrity and gangster culture through its Tarantinoesque nonlinear chronology, use of drugs, profanity, small talk, and savagery. Unlike the American director's propensity for onscreen violence, death in Hayloft's *Thyestes* is largely presented as offstage, and in this respect is cognizant of the tradition of Greek drama rather than the Roman context. In scene 10 of act 2, Atreus and Ryan playing Aegisthus' mother, Pelopia, extend the earlier use of Orbison's music and presentation of megalomania through deadpan humor. Atreus and Pelopia pull on matching bathrobes, Atreus' embossed with an "R" and Pelopia's with a "C." In response to Atreus' questions, "Who is 'R' and who is 'C'?" and "Who did you kill to get these?" Pelopia explains that the former letter signifies Roy Orbison and the latter is for "the lovely Claudette," Orbison's first wife, "killed in a car crash two years into their marriage," and that rather than assassinating anyone, "she" had the dressing gowns embroidered.⁵² Here, Hayloft's co-option of contemporary cultural images and

⁴⁸ Julia Prest, *Theatre under Louis XIV: Cross-casting and Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 3.

⁴⁹ Henning, personal communication.

⁵⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁵¹ Boenisch, "Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act," 115 (emphasis in original).

⁵² Henning et al., *Thyestes*, 25–26.

phenomena points to the limitations of Fischlin and Fortier's definition of *adaptation* as "includ[ing] almost any act of alteration performed upon specific cultural works of the past and dovetail[ing] with a general process of cultural recreation."⁵³ Such a broad definition ultimately relies upon the language of the original and neglects readings of adaptation as a synchronic process indebted to intertextual circulation, and more precisely, dependent on the medial interaction of the spectator. Hayloft's *Atreus* and *Pelopia* are not representational conduits of the Roman dramatist's text, but, like the reference to *Orbison*, citations for a spectator conscious of the process of re-mediation.

Neill similarly confines her interpretation of adaptation as a form of cultural production to an anterior text. In her terms, "there are adaptations and adaptations,"⁵⁴ such as theatre productions that represent a shift of medium, exemplified by the recent realization of Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River* onstage, or in the case of Stone and Ryan's *The Wild Duck*, which provided a new structure and dialogue for Ibsen's play, or a new translation or updating of a text.⁵⁵ Hutcheon's definition extends these explanations in her broad study of adaptation across a range of media, yet it culminates in an argument that positions the adaptation as "second."⁵⁶ She identifies a threefold framework that characterizes the interrelated perspectives intrinsic to the term as first a product of transposition, as in the adaptation of a novel into a play or as a shift in retelling a story from another standpoint; second, as a process of creation on the basis of re-/interpretation; and finally, as a process subject to memory and therefore a form of intertextuality heightening and extending the operations of reception.⁵⁷ A theatre adaptation is a "*formal entity or product*," according to Hutcheon's paradigm, and a "*process of creation*" subject to the "*process of reception*."⁵⁸ *Creation*, here, infers the act of (re-)interpretation and (re-)creation, a practice also called *salvaging* or *appropriation*.⁵⁹ Hutcheon subsequently reasons—to return to and counter Neill's conception that opened this essay—that an adaptation "is a derivation that is not derivative" in so far as it is "second," but not "secondary"—in effect, a palimpsestic entity.⁶⁰ Like adaptation, theatre has a long tradition of conceptualization as a "secondary or composite art."⁶¹

More than a derivation, however, adaptation constitutes a formative interruption that demonstrates, as Jacques Derrida reasons, that "[e]very sign, linguistic or non-linguistic, spoken or written . . . can be *cited*" and thereby "break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion."⁶² In the 1939

⁵³ Fischlin and Fortier, eds., *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, 4.

⁵⁴ Neill, "Hooked on Classics," 5.

⁵⁵ *The Secret River*, directed by Neil Armfield, opened on 12 January 2013 at Sydney Theatre Company as part of the Sydney Festival. Kate Grenville is one of Australia's best-known authors and has received numerous awards for her work, including the United Kingdom's Orange Prize for fiction. *The Wild Duck*, after Henrik Ibsen, directed by Simon Stone, opened on 12 February 2011 at Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney.

⁵⁶ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 8 (emphasis in original).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* Fischlin and Fortier reject the term *appropriation* on the basis that this can involve using an original text without altering it; they exemplify this point by referring to the reproduction of a Shakespearean sonnet on a Valentine's Day card. See Fischlin and Fortier, eds., *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, 3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶¹ Kattenbelt, "Theatre as the Art of the Performer," 33. See this for a survey of the tradition of conceptualizing theatre as a secondary art from Kant to Jan Mukarovsky.

⁶² Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton, UK: Harvester Press, 1982), 320 (emphasis in original).

version of his essay "What Is Epic Theatre?" Benjamin anticipates Derrida's point by raising the question of the structuring effects of citation. Benjamin asserts that interruption is a fundamental procedure constitutive of form.⁶³ In doing so, he points out that interruption extends well beyond the realm of art and, in fact, underpins citation in so far as citing a text interrupts its context.⁶⁴ Weber subsequently elaborates on Benjamin's conception of the origin of the work of art as a form or formation "based less on a model of creativity or construction—much less on one of expressivity—than on a process of *separation*."⁶⁵ It is a process by which "an intentional, teleological movement" or plot is "arrested, dislocated and reconfigured."⁶⁶ Here, the plot is specifically reformed as a gesture that is citable, and Benjamin identifies "[m]aking gestures quotable" as one of the major accomplishments of Brecht's Epic theatre.⁶⁷ Benjamin renders palpable the significance of scenic (re)framing for the theatre medium. The concerns of the artists in question in this essay can be comprehended in terms of Benjamin's seminal observation that aesthetic development is "more easily defined in terms of the stage than of new drama"⁶⁸—that is, in terms of medial adaptation.

Citation, as Weber's etymological analysis of Benjamin's use of the term suggests, does not simply equate to the idea of quotation;⁶⁹ instead, *citation* deriving from *citare*—"to summon, urge, call; put in sudden motion, call forward; rouse, excite"⁷⁰—infers both to set in motion and, in the sense of a (traffic) summons, to arrest, to interrupt an action. Its contemporary usage, *to cite*, signifies first an acknowledgment of authority; second, it confers praise; and third, it is indicative of disruption. Benjamin's notion of *gesture* repurposed as *citable*, Weber emphasizes, does not purely reproduce or recapture the past, but, more significantly, entails potential transformation and transposition.⁷¹ It is open to being re-cited, and theatre, as Weber reminds the reader, is not simply the occasion of space, but its disruption and rearrangement.⁷² In *Thyestes*, Ryan's cross-gender casting, to quote Benjamin, "interrupt[s] . . . the act of acting."⁷³ This approach to the female roles results in astonishment "rather than empathy" by pointing not to the social conditions of character function, but the medial (and dialectical) circumstances of character representation.⁷⁴ Ryan, in jeans and a hoodie, as Chrysippus, Aerope, Pelopia, and Aegisthus, interferes with the function of the performer as a theatrically concealed conduit of character and coherent, semantic unit. Here, Benjamin's thinking facilitates the re-conceptualization of adaptation in terms of citability, and as a formative rather than subsequent process that furthers the question of the relation of reflexive dramaturgies to practices that expose re-mediation.

⁶³ Benjamin, "What Is Epic Theatre?" 148.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Weber, *Theatricality as Medium*, 45 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Benjamin, "What Is Epic Theatre?" 148.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁶⁹ Weber, *Theatricality as Medium*, 44–46.

⁷⁰ *Online Etymological Dictionary*, s.v. "citare," available at http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=cite&searchmode=none.

⁷¹ Weber, *Theatricality as Medium*, 46.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 300.

⁷³ Benjamin, "What Is Epic Theatre?" 148.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

In contrast to the five-act structure of Seneca's drama, act 2 in *Thyestes* opens with scene 12, a temporal *caesura* as the electronic surtitle highlights a jump from scene 6 to 12, and continues to announce a backward trajectory at the opening of each scene until scene 7 or the final scene of the production. In this sequence of scenes, Hayloft furthers the claim of an unfettered relation to Seneca's text by introducing the intergenerational consequences of Atreus' triumphant revenge that concludes the drama. Ryan is playing Aegisthus in scene 12 until the curtain falls and the surtitle of scene 11 introduces Atreus' second wife Pelopia (or Ryan). Ryan, now the mother of Aegisthus, playing Pelopia, appears onstage in a bathrobe, singing and accompanying "himself" on the piano. Ryan's "Der Doppelgänger," the thirteenth song from Schubert's *Schwanengesang* based on Heinrich Heine's poem, is an ironic comment on the notion of encountering the double of oneself. Prior to this image, the surtitle to scene 11 has informed the spectator that Pelopia commits suicide on learning the identity of Aegisthus' real father, Thyestes. In the opening scene of act 2, scene 12, the electronic surtitle has announced "Thyestes' prophecy is fulfilled."⁷⁵ On discovering the identity of his father, Aegisthus shoots Atreus as he sits in a bathrobe in an armchair across from projections on the wall of family slides of two young boys. As a consequence of the inverted chronology, it is not until scene 9 that the audience learns from the surtitles that Thyestes has raped his own daughter, Pelopia, who "remains ignorant of her rapist's identity."⁷⁶ In this brief scene, the curtain opens to Pelopia (or Ryan) in fetal position on the stage floor, one bank of spectators exposed to Ryan's buttocks and the other to "her" tears as the fictional female character. Each audience bank is presented with a different image: either the front of Ryan's body or the back. As Thyestes, "shocked at his own act,"⁷⁷ stumbles against the wall of the set in his white T-shirt and with his jeans around his shoes, the spectator is reminded of the gap separating the phenomenal "reality" of the performance for one bank of the audience from the other.

Rowland S. Howard's "Wayward Man" is played throughout the scene then fades as the curtain rises on the final scene in the production. The reference to Howard, legendary guitarist with the Boys Next Door and The Birthday Party, merges the myth of "rock'n'roll poison"⁷⁸ with the unrestrained, power-hungry protagonists of Senecan drama. By scene 7, the final scene of the production, the machismo of Winter's earlier performance has fully transformed into the psychopathic mythic figure of Atreus: a gangster-style, rock-star tyrant who invites his brother to a reconciliation banquet in order to feed him the children he has dismembered and cooked. Atreus, in sunglasses, sits at the opposite end of a dinner table to Thyestes, who serves himself spaghetti and what looks like meat balls as he recalls childhood memories with his brother. Atreus, fully anticipating and relishing in his triumphant revenge on his brother, plays on the idea of "[t]hinking about death every time you sit down to eat."⁷⁹ In relation to this scene of mythic proportion, Henning points out that from "very early on . . . trauma was central to the narrative" in the sense that "the narrative itself was traumatized;"

⁷⁵ Henning et al., *Thyestes*, 23.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷⁸ Mick Harvey's lyric from "October Boy," qtd. in Robert Forster, "After They Are Gone," *The Monthly*, June 2011, 61.

⁷⁹ Henning et al., *Thyestes*, 29.

he explains that this is why Hayloft “cropped” the production “in the middle and went to the very end and reversed to that central moment.”⁸⁰ The effect can be read as a reconfiguration of Aristotle’s emphasis on the unexpected and unpredicted as critical to constituting order out of chaos and resolution. Instead of the sequential representation of meaningful action, or what Lehmann reprises as the “ideal of surveyability (synopton)”⁸¹ that subjects drama to “the laws of comprehension and memory retention,”⁸² Hayloft’s episodic structure heightens gaps in the process of re-mediating textual material for the stage.

Hayloft refashions the shock of recognition (*anagnôrisis*) that results from the sudden realization or jolt intrinsic to “a change from ignorance to knowledge” (*peripeteia*)⁸³ at the heart of tragedy through *scenic* interruption. As the curtain falls, the stage directions indicate that the concluding section “is the equivalent of a montage sequence in cinema.”⁸⁴ The curtain scrolls up and down, its pace increasing to capture what Henning describes as the “mania of the actual event,”⁸⁵ initially revealing Thyestes vomiting into his plate and then Aerope chastising Atreus, until the next image exposes Ryan’s Aerope with a gunshot wound to “her” head. Finally, Hayloft’s *Thyestes* concludes with Atreus rotating his arm around with a gun: “[t]astes good, huh? Tastes good. This is how it feels. You like that? They were calling for you. They were calling your name. Calling, ‘Dad!’, ‘Dad!’, ‘Dad!’”⁸⁶ The spectator confronts a continually altered image of the torture, horror, and sickness of Atreus’s kingship, contemporized as a barren realm of sociopathic power. The scene heightens the episodic nature of the production and, like Benjamin’s conception of Epic theatre, is “comparable to the pictures of a filmstrip” that proceeds through “jerks and jolts.”⁸⁷ As a consequence, *Thyestes* incorporates the prototypical features of the by-now old medium of cinema, and in doing so, demonstrates Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s fundamental understanding of a medium as that “which remediates” and, more specifically, “appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media.”⁸⁸ Theatre read from this perspective is fundamentally a site of adaptation.

In opening act 2 with a surtitle indicating the act division followed by a surtitle announcing scene 12, Hayloft arrests the (linear) movement of expectation and narration. Contrary to the function of *anagnôrisis* and *peripeteia* as unifying factors for theatre’s foundational Greek philosopher, *Thyestes* literally constructs and points to drama as a flow of time that is impeded in terms of Benjamin’s understanding of citation as interruption. According to Stone, the company reversed the order of the play in order to ensure that “both halves of the play head inexorably towards this horrific night”—the banquet.⁸⁹ Stone elaborates on this decision by pointing out that “[b]y the time you watch the concluding scenes, you have witnessed both the motivations and repercus-

⁸⁰ Henning, personal communication.

⁸¹ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 40.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸³ Qtd. in Stephen Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 42–43.

⁸⁴ Henning et al., *Thyestes*, 34.

⁸⁵ Henning, personal communication.

⁸⁶ Henning et al., *Thyestes*, 35.

⁸⁷ Qtd. in Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s Abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 106.

⁸⁸ Qtd. in Boenisch, “Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act,” 106.

⁸⁹ Qtd. in Henning et al., *Thyestes*, unpaginated notes.

sions leading to and resulting from the event taking place on stage."⁹⁰ *Thyestes* not only acknowledges itself as an adaptation that uses Seneca's play as a starting point, to which is added a mosaic of references to popular culture, but as a *hyper*-medium that fractures the temporal grid of drama. The production thus confirms Boenisch's argument that "[w]e could use all of the latest computer techniques on stage without creating any intermedial effect, while intermediality might sneak into a most traditional text-only talking heads drama production."⁹¹ In exposing typically imperceptible observational habits and the apparatuses of mediation, Hayloft's production exemplifies Boenisch's intermedial effect as "inflect[ing] attention from the real worlds of the message created by the performance, towards the very reality of media, mediation and the performance itself."⁹²

To stage a text constitutes not simply an act of alteration, as in Fischlin and Fortier's thinking, but infers adaptation and re-mediation. Whether that staging attracts criticism as an adaptation, however, hinges on the question of transparency. Neill's criticism, opening this essay, is indebted to Aristotle's foundational and systematic theory of the scenic medium in the *Poetics* as ancillary to *muthos* (plot). In addition, her apprehension regarding the impact of adaptation on local theatre production reflects a broader anxiety exemplified in the 1990s by European newspaper articles with titles like "Classics Everywhere, While Contemporary Pieces Rare."⁹³ In response to Neill's more recent claim that adaptations have been flourishing at the expense of local plays, Alison Croggon, a former reviewer for the *Australian*, discounted the notion that adaptations are increasingly dominating the Australian theatre landscape.⁹⁴ Ralph Myers, artistic director of Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney, similarly defended the practice and pointed to its currency as an artistic strategy during the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras.⁹⁵ If, then, as Myers reminded the *Australian's* readership, adaptation is a fundamental facet of theatre history, and more broadly a practice that has proliferated through the advent of broadcast and digital-media forms, why the perpetuation of highly charged, polemic public debate in contemporary Australia?

Adaptation has a long history as a colonial theatre practice and source of controversy in Australia. In addition to Anglo-American work, as Katharine Brisbane notes, French and German plays constituted part of the repertoire in English-language versions in the British settlement.⁹⁶ As in Europe, French and other dramas emerged in Australia under different titles, such as E. L. A. Brisebarre's *Les Pauvres de Paris* of 1856 that

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Boenisch, "Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act," 114.

⁹² Ibid., 115.

⁹³ Qtd. in Sabine Pochhammer, "Curtain," *Theaterschrift* 11 (1997): 11.

⁹⁴ Alison Croggon, "The Perfect Storm: Playwright vs. Director," ABC Arts, available at <http://www.abc.net.au/arts/blog/Alison-Croggon/playwright-versus-director-130731/>. Croggon compares the 2013 season of main-stage theatres with the 2003 season: of ninety-three productions in 2013, fifty-four were new Australian works (approximately 60 percent). This percentage of Australian plays has not changed from 2003.

⁹⁵ Ralph Myers, "Theatre Debate Is a Generational Battle for the Ages," *Australian*, 30 May 2013, 13.

⁹⁶ Katharine Brisbane, "European Influences," in *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, ed. Philip Parsons, with Victoria Chance (Sydney: Currency Press, 1995), 213. Brisbane notes that "local adaptations were as common in Australia as in Europe at that time, when copyright in a work lay with the publisher, not the author."

became *The Poor of New York*, *The Poor of Liverpool*, and *The Streets of Melbourne*, among other titles that localized texts. Charles Nagel's musical burletta *The Mock Catalani in Little Puddleton* that opened in 1842 attracted accusations of plagiarism in light of similarities to Adolf Bauerle's *Die Falsche Catalani in Krahwinkel*. In 1847, Jacob Montefiore conceded that his play, *John of Austria*, had been adapted from Casimir Delavigne's drama. A century later, the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust (AETT), charged first with creating a "native drama, opera and ballet" and second to "provide examples of excellence and set standards of comparison,"⁹⁷ toured its first work, a production of Euripides' *Medea* with a cast of Australian performers that launched the short-lived "classics-based enterprise," the Australian Drama Company.⁹⁸ From the outset of an official subsidy for the performing arts in 1954, the question of models of representation emerged in relation to the development of local drama. The AETT's examples of excellence were not simply a point of comparison, but offered prototypes and standards of performance for adaptation.

The focus in Australia has hinged on analysis of the stage as a representational tool—that is, as a coordinate of national expression. In this context, adaptation has emerged as a contentious topic of debate in so far as it centers on discursive, narrative engagement and the question of ownership over the tools of representation at the expense of consideration of the medium as an *apparatus* that has the political potential to communicate the ways in which the spectator processes medial information.

In light of the AETT's dual foundational aims, it is perhaps ironic that recent debate has centered on the trust's successor, the federal government's arts funding and advisory body, the Australia Council for the Arts, and specifically its definition of "Australian work." The council recognizes Stone and Ryan's *The Wild Duck* and Hayloft's *Thyestes* as "new texts" on the basis of the employment of local artists and an "Australian sensibility."⁹⁹ Australian playwright Stephen Sewell has raised the question of authorship in this context. According to him, directors of adaptations that claim authorship are "idiots" on the basis that they are declaring that they are writers (often only having changed a few words).¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, Sewell refutes the notion that classic plays, staged locally as an adaptation, "are magically transformed into Australian work."¹⁰¹ He implicitly critiques the council's acceptance of what Neill calls "reworked foreign plays" as Australian. While it is not the intention of this essay to dismiss the question of the protection of moral rights, debate has been limited to issues concerning copyright and the idea that "in a culture of literary property, originality becomes a primary value in art."¹⁰² Significantly, these debates tend to neglect theatre's history as a media technology.

⁹⁷H. C. Coombs, "The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust," *Meanjin* 13, no. 2 (1954): 283. The AETT, established as a nonprofit company, was set up to subsidize the performing arts in Australia. It played a significant role in the development of performing arts companies in opera, drama, music, and ballet in Australia and facilitated the founding of the National Institute for Dramatic Art.

⁹⁸Geoffrey Milne, *Theatre Australia (Un)Limited: Australian Theatre since the 1950s* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 101.

⁹⁹Qtd. in Neill, "Hooked on Classics," 5.

¹⁰⁰Qtd. in Neill, "The Elusive Stage," 5.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Laura Rosenthal, qtd. in Fischlin and Fortier, eds., *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, 4.

Contrary to the discussion of theatre as a medial construction, the practice of textual adaptation has remained central to the question of “cultural selfhood,” oriented from the earliest days of the AETT to the notion that theatre represents a fundamental objective for “a people aspiring to full nationhood.”¹⁰³ Theatre director Wal Cherry, for example, perpetuated this notion in his 1966 call for the development of an “Australian style” in productions of European drama. Cherry advocated that “[w]e must do the plays of Molière quite differently to the French. We have to do them like Australians, which might be a completely erroneous view of Molière.”¹⁰⁴ Cherry at once acknowledged and dismissed the concept of authoritative expressions of the French playwright’s work, and aligned the practice of adaptation to the question of the cultural production of the nation. In contrast, the late 1960s and early ’70s, often referred to as the “New Wave,” constituted for many a golden age of Australian playwriting that hinged on narrative discourses defined by “Australianness” as key to theatre form.¹⁰⁵ By the 1980s, protectionist rhetoric characterized the theatre landscape, as financial limitations impacted the industry and the question of the number of Australian plays in repertoire emerged as an issue for the sector.¹⁰⁶ A little over a decade later, responses to the then-Melbourne-based Barrie Kosky and his production of *Faust* arguably set the tone for future debates of the practice of adaptation in Australia. Critic Helen Thomson objected to “Kosky’s signature” and described the production as an assault on “any notions of appropriate theatrical form,” given that “Goethe’s voice struggle[d] to be heard.”¹⁰⁷

Kosky, the most notable, if not chief proponent of *Regietheater* (director’s theatre) in Australia is a major compass point in discussions of adaptation in a local context and a principal influence on the new generation of directors, such as Stone.¹⁰⁸ “One of my big things is the notion of ownership,” states the now-Berlin-based director.¹⁰⁹ In recognition of the significance of Shakespeare on the Australian stage,¹¹⁰ Kosky argues that “everyone owns it [Shakespeare’s work]. And it is what you do with it and why you do it that is the important thing.”¹¹¹ From the 1970s to the turn of the millennium, productions of Shakespeare in Australia tended to be characterized by a “defiant inflection of local concerns and local frames of reference,” according to Kate Flaherty.¹¹² These concerns are now identified as constricting and insular, as main-stage theatre

¹⁰³ E. M. Tildesley, “The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust,” *Australian Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (1955): 55.

¹⁰⁴ Qtd. in Garde, *Brecht & Co.*, 22.

¹⁰⁵ John McCallum, *Belonging: Australian Playwriting in the 20th Century* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2009), 140–41.

¹⁰⁶ See Garde, *Brecht & Co.*, 218–21, for a discussion of the relation of funding to approaches to staging plays—specifically, Brecht’s *Mother Courage*—during this period. Garde notes in this context that Australian playwright Jack Hibberd commented that the “European tradition” should be a “low priority” in such a stringent funding climate. In addition, see Milne, *Theatre Australia (Un)Limited*, 393–95, for a discussion of the number of Australian plays in repertoire as a marker of Australian theatre.

¹⁰⁷ Qtd. in Garde, *Brecht & Co.*, 335.

¹⁰⁸ Laura Ginters, “Glimpsing the Hidden World: Australian Directors on Rehearsal,” in *Catching Australian Theatre in the 2000s*, ed. Richard Fotheringham and James Smith (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), 74.

¹⁰⁹ Qtd. in Garde, *Brecht & Co.*, 20.

¹¹⁰ Shakespeare has consistently been one of Australia’s most produced playwrights, and by 1983, David Williamson had emerged as the second most-produced playwright in Australia. See Milne, *Theatre Australia (Un)Limited*, 394.

¹¹¹ Qtd. in Garde, *Brecht & Co.*, 20.

¹¹² Kate Flaherty, “Monument Shakespeare and the World Stage: Reading Australian Shakespeare after 2000,” in *Catching Australia Theatre in the 2000s*, 174.

aligns specific practices of adaptation to the internationalist concerns that Cate Blanchett, former co-director of the Sydney Theatre Company, argues will ensure that Australia occupies a more substantial presence on the international stage.¹¹³ In an address to the Australian Performing Arts Market, Blanchett commented on the significance of resisting stereotypical representations of Australia and the capacity to tour work as intrinsic to attaining international recognition.¹¹⁴ This renewed discussion of adaptation in terms of what Flaherty identifies as the “world-stage paradigm”¹¹⁵ tends to neglect, however, the long aesthetic tradition of adapting Brecht; that is, the German artist’s methodologies, as opposed to the question of text. In this respect, Hayloft’s *Thyestes* exemplifies Garde’s conclusion that Brecht’s practices have been so thoroughly integrated that his impact remains largely imperceptible.¹¹⁶

This situation is complicated by Thomas Ostermeier, the resident director of the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz in Berlin and currently a major influence on the Australian stage.¹¹⁷ Peter Craven even refers to “Antipodean imitators” of Ostermeier.¹¹⁸ Ostermeier has presented his acclaimed adaptations at Australian festivals: Henrik Ibsen’s *Nora* at the Adelaide Festival in 2006; *Hedda Gabler* and *An Enemy of the People* at the Melbourne Festival in 2011 and 2012 respectively; and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* at the Sydney Festival in 2010. Perhaps less recognized locally is Ostermeier’s relationship to Brecht. According to Boenisch, Ostermeier, mentored as a director by Manfred Karge, a pupil of Brecht, “rewrote Brecht’s political visions”¹¹⁹ at the Baracke, the venue he established with designer Jan Pappelbaum as an offshoot of the Deutsche Theater. In discussing Ostermeier’s grounding in Brechtian methodologies, as well as Meyerhold’s biomechanical approach to performance, Boenisch notes that the German director’s historical circumstance, and more precisely media-saturated globalization, demands an approach beyond the *Verfremdungseffekt* to contest habits of spectatorship.¹²⁰ Hayloft’s *Thyestes* is similarly indebted to the Brechtian project in the sense that it renders the apparatus of communication tangible, but it differs from Ostermeier’s theatre in so far as it heightens the experience of a double reality rather than reinvests in realism.¹²¹

The discussion of Brecht and Ostermeier is not to overlook the broader history of *Regiethater* in Germany that has arguably influenced recent theatre in Australia. John McCallum, for example, regards the current generation of auteur directors as respon-

¹¹³ Qtd. in *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Qtd. in *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* (emphasis in original).

¹¹⁶ Garde, *Brecht & Co.*, 365.

¹¹⁷ John McCallum, “Classics in New Forms in All Their Old Glory at Sydney Festival,” *Australian*, 1 February 2010, available at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/classics-in-new-forms-and-all-their-old-glory-at-sydney-festival/story-e6frg8n6-1225825210002>.

¹¹⁸ Peter Craven, “The German Production of *An Enemy of the People* at the Melbourne Festival Was a Paint-Splattered Triumph,” *Spectator*, 3 November 2012, available at <http://www.spectator.co.uk/australia/australia-features/8747111/alone-against-the-mob/>.

¹¹⁹ Peter M. Boenisch, “Thomas Ostermeier: Mission Neo(n)realism and a Theatre of Actors and Authors,” ed. Maria M. Delgado and Dan Rebellato, *Contemporary European Theatre Directors* (London: Routledge, 2010), 340.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 345.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* Boenisch reads Ostermeier’s theatre as “reinvested realism” on the basis that the German director returned to the model of individual characters and narratives as a political rather than aesthetic act in light of a cultural context that appeared to defy orientation and coherent narration.

sible for the most provocative productions in Australia, and the productions of Kosky and Benedict Andrews as “a shift away from a play-based definition of work.”¹²² This shift continues to inspire polemical responses concerning the origins and authorship of text. Williamson contends that classic plays fail to replicate the “immediacy of a contemporary play.”¹²³ For Australian playwright Andrew Bovell, who has adapted novels for film and the stage, including Grenville’s *The Secret River*, the practice of adapting the canon by specific Australian theatre directors constitutes a poor substitute for new writing for the stage and essentially is a parasitic approach.¹²⁴ Stone has dismissed these claims by consciously referring to his practice as “stealing” or “corrupting” on the basis that he has “no interest in honouring a set of ideas . . . that belong to the past of an audience.”¹²⁵ Furthermore, he has qualified this position by acknowledging the practical imperatives of theatre-making by referring to the significantly longer period of time required to mount a new Australian play.¹²⁶ Myers, on the other hand, has sought to justify adaptation by emphasizing the medium, as opposed to drama, and ultimately interprets Neill’s argument as indicative of a generational clash, as opposed to a conflict pitting playwrights against directors locally.¹²⁷

At the center of this debate is a significantly older tension based on theoretical conceptualizations of the medium as a transparent conduit of text and hermetically sealed aesthetic realm. For Neill, adaptation signifies a shift from “literary, writer-centred culture”¹²⁸ and stands in opposition to the production of local and *original* narratives intrinsic to the expression of cultural selfhood. In comprehending scenic representation as subordinate to literature, Neill perpetuates a long tradition of reading adaptation *and* theatre as a secondary art. Benjamin’s explication of citability, however, enables the conceptualization of adaptation as a formative interruption rather than merely a derivative process of reinterpretation and recreation. If theatre, then, is thought of as a *hypermedium* or, in the case of *Thyestes*, a *hyper-medium*, adaptation is an integral structural, compositional element of an art form that from its inception has re-mediated other media. Neill is correct in pointing to the notion that “there are adaptations and adaptations” on the basis that the intermedial impact that Boenisch identifies depends on performances that trigger this effect in the perception of the spectator. In Hayloft’s *Thyestes*, reflexive dramaturgies redirect attention to a set of techniques (and theories)—indebted to the Brechtian project—that in producing astonishment, challenge expected traditions of aesthetic lineage and redefine adaptation as the experience of theatre as a *hyper-medium* in the context of main-stage practice in Australia.

¹²² McCallum, *Belonging*, 377–78.

¹²³ Qtd. in Neill, “Hooked on Classics,” 5.

¹²⁴ See *ibid.*

¹²⁵ Qtd. in *ibid.*

¹²⁶ Simon Stone interviewed by Richard Aedy, ABC Radio National, “Sunday Profile,” 19 January 2014, available at <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/sundayprofile/simon-stone/5158650>.

¹²⁷ Myers, “Theatre Debate,” 13.

¹²⁸ Neill, “Tepid Stage for Local Writers,” 22.