Exploring the tension between Coleridge's Poetic Faith and Disbelief in the Metatheatrical strategies used in a Mask, a Key and a Pair of Broken Wings.

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Abstract

This explication is focused on the metatheatrical strategies employed in my thesis production: *a Mask, a Key and a Pair of Broken Wings*, a triptych of three short plays. The paper pursues a deeper understanding of the nature of an audience’s engagement with onstage narratives.

The production explores existential dilemmas through stories about runaways and escapees. Jean Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (first published 1943) can be construed as a map of the territories that the stories explore. I also employ a Sartrean style of argument in the unpacking of the strategies applied in the production’s staging. A cornerstone of both the narrative and academic inquiry is Sartre’s notion of ‘bad faith’ and the construction of self through it. In order to fully explore the constructedness of self, the production is done in a metatheatrical form. Metatheatre was coined by Lionel Abel to describe plays that consciously drew attention to their own construction. It is an appropriate form to expose the layers of relationships between the real and the performed.

In order to better understand the nature of audience engagement the paper considers two relatively unused sources of dramatic theory, Coleridge and Tolkien. Coleridge’s writings in *Bibliographia Literaria* (first published 1817) on disbelief and poetic faith are used to discuss the receptivity of an audience, while Tolkien’s concept of the division between the primary and secondary worlds allows the discussion of what the audience perceives. The key distinction between disbelief and poetic faith is the distinction between intellectual objection and emotional ascent to a secondary world.

By discussing the tactics of Metatheatre to be used in *a Mask, a Key and a Pair of Broken Wings*, the benefits and pitfalls of each strategy is revealed. My argument describes the possible effects of these on an audience’s consciousness as the results of variations in the relative strengths of their intellectual and emotional perceptions. Metatheatre is a rupture of the secondary world, the object of the audience’s poetic faith. Metatheatre can be a powerful tool in the theatremaker’s arsenal only by understanding how poetic faith and disbelief function in tension and in harmony with one another.
**Introduction**

Art is the expression of the way we see the world, so this is the explanation of the expression of my view of life. In clearer terms, it is the explication of ideas leading to the realisation of my thesis production, *a Mask, a Key and a Pair of Broken Wings*, a triptych of three stories about identity and escape. It is a journey through landscapes of the past, museums, basements and junkyards and through mindscapes of choice and selfhood. This journey is in the moments between here and there, between the choice and the decision. My work explores a moment of reconfiguration both for the characters on stage and for the audience. All art involves shifts in the state of the consciousness that perceives it, otherwise it gets no reaction. The goal of art is to influence the consciousness of the audience, commonly to create receptive states of mind, but also possibly to force a confrontation by antagonising the witnesses. The complexity of the mind is rich with shifting states of perception and receptivity, which I describe using a vocabulary drawn from several theorists. The goal of my art is to explore the transitions between states as moments when old codes are broken and new sets emerge. In these moments the audience is within a liminal territory, which "...may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but is in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise."\(^1\)

My priority as a writer and as a director is to seek out the liminal moments between the breaking of codes and their reconfiguration, both in terms of theatrical and narrative reality. For this I have turned to stories of characters searching for literal escape in a stage world where their reality is cut through by elements of the fantastic and the metadramatic.

In order to understand the nature of an audience and performer’s conscious state during a production this essay makes use of specific terminology taken from Coleridge, Tolkien, Abel and Sartre. The first task of this paper is to build a consistent platform from which the nature of audience perception can be examined. This will be where I will explore Sartre’s structure of the self and his style of argument and Coleridge’s ideas of a

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suspension of disbelief and of poetic faith. The second task is to understand what it is that the audience perceives, here Tolkien's structural ideas and Abel's theories on metatheatrical devices will be examined. Briefly put, I will explore through existential analysis (Sartre) various metatheatrical strategies (Abel) of manipulating audience engagement (Coleridge) with the onstage world (Tolkien). Metatheatrical strategies will be explored across three areas: the narratives of the plays, the performances and the staging.
Sartre's Existentialism

Existentialism forms a foundation of my inquiry into both the academic and practical aspects of metatheatrical strategies and also into the goals of the narrative. From my earliest readings of Sartre, his theories of existence have shaken me as a human being and as a writer and continue to be a source of inspiration and veracity. His book, Being and Nothingness\(^1\) is a map of the territories my work explores.

Jean-Paul Sartre published Being and Nothingness in 1943 in German occupied France\(^2\). Within its pages Sartre discussed what it meant to be conscious in the world. He avoided questions of metaphysical meaning beyond our experience and indicated that the questions of ethics that Existentialism could potentially address would be dealt with in later works. He focused solely on what an individual might discover about existence through inquiry into his own experience in the world. His theories built on Husserl's phenomenology to produce a systematic approach to examining consciousness in the world. He did so by positing a gap between the consciousness and that which it observed, including, revolutionarily, itself\(^3\). This enabled the philosophical exploration of new perspectives on the nature of the self.

In the introduction to the 2003 edition, Warnock discusses Sartre's style of argument in Being and Nothingness as a unique feature of Existentialism\(^4\). This technique is as important as the content of his arguments to the coming discussion of metatheatrical strategy. Warnock outlines Sartre's argument for the existence of a mode of being that may be called being-for-others\(^5\). Sartre founds this on the deconstruction of the emotions and state of mind of an eavesdropper to demonstrate shame as a proof of our being-for-others. Warnock concludes, "... we are not asked to agree to a proposition but to experience, in imagination, a familiar emotion. And while we are under the impact of it,


\(^2\) First published as L' Etre et le néant by Editions Gallimard, Paris (1943)


\(^5\) Found in chapter 1 of part 3 of Being and Nothingness.
we are asked whether we do not therefore necessarily believe that other people exist, and that they determine our own mode of existence.\textsuperscript{1}

Existentialism is founded on the principle of arguing from experience. Only if one can agree with the feelings evoked in the example can the argument stand. Existentialism can never be an empirical philosophy; the very nature of its engagement is founded on agreement on matters of subjectivity. This is why it provides an answer where demands for empirical evidence may knock down other arguments, if we can agree to the feeling we can proceed with the intellectual debate.

The title \textit{Being and Nothingness} is taken from Sartre’s hypothesis of the nature of our human consciousness’s relation to existence. He defines the two concepts, “Being is. Being is \textit{in-itself}. Being is what is” while nothingness is “the void that encounters being, the \textit{in-itself}. This void is the \textit{for-itself}, which is defined by its encounter with being.”\textsuperscript{2} Nothingness is thus a relation to being. And the consciousness, as that which encounters being and is defined by its encounter, is without being, it is the void. But this brief statement does not do justice to Sartre’s full definition of the self.

We can see that Sartre’s ontology is concerned with the encounter, the definition of the void. This encounter manifests the central problem of defining the self, one is not what one is, but one is not what one is not. “Self-consciousness brings with it a presence to self. At one and the same time we acknowledge our identity and perceive a distance from it.”\textsuperscript{3} This leads Sartre to posit two poles of absolute value between which moves the existence of the self and labeled these Facticity and Transcendence. Facticity – that which is. Transcendence – that which is not and so called because it is this trait that empowers human consciousness. Christine Daigle defines Sartre’s meaning as “the \textit{for-itself} is entirely free to become through its actions. It can freely break from its past or even from social or historical conditioning and affirm itself through its actions.”\textsuperscript{4}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{2} Sartre, Jean Paul. (Trans: Warnock, M.) \textit{Being and Nothingness: an Essay on Phenomenological Ontology} London, Methuen (1969)
\item \textsuperscript{4} Daigle, Christine \textit{Sartre's Being & Nothingness: The Bible of Existentialism?} in \textit{Philosophy Now Issue 53}, p14-17, 4p, 1 Nov/Dec (2005)
\end{itemize}
There can be no freedom and thus no meaning in our actions unless we are able to transcend our being, and yet there can be no meaning with out being. “Because I can break with my past, I am entirely responsible for it.”¹

Sartre also conceptualises our encounter with the ‘Other’, another consciousness – a subjectivity to which we are object. The mere existence of the Other causes internal reflection, our consciousness is able to conceive of itself as object. As object, we are a being. But we are not an object. Thus in the apprehension of the Other we can be captured in our facticity which we defy by our transcendence.

The equal dignity of being possessed by my being-for-others and by my being-for-myself permits a perpetually disintegrating synthesis and a perpetual game of escape from the for-itself to the for-others, and from the for-others to the for-itself.

Jean Paul Sartre²

Sartre is especially concerned with freedom and responsibility, to be transcendent is to be free, but facticity is responsibility. Our being, as opposed to our nonbeing, can be found in the apprehension of the Other. All that the other knows of our self is derived from our actions; therefore our actions are our being. Sartre asks the question, what is freedom if actions, the being produced, are not the responsibility of the self? Thus an approach to ethics becomes about claiming inward responsibility for all actions and acknowledging this truth to oneself.

Sartre defines the shirking of this responsibility as hiding one’s freedom from oneself and terms it, ‘bad faith’.

Sartre identifies 3 patterns of bad faith which the human condition is prone to finding itself in. It is from these that I have drawn the overarching themes of each of the plays in my production.

The first pattern of bad faith is what Sartre calls “the metastable concept of transcendence-facticity,”¹ a hanging between possibility (transcendence) and past

² Ibid.
(facticity). This consists of deferring the moment of decision. When a person is confronted with choice, he postpones the moment of decision thereby avoiding the responsibility corresponding to his choice.2

The second pattern is either arresting oneself in facticity or denying one's facticity in the face of transcendence. To illustrate these concepts, Denchu gives the example of a 30 year old imagining himself to still be the same person he was in high school. This is sharply contrasted with the example of the criminal denying responsibility for his past actions because he claims that he can change and is therefore not the man he was when he committed the crime.3

The third and final pattern of bad faith is one of viewing one's self as Other by permanently assuming one's role, thereby transforming oneself to the mode of being-in-itself.4 Using masks as a metaphor, it is the denial that there is a face behind the mask.

Each story within A Mask, a Key and a Pair of Broken Wings focuses on a different pattern of bad faith and combines it with a different strategy of escape. The characters are all trying to overcome the responsibilities attendant to living, they escape into bad faith and they escape from bad faith. Because of this obsession with escape I have based the characters on a single archetype which I describe as the Runaway.

Joseph Campbell explains his theory of the Monomyth in Hero with a Thousand Faces.5 He identifies it as the inherent structure of mythology and storytelling, a narrative which divides into three broad phases, separation, initiation and return.6 The first phase is the shedding of the old self and the physical removal from the community. The second is the revelation and understanding of secret knowledge, which usually follows from or is gained through a trial. The third phase is the return to the community, enriching it with the learned information and joining it wholly new.

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3 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
The archetype of the Runaway is a rupture of this cycle. She has no intention of returning and has no intention of improving the society that she has left – in fact she resents it or fears it. The possible reasons for this are multiple but all are manifestations of a schism between the individual and the society. This schism is the result of the tectonic pressure of definition: the Runaway, for all the possible concrete reasons, has left so as to escape definition.

The Runaway can attempt her escape in a number of ways. She can change the outward markers of her identity, she can physically remove herself from the societal context or she can avoid contact with other members of her societal sphere. We may call these strategies: disguise, flight and concealment.

**Disguise**

The face is itself a mask of the social self. It is read and interpreted, a symbol of our identity and role in our society. The mask declares to all, “I am only this role”. It hides the wearer’s face, a complicated and variable symbol of our identity with a constant one. However, the mask’s effect is ambiguous because this concealment, as much as it may declare one role, inevitably draws attention to that which it keeps hidden. It declares: “I am not myself” but the witnesses hear also: “I am not who you believed me to be”.

In the first play of the triptych, Gerald and Flute, the character of Gerald for almost the entire play is masked as a caricature dinosaur. The mask is at first ambiguous, the audience are kept unsure as to whether this is Gerald’s true face according to the theatrical conventions at work or an actual disguise in the world of the play. The mask is alternately treated as reality and then undermined to create antinomic tension. The reality is that Gerald is not a dinosaur, just a boy in a dinosaur mask. The audience is at first inclined to believe that they should regard him as a magically animated dinosaur but come to see the mask’s second declaration, “I am not who you believe me to be” to be the truth. Gerald chose the role of dinosaur as an escape from a previous definition/identity but he must also escape this role and plunge into the liminal moment of freedom before re-emerging to a new identity.
Flight

The attempt to physically remove ourselves from the context in which we were previously defined is one of the most seductive tactics of redefinition. The fantasy of the journey is told in quasi-religious tones and not for nothing has the idea of travelling the world to find one’s self become so prevalent in Western culture as to be a cliché. In literature the narrative can be divided into 2 categories: those pilgrims who find their destination by the end of the story and those who find it at the beginning. The first is optimistic and the second invariably revolves around disillusionment.

The second play, Flight focuses on two friends, Gen and Aaron. They are running away from their homes, looking for freedom. The world of the play is a scrap yard they cross on their journey, where they find a nameless, winged boy who is busy building a pair of wings. The pair left home as pioneer refugees intent on beginning a new world. But their quest for freedom is doomed from the outset. They carry the impulse to name and define with them. The winged boy is at first nameless when they find him and this is unacceptable to Gen. She names him William, deciding that he seems to be a “William sort of person”. Later Gen rebukes him for not acting like a William. The name becomes an imposed role upon him, burdening him with expectations and limitations. The pair can never stop searching for their paradise because they can’t make any final decisions, being unable to accept responsibility for the outcomes.

Concealment

When attempting to conceal oneself one attempts to remain within the society while avoiding contact with it. This is a tactic used by the escapee who is trapped in dependency, whose relationship with the society is so interlocked as to be virtually inseparable.

The third play is Locked, in which two sisters, Lily and Eve, are hiding in a basement. Both of them are staying in order to protect the other, and both maintain the lie that they are trapped. They also keep from each other the secret exits that they have found. Eve believes that Lily is hiding from what she will become and Lily believes that Eve is hiding from her past. The element of fantasy within this story is that the trunks and cupboards become exits from their present reality. Finally Eve disappears within them. Although both characters have the ability to exit, each stays for the sake of the other. They cannot see each other past identities they have constructed over each other.
Coleridge’s Poetic Faith

When discussing audience perception of a performance, ‘suspension of disbelief’ is the most commonly used term. It is applied to any situation in which a witness of fiction (whether theatrical, filmic or literary in nature) engages with it on its own terms. I find its use problematic in two ways. Firstly because of the many misinterpretations it is symptomatic of, and secondly, because of its ascendancy over the term ‘poetic faith’ in common and even critical parlance. This reflects a loss in critical writing of a particular view of the state of being of an audience. In order to reclaim this it is necessary to explore the nuances in Coleridge’s words that contemporary scholars too often overlook. Only then can it be employed successfully for examination of an audience’s reaction to performance.

It was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

“A willing suspension of disbelief” is often read as being an action, sometimes an audience may even be told to ‘suspend their disbelief’. However this is a misreading of the phrase, albeit a common one. Carroll in *The Philosophy of Horror* reads the entire phrase as an action in order to challenge Coleridge. His argument attempts to refute a ‘suspension of disbelief’ by stating that our beliefs are not matters of choice. Regardless of whether or not this argument is true, Carroll has created the action himself. “[the willing suspension of disbelief] seems to entail that it is possible to will what one believes.” But this is a syntagmatic shift. If Coleridge had written: “willing a suspension of disbelief” then Carroll’s argument could be validated as based on a sound interpretation.

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3 Ibid.
As I have said, this reading of Coleridge is not unique to Carroll, Galgut perpetuates it in a Defense of the Suspension of Disbelief: “one wills oneself into suspending one’s beliefs that can be encapsulated by the phrase ‘it’s only fiction’”, implying active selection of beliefs by an act of will and perhaps the intellect.

Despite the prevalence of this interpretation, in Coleridge’s statement the action of the witness is not an act of will, a crucial distinction in understanding how an audience approaches fiction. To deconstruct the passage, Coleridge uses 3 actions: he would direct his work to persons and characters supernatural so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure that willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith.

Coleridge is saying that the work of creating the willing suspension of disbelief lies with the author. His work must transfer the necessary human truth from our inward nature in order that it might inspire a poetic faith. The audience must be persuaded by the recognition of universal humanity in the work, then they would be willing to let their faith in the work surpass their disbelief. Note that I say let their faith surpass their disbelief, not placing these two as poles of a single continuum, but as competing and separate values. This leads to the second hindrance to a complete understanding of Coleridge’s statement, the assumption that ‘disbelief’ and ‘faith’ are direct antonyms. In Politics, Performance and Coleridge’s “Suspension of Disbelief”, Michael Tomko destroys this assumption. By parsing the two key words, ‘disbelief’ and ‘faith’ across the great body of Coleridge’s work he uncovered Coleridge’s idiosyncratic, consistent use of the terms.

Faith and unbelief are thus opposed and categorised as belonging to the will. They differ in kind from belief and disbelief, which denote intellectual assent and dissent.

Michael Tomko

The faith procured by fiction is thus of the religious ilk. The witness wants to believe and this silences intellectual apprehensions. Galgut extends her ‘defense’ of

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3 Ibid.
Coleridge by arguing that suspension of disbelief “is not the same as endorsement of a proposition”\textsuperscript{1} missing the point of his ‘poetic faith’.

Contemporary Western thinking has faith at the zenith of a single spectrum whose nadir is disbelief. Coleridge and other Fideists saw two continuums, one thought, one felt. Belief and faith. It is my proposal that metatheatrical strategies can only be fully understood in light of the tension between our rational belief and our poetic faith. In the same way that Sartre argues from a felt response to a conclusion, so too can our feelings as audience reveal through reasonable argument the nature of our engagement with the performance.

But what does the audience have faith in? In order to determine the full structure of their engagement it is necessary to understand what it is that they engage with. It is Tolkien who can provide us with this needed understanding.

Tolkien and the Structure of Stage Reality

Tolkien, though primarily concerned with oral and literary storytelling traditions has much to add to the study of theatre. I will be using his concept of the ‘world of the fiction’ to better understand the operation of poetic faith.

Tolkien argued that a distinction could be made between the ‘Primary’ and ‘Secondary’ worlds. The primary world is the mundane world, the rational world, while the secondary world is the world created within a work of art (Tolkien as a religious man, preferred and coined the far humbler term ‘sub-creation’ where I have preferred simply ‘creation’). He states his division as a response to ‘suspension of disbelief’ which he found to be “a substitute for the genuine thing, a subterfuge we use when condescending to make-believe.”

What then constitutes a ‘Secondary’ world? Galgut states: “Authors are concerned that their novels appear as realistic as possible, precisely because they want to engage the reader...” which is a plausible statement if Galgut is referring to a human interest and a semblance of truth transferred from our inward nature, but she continues: “... – where this is not the case – in horror or science fiction stories for example – the author assumes that the reader will be sufficiently aware of the nature of the genre in order not to throw aside the work as ‘unrealistic’.” ‘Realistic’ for Galgut means being in accordance with the rules of our mundane world, not our inner world. But Tolkien, the founder of modern fantasy, was obviously not concerned with the mundane laws of physics.

For Tolkien “the storyteller, if he proves successful, makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords to the laws of that world.” This is far more in line with the reading of Coleridge we find through Tomko’s work. However, poetic faith is the emotional reaction to work and it is that which governs our intellectual assent or dissent, our belief or disbelief. Tolkien’s secondary world hypothesis is based on an inversion of this statement: that poetic faith can only exist once intellectual assent has been achieved. For Tolkien the key was the

1 Tolkien, J.R.R. *On Fairy-Stories* in Tree and Leaf Great Britain, George Allen & Unwin (1964)
3 Ibid.
4 Tolkien, J.R.R. *On Fairy-Stories* in Tree and Leaf Great Britain, George Allen & Unwin (1964)
created world’s integrity under the scrutiny of reason. Coleridge calls to a truth felt in the parts of the consciousness not governed by the intellect. Tolkien’s hypothesis can be made to accommodate both views; the integrity of the secondary world is dependant on both belief and faith. The audience cares about the action on stage as long as it has faith in the secondary world and is also intellectually convinced of its verisimilitude.

In Tolkien’s narrow conception there is no actual fantasy; there is the primary world and then there is the secondary world that has been created by the storyteller. The secondary world requires events and actions to be consistent to the ‘laws’ revealed by the story. A story that contained actions or events that violated its world’s internal logic was to Tolkien merely a badly told story.¹ The laws could be character behaviour, magic or alternative variations of physics, but they were laws and immutable.

Later science-fiction and fantasy theorists have developed the notions further, building various taxonomies of fantasy according to the interactions between the characters and the ‘worlds’ or sets of rules that they encounter. Tolkien’s definition has become the model for ‘High Fantasy’ – literature featuring a consistent reality which is different to the rules of the mundane.² The label, ‘High’ stems from early associations with the literature of the Romantic period as opposed to the fantasy horror of the 20th century pulp fiction press. These other stories garnered the term ‘Low Fantasy’ because of its perceived lack of both literary merit and craft.³ However, a formal definition would be that they do not present a world of consistent laws. Other, more recent, theorists have arranged things differently. Recently Farrah Mendelsohn has written a paper dividing fantasy works according to the nature of the ‘intrusion’ of one mode of reality into another, suggesting that each layer of fictional reality can constitute another world so that they overlap, a secondary world invaded by a tertiary world.⁴ This allows us to defy Tolkien’s assertion, instead of a single world of inconsistent laws we have the interaction between worlds on stage.

¹ Tolkien, J.R.R. *On Fairy-Stories* in *Tree and Leaf* Great Britain, George Allen & Unwin (1964)
² Attebery, B. *Strategies of Fantasy* Bloomington, Indiana University Press (1992)
³ Gardiner, Jeff. *Beyond Classification* on *Gates of Elysium*
Amaryll Chanady in Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy attempts to understand the fantastic elements found in works from the genre of Magical Realism according to the manner in which the laws of the world are inconsistent or ruptured.

Two distinct levels of reality are represented, a world we accept as an everyday world ruled by laws of reason and convention and a supernatural world, one that is inexplicable according to our logic and that appears to be a breach in the normal order of things.

- Amaryll Chanady

Chanady uses the idea of antinomic tension to indicate a tension between a Secondary and a Tertiary world.

Tolkien argues that Fantasy is irreconcilable with drama because that at best it is capable only of producing a tertiary world (Any layer beyond a secondary world was to Tolkien poor storytelling). Tolkien described it as a world within a world within in a world, each level stretching the audience’s credulity. He explains further: the first world is the primary world of the mundane consisting of an audience watching actors. The secondary world is the set of conventions the audience generally expects to have: that the actor is not himself but a character in the drama. The tertiary world is the one in which the laws of the reality on stage differ to the mundane laws of reality, where fantasy is introduced.

I do not share Tolkien’s opinion that the conventions attendant to being in a theatre constitute a world in themselves, rather I choose to consider them as a lens through which the audience is able to access and interpret the secondary world.

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2 Ibid.
3 Tolkien, J.R.R. On Fairy-Stories in Tree and Leaf Great Britain, George Allen & Unwin (1964)
Abel and Metatheatre

Having established both the terms and the focus of the audience's engagement, it falls to this section to explain how these can be shifted during a performance. Metatheatre is used by theatremakers as a means of playing with the layered worlds in productions. Lionel Abel coined the term in the title of his book *Metatheatre, a New View of Dramatic Form*¹ as a label to describe trends that he observed in theatre. He considered these to be evidence of an as-yet-unidentified structure but one that was constantly being rediscovered in theatre since Shakespeare's era. Abel defines it as the referencing of the medium within the play in order to bring to the audience's attention the construction of the performance.

Abel becomes problematic when we enquire into the specifics of the structure of the metaplay. Although he states that the structure exists, he does not pursue its definition. Instead Abel proceeds through the chapters by proving that specific works are metaplays through careful analysis of their content and characters. He outlines many features but avoids a definitive statement on structure.

Abel posits the source of Metatheatre as the birth of self-conscious characters. As the character becomes more sophisticated internally so then do we, the audience, feel the closeness of the stage around him. "A gain for consciousness means a loss for the reality of its objects, certainly for the reality of its main object, namely the world."² The constructed world of the fiction is insufficient to hold the self-conscious character, according to Abel he spills out in acts of self-reference and onstage dramaturgy.

However Abel also identifies Brecht as a user of Metadrama, yet Brecht's characters are representational which must constitute the antithesis of a self-conscious character. The solution to an apparent conflict within Abel's definition of Metatheatre is that Brecht's theatre reflects a philosophy of the constructed nature of society. Perhaps it is not the nature of the characters' consciousnesses that defines it, but the relationship of the character to their world. This may well be why the Absurdists Esslin identified in his book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*,³ make such widespread use of metadramatic forms, seeing

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¹ Abel, Lionel *Metatheatre, a New View of Dramatic Form* New York, Hill and Wang (1963)
² Ibid.
³ Esslin, Martin *The Theatre of the Absurd* New York, Doubleday (1961)
as they were philosophically associated with ideas from the Existentialist movement. Esslin even took his title from Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus.*

Both Esslin and Abel attempt a unifying theory on disparate dramatists, and there is some degree of overlap in their subjects, notably Samuel Beckett. Are they competing or complementary explanations of trends in theatre? As has been noted, Abel claims that a particular structure is inherent in Metatheatrical strategies are tools of the theatremaker to achieve this. They are means of influencing the tension between the audience’s intellectual belief and their poetic faith in the world of the play.

There are various genres of metafiction including metaliterature (such as *if on a winter’s night a traveller* by Italo Calvino) and metafilm (*The Purple Rose of Cairo* by Woody Allen), which have in common the rupture between a secondary and a tertiary world. Only in theatre is it truly possible to rupture the barrier between the secondary and the primary. Theatre offers the interpenetration of codes at the most visceral level. Metatheatrical strategies are tools of the theatremaker to achieve this. They are means of influencing the tension between the audience’s intellectual belief and their poetic faith in the world of the play.

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This fusion is the use of theatre to question the nature of the human experience of the world. The metatheatrical strategies are tools of the theatremaker to achieve this. They are means of influencing the tension between the audience’s intellectual belief and their poetic faith in the world of the play.

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2 Esslin, Martin *The Theatre of the Absurd* New York, Doubleday (1961)
Analysis of Metatheatrical strategies in *A Mask, a Key and a Pair of Broken Wings*

To speak of metatheatricality in a useful manner it must be possible to define it in more specific manner than simply listing existing productions that make use of it. One must be able to speak of specific strategies and their real and intended effects. For this sake it is better to work backward, to define what the Metadramatic effect is first and then to find the elements of a production that produce this. It can be defined as any deliberate action that brings attention to the constructed nature of the event. It is important to specify that they be deliberate, as many accidents can and do occur on stage – an actor may lose his lines, may drop a prop, technical equipment might fail or malfunction, the corpse might snigger, etc. Any of these bring to the forefront of the audience mind the construction of the production, breaking the poetic faith and stimulating the intellect. To fully investigate the state of the audience’s engagement, it is necessary to pursue an existentialist style inquiry into their apprehension of the world.

Key to the notion of bad faith is the distinction between putting oneself into it and lying. Sartre unwinds the problem as the opening of the chapter on bad faith. Basically, a lie is directed outward, to the Other, but in bad faith one lies to oneself, fracturing the unity of consciousness.¹ Sartre begins by using Freud’s division of the mind into the 3 constituents of the id, ego and super ego in order to explore the nature of self-deception. He finds this to be an artificial structure and ultimately not useful to the inquiry. He instead finds that the behaviors and beliefs of a person in bad faith continually point to a unitary consciousness aware of the truth it conceals and the falseness of what it believes. The three forms of bad faith that have been discussed are different tactics meant for different results – they each cover a different kind of truth or put forward a different kind of falsehood.

Sartre’s third form of bad faith is of particular significance to the craft of acting since it deals with immersing one’s self into a role. Sartre uses a waiter as an example of this, arguing that the statement ‘I am a waiter’ is a performance of a function and a loss of human transcendence. The waiter is in bad faith because he denies his transcendence

to reduce himself to a role. His subjectivity is reduced to his being-for-others.¹ The actor too reduces himself to an object – he is not himself onstage, his subjectivity is removed as he is for the audience.

The most obvious barrier to this comparison is that the actor is aware of his falsehood, he is lying to the audience, not to himself. But then the preservation of his subjectivity onstage would entail that he step back from his actions and view himself as Other, by doing so he declares, “I am not my actions.”

However this is complete anathema to the actor employing any of the systems derived from Stanislavski’s theories of acting. He would be in a process of breaking down his self-awareness (or building up the psychic blocks against it?) and submerging his self in the character. At the start of a rehearsal process the actor should be fully for-his-self within himself. His encounters with the text and its context prompt him to find new actions, to make choices. But each choice made is the ability to choose destroyed, as Anne Bogart points out in her observations of Robert Wilson’s rehearsal process.²

But to make these choices continuously come alive for himself and for the audience the actor must make them again and again. Really make them, and yet know that there is no choice. A unitary consciousness aware of the truth it conceals and the falseness of what it believes. There is no room in this for the actor to create a critical distance from his performance.

The audience is aware both of the actor and of the character – intellectually of the primary and in a state of poetic faith in the secondary. To focus on the audience as an individual and using the feminine pronoun to distinguish the audience member from the actor – she is engaged in the same activity as the actor, creating a new subjectivity where her intellect sees an object, creating a consciousness united with its action. As with the actor, critical distance forces the view of the character to evaporate into actions and repetitions – even robbing the actor of his part in the construction of the performance by pointing to directing, style and the text as phenomena separate to the character.

From this analysis it can be seen that theatrical productions always walk a narrow path, hedged on one side by deliberate metatheatrical choices and on the other by errors

² Bogart, A. a Director Prepares: seven essays on art and theatre London, Routledge (2001)
and misjudgments that draw the audience's mind to the construction of the performance. The accident is a loss of faith in the secondary world and may prove permanent, but the deliberate choice is pitched to achieve specific ends. Metatheatre is not the loss of faith in the secondary world, but an attempt to influence the balance between belief and faith. In the following explanation the metatheatrical strategies used in my thesis production, a Mask, a Key and a Pair of Broken Wings, I will outline their intended effects on the belief and faith of the audience.

**Conventions**

An audience for a performance rarely arrives without expectations, they are loaded with their preconceptions of what they as individuals prefer to watch, and what they think theatre is. Most of these are in fact beneficial to the theatremaker, though some practitioners complain bitterly of it. The audience can be relied on to expect and dismiss what past experience has shown to be convention because pre-knowledge lowers intellectual engagement and points to the bounds of the secondary world in which they will have faith. Any encounter with the new will rouse belief. The first play of the triptych is *Gerald and Flute*. The character of Gerald for almost the entire play is masked as a caricatured dinosaur. Convention holds that a mask onstage is the true face of the character and this is reinforced by the other characters treating Gerald as a dinosaur. And so the removal of the mask would be a moment when the audience had to rethink their assumptions. Gerald, wearing the mask, is not a dinosaur but a boy in a dinosaur mask. The mask slides between being the reality and being itself. This rethinking on the audience's part is an engagement of the intellect with the construction of identity. The theme of the play is growing up, leaving behind the roles of childhood and establishing a social persona. However the characters Gerald and Flute are living in the past – literally, the Natural History Museum – creating a Never-never Land for themselves with their games punctuated by the passing of the night Security Guard. Gerald is being forced through the cycle of the 'monomyth' as described by Campbell. From an audience point of view, the removal of the mask is a significant moment in the play because of their faith in the secondary world and it resonates through their intellect to the primary world.

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Richard Foreman takes playing with conventions past the point of violation. In his work he looks for ways to confront his audience. He tries to create effects that they have no way of dealing with and which they have encountered in theatre before. Instead of being narratively confrontational he attempts to be inaccessible to an audience, presenting them with a situation that they can either walk away from or else rearrange their perception of. He speaks of the number of people who chose the former as being a “disheartening achievement”. Foreman removes the possibility of faith from an audience, but his goal is not only intellectual engagement but a state of being for the audience beyond either.

Breaking the Fourth Wall

The most obvious and most famous group of metatheatrical strategies is the break from the secondary world into the primary one. There are two categories into which these can be divided: physical and referential. In the physical the performers move between the ‘performance space’ and the ‘audience space’. The bounds of where the stage ends and the world begins is largely dependent on the audience’s own conventions. However in most situations the audience has its own space from which it views the play. In a proscenium arch theatre this divide between the performance and the audience is the clearest. Breaking the fourth wall physically is most often characterized by the actor invading the audience. In Gerald and Flute, Flute hides from the Security Guard among the audience, posing as one of them. Later she says to Gerald that she hid “in the anthropology section”. The performer can physically break the fourth wall in other ways too. Any direct interaction with the primary world qualifies, whether the actor adjusts the lights or ‘performs’ a sound check.

Abel uses many examples of the second category in his discussions of metaplays. The referential tactics include the ‘play-within-a-play’ and in fact any dialogue that discusses or mentions performance. Both categories are often employed to provide comedy, and indeed some plays are written solely around these strategies, such as Tom Stoppard’s the Real Inspector Hound and Michael Frayn’s Noises Off.

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1 Foreman, Richard (interviewed by Jordan, Ken) Film is Evil, Radio is Good: an Interview with Richard Foreman on Ontological-Hysteric Home Site (1990)
2 First performed 1968
3 First performed 1982
**Alienation in Acting**

Brecht’s alienation technique is metatheatrical in that it blocks the poetic faith. The Brechtian actor does not attempt to create an inner subjectivity, Brecht’s alienation maintains the audience in the primary world and in a state of intellectual ascendance over faith.

My work does not attempt to be Brechtian in any sense though. In an attempt to deepen the connection of actor to text and hence to the subjectivity of the character, there is a notable lack of stage directions in the playscripts. In place of descriptions of actions non-essential to the plot there are gaps so that the pages lie mostly blank. The layout also gives a visual sense of pattern and rhythm to the words. This section comes from Locked:

Eve: Oh... nothing.

I couldn’t sleep. Maybe you could, you know, tell me a story?

Lily: A story?
Eve: A story.
Lily: Oh. Okay. Well, once upon a time there was a GO TO SLEEP!

Eve: Good night Lily.
Lily: Okay. New rule: No talking when I’m sleeping.
Eve: ...
L: Uh!
Eve: ...

Lily: Right. Good night Eve.

Eve: ...
Lily: ...

They lie back and Lily goes to sleep. Eve lies awake.
Actors are later to add their notes on blocking and action once these have been found during the rehearsal process. This gives the actors a sense of ownership and discovery, opening them to the characters. A play as text has dialogue, not characters. These simple words must be brought to life by the actor working from within himself. This indefinable essence that is character lies not in the actor, but not in the text either, the two are inseparable. But I see the actor as the prime material of the character, not the words or the actions described. The minimization of stage directions forces the actor to project action from the first reading, and in doing so become party to the creation of new meaning in the words.

Rupturing the laws of the secondary world

A rupture in a code of ‘reality’ constitutes a moment of metatheatricality. As has been discussed earlier, worlds are formed by consistent codes that govern the possible events therein. It is therefore a moment when the audience is put in the position of re-evaluating the onstage world. They must re-examine the moment in the context of its theatricality. This is also the area in which most accidental ruptures occur because of poor writing. Handled with subtlety the audience is made aware of the existence of a pattern (whether of behaviour or of the workings of the secondary world) by a break in that pattern. In B.J. Mann’s essay Character Behaviour and the Fantastic in Sam Shepard’s Buried Child,¹ he outlines how Shepard’s characters seem to be in a state of plausible and realistic behaviour “but time and again, they stop being even remotely predictable and either do something inexplicable or say something disturbing or irrelevant”.² This creates a tension within the ‘real’ codes of the secondary world.

In the second play, Locked, the younger sister Eve escapes by disappearing into the traveling trunks stored with them. Until this point in the story no indication has been given of this possibility. The rupture is intended to evoke in the audience questions of the motivation behind the escape they have just witnessed, an inquiry of the intellect and faith.

² Ibid.
Violence and the Body onstage

The depiction of violence also causes a rift between the primary and secondary worlds. Violence is the violation of the For-itself, forcefully subjugated and transformed into In-itself. Simone Weil simplifies it by stating that violence turns "anyone subjected to it into a thing".¹ Sartre's personal preoccupation with oppression as an act against the individual leads one to the thought that it is objectification that he fears. This action is transported into our own consciousness by empathy. We wince at hearing the crack of a bone from a fall or when we see a razor blade slice into skin because it brings to us the facticity of our own body, and our own material vulnerability is made suddenly clear to us.

We believe in the facticity of the actor's body, we have faith in the spirit of the character. The masterful performance of physical characterisation lends credence to our faith in the body as character because we do not recognise the performer. Take for instance the question of nudity. Like violence, it brings our attention to the fact of the body and from there away from the character and toward to the mind of the performer. The audience is brought back to the primary world and their faith is disturbed. How great and permanent this effect is, is very much dependent on the opinions of the individual audience members. "Brave", "beautiful" or "gratuitous" are not thoughts about the character but they can be co-opted by a carefully considered production to emphasise the character's situation. Both violence and nudity are the subjects of strong and varied opinions. Nudity is not so common onstage that it can be simply received with the same mind as any other production choice. They are both risky choices because their effects are unpredictable, which is not to say that they are not risks worth taking. The audience feel in a visceral manner the primary world before them, they feel it beyond the intellect and they are also aware of the character. For this reason violence and nudity are powerful in both the primary and the secondary worlds. The audience feels beyond the fact or the subject and are caught in the movement of their internal perception, the tension between the moment of the feeling and the recognition of the cause.

In the third play Flight, the winged boy William heals Aaron's injured hand simply by holding it between his.

Gen That’s incredible
Will Thanks
Gen Really incredible
Aaron It doesn’t hurt at all
Gen Really incredible
Will Thanks
Gen Do it again
Will What?
Gen Do it again, I want to see you do it again
Will But I can’t fix something unless it’s bro-

*Gen picks up a bottle and smashes it over Aaron’s head. Aaron is knocked down.*

Gen Do it again.

The question this proposes is of its effect on the audience. They begin in the secondary world then the codes are violated by the intrusion of William’s other worldly healing ability. The codes stabilise in the dialogue, the other characters’ sense of wonder reassuring the boundaries of the possible. Suddenly Gen brutally hits Aaron with a bottle, which shatters over the actor’s head. The audience reacts to the violence onstage by crossing between worlds. In the primary world there is the shock and concern for the safety of the actor, the sudden and visceral danger of the effect, then an intellectual engagement – what was the fakery involved – and finally admiration for the actor in the moment and commitment to the role. The audience must then return to the secondary world in which there is only the character and the laws of the onstage reality.

This conceptual violence is visited on the observer of the drama by their expectations of the actor as character and their engagement with the rules of theatrical conventions. A great deal of commercial theatre seeks to make the audience comfortable in a single level of belief – secondary belief. But theatre can push against the confines of this comfortable space and even rupture it to move the audience between different levels. The audience, in this flux must re-evaluate the action on stage – and in doing so question the nature of the character on stage.
Special Effects and Magic

This section accompanies the issues raised in the other subheadings on violence and on elements of the fantastic. It applies to any stage effect. Earlier Eve’s disappearance into a box in Locked was used as an example of the rupture of the rules of a world. The second aspect of that is the practicalities of her – or rather of the actress’s – disappearance. For stagecraft to be successful it must work both conventionally and technically. In Mark Fleishman’s 2007 revival of Voices Made Night\(^1\) an actor coughs up a crow that speaks prophecies. The event was created through the physical performances of the actors with no technical trickery or sleight of hand. It was successful because the audience had been brought into the conventions of the production.

However, conventions are not the bandage on poor technical effects. Invariably in theatre we can see how an effect is achieved: we can see ropes on the flying boys. This is both because such advanced special effects are prohibitive in their cost and technical exclusivity and because we don’t go to the theatre to see magic. A stage magician is a very different performer to an actor. We stay in the first world for the magician because that is where he insists we are, never for a moment opening a secondary world to us. I don’t claim magic is anything more than incredibly cunning technical skill and illusion; I use the word as a label for effects where ‘the rope is invisible’. The goal of theatre is not to fool an audience into believing the secondary world because it cannot see how an effect was achieved, but to inspire faith in it that surpasses the belief of the primary world.

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\(^1\) Mia Couto’s Voices Made Night adapted and directed by Mark Fleishman, referring to the 2007 revival.
Conclusion

In my use of metatheatrical strategies in the A Mask, a Key and a Pair of Broken Wings, the violation of codes shifts the audience’s perception and prompts a re-categorisation of the piece. Being neither one code of rules nor another, it sets up a liminal space that resists their attempts at definition. This is the tension of definition, and it is in the moment of violation of the established codes that the audience is forced to rethink their Secondary belief. To Tolkien this questioning was a failure of the artist. However, in my work it is used to make an audience receptive and empathetic to the moments between definitions by forcing them to change their own definitions.

I have explained my use of vocabulary drawn from four very different theorists to explain the nature of our feelings as an audience when we see a consciousness on stage. At the heart of the matter is our search for an inner truth. We expect and are prepared for fiction but we do expect adherence to certain principles, conventions.

Ultimately, our experience is weighted both with an intellectual and emotional engagement, with belief and with faith. The intellect seeks to understand the medium and in doing so, raises the themes of the piece into conscious consideration. This in turn opens the path of our emotions to help us look past the medium and make us receptive to the inner truth of what we witness.
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