Fantasy on the Clock

The Virtual Cruelty of Collected Works' The Balcony

Rebecca Chaleff

The first time I saw Collected Works' production of Jean Genet's *The Balcony* (1956) was the first time I set foot in San Francisco's iconic Old Mint. It was 14 February 2015; wandering the halls, I saw traces of history in cubes of glass, maps of memories I did not know, and pictures of a city so demolished by the 1906 earthquake that I could not recognize it. In the basement, I discovered deeper remnants of that history in the marks that millions of pieces of gold had imprinted against the stone walls. There, where the stone gave way to the gradual and persistent pressures of coins, I began to imagine how Collected Works' immersive production of *The Balcony* might begin.

Today, the Old Mint stands as a massive, stone emblem of history in San Francisco's Civic Center district. Although the San Francisco Museum and Historical Society originally planned to convert the landmark into a museum, their plan was terminated before full restorations were complete. Now, the building is used for special events, only some of which are open to the public. Although not all rooms are accessible, some still exhibit remnants of the original damage. Collected Works' production uses both the raw and restored spaces to stage the polarities of wealth, power, poverty, and despair enacted by the characters of *The Balcony*. Before the production begins, the audience is allowed to roam the smaller rooms of the basement. As we wander, we are surrounded by stone and concrete, ensconced in the secretive chambers of Madame Irma's brothel.

Amidst this history, glimpses of the set are visible to the audience: white fabric hanging from the ceiling of one room; cords of yarn

Figure 1. Penny and the Beggar perform a ritualistic encounter in the Old Mint's basement halls. Nathalie Brilliant and Florentina Mocanu in The Balcony, *directed by Jamie Lyons and Michael Hunter. The Old Mint, San Francisco, 4 February 2015. (Photo © 2015 Jamie Lyons)*

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strung from the wall to the floor in another; a wooden cross, candles, ladders, and other mysteries for the audience to explore. Surrounded by these objects, my attention turned from the history of the Old Mint towards a temporally amorphous space rich with the memories and everyday practices of characters I had yet to meet. In this setting, past, present, and future were poised to unfold simultaneously. The set and design of this production reference multiple centuries at once and no location in particular; temporalities comingle to complicate the relationship between truth and illusion, the real and the virtual. In the dialogue are indications of Revolutionary France; in the costumes, influences from 19th-century to contemporary styles; in the set, objects you could find either in your living room or in a museum. The basement became a curiosity cabinet full of memories yet to unfold.

This creative staging of *The Balcony* is typical of a performance by Collected Works, a young company based in San Francisco with a knack for site-specific works staged in unusual locations. *The Balcony* takes place on two and a half floors (including an additional staircase and a balcony) of the Old Mint, and even stretches into its courtyard. But the building provides more than a flexible space; it also complicates Genet's depiction of the relationship between power and illusion by emphasizing the entanglement of capital. The Old Mint's stature within Bay Area history implicitly underscores this aspect of the production. Immersed within this complex spatiotemporal field, the audience's imagination becomes irretrievably intertwined with their perceptions of the multiple histories present—histories that bind past and future within the momentary experience of performance.

Figure 2. In a basement room, the Bishop ceremoniously dons his robes while Rosine looks on impatiently. Todd Pivetti and Jeff Schwartz in The Balcony, *directed by Jamie Lyons and Michael Hunter. The Old Mint, San Francisco, 4 February 2015. (Photo © 2015 Jamie Lyons)*

Attention to capital is further pronounced through the diegetic elements of the set, designed by Angrette McCloskey. In a smaller room at the end of a long hall, with brick walls and a tile floor, a giant, magnified dollar bill is framed above a fireplace. Aside from a green velvet couch, it is the only adornment. There, currency literally hangs over the characters' conversations. In other scenes, they count heaps of cash while they carry out their dialogue. All the while, they slip in and out of fantasies in which they mobilize financial power to disrupt their dependency on corrupt political networks.

Confined by the walls of the Old Mint, the characters remain captured within a powerful economy, which, given the temporal flexibility of the staging, also comments on neoliberal capitalism as the West (and, more specifically in this context, the Bay Area) experiences it today. If, as David Harvey explains, neoliberalism is the "financialization of everything" (2007:33), then this setting underscores the financialization at work within the play, opening its political commentary to critiques of neoliberal as well as liberal capitalism. This staging references the history of Western capitalism through its temporal valences. The revolutionary characters of the play seem at times to have stepped out of a Victor Hugo novel; the urgent plans, rallying cries, and spirited songs they share in their decrepit headquarters call up the history of resistance to the burgeoning bourgeois capitalism of 19th-century Europe.

The Old Mint itself pivots the play at the crux of a historical moment when the building transformed into a signifier of the strength and resilience of capital amidst a natural disaster that reduced San Francisco to rubble and embers. The costuming, props, and set pieces that reference a more contemporary timeframe echo the Bay Area's recent source of vast economic growth via an emphasis on technology that connects the play to the audience's contemporary milieu. Time crosses over itself to cross-reference the history of liberal capitalism and the revolutions it extinguished in its wake.

Genet originally wrote *The Balcony* in 1955 in France. Although it is not his most popular play, it has circulated widely on global stages. It has been produced on the European continent and off Broadway in the US, perhaps most famously by Peter Brook in Paris (1960). With a plot so complex it ultimately becomes secondary, *The Balcony* attends best to the significations of its characters. In the midst of the political turmoil the rebels have stirred while rallying to the defense of the oppressed. Irma, the Madame of an upscale brothel, covets the power of the Queen while the Chief of Police rushes to her aid with plans to suppress the revolution and solidify his control over the city. The Court Envoy protects the Queen's power by manipulating Irma into believing she might inherit that power. The Bishop, the Judge, and the General alternately assert their religious, legal, and military power while cowering beneath the weight of their inherent austerity.

The first production of *The Balcony*, directed by Peter Zadek, premiered in 1957 at the Arts Theatre Club in London. Disappointed in the production, Genet tried to physically obstruct the continuation of the play's performance but was prevented from doing so by the police. This story echoes with irony in relation to the play itself which, like many of Genet's plays, comments on police brutality and structures of power. Genet's lifelong contention with the politics of power is expressly apparent in *The Balcony*. As Rustom Bharucha explains, Genet's ethics align with the oppressed only so long as they are oppressed. These ethics are explicit in Genet's provisional support of Palestine: "'The day the Palestinians become an institution, I will no longer be on their side. The day the Palestinians become a nation like other nations, I won't be there anymore'" (in Bharucha 2014:41). For Bharucha, Genet's allegiance to revolutionary struggle sets his plays within "revolutionary time," which is "neither yoked to the Past that needs to be reclaimed, nor suspended in the endless deferral of the Future, in which much contemporary politics find refuge" (41–42). The open and flexible timeframe of *The Balcony* therefore underscores Genet's critique of power through the multiplicity of its temporal valences. Present actions, past memories, and virtual becomings are all oppressed by structures of political and economic power.

Codirectors Michael Hunter and Jamie Lyons take a creative launch from the play's ambiguous timeframe and catapult the events into a temporal space that effectively lacks specificity. Although the play's dialogue reflects the social politics of another century, the production's design situates the contemporary and the historic side by side, refusing temporal consistency: Madame Irma uses an iPad-like tablet to keep track of her house; photographers take snapshots of the General, the Bishop, and the Judge on their cell phones. Latifa Medjdoub's costumes reference no stylistic era in particular, but clothe the characters in rich, anachronistic details. Each character has the vague look of a different time, but the cast, overall, appears tied to no time at all; while the Court Envoy wears a regal red dress and Irma a tight corset, the Chief of Police sports a trench coat and Roger wears jeans. In a similar manner, the Old Mint also plays an important role in the play's temporal ambiguity. Although much of its interior has been restored, certain rooms remain untouched, accented by a decay that marks the rupture of the building's history.

The play officially begins in the basement with the appearance of Carmen. Playing the role of hostess and whore, she is the only character who addresses the audience directly; gathering the audience around her, she explains, for the purposes of this performance, how we will navigate the play. She tells us that in entering the chambers of Madame Irma's brothel we have entered a realm of fantasy, desire, and luxury. "Masturbation," she says coyly, "while

Figure 3. The Chief of Police describes his phallic monument to Madame Irma, the Court Envoy, and the Judge. From left: Scott Baker, Val Sinckler, Florentina Mocanu, and Lauren Dunagan in The Balcony*, directed by Jamie Lyons and Michael Hunter. The Old Mint, San Francisco, 4 February 2015. (Photo © 2015 Jamie Lyons)*

encouraged, is strictly prohibited."[1] Ryan Tacata plays Carmen in a provocative drag performance punctuated by skyscraper heels and a sharply edged blazer. She is all business and all pleasure at once.

As per Carmen's instructions, the audience divides and disperses into four rooms where four scenes occur on simultaneous repeat. This device separates the audience into more intimate groups; as the groups part company, it becomes clear that the action in each chamber loops continually during this portion of the performance. Each audience member is free to move among the four scenes, crafting their own narrative sequence. After the first scene, I found myself entering the others somewhere in the middle, staying while one group filtered out and another filtered in, and exiting halfway through. The start and end points appeared deliberately ambiguous. Watching the scenes end and begin again made me keenly aware of their repetitive continuity. I may have been convinced that time circled within this perpetual loop, had it not been for Madame Irma visiting the doorway every so often to ask if the characters had finished, or to say that time was up. A rich paradox emerged: this was fantasy on the clock, paid for by the minute. Madame Irma's success was thus bound to the timeliness of capital exploiting the timelessness of fantasy.

But in the world of *The Balcony*, fantasy is both morally and financially corrupt. In one chamber, the Judge (referred to with a male pronoun in Genet's script but cast here with a female actor in the role) plays out a court scene in which a thief is exposed, condemned, and prompted to cry and beg for mercy. In another, the General designs a fantasy of loyalty with a young woman costumed as a bright pink horse. In another, the Bishop dons his holy robes to preach of his importance and impermeability. "Ornaments, mitres, laces!" he proclaims. "You, above all, oh gilded cope, you protect me from the world." The structural pillars of systems of moral judgment, military violence, and religious belief all circle within this underworld of imagination. Protected from the outside, they selfishly reimagine the world as they believe it would best serve them. With an (in)appropriate dose of camp, Genet gathers these lascivious characters here to show that their power is sustained by fantasy sustained by capital. Time loops within Madame Irma's chambers not only because each scene is played out four times, but because every moment of the present blurs into the virtual fantasies of the Bishop, Judge, and General. These three characters carry the meta-theatrical weight of the play as iconic yet corrupt figures of belief, justice, and war. Each is exposed to be just as susceptible to illusion as those of us in the audience who have become enrapt in the illusions of the play.

Numerous philosophers and theorists have analyzed the virtual in terms of space, time, affect, and politics. In *Matter and Memory* (1896), Henri Bergson writes that past, present, and virtual are all experienced in the moment of perception. In this moment, memory, consciousness, and virtual action bleed together

1. The accuracy of this quote, which is not in either Genet's or the Collected Works' script for the performance, has been confirmed by Ryan Tacata.

to "create something new every moment" (1988:223). More recently, Brian Massumi has described the virtual as the realm of potential (2002); and Patricia Clough has tied Bergson to Massumi by arguing that the virtual's potential is dependent on its specific temporality, which folds past, present, and future into its temporally open affective resonance (2008). Theorizing the threshold of the virtual, Clough presents this virtual affective space as "a chance for something else, unexpected, new" (2008:19).

The characters of *The Balcony* luxuriate in the potentiality of the virtual to a dangerous degree. Each character becomes so enrapt with their imagining of a future that they cannot separate from their actions in the present moment. More than a spatiotemporal field of possibility and becoming, then, the virtual is immobilizing. Carmen fantasizes about the garden in which she will meet her daughter, and throughout the play drifts in and out of this virtual comfort. Madame Irma scoffs at Carmen's musings, but in so doing reveals her own fantasies of power and pragmatism. Roger, the young, impassioned rebel, dreams of toppling the powers that be with an ambition that is only thinly veiled by romance. But if the virtual is a space of becoming, then these characters are only becoming more thoroughly entrenched in their present moment of social and political reproduction and corruption. Roger refuses to abandon romance for rebellion. The Chief of Police pursues his own ambitions despite his office, puffing on cigars while describing his beloved dream of a phallic mausoleum. Irma sacrifices those she claims to have loved along her immoral pathway to power that is always virtual and never actual.

Capital looms throughout this staging of the play, aligning Genet's cynicism with Clough's claim that the virtual is "met by the reach of political economic capture" (2008:3). For Genet, this capture is located in the relationship between the virtual and the desire for power. Power corrupts the virtual while, inversely, the virtual corrupts systems of power. Indeed, power is revealed in the hands of those who effectively manipulate the virtual. In the chambers of Madame Irma's house the Judge, the Bishop, and the General feed their sanctioned power with fantasies that simultaneously revamp and reveal their manipulations of that power. Although Irma prides herself as being an adept exploiter of fantasy, in the end it is the Court Envoy who holds the virtual reins of power.

The Envoy reveals this distinctive power in her very first appearance, in conversation with the Chief of Police and Irma over the body of Irma's lover, Arthur, while Carmen dreamily rearranges the flowers strewn alongside Arthur's body. Dressed in an extravagant red felt dress and hat, the Envoy is the power tie to the political body. When pressed to reveal the location of the Queen, the Envoy playfully muses at her whereabouts. "She is embroidering," she tells Irma, for it is the Envoy's duty to describe the Queen as well as to conceal her: "She is embroidering and she is not embroidering. She picks her nose, examines the pickings and lies down again. Then, she dries the dishes." The Envoy flaunts her power by deliberately toying with the imaginations of Irma and the Chief of Police. Her playfulness reveals the ease with which she manipulates the

Figure 4. The Rebels, masked in Latifah Medjdoub's renderings of Jean Genet's face, serenade the audience as they enter their camp. From left: Will Trichon, Nathaniel Berman, Derek Phillips, and Jamie Freebury in The Balcony, *directed by Jamie Lyons and Michael Hunter. The Old Mint, San Francisco, 4 February 2015. (Photo © 2015 Jamie Lyons)*

possibilities of the virtual. Irma and the Chief of Police, who know they cannot believe what she is saying, thrash in her virtual web. "By God! What have you done with Her Majesty?" the Chief of Police exclaims. "I want a straight answer. I am not amused..." But the Envoy's answer does not attend to his urgency. "She is in a chest. She is sleeping. Wrapped in the folds of Royalty, she is snoring...she is snoring and she is not snoring." The game goes on, weaving truth and lies through the eyelet of fantasy as the Court Envoy playfully weaves her way through the audience. With smiles and winks, she makes us feel as though we are coconspirators while asserting her power over everybody in the room, regardless of whether they are standing near the doorway or sitting at her feet. As long as the Envoy controls the virtual spacetime of imagining, we, like Irma and the Chief of Police, feel powerless within our present moment, clustered as we are around their feet while our minds stretch towards their fantasies.

Figure 5. In the final scene of the play, the Judge, the Bishop, and the General stand before Madame Irma, flanked by magnified depictions of currency. From left: Lauren Dunagan, Jeff Schwartz, and Jack Halton in The Balcony, *directed by Jamie Lyons and Michael Hunter. The Old Mint, San Francisco, 4 February 2015. (Photo © 2015 Jamie Lyons)*

Genet's original script shows how the characters explore the virtual in a way that either exploits others or allows others to exploit them. Power circulates through these tiers of social office, from whore to rebel to Madame to icon to Envoy. At various moments, the characters' imaginations project them into a virtual realm where they wield their powers as they wish; but with the exception of the Envoy, who paints pictures for others and not for herself, the virtual ultimately entrenches these characters in their original positions and functions. The imagination becomes a space of unrealizable fantasies and futures that render the subject idle and complicit. Divorced from action, the virtual loses the power of its potentiality, its chance to create something new. Instead, it capitulates to economic capture.

Genet's play is a critique not only of the desire for power, but of the futility and futurity of this desire. This circular relationship between the present and the virtual resembles Lauren Berlant's model of cruel optimism, which she describes as "a relation of attachment" founded on a central connection to "compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *im*possible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic" (2011:24). The cruelty of this system of optimism is that the very desire for "the good life" prevents the subject from achieving the object of desire. The virtual has a systemic function: it controls the movement of power and capital.

Without abandoning the looseness of Genet's original temporal bounds, the Collected Works' production of *The Balcony* brings the politics of the play into our current moment, where desire entwines power and capital within a virtual without potential. Either impossible or toxic, the desires that comprise the virtuality of the play immobilize its characters. In the end, the burgeoning icon of the revolution is dead, but all else remains the same. Carmen is still running around in the midst of fantasy; Irma is merely the Madame of her house; the Court Envoy has orchestrated all of the possibilities of the play to lead to nothing new. At the close of the play's cycle, we are left with a conclusion that scarcely realizes the ending its characters desired. Time, power, and capital have surged forward towards virtual possibility only to come right back again, leaving all possibility unrealized.

In Collected Works' *The Balcony*, the virtual becomes entangled in the temporal confusion of the play as the movement between tenses gives way to the slipperiness of temporal multiplicity. Immersed in the production, viewers take part in both the action and the illusion of the play, as they travel between scenes, brush up against the performers, and surrender their imaginations to the characters' fantasies. Within the slippage between a past, present, and virtual that are all charged with desires for power and capital, the spectators' protective distance collapses. How easy it is for the spectator, like virtual spacetime itself, to become complicit in the consumption and production of capital.

The Balcony confronts the audience with a simple question: what makes you any different from these characters? Although both the characters and the play position themselves within ideologies of resistance, in the end they are all swept up in the perpetual production of capital. In turn, the audience must ask how their actions are complicit with this production: in play and in solemnity, in art and in life, in time and in timelessness.

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TDR: The Drama Review 60:2 (T230) Summer 2016.
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Gestural Economies and Production Pedagogies in Deaf West's Spring Awakening

Sarah Wilbur

Deaf West is a California-based theatrical institution that has been modeling inclusion through ASL/English theatrical productions for close to 25 years (Deaf West Theatre 2015). I attended the company's production of Steven Sater's and Duncan Sheik's musical *Spring Awakening* first on Wednesday 3 June 2015 at the Wallace Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in Beverly Hills, and once more on 29 September 2015 for the opening week of the company's limited Broadway revival run at the Brook Atkinson Theatre in New York City.[1] In this production, gesture reveals and attempts to subvert representational

1. The fastest show ever to ascend to Broadway, Deaf West's revival of *Spring Awakening* has tumbled forward into critical acclaim from its inaugural performance at the Rosenthal Theater at LA's Inner City Arts, through a short run at the Wallace Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in Beverly Hills, to the Brooks Atkinson Theatre on 47th and Broadway, where it premiered 27 September 2015.

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Figure 1. Director Michael Arden deploys tactile contact in Spring Awakening*'s schoolroom scenes to extend the overarching message about repressive institutionalized norms within deaf culture. Foreground: Austin P. McKenzie and Patrick Page. The Deaf West Theatre production of* Spring Awakening *at the Brook Atkinson Theatre, New York. Book and lyrics by Steven Sater; music by Duncan Sheik. Directed by Michael Arden; choreographed by Spencer Liff. (Photo © Joan Marcus, 2015)*

as my institutional axis, I am interested in joining Noland's semiotic and material concerns with McLaren's philosophy of gesture as curricular to expose how Deaf West's work challenges hierarchies of representation, reception, and production that have historically foreclosed participation by nonhearing people. A reading of the onstage and offstage workings of gesture in *Spring Awakening* reveals how touch and ASL gestural translation function pedagogically to subvert audiocentric theatrical hierarchies. The hidden triumph of the piece, as I see it, lies in the demands that the company's multifaceted use of gesture places on audiences, performers, and producers.

Gesture does different political work in the show, both onstage and off. Onstage, director Michael Arden's and choreographer Spencer Liff's choreographic

and infrastructural hegemonies guarding mainstream musical theatre. Deaf West's revival of *Spring Awakening* serves as a lens through which we can take seriously the power of gesture as a constitutive, communicative, and material phenomena.

This production provides an opportunity to drill down to what Carrie Noland has called the "pressuring" force of gesture as both a semiotic and material means of exposing "standard" routines and challenging their exclusionary logics (2008:ix–xxviii). Noland's concerns with gesture's constitutive power are particularly productive to consider here in relationship to Peter McLaren's promotion of gesture as an engine of embodied norming and learning. McLaren's 1986 *School as Ritual Performance* extends a performance lens to classroom analysis to show pedagogues the extent to which gesture produces meaning and structures social norms within educational contexts ([1986] 1993). Extending Victor Turner's advances in the study of social ritual to institutional ethnography and pedagogical theory, McLaren asks how ritualized action functions to shape social power in learning contexts. Taking mainstream Broadway theatrical productions here

integration of ASL and tactile contact explicitly trains audiences to trade sight for sound as a semiotic anchor to effectively extend the piece's overarching message about failed institutional norms to the realm of deaf culture. Also onstage, there are a multitude of gestures—imperceptible actions—that Liff and ASL translators have woven into the show's internal cueing system that tacitly build corporeal consensus among hearing and nonhearing performers to mitigate the absence of a shared auditory downbeat. Offstage, the company's employment of teams of ASL translators also places material demands on the time-stamped, profit-driven context of Broadway production. Deaf West's infrastructural dependence on gesture to drive rehearsals costs producers temporal and human capital that reveals the technical dependency on audiocentric production pedagogies as a threat to future stagings of integrative musical theatre on a commercial scale. These layered gestural economies together demonstrate the practical means by which hierarchies of representation, reception, and theatrical production in US commercial theatre are established and maintained. The company's critically acclaimed run at the Brooks Atkinson

Figure 2. Deaf West's signature bilingualism—integration of ASL gesture and spoken/sung text—re-train audience reception in the reprise to the number "Mama Who Bore Me." Clockwise from bottom left: Treshelle Edmond, Ali Stroker, Amelia Hensley, Lauren Luiz, Katherine Gallagher, Krysta Rodriguez, and Alexandra Winter. The Deaf West Theatre production of Spring Awakening *at the Brook Atkinson Theatre, New York. (Photo © Joan Marcus, 2015)*

Theatre offers an occasion to reflect more broadly on how mainstream theatrical rituals of reception and production pedagogically exclude nonhearing publics. Deaf West's alternative gestural economies—tacit and explicit—throw foreclosing theatrical practices into some much-needed relief.

Spring Awakening premiered on Broadway in 2006, winning eight Tony Awards and critical acclaim for its creative team (music by Duncan Sheik, book/lyrics by Steven Sater, choreography by Bill T. Jones) and the performers who played its lead protagonists (Lea Michele, Jonathan Groff, and John Gallagher, Jr.). Based on Frank Wedekind's controversial 1891 play about German youth awakening to the complexities of sexual desire and identity, Deaf West's revival meaningfully leverages the piece's core message of communicative ruptures between institutions, parents, and adolescents to illuminate normative constraints placed on nonhearing youth and adults. The original Broadway production had closed relatively recently (in January 2009) when Deaf West's scaled-up second version at the Wallace Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in L.A. (21 May–7 June 2015) was picked up by producer Ken Davenport for a limited 18-week run at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre in New York (27 September 2015–9 January 2016; subsequently extended to 24 January), where the company's approach has been drawn farther into the public spotlight.

As with Deaf West's past musical productions (*Big River* in 2013 and *Pippin* in 2009, both directed by Jeff Calhoun), director Michael Arden's *Spring Awakening* deliberately integrates the nonhearing status of certain performers into the theatrical plot to heighten tensions and miscommunications. This integrative casting results in an electrically charged movement world fuelled by Deaf West's signature

incorporation of both ASL gestures and choreographed action—a unique representational bilingualism that heightens the communicative congestion demanded by Wedekind's play. Arden's directorial approach evidences how this gestural bilingualism re-trains audiences to forego sound for sight as a communicative anchor in the work.

Explicit Gestures

ASL as a Representational and Pedagogical Force

ASL is the visual-gestural language used by a majority of deaf Americans, and it functions alongside sung/spoken text as Deaf West's principal semiotic engine in their musical and nonmusical stage work. ASL is generally considered a pictographic and nonalphabetic writing system wherein actions of the arms, hands, and face mimic images from lived reality (Armstrong and Karchmer 2002:xi–xix). The mimetic properties of ASL signing lend *Spring Awakening*'s work political import as a piece that challenges conventional modes of audience reception by centralizing hand gesticulation and sight as core representational instruments of the modern commercial musical.

Unlike ASL productions where gesture is magically "understood" but not reflexively acknowledged by actors or audience, Arden deliberately integrates the nonhearing status of certain performers into the plotline through double casting and voice doubling, moves that highlight the interior reflections of the youthful characters during the show's many rock and folk musical numbers. That ASL gesturing demands continual use of both hands forecloses the deployment of hand-held microphones that literally and symbolically amplified the message of youthful self-possession in the original production. As the visual "voice" of the text, the performers' hands are reserved for touching and signing meaning throughout the course of the work.

The deliberate censorship of nonhearing people who depend on their hands to communicate is brutally represented in the play's classroom scenes, wherein the adult teacher (played by hearing actor Patrick Paige with projected supertitles) restricts the gesticulation of the underachieving and nonhearing character Moritz Stiefel (played by nonhearing actor Daniel N. Durant and voiced by Alex Boniello, who also plays guitar). Through aggressive manhandling, hand restraint, and forced speech, the schoolroom scenes play up the adult characters' efforts to repress the youth while also avowing an active dimension of the politics of deaf education in Germany during the writing of Wedekind's play. Arden's research in preparation for the 2014 LA workshop production (17 September–9 November 2014 at LA's Inner City Arts Rosenthal Theater) revealed historical convergences between Wedekind's writings and the 1880 Milan Conference, a national convention that sought to reform deaf education in Germany by promoting oralism as a pedagogical practice superior to signing. Arden's handling of schoolhouse scenes in *Spring Awakening* plays up the pedagogical privileging of oral and aural learning practices through tactile manipulation by schoolmasters to effectively situate Stiefel's educational failure, written into the play, as a failure to perform to pedagogical standards driven by speech and sound as dominant senses. In addition to the spoken parroting and stick beating deployed in hearing productions of the musical, Arden's hearing schoolteacher sustains his control over Stiefel by holding together the latter's hands, encumbering them to further reinforce the violence of audiocentrism within 19th century educational reform. Such interactions function throughout the performance as teaching technologies that shape and constrain the expression of the play's young characters.

One moment of tactile censorship of Stiefel's nonhearing character occurs during the song "All That's Known" (sung by the hearing character Melchior Gabor played by Austin P. McKenzie, a hearing actor who also signs) when the teacher repeatedly beats the tops of Stiefel's hands with a switch as he attempts to sign or signal his response to spoken prompts. Throughout the song, such violent gestures reinforce the "upper hand" of the institution. The teacher further presses the institutional commitment to hearing and speaking as "correct" practices when he holds Steifel's hands to his adult lips and forces the student to trace the motion of his mouth while

he recites the verse. Such hand-to-mouth gestures compound the institutional rejection of sign language as an admissible means of articulating correct "answers." That the teacher does this through touch and gesture is significant in the realm of deaf education and deaf musical theatre, two cultural contexts where people depend on hands to embody "words." Arden's staging of classroom scenes articulates a clear affront to deaf knowledge and the systemic oppression of nonhearing people by demonstrating how hand-holding functions as a pedagogical instrument for enforcing hegemonic norms around learning, literacy, and ability.

Figure 3. Gestural bilingualism in "The Bitch of Living" engages audience members in a hypervisual search for plural meanings. Seated, from left: Joshua Castille, Austin P. McKenzie, Daniel N. Durant. Standing, from left: Alex Wyse, Miles Barbee, Andy Mientus. The Deaf West Theatre production of Spring Awakening *at the Brook Atkinson Theatre, New York. (Photo © Joan Marcus, 2015)*

Whereas the classroom scenes of *Spring Awakening* deliver a potent critique of 19th-century curricular norms through disciplinary gestures and tactile contact, I find it equally productive to extend McLaren's notion of gesture as symbolic pedagogy further into the performance to show other points in the piece where gesture reverts dominant representational practices in conventional musical theater that foreclose nonhearing participants. The production's iconic all-male ensemble number "The Bitch of Living" makes a particular purchase on sight to implicate hearing audiences in the policing of institutional norms guarding youth identity and capacity. The spoken and signed action in the song's repetitive chorus, outlined below, engulfs audience members in a hyper-visual search for meanings. I'll describe this scene, briefly, in order to contextualize how the use of gesture signifies in plural directions.

Six male cast members sit at three long classroom tables angled toward the headmaster's chalkboard as the song reaches its climactic chorus. They turn to face the audience directly, singing and signing "lyrics" that repeat the song's titular refrain:

Lyric: It's the bitch of living.

Gestures: *Right and left hands crash and momentarily stick together at the fleshy crevice between the thumb and index finger. Left fist pounds down into the crease of a bent right elbow as the right hand performs a middle finger "flip off" directly to the audience. Both hands make fists, thumbs extended and pointing up as the knuckles beat across the chest from the sternum extending outward.*

Lyric: Ah... Ah... Ah... With nothing going on. Nothing going on.

Gestures: Hands make fists and punch the air three times alternating left-right-left at various indirect targets. Cross wrists in front of face in a quick clasp, hands clenched into fists, knuckles facing out as if wearing handcuffs. Hands and fingers break open the clasp and both index fingers point forward in unison using strong and direct energy.

Lyric: Just the bitch of living.

Gestures: *Right and left hands crash and momentarily stick together at the fleshy crevice between the thumb and index finger. Left fist pounds down into the crease of a bent right elbow as the right hand performs a middle finger "flip off" directly to the audience. Both hands make fists, thumbs extended and pointing up as the knuckles beat across the chest from the sternum extending outward.*

Figure 4. Musical numbers use tactile gestures to signify explicitly (by reinforcing themes of intimacy) and implicitly (by providing hidden cues that keep the hearing/nonhearing cast in sync). Austin P. McKenzie (center) and company in "The Word of Your Body." The Deaf West Theatre production of Spring Awakening *at the Brook Atkinson Theatre, New York. (Photo © Joan Marcus, 2015)*

> Lyric: Asking WHAT? WENT? WRONG??
>
> *Gestures*: *Both hands extend with pointed index fingers away from the center of the torso, hooking index fingers in, like question marks, as the elbows slam into the side of the waist. Right hand raises up to the right side of the face while the left hand throws down to the left side, right fist partly clenched with thumb and pinky extended. Pulse this clenched gesture twice toward the chest with the thumb side leading but not touching the chest.*

The accumulative effect of this barrage of spoken and gestural "texts" institutes an onslaught of visual, oral, and aural significances rife with contradictions. The simultaneity of sung text and enacted ASL gestures carries surplus meanings that bolster the piece's themes of youthful confusion and transgression as a multi-signifying problem. When the hands crash together at the soft tissue between thumb and forefinger, this gestural ambiguity creates meaningful parallels around material action and "stuckness"—the "bitch of living"—as a misunderstood youth links here to the enduring lack of direct word-for-word translation of this deeply embodied experience. ASL gestures animate *Spring Awakening*'s main themes of foiled communication, repression, and deep questioning through their precise imprecision. For non-signing audiences, gestural signifiers force viewers to search for connections between what is done and said. It is this practice of searching and seeing over the course of two and a half hours that cracks open hegemonic modes of reception in conventional musical theatre, where audiences are generally treated to aural and oral insulation and can easily rely on sound to keep the story on track. This is just one way in which Deaf West's choreographic strategies denaturalize and subvert listening as a prevailing schema driving signification in conventional musical theatre. Through ritual integration of hand signing and spoken or projected text, the company trades sound for sight as a bridge between audiences and performers.

Tacit Gestures

Disrupting Audiocentrism in Mainstream Musical Theatre

In addition to the explicit and tactile ASL communicative strategies, small pedestrian gestures within the play's internal cueing system assure the choreographic synchronicity of the hearing and nonhearing ensemble. In production interviews surrounding the work, Liff and Arden have discussed the company's use of hundreds of small movements and tactile points of contact that, though barely perceptible to outside viewers, keep the actors and music in sync. In an interview on producer Ken Davenport's podcast, Liff describes the process of establishing a gestural cue—in this case a shoulder shrug—as a visual anchor between hearing and nonhearing actors during the show's final number "The Song of Purple Summer":

So the three of you are going to watch Ali,[2] and she's going to shrug her shoulders on the 7, and then on the 8 you wait a beat, and then you stand on the 1. And you three over there are going to watch Kathryn, and she points her finger out from her fist on the 8, and that's your cue. (Davenport 2015)

By weaving a series of virtually imperceptible movements into the choreographic structure of "The Song of Purple Summer," Liff's tacit gestures secure an ensemble infrastructure in this unique cast where half the members cannot hear the music. The bulk of the implicit cueing in *Spring Awakening* is actor driven, which heightens the obligations and responsibilities of each person in the 27-member ensemble. In the above example, a musical downbeat takes the shape of a pointed finger, which signals a large-scale ensemble movement shift. In many of the musical numbers in *Spring Awakening*, the hearing actors assume choreographic responsibility for enacting gesture-based visual and tactile cueing that keeps the ensemble entrained.

Moritz Stiefel's suicidal contemplation song, "And Then There Were None," offers an example where interdependent gestures between nonhearing actor Durant and his vocal counterpart Boniello pilot gestural entrances and exits. Whereas certain signals are straightforward, such as Boniello's opening head nod to cue Durant's opening ASL stanza, other cues make strategic use of props already in play in the scene to cue Stiefel's subsequent entrances and exits. Using a handwritten letter passed repeatedly to Stiefel throughout the song, Liff underscores Stiefel's frustration around his failure to secure funds to emigrate to the US. Here, the simple act of passing, crumpling, and throwing a letter signifies in multiple directions depending on whether one is seeing these gestures from inside the ensemble or out in the house. This strategic doubling of gestures supplants audiocentric cueing as a dominant practice upon which conventional musical theatre depends.

A closer look at the letter-passing gesture presses this point. The song begins as Stiefel stands at the foot of his twin bed holding a letter and "listening" to Melchior's mother speak/sign her message rejecting his request for funds to leave Germany and emigrate to the US. Boniello stands downstage (a low-level position, in contrast to Durant) and is turned upstage to face his signing counterpart. When a male cast member standing to Durant's right places his hand on the bed and spreads open his fingers, Durant knows to crumple the paper and throw it aside to begin signing. Throughout the number, letter handoffs signal Durant's cue to start signing the next verse. Still other verses commence when the letter that he is reading gets snatched away.

Hand-eye coordination also times the staged action in the later number "I Don't Do Sadness." As Boniello sings in place downstage right, Durant signs while traversing a makeshift catwalk that is created by the ensemble members who lock three rolling schoolhouse tables together to create a veritable runway from upstage to downstage center. As Durant walks down the catwalk, he relies on the same kinds of finger spreading gestures from ensemble members who are crouched down to hold the tables in place to signal his signing. Surrounded by crouching actors who subtly pull their fingers together and apart, Durant, Boniello, and the ensemble collectively master the cue for each new verse.

Throughout many of the songs signed and sung by the cast of *Spring Awakening*, activities like folding or unfolding arms, subtle shifts of body weight, focus changes, and audible breathing establish the group's sense of entrainment, or shared pulse. Without aural or oral cues to track action, Liff relies instead on choreographic choices that are visually unremarkable in their simplicity. A head nod, a squeeze of the arm, or an extended finger becomes a vital trigger deliberately designed to get lost in the visual spectacle of the production. The tiny acts that coordinate the Deaf West ensemble are far from random. They

2. Ali here refers to Ali Stroker, a cast member who is the first instance in US history of an actor who uses a wheelchair performing a Broadway musical. For details see Dziemianowicz (2015).

Figure 5. Careful to limit costly moments in translation on union time, choreographer Spencer Liff and ASL rehearsal translator Kilwitt make changes during Spring Awakening*'s tech week. (Instagram photo by cast member; courtesy Boneau/Bryan-Brown)*

have been habituated over months of rehearsal to provide corporeal security and synchronicity among the cast, orchestra, and crew.

While one could certainly argue that understated gesture underpins many theatrical performances, what Deaf West's hidden gestural infrastructure reveals, for me, is how embodied action and sight subvert the ableist and audiocentric assumption that choreographic action in conventional musical theatre has to be structured around the capacity to hear. Deaf West's cueing structure—choreographically constructed through deliberate gesture, focus, and touch—presents an alternative approach that awakens us to the political possibility that staging commercial musical blockbusters need no longer depend on the sound of music.

Infrastructural Gestures

The Translational Costs of Staging Integrative Theatre on the Broadway Stage

Given my overarching concern here with gesture as a constitutive force shaping audience, performer, and producer obligations, I want to close by moving further offstage to show how Deaf West's translation practices place material demands on commercial musical theatre in the realm of technical production. Here, again, gesture functions as an instrument of communication that depends fundamentally on the presence of the human body (Noland 2008:xxiv). Specifically, I am interested in how the army of ASL intermediaries hired to translate Deaf West's work make for significant time lags during the company's technical rehearsals. A brief anecdote from Liff helps expose how Deaf West's gestural demands pressure and expose norms of production within the generally time-stamped, cost-conscious context of mainstream commercial theatre.

In his interview with Davenport, Liff details the time-consuming experience of facilitating *Spring Awakening*'s technical rehearsals at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre to show how the act of managing the integrated hearing and nonhearing ensemble strains the swift expedition of production changes typically demanded by union musicals. His testimony underscores the translation-heavy exercise of changing choreography, staging, music, or lighting with a hearing and nonhearing cast as a materially and temporally expensive problem. Deaf West's double-casting and necessary inclusion of many interpreters at all stages of the production process is necessary for ensemble consensus. Thus, certain conventional production shortcuts, like the one described by Liff below, simply do not hold up in practice.

In this particular scenario, the conventional use of the "god mic"—the microphone that directors use during technical run throughs to swiftly halt all onstage and backstage action—completely loses its utility as an instrument of control with a hearing and nonhearing cast:

> Tech is not fun with this process, mainly because you can't really use the "god mic" in the way that you would normally. [Arden] has to say, "Hold," and then TJ [Deaf West's stage manager] hears that, and he has to flash a light, but [the cast] is all in the middle of doing stuff. It takes them all 30 seconds to realize that we've said "HOLD," and by then, everybody's got to reset and we've got to stop and they have to look at the interpreter, who's got a little light on her, and then you just run up onstage and you're trying to move people around, because you

> can't really just sit in the house and say, "Hey Treshelle, what number are you on?" It's not so easy as that. And then you're running onstage and [the lighting designers and technicians] are also busy lighting, so you have to find the light so that they [the nonhearing members of the cast] can read your lips or they [the ASL translators] can see you well enough to interpret, and the interpreter's running behind you, and I just want to go fast and fix everything and she's running alongside, trying to sign along. (in Davenport 2015)

Excess time spent in translation is not without its costs to Liff, Davenport, and *Spring Awakening*'s many producers, who are pressured to produce $4.5 million by the end of the 18-week run to capitalize the cost of moving this integrated production from Beverly Hills to Broadway. I highlight Liff's recognition of these heightened temporal and human demands because he gently fashions a critique: that oppressive timelines and producers' aversions to excess spending doubly threaten future interventions that require translational practices. Liff's podcast testimony—which interestingly became part of the show's publicity campaign—brings Deaf West's production circumstances into sharper view as counter-hegemonic practices that disrupt pedagogies of US commercial theatre. This company's production curriculum enacts temporal, material, and practical demands that push back against economically motivated shortcuts of many musical productions. These layered gestural economies together expose how, despite Deaf West's formidable success staging alternative production pedagogies in the commercial realm, hierarchies of seeing, structuring, and staging musicals continue to threaten to leave out deaf actors and audiences within and beyond Broadway. Through Arden's onstage integration of ASL gestures and choreographic action, through the compendium of small movements that comprise the piece's inner cueing system, and through the armies of offstage interpreters charged with technical teaching and translation, Deaf West's gestural economies productively subvert hierarchies of showing, seeing, cueing, and staging that have heretofore estranged nonhearing publics.

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TDR: The Drama Review 60:2 (T230) Summer 2016.
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