

# Animal Labour in the Theatrical Economy

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*In this article Nicholas Ridout argues that the work of the animal in theatrical performance generates an affective response which has both cognitive and potential value. Using examples of the appearance of animals on stage in recent work by Societas Raffaello Sanzio and Jan Fabre, it suggests that when animals are coerced into the making of meaning in theatre, the unease which their appearance provokes is not so much the result of an encounter with the irreducibly 'other' as a recognition of familiarity, proximity and a history of exploitation. That animals can readily be seen to be exploited on stage allows the possibility of the exploitation of humans being seen as part of the same economy and this same history.*

## 1

Once upon a time, in the Winter of 2000, during a performance of Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* at the Comedy Theatre in London,<sup>1</sup> towards the end of Douglas Hodge's long account (as Aston) of his forced incarceration in a mental hospital and his treatment with electro-convulsive therapy, I thought I saw a mouse make an entrance from downstage left, crossing in a shallow diagonal and disappearing underneath the bed on which Hodge was seated. Upstage of Hodge, and more or less dead centre, sat Michael Gambon (as Davies), on another bed. After a short while in which I had time to run through various possibilities in my mind as to the exact nature of the phenomenon I had witnessed, the mouse reappeared, crossing in a far steeper diagonal from under Hodge's bed towards Gambon, who slid his right foot to one side to allow it past, and to disappear again beneath this second bed.

Quite apart from the additional excitement generated by the double entrance-exit routine executed by this non-human performer, one striking consequence of the stage mouse was the kind of conversation that sprang up around its appearance. The most thoroughly mined line of speculation was not just anthropomorphic but also economic and professional. An actor I spoke to in the bar during the second interval claimed that he and the mouse were both represented by the same agent. News of the production, that 'it may be going to New York' led to inevitable deliberate misunderstandings in which the mouse was assumed to be going, but Gambon not. The Equity status of the mouse was discussed. That the mouse could be conceived as possessing an agent and a role in the economy of the theatre dependent upon agencies of representation is not entirely whimsical or fortuitous.

## 2

We know whom we expect to see on stage. We expect to see actors. This needs saying: we do not even expect to see human beings, in all their diversity, but, as their representatives, a kind of group apart, more beautiful perhaps, more agile, more powerful and subtle of voice. Creatures who have been chosen on the basis of some initially desirable attributes, which they have subsequently honed and refined by means of professional training. So when we get something else, it appears as an anomaly, and a worrying one at that. The worries tend to be about exploitation. In the specific case of animals, there is an uneasy sense that the animal on stage, unless very firmly tethered to a human being who looks like he or she owns it, is there against its will, or if not its will, at least its best interests. The dog safely accompanied by a fictional owner (like Launce's Crab in Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*) is naturalized out of this exploitative scenario by its subsumption into the owner-pet dyad. Other animals, perhaps especially those that are not quite so close to the human hearth as the dog, or which have a history of participation in long-extirpated cruel and unusual entertainments (bear-baiting, cock-fighting) bring with them specific and uncomfortable associations. A particular version of this discomfort obtains in the circus, sometimes seen as an anachronistic survival from the bad old bear-baiting days, but objections to circus do not also involve the sense that the animals should not be there, at least not in the double sense that operates in the theatre. In the circus the animals should not be there simply because it's cruel to make them perform tricks for us, but they also should be there in the sense that they always have been, are part of the idea of circus. They are, after all, circus animals, and many of them may even have been born to it. In the theatre, by contrast, the animals are not part of the tradition, even if they may sometimes have performed nearby. There are no theatrical dynasties of animals. The theatre is all about humans coming face with other humans and either liking it or not liking it. The animal clearly has no place in such a communication. Thus when it does appear on stage, untethered from framings as a pet within the dramatic fiction, the animal seems doubly out of place. Not only should it not be there, because it cannot be in its own interests to be, but also it should not be there because this particular kind of being there when it should not is what we expect to find in the circus, whether we go there or not, and we certainly do not want the theatre contaminated by that kind of association. There is also a third sense in which it should not be there, closely related to these two: it should not be there because it does not know what to do there, is not capable of performing theatrically by engaging a human audience in experimental thinking about the conditions of their own humanity (assuming for the moment the animal in question is appearing in a relatively high-brow entertainment: the effect of an animal appearing in, say, *Cats*, might be another matter.) The impropriety of the animal on the theatre stage is experienced very precisely as a sense of the animal being in the wrong place. In the circus there are still a few tawdry reminders of nature. The space is wide and open. It is a tent with an opening to the sky. Beneath our feet is some temporary flooring that does little to hide the proximity of the actual ground, grass and earth. The circus moves on. The theatre, by contrast, rigorously excludes nature. It stays where it is, in the city. No natural light comes in. On stage, there is culture raised to

the power of two, as temporary floors and walls simulate the rooms of our own homes and other built spaces. Do not lean against the wall or the cultural equation collapses. Bringing an animal in here is courting disaster. We will have them in our homes, so long as they have been properly trained, but in the super-artifice of the theatre, we fear that even the best-trained creatures could run amok at any moment, and spoil everything, especially since we know (do we not?) that they would really rather be anywhere but here.

This last issue is presumably the source for the much-cited advice never to work with animals (or children), usually attributed to W. C. Fields. The question of children as theatrical performers is a topic in its own right, and awaits a full study. It therefore largely falls outside the scope of this essay. To some extent, however, children and animals raise similar problems for the theatre-going audience, suggesting that their appearance together in Fields's advice is more than coincidence. There are instances where the nature of the dramatic fiction allows the child actor to be assimilated like the fictional pet into the world of the professional actor, but where this assimilation is incomplete (which is often the case), there are side effects that are difficult to contain. The child actor starts to appear as precocious. Some training for child actors seems to have the effect of accentuating this, with too-perfect diction and too-sweet smiles. The precocious child is uncanny and (on stage at least) unpleasant, because of its knowing, or not-knowing-enough imitation of the imitations of its adult colleagues. They tend to appear as mini-adults, and some of our unease at their appearance seems to arise out of a sense that they are learning and displaying too much too young. In two entirely different registers, the issue of exploitation tends to arise. In the 1980s on British television there was a programme called *Mini-Pops*, in which young girls dressed like the female pop-stars of the day performed raunchy routines to well-known songs. Their dress, their make-up and the feeling that their engagement with their material involved a worryingly precocious sexuality led to public objections to the programme. At the far end of the entertainment spectrum, the appearance of six children in the Auschwitz section of Societas Raffaello Sanzio's *Genesi from the Museum of Sleep*<sup>2</sup> led some members of the British audience to protest that the children were being exploited by their use in a piece of theatre that addressed issues beyond their understanding. In general, with both animals and children, the concern over exploitation focuses on whether or not the animals and children know what they are doing, whether they are capable of giving properly informed consent to their own participation and whether their lives will be in any way damaged by their appearance on stage. No such concern is expressed over adult performers, except perhaps in the sex industry.

I would like to suggest that this anxiety over the exploitation of animals (and children) is both on the mark and wide of the mark, uncannily full of insight to which it is also blind. Labour and its divisions are clearly at stake, but rather more seriously than the routine liberal accusations of exploitation would credit. What these concerns actually illuminate rather valuably is the reality of theatrical employment itself, irrespective of the status or will of the employee, as a particularly acute form of exploitation, and that the non-human animal on stage has more in common with her more familiar human co-worker than we usually suppose. Is it too much to suggest that the key word in Fields's famous dictum is neither animals nor children, but work?

## 3

Michael McKinnie<sup>3</sup> has suggested that the liberal response to the apparent excess of exploitation in scenarios involving animals and children might usefully alert us to the usually hidden exploitation of adult human actors. McKinnie points out that the theatre is an economic sub sector in which work is highly alienated. Picking up on this perception one notes how the employee's time is regulated with rigorous force by bells and curtains, how both the rehearsal process and the nightly routine of performances are dominated by repetitive activity, how wage levels are set in structures of extreme differentiation, how these are maintained by a huge pool of surplus labour which renders effective industrial organization impossible, and how the core activity itself is both a metaphor of alienation and alienation itself: the actor is paid to appear in public speaking words written by someone else and executing physical movement which has at the very least usually been subjected to intense and critical scrutiny by a representative of the management who effectively enjoys the power of hiring and firing.

Yet what these hirelings are paid to produce, in the perspective stage and through the tools of psychological illusionism, is usually the fully rounded autonomous character, rich with the complex subjectivity that is the birthright of the bourgeoisie. And the technique by which they produce these figures of bourgeois subjective autonomy works with uncanny efficiency to hide the means of production: we see plays, not work, and the success of character-production is routinely attributed to the entirely free and spontaneous creativity of the autonomous (non-bourgeois, bohemian) artist, who, of course, either never did a day's work in his life or literally sweated blood to lay her creation before the public. The hysterical way in which theatrical labour is discussed is surely a symptom that points to the existence of a genuine underlying complaint, but one which rarely, if ever, surfaces as a political grievance in any meaningful way. What the children and the animals do, therefore, is point through this hysteria to the alienation of the actor and to the economic conditions of her presence on the stage. So, to return to *The Caretaker*, it is clear that in this accidental performing mouse we enjoy a fleeting glimpse of the bourgeois subject's construction by the capitalist mode of production, and its continued reproduction in a space that modern capitalism figures as the absolute other of labour: entertainment.

## 4

The presence of the animal on stage in contemporary theatre and performance is usually understood, and often, it seems, deployed as an insistence upon an irreducible materiality. The animal being as opposed to the human being is presented as a raw mass from which no meaning, no history and no politics can be developed. It promises an escape from the theatrical system that is the system of representation *par excellence*. It really is an animal, it is not pretending or representing anything or anyone; it is what it is, and it does what it does, and it means nothing by it. Animals only 'mean' on stage when their 'natural' behaviours, whether trained or untrained, are framed within human contexts in which they become meaningful. It is the forcible 'matrixing', to borrow Michael Kirby's term,<sup>4</sup>

of animal behaviour so that it becomes meaningful or amusing for a human audience, which tends to be viewed as a form of exploitation.

An alternative approach to the animal in the theatre and performance, one that is shaped by postmodern ethical philosophy, will be familiar to readers of *Performance Research*, for whom Alan Read edited an edition entitled 'On Animals'. In this volume a contribution by David Williams is typical of this new approach to the presence of the animal and its potential in performance. Williams considers that the standard position, that the animal offers natural behaviour framed into meaningfulness is

reductive. It occludes another economy based on the circuits and intensities of an unpredictable energetics and a poetics of lightness. Furthermore, it ignores the ways in which the human is displaced by the call of the animal outside and required to respond by exposing something of the 'animal' within.<sup>5</sup>

What Williams is seeking to open up here is the possibility of performance as a space and time in which inter-species subjectivity can be explored and negotiated. The inability of the animal to pretend, far from being a problem, is in fact the foundation upon which such reciprocity is seen to depend:

The very 'lousiness' of animal actors, in terms of their inability to sustain fictive bodies and effect a consciously ironic meta-braiding of a not-self with a not-not-self, makes for a particular quality of attention, conductivity and present-ness in the face-to-face encounter.<sup>6</sup>

And our attitude towards it should be to let it be in its alterity. We certainly should not commit the act of violence of putting it on stage as a sign. We should keep it out of our damnable plays with signs and meaning, and instead let the animal collaborate with us in performance's attempt to exceed, evade or move beyond representation.

## 5

At first sight, Romeo Castellucci, director of Societas Raffaello Sanzio, also writing in Read's 'On Animals' edition of *Performance Research*, might seem to be using the animal on stage for just such purposes. For Castellucci, who insists that his aim is 'to communicate as little as possible',<sup>7</sup> the animal on stage seems to operate as a trace of or a return to a pre-tragic theatre, in which our orders of representation perhaps did not obtain, and in which, it seems, the animal routinely appeared. But Castellucci's text – like his theatre practice – is more ambiguous than this, and retains a historically alert sense that the search for origins may never get us back to the moment before representation kicked in. And, try as we might to insist that these dogs, monkeys, horses, sheep, and goats are just being there – as alterity figures,<sup>8</sup> if you like – Castellucci's theatre is too complex a system for us not to be lured irrevocably into acts of reading. Let me dwell for a moment on just one example – the function of the horse in his 1997 production of *Giulio Cesare*.<sup>9</sup>

A horse stands at the back of the stage as the body of Caesar is washed and pinned to the floor. During the action that signifies the assassination, the downstage flank of the

horse is painted in white with the words 'Mene Tekel Peres'. Later on the skeleton of a horse is wheeled in to occupy the same place on the stage as the real horse. The skeleton is here to mourn the death of its master. Its head is pulled back to the recorded sound of a mournful neigh. A sea-horse, hanging from a string, does nothing. It is not a horse, it is just called a horse, and so its status as a horse on this stage depends entirely on its being read as sign rather than sea-creature. A stuffed fox and an animatronic cat also feature prominently in Act II.

The relationship between these animals and the living breathing humans performing alongside them seems to be one in which the uncanny disturbance of the animal is somehow displaced onto the human actors. The bodies of the humans on stage – not only the anorexic women of the second half, but also the fragile old man who plays Caesar and the laryngectomized Antony-actor – are all much more insistent on their 'irreducible materiality' than these animals are. Because the 'real, live' horse is dragged into the world of signs by this network of relations between meaningful bodies, it is, beyond question being used, in defiance of common sense, as a sign.

'No theatre person in their right mind would do such a thing',<sup>10</sup> observes Michael Peterson, who goes on to suggest that all such a use of a live animal performer as sign can add to a performance is 'expense and inconvenience'.<sup>11</sup> And I think he is quite right. The awkwardness with which the horse is displayed here, deployed as a sign, demands that we pay attention to the material difficulties associated with its appearance. Apart from anything else, the horse in question, like so many of the animals who appear when the company tours outside Italy, is a local understudy, and it appears as such as the direct result of a global legislative framework designed to regulate the movement and trade of livestock, and to sustain, at least in part, the agricultural sectors of national economies.

The horse in *Giulio Cesare* stands on stage, then, as a stand-in or representative of the production's original horse, as a reference to the economies of everyday and theatrical labour in which company members both human and non-human take part, and thus, as a sign of a certain amount of 'expense and inconvenience'. The horse is clearly and visibly inconvenient, and appears as excess in the presence of so many stuffed or fabricated animals who sign with greater efficiency. In its failure fully to become an efficient sign with phenomenal 'noise' filtered out by the framing and repetition, the horse insists that this excess must have a purpose. The purpose is to point to the excess, to the expense and inconvenience. In short, to labour.

The proposition that the animal on stage might work to highlight questions of labour is given highly suggestive support by the use of animals both dead and alive in Jan Fabre's production of *Swan Lake* for the Royal Ballet of Flanders.<sup>12</sup> To the conventional dramaturgy of the ballet developed around the music of Tchaikovsky and the choreography of Petipa and Ivanov, Fabre made a series of tactical additions, all of which appear to have been designed to address the issue of labour at the level of form. While the conventional choreography handles the transformations of Odile and Odette into swans and back entirely within the vocabulary of classical ballet, Fabre introduced several elements in which classical technique was thrown aside. From time to time throughout the production one male member of the *corps de ballet* performed a floorbound dance of agonized metamorphosis, in which spasmodic contortions of his

arms repeatedly failed to lift him into the air. His arms stubbornly refusing to become wings, his body crashed violently against the floor, again and again. A chorus of armoured knights performed a unison dance, in which the weight and constraints of their metal casings visibly and audibly prevented them from attaining the grace enjoyed by other choric groups (most particularly, of course, the swans themselves). During an earlier sequence of repetitive choric patterns involving four pairs of dancers, the skeletons of dead animals were ‘flown’ into the proscenium. The production as a whole was framed by the presence of an owl, seen first in a film sequence projected onto a front-cloth at the opening of the performance, and then again at each interlude, and subsequently, live on stage, tethered to the head of the dancer taking the role of Rothbart. Although the presence of the owl during a number of key scenes clearly worked in ways that stressed the owl’s specially material presence amid so much highly technical artifice (it squawked consistently against Tchaikovsky’s score), it also formed part of a network of signification in which the labour of ballet itself was made visible.

In Kleist’s essay ‘On the Marionette Theatre’<sup>13</sup> we are invited to believe that the grace to which human dancers aspire and to which only those without consciousness can attain is a grace to be achieved without visible labour. Instead of the human dancer visibly and audibly working against the limitations of physiology and the constraints of gravity, Kleist’s marionettes seem to move, their feet barely scraping the ground, without putting in any effort at all. Of course behind them and all their kind lie other labourers (the puppeteers and the manufacturers), but the drive of an aesthetic based on the marionette is that all effort should be eradicated from the moment of performance, so that the audience experiences the work as spontaneous free play. We see plays, not work, again. Joseph Roach locates Kleist’s essay at the start of a very particular Romantic approach to performance in which spontaneity and grace are achieved by means of technical virtuosity. In order to present the audience with the satisfying illusion of perhaps superhuman or even supernatural powers, long hours of repetitive and painful physical labour are required. Roach cites the virtuoso displays of Paganini in the concert hall and *bel canto* on the operatic stage, but reserves the paradigmatic place to the *pointe* technique of ballerina Marie Taglioni. Her apparently effortless transcendence of gravity was achieved at a price.

The ballerina’s body, like the singer’s larynx of yesteryear, is tortured into shapes and launched into physical trajectories that are not in nature. In the absence of suitable automata or in spite of them, repetition of exercises must fix the positions and motions of the dance so indelibly on the artist’s muscles that she becomes capable of transcending artistically extraneous impulses such as pain. The art of the dance is motion recollected in tranquillity.<sup>14</sup>

Or work reproduced as play. In the case of Fabre’s staging of *Swan Lake*, it is the animal skeletons that compel the audience to think about the bodies of the ballerinas. From the very start of the performance, the skeleton of a swan has been placed downstage left, in front of the proscenium. Further skeletons are lowered from the flies during sequences in which ballerinas are repeatedly and bluntly lifted and held, as if for display, by their male partners. The bodies of the ballerinas, displayed thus, as though in the museum

from which the skeletons seem to descend, are there, in ballet terms, to make aesthetically gratifying shapes: to be geometry rather than biology. What the animal skeletons do is force the audience to consider the skeletons of the dancers too. Suddenly conscious of the fact of the skeleton, the effort of lifting, the tension of the poses, the audience becomes aware of the musculature at work in the fabrication of the spectacle. The struggles of the male dancer trying to fly and the chorus of armoured knights trying to dance both seem to allude to the same thematization of work as an essential prerequisite of theatrical virtuosity.

## 6

Let me rehearse this one more time, this time in an art gallery rather than a theatre. In *The Postmodern Animal*,<sup>15</sup> Steve Baker adopts a position on animal alterity very similar to that which I referred to earlier with Alan Read and David Williams. For Baker, it is Heidegger's idea that we must leave the animal 'as it is' that seems to shape postmodern art's relations with the animal. He offers a persuasive account of works by Damien Hirst, Robert Rauschenberg and Mark Dion, in which the artists are shown to be respecting the being of the animal in its complete alterity. Baker also wants to read Jannis Kounellis's installation, *Untitled (12 Horses)* in the same vein. I would like to end by reflecting on how the theatrical nature of Kounellis's work, the fact that it plays itself out over time, starts to undermine this account of its meaning.

The Whitechapel Gallery hosted the reinstallation of *Untitled (12 Horses)* as part of a series of events curated under the title *A Short History of Performance*. For those unfamiliar with this work, it simply involves the installation of twelve horses in an art gallery. It is worth noting that entry to the Whitechapel gallery, usually free, was for this work, by paid ticket. Kounellis's work is already drawing attention to the way in which it makes particular economic demands. Parked outside the gallery when I arrived was a trailer belonging to the company responsible for the transport of the horses. The presence of this trailer, of a kind not usually seen on such an urban street, already carried some of the weight of a thing out of place that is part of the point of the installation itself. Even more striking in their insistence on the interaction of two 'worlds' were the men who would from time to time enter the gallery to remove horse shit from its floor or to replenish the hay provided for the horses to eat. Both the difference in dress between these men and the paying visitors to the gallery, as well as the fact that they were conspicuously working (shovelling shit, no less) while we played, emphasized the 'otherness' of their presence, as out of place in Whitechapel as the horses they were looking after. The fact that they were providing the horses with their means of life, in order to maintain their own, as well as removing the digested results of earlier provision, highlighted the interaction between the urban economy of leisure services and the rural economy of agricultural production. The politics of this relationship were palpable in your collision, the moment you entered the gallery, with the smell of horse-sweat, hay and shit. How, in the face of such forceful evidence of the history and economy of animal – horse relations, could one simply look on these horses 'as they are' and believe that we have 'let them be'? The postmodern philosophical



decision to resist making anything (meaningful) of these animals and their situation would involve a wilful suppression of affect as well as an evasion of political responsibility.

The strangeness of the animal on stage comes not from the fact that it ought not to be there, has no business being there, but rather in the fact that we sense there is suddenly nothing strange about it being there, that it has as much business being there, being exploited there, as any human performer. What we experience is a form of shame, I think, at being discovered in our own acts of domination, over animals and over ourselves. The truth of the division of labour makes itself felt, and what we are ashamed of is that we never saw it before, not until the animal returned to the stage and made us stare it in the face, smell it, and thus know it, feelingly.

## NOTES

- 1 Harold Pinter, *The Caretaker*, directed by Patrick Marber, at the Comedy Theatre, London, December 2000.
- 2 *Genesi from the Museum of Sleep*, Societas Raffaello Sanzio, 1999, directed by Romeo Castellucci, presented in London as part of the 2001 London International Festival of Theatre, at Sadler's Wells Theatre, June 2001.
- 3 In conversation with the author.
- 4 See Michael Kirby, 'On Acting and Non-Acting', *The Drama Review*, 16, 1 (1972), pp. 3–15.
- 5 David Williams, 'The Right Horse, the Animal Eye: Bartabas and Théâtre Zingaro', *Performance Research*, 5, 2 (2000), pp. 35–6.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 7 Romeo Castellucci, 'The Animal Being on Stage', *Performance Research* 5, 2 (2000), pp. 23–28.
- 8 The phrase is Simon Bayly's.
- 9 *Giulio Cesare*, Societas Raffaello Sanzio, 1997. Directed by Romeo Castellucci. Presented in London as part of the 1999 London International Festival of Theatre, at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, June 1999.
- 10 Michael Peterson, 'Stubborn as a Mule: Non-Human Performers and the Limits of Semiotics', unpublished paper given at the ASTR Conference Seminar, Beyond Semiotics: Theatre and Recalcitrance, CUNY Graduate Centre, New York, November 2000.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Swan Lake*, Royal Ballet of Flanders, directed by Jan Fabre, presented as part of the Edinburgh International Festival, at the Playhouse Theatre, Edinburgh, August 2002.
- 13 Heinrich von Kleist, 'On the Marionette Theatre,' in Heinrich von Kleist, *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. by David Constantine (London: J.M. Dent, 1997), pp. 411–16.
- 14 Joseph Roach, *The Player's Passion* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 165.
- 15 Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

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