

Enacting the Impossible: Techniques and Limitations of Staging Magical Realism

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Abstract: This paper explores the complexities of bringing the imaginative extremes of magical realism to the physical realm of the stage. Magical realism famously challenges the reader by demanding not just a suspension of belief but also a suspension of disbelief—it demands that we suspend our beliefs in the physical reality of our existence and move into a realm where we are required to accept the excesses of the imagination beyond what is usually considered to be fiction’s limits. Moreover, it requires the willingness on the part of the reader to take up the challenge of accepting what would be impossible in the physical world while demanding that these elements are understood in relation to a reality that appears convincing and possibly even familiar. In recent years in English-speaking theatre, productions such as *Angels in America*, *Marisol*, *Midnight’s Children*, *Jerusalem*, and *Life of Pi*, innovate theatrical convention with light and digital projections, sound, symbolic set-design, and puppetry while maintaining a necessary foot in realism through the placement of familiar objects, locations, costumes, and language register. This paper will consider the effectiveness of these techniques and the comparative success of adaptations of novels for the stage, in contrast to magical realist plays written for the stage. The resulting exploration considers the potential for further development of the genre of magical realism in recent forms of magical realism of World Theatre in Asia and Latin America.

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Magical realism famously challenges the reader by demanding not just a suspension of belief but also a tricky simultaneous suspension of disbelief. This follows from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s fundamental assessment of the inclusion of supernatural elements in truthful poetry “to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these

shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, that constitutes poetic faith” (270). It demands that we leave behind our beliefs in the physical reality of our existence and move into a realm where we are required to accept the excesses of the imagination beyond what is usually considered to be fiction’s limits. Moreover, it requires the willingness on the part of the reader to take up the challenge of accepting what would be impossible in the physical world while demanding that these elements are understood in relation to a reality often contrasting to that of the reader’s beliefs. It takes a leap of faith to read magical realism, as Christopher Warnes notes in relation to mythologically influenced examples: “Faith based magical realism often assumes a vatic function, calling upon the reader to suspend rational-empirical judgements about the way things are in favour of an expanded order of reality” (12). As Salman Rushdie’s narrator in *Midnight’s Children* insists to his reader “Believe don’t believe but it’s true” (460).

Magical realism can exist in multiple forms and genres, including architecture, painting, film, and poetry and in the case of theatre, and particularly narrative drama, magical realism can be strongly presented. However, the difficulties of communicating magical-realist events on the limited space of the stage, which necessitate the imaginative participation of the audience, produce challenges that require higher innovative use of theatrical space and devices. This article will examine the attempts by well-known theatre directors, considering productions created from both scripts written specifically as magical-realist plays and those written by adapting magical-realist novels for stage. What this article proposes is that the added difficulties of working with adaptations of novels produces plays that are generally seen as less successful than those written specifically for stage. However, even though both fiction and stage drama rely upon the imaginative interaction with the story, there is an unavoidable limit on stage to the physical representation of a magical happening that is written without limit in the realism of the magical-realist text. In a study on *Adaptations in Contemporary Theatre*, Frances Babbage explains the challenges:

In fiction, the laws of time, space and economics cease to apply: a narrative travels wherever its author elects to take it. That combination of agility and expansiveness poses self-evident challenges when books are tackled in dramatic adaptation. Of course, such ‘problems’ can be a spur to creation; even so, the extraordinary imaginative flights of some authors might well leave actors, directors or playwrights struggling to find a language that could get an adaptation off the ground. (119)

These issues are even more challenging when dealing with the extraordinary limits of magical realism in a stage setting, hence the need, as Babbage notes, of heightened creativity of the *mise-en-scène*. Hence, this article explores the way in which magical-realist theatre faces the complexities of bringing the excessively imaginative to the physical space of the stage. Yet, it also reveals that magical realism pushes innovation to the limits, occasionally failing, particularly in relation to stage adaptations of magical-realist novels.

This article provides an examination of a gap in international magical-realist research, that recognizes the development of magical realism in the field of contemporary theatre. This

international study requires a new approach that draws upon theories of magical realism, dramaturgy, scenography, and the study of puppetry. Focusing on magical-realist plays written specifically for stage and also adaptations for stage of magical-realist novels, the study will consider how magical realism can be adapted for the physical and limited space of the stage, where nonetheless the medium of theatre itself is one that prompts imaginative interaction beyond what is visible. The theatre critic Gay McAuley reinforces this point in her study *Space in Performance*:

The experience of fiction is always precarious in the theatre due to the complexity and power of the stage reality and the fascination exercised by the presentational system, but I think it can claim with equal force that the theatre also functions very powerfully to fictionalize whatever it presents. (127)

Hence, although theatre also functions by our willingness to suspend belief and enter into the world of the drama, it relies on metaphor, metonymy, and inference to depict what cannot be physically enacted. This is at the heart of what is known as the “magic of theatre,” something that was explored by the eminent director and writer Peter Brook, who recognized: “There is a difficult balance to be found all the time between what is realistic and what needn’t be realistic” (17). This balance is a negotiation between the imaginative response of the audience to “any suggestion” and a need for an element “rooted in reality” (17).

Brook is acclaimed for creating and encouraging the use of the concept of “the empty space” (a minimal set in which the drama takes place) to promote the audience’s imaginative play during the production. The concept rests on the idea that the stage itself, uncluttered with “realist” props and sets, becomes a place of imagination for the audience and actors alike. Although this concept has become conventional in the intervening years, Cormac Power revises its impact in his work *Presence in Play*, finding it useful in exploring the foundational aspect of the relationship between the audience and the imaginative process of theatre in a negotiation of reality, realism, and fiction: “Brook has recognised that theatre should appeal to the imagination by striking a balance between the reality of the stage, and the unreality of fictional propositions.” Such negotiations are carried out through all aspects of the performance of a play: script and stage direction, acting style, set design, sound, lighting, and visual projections. With so many aspects to consider, the balance required between magical and realistic elements to keep the extraordinary grounded in realism, for the requirements of creating a communicative magical-realist performance, is all the more intricate. In recent years in English-speaking theatre, productions in the United States and Britain such as *Marisol*, *Midnight’s Children*, *The Woman Warrior*, *Angels in America*, *The Master and Margarita*, *Jerusalem*, and *Life of Pi* respond to these complexities by innovating theatrical convention with light and digital projections, sound, symbolic set-design and puppetry while maintaining a necessary foot in realism through the placement of familiar objects, locations, costumes, historical reference and language register.

Magical realism can be written into the script by including extraordinary elements in performances that infer connections to a realism, or to borrow from Coleridge, a “sufficient” “semblance of truth.” Where dramatic approaches often take an oppositional position between

either a realist or abstract presentation, magical-realist theatre walks a delicate line between the two, and thus does not gain as much critical attention either from dramaturgists or magical-realist critics.

Of course, the presentation of magic in theatre has a long history, in Europe as well as in Asia. Shakespearean theatre famously infers magic and the supernatural in Macbeth's witches and the ghost of Hamlet's father. Recent studies of Early Modern theatre reveal a deep concern and representation of magic, as indicated by the study *Magical Transformations on the Early Modern English Stage* (2014) by Lisa Hopkins and Helen Ostovich. This study exposes the oppositional attitudes to magic in this era, between a negative and positive representation. Interestingly, and similarly with our contemporary magical realism, magic has strong positive presentation in some Early Modern plays, so that "magic is a practical resource when all else fails. At the least, it is a hope, a wish based on sympathetic magic that awakens animating forces in things and beings that will reconnect existing energies to improve any given situation" (Hopkins and Ostovich 1). Citing the early 20th-century French ethnographer, Arnold van Gennep, Hopkins and Ostovich note his recognition of the use of magic in rituals that inspire societal change and transition. Using modern terms, as they state, magic allows a presentation of "liminality" in Early Modern works. Magic's situation in the Early Modern world, as familiar and yet beyond the ordinary, indicates this liminality, which also allows for the peripheral investigation of societal assumptions and positions. This echoes the liminality that Wendy Faris recognizes in 20th century magical realism, something that is "between art and reality, and dream and memory, life and death" (151). It is this interplay that gives magical realism its power in all its forms.

The plays that will be explored in this paper all include presentation of the extraordinary in a context that points to an underlying realism that reflects the liminality of the subject matter or context of the plays: *Marisol* set in the poverty-stricken periphery of New York society; *The Woman Warrior* representing second-generation immigrant identity in California; *Midnight's Children* revising Indian history and national identity from a postcolonial perspective; *Angels in America* following the lives of out-of-place characters connected through the presence of HIV/AIDS in their lives; *The Master and Margarita* following the story of a peripheral writer and his major work, when the devil appears in Soviet Moscow; *Jerusalem* exposing the lives of the rural poor and disenfranchised in contemporary England; and *Life of Pi* exploring the narrative of childhood trauma. All these topics correspond with Faris's conception that magical realism is capable of communicating liminality through the incorporation of the disruption to time, space, and identity (7). Moreover, this article will consider further the increased sense of disruption to these elements through innovative uses of the space of the stage that challenge audience expectations.

This prompts consideration of the effectiveness of these productions and the resulting potential for further development of the genre of magical realism in the context of scenography, direction, and performance. Since the 1990s, there has been success by a few dramatists to create communicative magical-realist drama in English-language theatre. As with the success of much magical-realist fiction, the examples of magical-realist plays written for stage are also considered to be key theatrical events of our time. This, however, is in contrast to the criticism of those written as adaptations. This paper will explore why.

Where magical-realist plays written for stage have a tendency to play with meta-theatricality in order to enhance the magical realism, magical-realist novel adaptations for stage seem to lack the power of their postmodern text-based versions, lacking the complexity of the original. Magical-realist plays written for stage, like magical-realist novels, appear to embrace postmodern ambivalence. The success of magical-realist scripts lies in the tendency to create contradiction by mixing and playing with different forms of presentation, promoting complexity of the dramatic realism. These techniques have been then adopted by dramatists attempting to stage adaptations of magical-realist novels with mixed success.

For instance, one of the earliest adaptations of a magical-realist novel for stage was the creation of a play in 1995 from *The Woman Warrior: A Memoir of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (first published 1976), originally written as a fictionalized memoir by the Chinese-American writer Maxine Hong Kingston. This very popular Californian novel draws on Chinese myths and stories, famously including an adapted version of the Chant of Fa Mu Lan (known as Hua Mulan in Chinese). Following a nervous breakdown, and confined to bed, the protagonist immerses herself in stories and magically merges with Fa Mu Lan to develop the strength to face the complexities of her world. In the book, she describes herself flying through the air in battle. Of course, this is easy to relay in fiction, relying on the description to encourage the imagination of the reader. On stage, the director has to make a decision about how to represent a person carrying out the physical impossibility of flight. Wires are often used for this—and are frequently used in magical-realist theatre, wherein they allow the doubleness of apparent magical flight and the evidence of stage mechanics to undermine any easy attempts at verisimilitude. Babbage is aware of the contradictory effects of the physicality of enactment on the stage: “[...] the very animation of theatre may produce the inverse problem: the material stage, the flesh and blood bodies of actors, can too easily weigh down and ‘deaden’ a narrative that leaps and sparkles on the page” (123). Facing this dilemma, in a reversal of the expected, in the Berkeley adaptation by Deborah Rogin, directed by Sharon Ott and with a set design by Ming Cho, the bed and the actor are suspended by wires in the air above the action of battle where the characters move across the stage in the restricted space below, rather than flying high above the stage. The depiction of the action, the set, and the costumes are inspired by Peking Opera, a highly stylized form of theatre that relies on recognized gesture and symbolism, rather than conventional Western realism. In this way, the play attempted to undermine expected references to realism and verisimilitude by drawing on a culturally apt yet less familiar style of theatre for the Californian audience. The play, nonetheless, did not impress the critics who claimed it lacked the power of the imaginative novel. Laurie Winer observes, in a *Los Angeles Times* review (17 February 1995), “imagery and other pageantry aside, the onstage ‘Woman Warrior’ stubbornly falls short of the alchemy Kingston achieves in her books.” Whether this was due to the difficulties of effectively communicating magical-realist elements physically on stage or due to the use of a narrator (the protagonist) commenting on the action and thereby bringing a “deadening” added layer between the audience and action, as Winer suggests as well, it is unclear. However, what remains is a clear indication of the difficulty of staging the extraordinary in a realist setting.

Also moving away from the use of wires, *Marisol* by American-Puerto Rican playwright José Rivera (first staged in 1992 in Louisville, Kentucky), is one of the earliest and best received

plays specifically written as a magical-realist story for stage. The play follows a Puerto Rican woman's life as she descends into homelessness and madness in a dystopian version of 1980s New York. The play focuses on the character's negotiation of the disorientating changes to her identity, sense of place, and crucially, safety, even to the point she is unsure if she has already died and is the corpse of the woman who shares her name. It is set in the degraded rooms and streets in less celebrated spaces within the city. The scenography is suggestive of enclosed urban spaces, with brick walls, barred windows, and subway scenes. J. Chris Westgate observes, in his article titled "Toward a Rhetoric of Sociospatial Theatre: José Rivera's *Marisol*," that "[t]he play invokes, [...] a particular experience and expectation of urban space," which is shattered by a "walking nightmare" (27) of inescapable violence. Threat and unnerving harshness permeate the play, yet are countered by the presence of guardian angels, sometimes unnoticed by the characters. In typically detailed instruction, the playwright instructs the angels to merge into the degradation of the setting, providing a magical-realist integration of the immortal into everyday life:

The Angel is a young black woman in ripped jeans, sneakers and black T-shirt. Crude silver wings hang simply from the back of the Angel's diamond-studded black leatherjacket. Though she radiates tremendous heat and light, there's also something tired and lonely about the Angel: She looks like an urban warrior, a suffering but-out soldier of some lost cause. She watches the scene below with intense concern. (Rivera Act 1, Scene 1)

The figures of angels and demons are the regular inhabitants of the magical-realist world and their stage depictions present a good example of some of the solutions sought. Adopted in the fictional works of Rushdie, Tony Kushner's play, and the films of director Wim Wenders, for instance, angels and demons are some of the most recognized characters of magical realism. Usually, these figures, in magical-realist stories, rather than being oppositional representatives of good and evil, are complex, shifting between the divine and secular, between terrifying and familiar. Hence, they are representative of the refusal of magical realism to create boundaries and define limits to what can be presented as reality.

Angels in America and *Marisol* share a location in New York, where, notably, angels appear to proclaim and fight against the deterioration of society, both with dystopian overtones. *Angels in America*, in particular, focuses the climax of the play upon the appearance of an angel in an epic two-part play. This identifies the zeitgeist of America at the turn of the millennium, which presents a moment of potential national failure and crisis.

The playwright of *Angels in America*, Kushner, gives clear instruction to allow for a sparse, symbolic set that allows meta-theatricality. In this respect he follows Brook's suggestion of an "empty space" of the stage. Kushner requests:

The play benefits from a pared-down style of presentation, with minimal scenery and scene shifts done rapidly (no blackouts!) employing the cast as well as stage hands—which makes for an actor-driven event, as this must be. The moments of magic [...] are to be fully realised, as bits of wonderful *Theatrical* illusion—which means it's OK if the wires show, and maybe

it's good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly amazing. (Kushner, *Part One* n. p.)

Hence the magical realism is created by use of techniques of theatrical illusion, to help the audience to believe, but also to allow for the audience to remember that they are experiencing an enactment of the imagination, despite the indication of familiar and real events and figures. Power notes: "The 'magic of theatre' is the game that Kushner plays [...]. The aura of the stage is thus invoked and disarmed in the same moment: the 'magic' is itself a conceit produced by the play's own manipulation of theatrical convention" (203). This contributes to the postmodern play with notions of truth and belief in the theatrical space, thus undermining any easy assumptions of conventional realism.

There have been many reactions to these instructions. They are most obviously monitored in the methods by which the figure of the "angel" is created in differing productions. In *Marisol*, the angels are in fact more human than angel, integrating them into the realistic setting of the cityscape. Angels in productions of Kushner's play *Angels in America, Part One* and *Two* often make use of wires, allowing aerial movement and descent (particularly the Royal National Theatre of the UK's production by Marianne Elliot, 2017—with acknowledgement of earlier versions by George C. Wolfe in 1993 and by Michael Grief in 2010). Sometimes, the wardrobe director dresses the angel in conventional robes so often depicted in religious Christian painting, as was the case in one of the earliest productions by Grief. This promotes a recognition in the audience as they are viewing a figure who is recognizable from familiar cultural symbolism, and yet also shocking as an embodiment of a divine being in the immediate space in front of them. The only particular instruction written into the character description, is that the angel has "magnificent pale grey wings" (*Dramatis Personae, Angels in America*). However, the notes on scenography at the appearance of the angel at the end of *Part One* are more novelistic than directional. They state:

A sound, like a plummeting meteor, tears down from very, very far above the earth, hurtling at an incredible velocity towards the bedroom: the light seems to be sucked out of the room as the projectile approaches; as the room reaches darkness, we hear a terrifying CRASH as something immense strikes earth.... And then in a shower of unearthly white light, spreading great opalescent grey-silver wings, the angel descends into the room and floats above the bed. (90)

These directions are oddly excessive given the earlier instruction in the "Note about staging" that "the play benefits from a pared-down style of presentation" (Act 3 Scene 8; Kushner, *Part One* 90).

The ground-breaking Royal National Theatre of the UK's production directed by Marianne Elliot in 2017 used an innovative and highly effective method of metatheatrical device to produce the angel. Employing a new form of puppetry by the South African Handspring Puppet Company, Elliot brings in puppeteers to manipulate a huge detached pair of wings that float near to the bedraggled human figure of the angel. These increasingly tatty wings are symbolic of the state of despair in Heaven about Earth and have the effect of reducing the divine association with the

angel, creating a liminal divine/human character that has a radical influence on the direction of the plot. The wings are operated by figures who are dressed in full body suits to integrate them into the scene. Although they are unobtrusive, they are, however, still visible, and in accordance with Kushner's instruction and desire to inspire the audience's willingness to believe beyond the conventional rules of realism. The effect is one of breath-taking impact upon the audience.

Power explains the impact of this metatheatrical relationship "collusion" between the magical "conjuring acts" of the play and audience, noting, "Theatre, through its very 'artificiality,' does not merely point to an a priori reality which is 'there' for us, but complicates the relationship between consciousness and world, highlighting our part in the construction of what we perceive around us." Thus, the technology of the puppetry and the wires become part of the deconstruction of conventional realism that allows the magical realism to appear.

In his study of puppets, Tzachi Zamir asks "What kind of object is a puppet and what modes of spectatorship does it mobilize? What manner of art is the puppeteer presenting and what is the source of its prevailing charm?" (387). The notion of charm reminds us of the "magic of theatre" alluded to earlier: the audience's willingness to believe the enactment of a kind of acceptable reality on the stage. Although we can see the puppet's sticks or strings and sometimes the puppeteers themselves, we are more engrossed in the life that exudes from the puppet figure than the mechanism of how it works. In effect, it is the perfect magical-realist device. The stage presents us, as with the pages of a novel, with a space in which we accept the possibility of things that are impossible in physical reality. In this space, the puppet is able to do things that humans cannot (for instance, be suspended in mid-air) and present a reality in excess of that of the audience.

The angel in Elliot's version also appears against a suitably sparse stage set, following Brook's influence. Rooms are simply outlined by neon tubes with the minimum of furniture within them. The magical "mental" space in which the characters extraordinarily meet each other (through a form of unintentional, telepathic physical transportation) is an empty stage covered in fake snow. This illustrates the power of Brook's concept of an empty (or near empty) stage-space to encourage the audience's imaginative response to the immediate action—something that is entirely appropriate in a magical-realist production. As Power explains:

Theatre which turns away from illusion and naturalistic scenography and stops being about a specific time and place, instead opting for the transformative potentials of the "empty space" becomes more about what is happening "now" between actors and audience. As Brook notes, "The essence of theatre is within a mystery called 'the present moment'" (Brook, 1993, 81). (32)

Kushner's play prompts the "mystery" of the "present moment" by pushing the audience's credulity through excessive meta-theatricality by requiring (as would be common in an ancient Greek play) that some of the actors play multiple characters. This is particularly clear in relation to those who share a scene with the character of Roy Cohn. Cohn is the clearest indication of a political significance in the play, that comments upon the state-of-the-nation in crisis in the power-house cities of New York and Washington. All the characters are connected to the governing powers in Washington DC, some indirectly through relation to other characters and some very

evidently. Most obvious is the inclusion of the controversial political manipulator, Cohn, who is depicted with attempted mimesis to the actual historical figure (in costume, gesture, and language). Yet, despite his connection to historical realism, he is still subject to the play's magical realism and creates the potential for its occurrence. As Stephen Bottoms notes, Cohn is a fascinating figure for any story as he is created from contradictions and lives by manipulating the truth until it is emptied of meaning: "For Roy, America itself was created 'out of thin air' by the lawyers and politicians who framed the Constitution (2:56), and he tries to explain to Joe that the ability to reinvent reality continues to be the prerogative of those who know how to manipulate the mechanics of power for their own purposes" (163). In this sense, despite being a historical figure, his dismantling of truth allows for the extraordinary to occur within his character's realm.

Cohn's actions in life literally come back to haunt him in the play, such as the reappearance of the victim of one of his most infamous miscarriages of justice, Ethel Rosenberg, sentenced to death as a suspected Soviet spy in 1953. The ghostly aspect of Ethel (in clothes reminiscent of those she was photographed in at the time of her sentencing) is revealed by her purposeful movement across the neon lines that indicate the presence of a wall as she moves to haunt the character of Roy Cohn (in a hospital bed with deteriorating health where he is in denial regarding his diagnosis of AIDS). The direction requires that Ethel Rosenberg is played by the same actor as that of the Rabbi at the beginning of the play, Roy's doctor and the mother of Joe, Roy's prodigy. This meta-theatrical device creates a magical-realist environment, confuses the mimetic elements of the depiction of the two historical figures, undermining the historical verisimilitude of the play and promoting a sense of imaginative play with the "truth" of history.

One of the foundational novels of political magical realism that was adapted for stage, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, is also concerned with challenging the concept of historical truth. The 2003 Royal Shakespeare Company production of the adaptation of the novel was created in collaboration with the author, Rushdie, and the dramatists Simon Reade and Tim Supple. It is one of the most difficult tasks of theatrical adaptation due to the novel's structure around a postmodern self-reflexive first-person narrative, while representing the most extraordinary magical happenings in such a way as to make them acceptable. The playwrights opted to present the meta-textual and storytelling aspects above the realism of the magical events, using the ancient Greek dramatic device of a narrator who speaks directly to the audience, and thus breaking the "fourth wall" that conventionally exists between cast and audience. This is a technique that has an ambivalent effect as it both brings the audience into real contact with the character, and yet also reminds the audience of the artificiality of the theatrical experience. The set design also played a large part in the attempt to overcome the difficulties of presenting magical happenings on stage. There was considerable use of digital displays which enable for the tricks of film to represent the extraordinary through special effects. Notable sonic realism was also brought into play with recordings of airplanes, warfare, and riots. Unfortunately, although the play was considered a theatrical success, it failed at the task of representing the postmodern magical realism on stage. As Michael Billington noted in response to the use of digital imagery and sound, in *The Guardian*: "although the adaptation is skilfully reinforced by newsreel film reminding us of the march of history, there comes a point when exhaustion sets in" (Billington).

The extraordinary Soviet novel, *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov (published posthumously in 1940) also questions the notion of truth and belief and is one of the most complex and challenging novels to stage. Not only does it involve magical aspects such as flying women, speaking cats, and the magical appearance of the devil, but it also is a very literary and textual novel. It is constructed from a dual narrative of a writer protagonist and the narrator of his work. This adaptation had to transfer magic, textuality, and a questioning of the nature of truth onto the small space of the stage.

Following from the success of Handspring Puppet Company, particularly for *Angels in America*, the Complicité company used puppetry in their 2021 adaptation of Bulgakov's novel. The devilish, speaking cat was presented as a puppet with its limbs controlled by sticks worked by the puppeteers who carried the large cat around the stage. Unfortunately, this did not impress the critics, including Jeremy Bigood who claimed, "Sadly the show's weak point is its puppetry. The foul-mouthed cat Behemoth, part of Woland's eclectic retinue, is a human-sized feline that attempts to energetically bound around the stage. In reality he looks and moves more like an out-of-place stuffed toy." Additionally, the use of visual projections also fell short for critics such as Lyn Gardner in *The Guardian* who lamented that "McBurney's virtuoso use of technology made me gasp, but it also left me somehow cold."

However, the more simple solutions that prompted the imaginations of the audience seem to have provided a stronger magical-realist impression. Babbage praised the solution to the character Margarita's flight swooping through the city and witnessing its life as she goes. This was carried out, not through elaborate wires, but with the simplicity of moving the set around her:

Her cream-smeared body appearing weirdly blue under the lights, the actress Sinead Matthews writhed face down on the stage floor while her figure was projected against a moving photographic backdrop of the city on the cyclorama. And just as the actor could, by this means, occupy multiple spaces at once, so too could the minds of an audience: seduced by the fiction, while relishing the mechanism of its production; in imaginative flight, but firmly grounded by the material stage. (120)

Hence, the simple solution of using the "magic of the stage" and the willingness of the audience to engage in such illusion worked more powerfully than the use of elaborate technology.

Rather than repeat technical tricks, Jez Butterworth's English play *Jerusalem* (Ian Rickson, Royal Court, 2009), written for stage, took an entirely different and effective approach to creating the magical realism of the play. The playwright's directions on set design, rather than using the empty space of the stage, encourage the recreation of a realistic setting full of detail of a "fully-furnished" recognizable world within which to infuse a mythological atmosphere. Act One begins with the instructions:

England at midnight. A clearing in a moonlit wood. At the back of the clearing stands an old forty-foot mobile home. The deafening bass pumps from within, and from speakers on the roof [...]. Blackout. Music continues, until [...] Birdsong.

Now we can see that the mobile home stands in a fairly permanent state. The old Wessex flag (a golden Wyvern dragon against a red background) flies from the end. An old rusted metal sign screwed to the mobile home reads “Waterloo.” (6)

Jerusalem is set in a woodland clearing in which a dilapidated caravan sits, the home of the protagonist, a rebellious and riotous figure, Johnny Rooster Byron. The list of items of the stage is expansive: “A porch stands out front—an old mouldy couch stands on the porch deck. Lots of junk...” (6). The set, filled with numerous objects is reminiscent of Alejo Carpentier’s discussion of marvelous realism as a baroque art form in which “decorative elements [...] completely fill the space of the construction” (93). The set-design, instructed by the playwright, fills the entire stage with a grassy area, a real air-stream caravan, a broken sofa, empty beer bottles, broken pieces of equipment, and a chicken-coop with real chickens all against a backdrop of actual trees.

The magic in *Jerusalem* exists in the mythological power that resides within Johnny Rooster Byron, something that is revealed through character interaction and audio projection. As a descendant of the ancient inhabitants of the woodland in which he lives, in a part of England that looks back to its pre-historical mythology, Johnny is a Romany “gypsy” who can conjure the power of his ancestors in fighting against the local authorities who want to evict him. There are two notable moments of magic in the play: the one where Johnny’s girlfriend trembles when he invites her to see the supernatural power in his eyes; the second when, in a desperate and failing attempt to save his life (both figuratively and physically), he calls upon his ancestors and all the ancient pagan gods of the locality in an incantation. The first of these incidents relies solely upon the audience’s willingness to accept what we witness through character interaction. The second, is created through the use of noise—a thunderous and unearthly off-stage noise that builds into a crescendo until curtain-fall. This is in contrast to the two other prominent uses of realistic sonic design in the play—the singing of the national hymn of England by a young girl that is interrupted by loud and pounding electronic dance music. Hence, the productions of both *Jerusalem* and *Midnight’s Children* share the element of audio projection to reinforce the “reality” of the action. Notably, *Jerusalem*, described as “The greatest British play of the century” (Cavendish), is entirely credible as a piece of magical-realist theatre. But it was written for the stage and hence the magical elements were created with the possibilities (and limitations) of the stage itself.

Moreover, Butterworth’s direct references to Shakespearean plays build a sense of the play’s setting in a mythological framework that is quintessentially English in a rebellious sense. As can be seen in the stage directions quoted earlier, the language of the play often has a Shakespearean rhythm despite its everyday setting and frequent use of contemporary slang. Additionally, the characters make reference to the players (a merry band of men) from *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, recalling the chaos of subversion that is caused by Puck’s spell in a woodland. Rooster Byron has clear points of similarity to Falstaff and his subversive charisma in the way in which he brings the disenfranchised young of the village to his raucous parties of alcohol and drug taking. These elements bring an additional magical-realist meta-scenic element to the play by allowing the audience to feel comfortable in the context of a play imbued with the familiarity of Shakespearean drama and that draws upon the very methods of Shakespearean mythological storytelling.

Following the enormous success of both *Angels in America* and *Jerusalem*, many stage adaptations of well-known magical-realist novels have been prompted. An adaptation of the novel *Life of Pi* by the Canadian-Spanish author Yann Martel (adapted by Lolita Chakrabarty, directed by Max Webster for Sheffield Theatres, 2023) owed much to the National Theatre's production of *Angels in America* and the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Midnight's Children* before it. The staging itself garnered praise from critics. Arifa Akbar claims:

The magic here lies firmly in aesthetics, from the teeming menagerie of large-scale puppets, exquisitely designed by Nick Barnes and Finn Caldwell, to visual effects that surge, dazzle and undulate like ocean waves (stage design by Tim Hatley with video design by Andrzej Goulding and lighting by Tim Lutkin).

The novel presents an incredible story that the writer claims to be true, of a boy surviving a shipwreck in the Pacific Ocean in a life-raft with a Bengal Tiger. The story begins in his parent's zoo in Pondicherry and ends in a hospital in Mexico where Piscine (the boy) is questioned by doctors and investigators to try to unravel and verify his story. The novel presents two possible endings: he is using animal characters symbolically in his tale in order to avoid facing the terrifying violence and depravity of his own cannibalism and that of his fellow passengers (including the death of his mother); or, he did indeed share a boat with other animals who were each killed in turn leaving just himself and the tiger. Throughout the novel, it is unclear which of these two versions are the truth. Ultimately, Piscine asks the interrogators which story they prefer, to which they answer, the one with animals. Thus, the novel ends with the comment that, "very few castaways can claim to have survived as long at sea as Mr Patel, and none in the company of an adult Bengal tiger" (Martel 319). The staging relied on the use of puppets to depict the animals who, in the novel, crucially, could be read either as real animals sharing a boat with a child or symbolic stand-ins for the human characters whose actions are too horrific to depict directly in the child's narration. The decision to use these puppets in this production increased the uncanny uncertainty about whether the characters are human or animal by allowing the puppeteers to be visible, sometimes partially revealed under the costume (creating a half-animal/half-human figure). The sparse stage set—a bed inside a boat for much of the play—also revealed an influence from *Angels in America* using light projections on the floor to indicate location and *Woman Warrior* with its centrally-suspended bed. Similarly, the use of a narrator (the protagonist telling their tale from bed) was aptly reminiscent of the staging of *Midnight's Children* (after all both novels use unreliable narrators, involving a traumatic story of childhood, with Indian child protagonists). Although, it seems that the critics found this element was the least successful. In Akbar's opinion, where the narration in the novel is "subtle," in the play, "the visual effects seem to compete with, and ultimately drown out, the quieter, more philosophical elements of the drama, not leaving enough room for Pi's existential rumination, which is key to his tale."

Thus, it appears that English-language adaptations for stage of magical-realist novels, despite the influence from original powerful staging techniques in productions such as *Angels in America* are still struggling to accommodate the expansive sweeps of imagination and the complex

narrative strategies that create the ambivalent magical/realist space of magical-realist narratives. Although sometimes appropriately used, such as in *Life of Pi*, a point has been reached where innovations in staging the “beyond possible” elements of magical realism in the English language are needed to inspire again. In this sense, Theo D’Haen’s framework of four stages of magical-realist fiction, as outlined in this issue, the last being of World Literature, indicates a similar move towards the fourth and most recent stage of magical-realist World Theatre as the new place of dramatic innovation.

There are perceivable developments in contemporary theatre in East Asia, inspired by the fictive depictions found in the “classic” texts of Latin American magical realism of the 1960s–1980s. Thai drama critic Grisana Pungpeng has noted magical-realist theatre becoming more prominent in local and independent theatres in South East Asia, inspired by writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, combining the excesses of imagination with political reality. American theatre critic Ron Smith concurs and notes the development of Chinese language community-based theatre since the 1990s that mixes “Magical Realism with theories and practices of Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed to act as a social corrective to current events” (107). Simultaneously, there are new and experimental forms of magical-realist theatre in development in Latin America (e.g. Filipe Ortiz, the magical-realist improviser’s work for public display). One of the most exciting innovations in staging magical realism is being carried out by the aerial dance choreographer, Lisa Giobbi. Giobbi, who is based in New York, works internationally, particularly in Latin America and China. Giobbi’s dancers use tracks and wires in innovative ways that can replicate, for instance, walking on air, or floating upside-down. Like with Kushner’s angel, the wires can be visible and prompt a reminder of the theatricality, or can be hidden in order to promote a sense of the realism of the magical action, depending on set design. In 2021 she was invited to work with Chen Shizheng in Jiangxi Province to stage an adaptation by Guan Shan of the mythological stories of *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, named *Mountain Sealing*. What set this production apart was the scale of its design by Studio Leigh Sachwitz and flora&faunavisions. The spectacle of the set rather than its sparsity creates an overwhelming sense of awe in the audience, moving away from both a detailed realist production or an empty space for the imagination. Additionally, this is semi-immersive theatre in which there is a performance space around which the audience stands. Hence the set moves the audience into a space reserved for the extraordinary tales of mythological creatures. In this sense, it deviates from the mechanisms of narrative magical realism, but still unlocks a belief in the extraordinary for the viewer. This spectacular international production, also used a combination of frequent staging techniques for magical-realist productions, employing digital visual projections, puppetry, and the use of wires. The darkened stage with partially visible puppeteers allowed for the use of barely visible wires for characters to appear against enormous digital projections (such as the iris and pupil of an eye hovering over and covering the performance space, allowing the aerial dancer to appear within the middle of the eye itself). Thus, Giobbi’s work that moves the use of the hardware of set design to a new level, allows the body to replicate what would be physically impossible without the aid of wires. Hence, her work innovates a way to enact the impossible that can be witnessed as an actual event by the audience, pushing the idea of magical-realist theatre to more “magical” possibilities.

My hope for the future of magical-realist theatre is that it can continue to grow and inspire across continents from local theatre groups to national theatres, addressing contemporary realities with flights of the imagination, with the same significance that has been achieved by the magical-realist novel. However, although theatre provides an effective vehicle for the presentation of the excessively fictive anchored to a recognizable realism, it appears that the modern stage and dramatic devices have become stuck, to some extent, in their limited attempts to enact the excesses of magical realism. Given the significant movement of magical-realist fiction to become a key genre of World Literature, it is my hope that international theatre, such as that of Giobbi's aerial work, will provide the innovation that magical-realist staging requires to move the genre forward.

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