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**Deceptive entertainments: Transnational tricksters and the theatrical journey to self-knowledge.**

Theatrical performance has been argued to be an experience of “consciousness in action” (Yarrow 2006). Theatre is a space in which the audience directly confronts, participates in, and negotiates layers of mistruth with the ultimate purpose of gaining either - or a combination of - intellectual, emotional and spiritual insight. The tradition in literature and theatre of the Trickster or prankster who uses disguise, stratagem and mayhem to achieve his or her desired goals, also acts to enhance the potentially transformative power of theatre performance. The transnational trickster’s actions also function on a more fundamental level: in destabilising certainties and in creating or enhancing the dynamics of inner change through self-knowledge. Taking various examples of the trickster character, this paper examines how the actions of the trickster challenge, alter and renew social rules, and allow shifts in human consciousness. Tricksters act in catalysing ‘new’ awareness in the minds of the audience and aid in creating positive individual and social change.

Theatre is all about mystery—and revelation. Every theatre performance is unique, and each “two hours’ traffic” of every stage ideally involves the gradual clearing away of uncertainty to a perception or revelation of truth. Theatre itself is a medium in which the audience directly recognises, confronts, participates in, and negotiates layers of mistruth with the ultimate purpose of gaining either (or a combination of) intellectual, emotional and spiritual insight. The consciously-aware theatre-goer is a co-creator of knowledge, both as an individual awareness and as a part of a larger group consciousness. All theatre acts in many ways to create this re-alignment of consciousness. Theatrical experience is a dynamic and interactive process of experience and gaining new knowledge based on both cognitive and affective change. As Jeanette Winterson has written about the arts in general: “Art is conscious, and its effect on its audience is to stimulate consciousness” (1996: 26). Theatre tradition endorses and perennially reinvigorates the Delphic oracle’s exhortation to “Know thyself”. The traditions of drama from the Greeks onwards (bearing in mind that our concepts of

western theatre and democracy were born in the same place at the same time – Athens in the fifth century BCE) have created a ritualized social and interpersonal meeting-place, a safe public space not for commerce or productive gain, where anything can, and does, happen.

In many different countries and drama traditions, characters and recurring themes can illuminate perennial “truths” that will ultimately heal the human condition in any time or place. The figure of the trickster comes to us down the centuries and from within many cultural traditions. Scholars of traditional and mythical archetypal characters have identified many trickster characters in folk-tale and native literatures. Often thought to originate in Europe in the servant character *Zanni* in the *Commedia dell’Arte*, the trickster is the transnational figure defined by the masks of deceit and cunning. Eric Weitz (2011) describes tricksters as “travelling scamps, lords of disruption and shameless heroes, driven by corporeal hungers and with recourse to dreamlike metaphysical freedoms”. He explains that: “Such dramatic types come fully loaded with the makings of comic activity: naughty, naïve, indulgent, resourceful, driven by base instinct and alive to the spheres of clever illogic we otherwise call humour” (1-2). Yet, as he emphasises, the texts themselves are serious, and essential for the maintenance of social codes and values.

Moreover, most importantly, “Trickster is among other things the gatekeeper who opens the door into the next world” (Hyde 159). Here, I argue that the trickster’s actions do more than merely disrupt the surface relative level of existence, he/she (for the trickster is often a gender-bender) also acts on a more fundamental level: to affect

not only that revelation of truth but consciousness itself. As Barbara Annan suggests, the trickster takes us on a journey “into a place of unknowing” (110). The trickster destabilises the concept of reliable perceived “truths” so that the audience’s (or reader’s) mind oscillates between extremes of conscious experience, swinging between polarities of experience and creating, as it were, a vacuum in certainty –a space where new conclusions must be drawn about the nature of outer—and thus inner— reality. As certainties are shaken, the mind passes through (as it were) a state of “void of conceptions” to reach a new sense of “I am”.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of psychological and social archetypes, Jung traces how these figures can be traced deep in antiquity as haunting, “the mythology of all ages, sometimes in quite unmistakable form, sometimes in modulated guise” (Jung 165). He identifies the trickster as not only a figure of entertainment but an archetypal primitive form of consciousness. Yet, “we are no longer aware that in carnival customs and the like there are remnants of a collective shadow figure [...] descended from a collective figure. This collective figure gradually breaks up under the impact of civilisation, leaving traces in folklore which are difficult to recognize” (Jung 168). Jung talks in terms of light and dark and how the trickster “is both subhuman and superhuman” (169): hence, perhaps, our sense of uncertainty and unease when he or she is directly encountered.

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<sup>1</sup> William Haney describes this as a state of ‘pure witnessing consciousness’ which is delineated in the Upanishads. The Maitreya Upanishad (6.18-19), ‘posits a non-changing, qualityless state of pure consciousness [...]: “That which is non-thought [yet] which stands in the midst of thought”’. (Haney 170)

Traditions from around the globe endorse different aspects of this character's timeless function. Yet for the trickster, there are no boundaries. He is the shape-shifter (Loki from Norse myth), the wise-fool (as in Wagner's *Parsifal*), the mis-leaders and liars Dionysus and Hermes, Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Monkey from China. The masked or unmasked trickster is the audience's guide in travelling from the comfortable "real" world into the world of the imagination—from knowledge to uncertainty and fantasy— and back again. Trickster is the translator between states of being, who, through his actions, creates separation and then recreates by joining together again to create a new state of existence—individual or social. His/her role is to break down familiar and stable structures of being and knowing. In Indian mythology, the figure of Krishna (both as mischievous child and playful adult) acts as trickster as prophet: the means through which ultimate truth is revealed. The trickster could also be argued to represent the unrecognized, undesirable, or unknown self that has been repressed and projected onto the other—the unconscious ego that could only be encountered otherwise in dreams, visions or hallucinatory states.

Natalie Zemon Davis also expands our vision beyond that of Europe to consider Islamic sources, where the trickster often appears in the form of a bird. "Birds who talk, rule, advise, seek and quarrel have a strong presence in Persian and Arabic literature" (2006 112). "The bird story not only is about ruse and invention but was created by ruse and invention" she explains (110). Perhaps the most famous of these tales is *The Conference of the Birds* (early 13<sup>th</sup> century by the Sufi author Attar), where the hoopoe leads the other birds to find spiritual salvation and the ultimate truth of their existence – and where the final 'trick' is to reveal that truth to be their own image. The Simurgh, this

great bird of Sufi tradition, holds up the mirror whereby one sees oneself as one truly is. This, and other bird narratives, illustrate the Islamic concept of *'hila'*, which Davis defines as “ruse, artifice, stratagem, ‘ingenious means to get oneself out of a difficult situation’” (113). Similar tales also entered Europe in the works of Greek slave Aesop’s animal tales –perennially popular in Italy and across the rest of the continent. The role of wit, disguise, deception and trickery also permeates the practical philosophy of Nicolò Machiavelli. But equally influential across the world is that most famous of female tricksters, the story-teller Scheherazade in *Alf Laylah wa Laylah, The Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of stories (of probably multiple authorship) from India, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, and Turkey.

In the Islamic world, one trickster figure is El Khidr, the mythic stranger who “shakes our subjectivity and alters our consciousness” (Annan 101). El Khidr is literally “the green one”, because, as Annan explains, “he has drunk from the water of eternal life” (101). Annan discusses how the Qur’anic story of Khidr:

provides a paradigm for the mystery and allure of the Other, and shows how subjectivity is unseated in proximity to Otherness in the form of knowledge not previously accessible to the conscious ego. Meeting a stranger, in many legends, is associated with a sense of altered reality and of being in a place beyond time, where one’s identity is meaningless and events occur that contradict one’s existing worldview. (104)

An encounter with Khidr creates a disturbance in our sense of linear space and time and the outcome is “an altered, renewed perspective of life and self” (ibid) – in a way that I argue here is also an effect of witnessing a powerful theatrical performance. Khidr delivers a gift of meaningfulness: The encounter is also “a metaphor for a non-rational, intuitive knowing” (Annan 102) of both self and thus the Other. Yet the “other” manifests as both another human being and the otherness of one’s own being –the repressed or unknown dimension of one’s individual psyche beyond ego—the unexplored regions of the totality of human consciousness. It is this (frequently mislabelled as “mystical”) dimension of human existence that the Khidr-trickster is sent to enliven. The character of Raven in N. American myth similarly come to raise consciousness, to hold up a mirror to see our true selves, as well as force the perception of the self as Other, and the other as the self. <sup>2</sup>

The trickster’s behaviour can be viewed as bizarre, uncivilized and ambiguous—and in the postcolonial context, as threatening to the observer’s moral, physical, and social welfare and dominance. The trickster’s behaviour may be motivated by sheer survival instinct or more acerbic dissention. According to Hyde, the Trickster “feels no anxiety when he deceives [... ] He... can tell his lies with creative abandon, charm, playfulness, and by that affirm the pleasures of fabulation” (71). As Hyde tells us, “almost everything that can be said about psychopaths can also be said about tricksters” (158), yet they also have a valuable function: as gatekeeper to a door into another world, and “those

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<sup>2</sup> The contemporary novel also frequently draws upon traditions of the North-American trickster – *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, for example, creates a 20<sup>th</sup> century Raven, without whose guidance the ‘magical’ female protagonist Tilo would be unable to navigate (and heal) the often confusing multi-ethnic world of suburban Oakland and San Francisco.

who mistake him for a psychopath never even know such a door exists” (159). His/her role then, is to break down familiar and stable structures of being and knowing and suggest new ways of exploring reality.

Trickster is the archetypal Other, often acting from a space of alienation, who as in postcolonial studies, represents the uncomfortable zone of the outsider, the unwanted, the unknown. An encounter with these strangers is a confrontation with a new reality, which leads not only to a shift in perception, but also in self-awareness—in knowledge of one’s true self: to a forced re-evaluation of one’s beliefs in the very nature of reality. The potential power of this shift lies in not just rupturing some pre-existing state of mind but in adjusting, in becoming aware of what was on the periphery of our vision or of our hearing or sight. As this shift occurs, new patterns appear in both inner and outer landscapes. The shape-shifting quality of Zanni is both intrinsic to his character and a mechanism he bestows to others. His unsettling nature and destabilizing activity creates a shift –a gap—in our assumed knowledge or assumptions, creating new perceptions of boundaries –and allowing the establishment of liberating new terrains.<sup>3</sup>

The link between Zanni and the traditional trickster of the African and Caribbean folk tale is pointed out in critical texts such as in Helen Gilbert’s *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (1996) and by Yomna Saber (2017). In the Caribbean islands this

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<sup>3</sup> The trickster creates an alternative existence at the liminal edge of the rational and the known. This destabilisation could also be equated with the uncanny, *das Unheimlich*, literally that which is “outside the home” and which equates with being dangerously “out of control” in a location out of normal space-time (Bhabha, 1994:10).

masked figure transforms into the animal tricksters—the folk heroes Anansi, Brer-Booki and Brer-Rabbi, who disrupt, outwit, manipulate, and do whatever it takes to survive no matter what the cost to others. They can also be the rebellious slave figures in pan- Caribbean literature, and more recently, the postcolonial figure of subversive and subtle rebellion, the “mimic man”, who in mimicking white manners and behaviours ruthlessly undermines them. The trickster acts through opposition, through mischief, through shamelessness, lying, shape-shifting, amorality, using disruptive scatology, and especially through irony and humour.

Tricksters navigate existing psychic and territorial paths between class, caste and colour to create new cultural identities. In the context of post-colonial narratives: the passive-aggressive strategies of non-cooperation of the trickster are a form of resistance. Postcolonial theatre also by definition implicates and engages with the public and “has the capacity to intervene publically in social organization and to critique political structures” more effectively than written (unperformed) narratives (Gilbert and Tompkins, 17). Linked to obeah, shamanism and alternative means of subverting and gaining power; to masquerade and mimicry and to the masks worn as empowerment and disguise, the ritualization of the trickster role becomes ingrained in culture across islands and different linguistic/religious/performative expressions. Accessing and identifying tropes of shifting alterities as traditional societies transform to meet the encroaching demands of modernization has long been the concern of anthropologists, who document and explain ‘paradoxes of mobile cultural and symbolic forms’ (Linke 188). These “portable imaginaries of belonging or exclusion—during periods of transnational crisis and restructuring” (ibid), and the struggle to negotiate



national and cultural identity also relate to postcolonial theatre. Dramas that have examined this perspective and feature trickster figures include those by Derek Walcott, such as *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*, and *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, and other plays from S. Africa, India and the Caribbean—and include genres of the absurd, magical realism, and post-colonial fantasy.

The tradition in literature and theatre of the joker, the trickster or prankster who uses disguise, stratagem and mayhem to achieve her desired goals is taken here to illustrate one creative facet of how order can come from chaos. In her book, *Chaos Bound, Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (1990) N. Katherine Hayles focuses on “the spontaneous emergence of self-organisation from chaos”, arguing that chaos can be “conceived as an inexhaustible ocean of information rather than as a void signifying absence” (8). Hidden order exists within chaos, for the dichotomy of order/disorder (which she sees as central to Western thought) is destabilized through constructions in culture and language. Concepts such as this, and others from contemporary consciousness theories, can help in understanding the ways a theatrical performance experience affects human awareness, but also how the process actually works in terms of the transfer along the dimension of author-director-actor-audience.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Dramatic performances relevant here include Peter Brooks' *Mahabharata*, as well as his theoretical text *The Empty Stage* (1968); the plays of Beckett and Pinter (Theatre of the Absurd); the theoretical work of Martin Esslin, Harold Bloom's discussion of Shakespeare's plays as 'the invention of the human' (*Shakespeare* 1999).

Live performance can trigger new states of awareness. The process of stage drama being a dynamic conversation between the text and the audience is vividly described by actor George Kemp:

We watch TV and films quite passively I think, but you can't do that with theatre. What theatre does so brilliantly is to put you in the living rooms or on the battlefield with strangers and make you feel for them. When you see someone breathe in front of you, you are sharing the space, sharing the air with them, and feeling a little bit of what they are going through. They look at you and hopefully, as characters in plays, they touch you. The immediacy of it works so well. We can tell such enormous stories on such a small scale; we can tell such great stories with a few people. A play can take a huge theme and then, on stage, we boil it down until it's concentrated enough that we can touch what that story is. And it is live, of course, and *alive*. We suspend our disbelief and then our imaginations do the rest to fill in the blanks and allow you to go actively in your mind to all these places. The pact between the players and the audience is to suspend our disbelief, you know it's not real, we know it's not real, but we sit down and agree to suspend our disbelief. You use your imaginations and give energy – and the audience's energy is what keeps it alive. We then share the experience. It's a to and fro – a conversation between the play and its audience – and the more an audience gives, the more it adds fuel to the fire. (Kemp 2018).

Peter Malekin's profound analysis takes this theme of the transformation of individual's emotions, understanding --and ultimately consciousness--through theatrical performance to deeper dimensions. The theatre goer's awareness expands not only

through a sense of connection with the characters, and imagined locations—but is capable of being transformed in time as well as space. Malekin argues that the experience of watching a great performance of a play can exist, “outside time, in the sense that time awareness falls away [...] and memory goes on and can transform all our time to come” (2001, 171).

Moreover, the audience member can achieve a state of transcendence, an escape from the normal modes of culture-imposed being. Malekin terms this experience one of “eternal beginning”, outside space-time. The mind is stilled, if only temporarily, from the demands of ratiocination. The theatre-goer enjoys a state of pure being, together with the concomitant emotional transformation engendered through the *rasa*, the suggested emotional content, of the drama. As William S. Haney has explained, through the intervention of *rasa* the audience experience and yet remain detached from any specific emotion, because, “*rasa* constitutes an experience of the subtler levels of activity of the mind itself” (1991: 301). The “aesthetic rapture” or thrill of theatre going at an outstanding performance is the bubbling up of bliss from these subtler levels of the conscious mind.<sup>5</sup>

Ralph Yarrow elaborates with insight into the theatre experience and the theory of *rasa*, which:

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<sup>5</sup> See also my discussion of *rasa* theory in *Beyond Bodies* (2014: 45-48).

claims that art-experience aims to put the receiver in a particular state in which he or she is able to “read” more from a performance: both in terms of more nuances, levels, degrees, qualities, connotations and associations, and in terms of increased cognitive and affective subtlety and range, instituting a kind of “flow” condition in which observation, understanding and participation are felt as one. (in Meyer-Dinkgräfe 15).

Theatrical performance, Yarrow suggests, could be thought of as “consciousness in action, and [...] it can also enable participants [...] to move into or through what it is to be able to know, to cohere, to *make sense*; to locate the place, or non-place, or moment in and out of time, from which the knowing and the sensing and the making proceeds” (ibid 15, emphasis in original). Time and place are suspended. For two or three hours we are in the permanent Now.

Yet, as audience, we are aware that we are fooling ourselves. Behind the façade, as Howard Brenton’s argument warns, “To love the theatre seems a most ill-directed passion. The theatre is basically an intractable load of old tat, cardboard, canvas, splintery wood, crude lighting and figures in garish colours in the middle distance gesticulating and hard to hear.” (1986, ix). Yet, although we are watching something both imaginary and temporary, as Sean McCarthy points out, “It is precisely this transparency that makes theatre so vital – you are continually aware, as a member of the audience, that what you are seeing is unique” (2017). What makes theatre unusual, then, is that the audience knows that whatever happens while we are watching a performance is quite irreplaceable—the play, and the response, will never be exactly the same again. Not on any other night or performance.

Many of us who do “love the theatre” and are regular theatre-goers may instinctively feel that even the tradition of the curtain rising is the indication to the brain to trigger a new state of consciousness—change is imminent. The action of witnessing a theatrical performance, and the potential risk to our sense of the status quo of selfhood and self-satisfaction, is surely contained in the line spoken by the character Josef Frank in Brenton’s play *Weapons of Happiness*, “What do you expect me to see when I look in that mirror?” (viii). As willing audience, we have agreed to take part in a journey into the unknown, whether it be stressful or joyous, and to see ourselves anew. And the play will –or should—hold up that mirror. As David Hare puts it in *Writing Left-Handed*, the theatre’s “special beauty” comes “from the fact that at seven-thirty you have no idea how you will be feeling at ten-fifteen. And at ten-fifteen you will look back, as across an ocean, to an almost unrecognizable stranger who arrived at seven-thirty.” (1991: 45)

The destabilising figure of the trickster character can enhance this process—our *practice* of “eternal beginning”. Across time and place the traditional figure of the trickster acts as agent of ‘new’ awareness in the minds of the audience, helping us in negotiating new territories, whether joyous or tragic. The appearance of these tricky, amorphous, certainty-challenging characters creates an encounter with the non-rational—forcing the human mind to go beyond logical ratiocination to an experience of pure *being-ness* beyond thought. As Lewis Hyde elaborates, “When a human mind recognizes what has been revealed, it is recognising itself” –and trickster is that mind (300). The trickster enables us to recognise and access “higher truth” by clearing a path for others to follow through the “muddiness, ambiguity and noise” (ibid). In theatre, the trickster in his/her various incarnations lays the foundations for the development of

performances that enable the spectator's confrontation with a new reality, which leads not only to a shift in perception, but also in self-awareness. This process, facilitated through the spectator's encounter with the trickster character, can serve as an approach to understanding our subjective "delight" or intuitive sense of something fundamentally important shifting in our brains during experience of a powerful performance.

Developing this knowledge could even lead to new much-needed strategies for healing and restoration of health, happiness and well-being. Any culture or society would benefit from engagement with a dynamic performative method of gaining wholeness.

While associated with bringing trouble, uncertainty and instability, the trickster brings spiritual insight. In keeping with Lewis Hyde's description of tricksters as "the lords of in-between" (105), Natalie Zemon Davis uses the terminology of the trickster to delineate the life of Leo Africanus, a historical figure who travelled between the worlds of East and West, steering a course between the troubled worlds of Christianity and Islam bordering the Mediterranean in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Both deviant and brave, a master of cunning and wit, he forged new realities for himself and those who still benefit from his stories and legacy. A travelling narrator and vagabond trickster, man of contradictions and mysteries, was he, as Davis suggests and explores, on a quest for spiritual enlightenment? (13)

Tricksters, based on the *Commedia's* Zanni, is also the character who functions as a messenger, but who persistently mis-delivers, distorts, or seriously delays the message. In terms of theatre throughout the ages, this character is well known to be a prime agent in the disruption of smooth plot, and the harbinger of tragedy and the agent of

change from stasis to some form of new social existence. Messages misinterpreted, delivered late, or not at all, are at the core of the final destruction of Odysseus, of Romeo's failure to rescue Juliet from her tomb, of the demise of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (both Shakespeare and Stoppard versions). In some models of consciousness of the human mind (for example, the Vedic tradition of India), the development of human awareness or mental capability into so-called 'higher' or more expanded states of consciousness (ultimately described as 'enlightenment') is characterized by the frictionless flow of information and knowledge between subject and object, an equality / identity of the knower, the known, and the object of knowledge. Consciousness studies in relation to drama suggest how one of the key purposes of drama is to aid in the spectator experiencing expanded states of awareness (for example, Haney 2008). In this state, the danger of misinformation is avoided, since the human awareness functions on the same 'deep structure' or frequency (as it were) as the linguistic content. This state, in the Vedic literature is described as *ritam bhara pragya*, that level of consciousness where the thought, the word and the desire (or desired result) are one.

Yet the acquisition of knowledge in the human mind is a process not fully understood in psychology or western philosophical traditions. The definable structures of memory and language are confronted by more nebulous areas such as the role of intuition in accessing and perceiving otherwise intangible information about self, others or environment. The adage that "knowledge is structured in consciousness" and that knowledge is different in different states of human consciousness, argues that any individual or audience has, as it were, a limited capacity for understanding, and can only

appreciate and absorb information (or wisdom) proportional to that capacity (picture a jug that can only be filled with a certain level of water—the larger the container, the greater the volume of water). The experience of being part of an audience arguably expands that capability—the capacity for cognitive and emotional apprehension (so the jug of water has the potential for becoming a reservoir)—hence the excitement, the *thrill*, of being in a live theatre performance as opposed to watching a film or even the same play or opera broadcast on TV.

In live theatre experience, this is also relevant to the production. Just as the conductor of an orchestra is a conduit for the intention and emotion of the composer of the music, the director is also responsible to conveying the intention of the playwright—the consciousness of the writer—to the audience. The director and actors can either be in tune with the intentions of the author or not, and be able to discern not only the plot (text) but also the consciousness of the playwright. Even though the author may have greater or lesser direct influence on the final performed play, the author has two concerns in mind when they write: the theme to be conveyed and the state of awareness the play should evoke in the audience—the resulting subjective interpretation of text, delivery of dialogue, the staging and so on—the revelation of the total experience. The extent to which directors and actors are in tune with those intentions determine the extent to which the audience will resonate with the author's consciousness. Even if the staging visually transposes the text in time, place, or gender of actors (transported to modern social contexts or adapted to a different cultural milieu) the success or failure of a production may rest with the ability of the director to produce something timeless—



so that the experience resonates with a contemporary audience. This process was described recently by the author and director David Hare:

When we see a fresh production of *Hamlet*, say, or *Tartuffe*, and we exclaim “It’s as if I had never seen the play before”, that is because the director has somehow managed to mediate the experience, to relax the audience’s understanding to a point where they can open themselves up to everything the actors want them to see and hear. (2015: 3)

The enduring value of the textual/dramatic experience will depend on the universality of the quality of writing, and directing, of how the audience becomes a receptive *collective* consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, unlike in prose fiction (the novel and short story) where information is provided by a more or less omniscient narrator (or at least an author in control of the narratorial voice), in drama, the absorbing/interpreting mind is always limited, can never be omniscient, since it is that of each individual audience member, recreating meaning as the play goes along.

Perhaps since human capacity for information transfer is fraught with error, messages in theatre are frequently linked to the supernatural: Macbeth’s witches, Hamlet’s father’s ghost and so on, all appear with the veracity of the supernatural to endorse their messages, even if, as in Hamlet’s case, the source itself is doubted (benign ghost or

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<sup>6</sup> Excerpts from plays ranging from ancient Greek plays staged in Epidaurus, to Venetian and Italian examples of surviving uses of the *Commedia*, to the RSA, Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre in London to experimental British theatre groups, and the treasure of European playhouses could be given here as examples of cross-cultural links of the trickster’s role in society and drama.

a devil in disguise?) Ralph Yarrow envisages the theatrical experience as a “shock”, where the Real (or “the truth”) is produced through a deconstruction of all the elements of drama—of the senses, the acting, even of coherence itself—creating a void at the centre of the audience’s sense of meaning. And due to this “emptying-out”, meaning, energy, and wholeness re-emerge in the conscious mind. “For the body of the performer, the text and the director, it is an emptiness that both deconstructs and offers the location of the withheld energy of reconstruction”, he explains. In a state beyond language (“the moment when the word has not yet been born”) comparable to that of meditation, both performer and audience experience “a discovery of freedom”, and there we “meet ourselves as theatre” (Yarrow 2001,89-90). Through this charged theatrical encounter of audience, actors, text and actions, meaning is then brought to the play.

Theatrical experience on both sides of the stage initiates this “emptying out” of being and non-being in which each performer must “drop out of language and habit and live in the space that is not yet” (Yarrow 2001: 91). This is the space, or non-place, in which the trickster also resides, between liminal defined realities, in the state of beyond-ness, and can be the catalyst for the process of becoming something new. (Relevant again to the ‘empty’ space of the stage, on which the instabilities and uncertainties of drama-in-process occur.) This is a metaphorical and well as a literal road, it is a spirit road travelled by the trickster, “between heaven and hell, and between the living and the dead. As such he is sometimes the messenger of the gods and sometimes the guide of souls, carrying the dead to the underworld” (Hyde 6).

While on one level, his actions can be perceived as devious, the trickster forces us to ask questions of the nature of reality itself. Perhaps it is not trickster who is unruly, misaligned or misconceived, but the preconceptions and modes of behaviour that society forces upon us, the mis-identifications that have forced us to believe this is the way things must be. The trickster figure allows a rethinking, and most importantly, “to infuse it with a little humour [...] to have the wit constantly to make one’s way anew from the materials at hand” (Hyde 277).

Lewis Hyde (2008) describes this as the ability to make “a way out of no way” (277), to operate with detachment. The advice to operate with detachment is of paramount significance, and at the core of great spiritual texts such as the *Bhagavad-Gita*, where Krishna advises Arjuna to “perform action established in being” -- *Yoga stah, kuru karmani* (Chapter 2, verse 48). This ability to act beyond the level of sense-attachment may also be the key to Yarrow’s concept of performers and/or audience being “zeroed”: part of which involves a suspension in “a situation out of (or prior to) space-time and body-mind operating in space-time” (2001 75-76)—challenging our sense of individuality and agency. Eventually, performer/audience emerges from a state of “unknowing”, from “encountering that which is dark in me or the places where ‘I’ cease to know who or what I am. [...] It is knowing as knowingness, as stillness and absence and silence, as an acquainting with the ground state of knowing” (Yarrow 2006 24-25). As Ralph Yarrow concludes, the result of this experience is “the knowledge that the realignment of the scope of my knowing is an ethical challenge and a political move” (ibid 25).

Similarly, tricksters read the world as if *witness* of events, good or bad, they are non-judgemental of external structures but act to make others question themselves: to be agents of freedom for “the awakened human mind, a freedom those in power have not necessarily acquired” (Hyde 278). This role is replicated by the purpose of drama itself in providing not only a “variety of techniques [that] call into question the truth-value of logic and reason, but also highlight the uncertainty and illusion of ordinary experience [...] by pointing beyond this dimension to a field of unity” (Haney 2008, 9). Again, the quality of witnessing is inherent within the dramatic/performative experience (as recognized by directors such as Stanislavsky and others) as well as enhanced by trickster-awareness. Operating in a hybrid space, on the border of society and between two worlds, the trickster is in that no-space, which has often been referred to here as the space where the transformation of consciousness is available. The possibility of spiritual development occurs in that liminal state of uncertainty, of detachment, of suspension and suspense. Held in this place, the audience in a play perceives the emotion behind the words, the silence beneath the activity, the pain beneath the laughter, the triviality behind the tension.

Trickster as a boundary-crosser mediates such opposites to create wholeness. Like the social safety-valve mechanisms of festivals such as Carnival, Junkanoo, Holi and Fastnacht, where normally acceptable codes of behaviour are temporarily overturned, the trickster acts by creating chaos in order to redefine the boundaries of normality and renew harmony. Hence, perhaps, the fact that, at two extremes of action, the democratic senate of ancient Athens decreed that slaves should be given time and funding to attend the theatre, and that theatres in Elizabethan and Jacobean London (and in other

countries by other regimes at other times) were regularly closed by kings, queens, and parliaments whenever they decreed a performance (or the very theatre itself) was likely to threaten or undermine public morals or latest government policy.

The dark side of the Trickster is revealed in Iago –who famously manipulates all the other characters, misrepresenting and distorting the nature of reality itself. A recent (2018) production of *Othello* at the Sam Wannamaker Globe Theatre however, highlights the comical in Iago, and the production is played for laughs –as Iago (Mark Rylance) uses his lines as mere banter with the audience, accompanied by smiles and winks into the standing groundlings—(on the day I went, mainly made up of teenage school children and foreign tourists, all of whom seemed to delight in finding themselves in the midst of a comedy rather than the tragedy they might have been expecting). Rylance’s clownish Iago rushes in and out and prances round the stage, breathlessly delivering some devastating lines in an off-hand and jovial manner. Does the portrayal of Iago as a scheming buffoon, who draws constant laughter from the audience, in fact make his Iago more menacing and threatening? For me it didn’t work, but as a pure Zanni reincarnation, he couldn’t be beaten.

Another Zanni-trickster characterisation that has more of the appeal of the mischievous but likeable rogue of the *Commedia* is in opera – Puccini’s *Gianni Schicchi* (with libretto by Giovacchino Forzano). The story has its origin in a few lines from Dante’s *Inferno*, which were then fleshed out by an anonymous writer in 14<sup>th</sup> century Florence. Schicchi is a typical Zanni, the cunning servant who overcomes all obstacles to gain material prosperity and upward mobility. Brash, fearless and mercenary, he wins by unexpected

trickery and by sheer nerve, but at least in Schicchi's favour, we like him for it. But, like many a trickster, Gianni Schicchi may be outside the realm of acceptable society (for he is a peasant) but he is no idiot. He is, as we learn, an expert in all forms of law, and it is this expertise, as well as his sheer calculating bravado that ensure he will be the ultimate winner. Called in reluctantly to help an ailing aristocratic Florentine family –by impersonalising their dead relative, pretending the old man is still alive and then dictating a new will before his ultimate demise and “death”. Schicchi seems to be playing along with their wishes. Only the final moments reveal what he has been planning all along; he has changed the rules of the game and outwits all the family by bequeathing all the old man's wealth to “his great friend”, none other than Gianni Schicchi himself. The family are horrified, but there is nothing they can do as he orders them to leave what is now his house. Social order is overturned: the peasant becomes the most powerful man, and he and his daughter own all the wealth—which means she can now marry the man she loves. In the end, no-one has suffered except the appalling aristocrats who have been taught a lesson, and true love wins the day.

Whether within genres of comedy or tragedy, plays and opera can be an act of political subversion for actors and playwrights and audiences. Simultaneously, theatre, consciousness and drama enliven both individual and collective audience's sense of self, other and interpretive perception of “higher” truth, including how traditional figures of the trickster character have functioned from times of the ancient to postcolonial worlds as agents of change and truth. Whatever the incarnation of the character, the trickster's themes and traditions from within drama, both East and West, can illuminate the total theatre experience. Cross-cultural contexts demonstrate how language and

performance are linked in individual and social expressions, and how dramatic characters embody psychological archetypes. Viewed as an anthropological and literary dynamic force, the work of tricksters to alter the awareness of the audience can eventually affect the structure of society. In this context, the trickster becomes a kind of “theatrical guide” through potentially dangerous territories to safely deliver liberating explorations of self and other. In the timeless no-place space of the stage, silences can be safely breached, frustrations expressed, experimentation encouraged, memories reimagined, alternative ideas played with, connections made, and traumas healed. The level of consciousness and intention of the playwright, the skill and understanding (and capacity of feeling) of the actor, and how these connect to the group consciousness of the audience create a dynamic of internal change. Theatrical performance at its best is enlightening: it wakes people up, offers altered states of being, and changes minds and hearts to enliven self-knowledge. Connected to this dynamic is also the tradition of theatre in challenging norms and instigating social change—reaching out from the small world of the stage to the larger ‘outside’ world—repeatedly offering an eternal beginning: the chance to rethink reality.

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