

The Spirit of a Thought in a Fictional World: Summoning Ghosts to the Stage

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Works of art are inherently spectral in that they are fictional representations of life and reality, particularly theatre, which brings a nonexistent world to life by creating layers of performance between audience and actors, and even the characters of the play. Through a close reading of both the text and performance of Henrik Ibsen's tragedy *Ghosts*, this paper explores the relationship between theatre and hauntings, unpacking the layers of spectrality of stage props and the employment of silence onstage.

“Theatre, in all of its aspects, uniquely insists on the reality of ghosts,” claims Alice Rayner (Introduction). Though ghosts defy definition and encompass a diverse range of beings and concepts, most share one feature: having a foot in each of two worlds, a liminal existence that hovers between opposites and which is sometimes referred to as “spectral.” Theatre operates in a similar threshold between past and present, reality and illusion, literalism and symbolism. Visual arts such as paintings and sculptures lack the immediacy of live creation that theatre relies upon, and other performance arts such as dance lack the concrete narrative that plays provide. No other art form summons such a tactile, animate story on command. This world is self-contained by the so-called fourth wall that separates audiences from actors. Yet this fourth wall is easily perforated, as theatre provides a uniquely accessible and relatable experience by using human performers as its canvas—it seems to invite audience members to imagine themselves in the place of the characters. These few juxtapositions are just the tip of the iceberg and provide a basic justification for further inquiry into the relationship between theatre and ghosts.

Entire books have been devoted to this subject, so this essay will be focusing on two specific facets of theatre that can be probed for spectrality. One is the employment of props: the way that objects—in and of themselves—embody a tactile link between past and present, and the additional ghostliness that objects take on when they are used in theatrical productions. The second is the unique immediacy of silence onstage. It is utterly unlike silence in cinema, as it is live and present and instantly engages the audience with the performance in a new and spectral manner by demanding that the audience play an active role in determining the meaning and weight of the silence. These two subjects are ideal for a brief but thorough examination of theatre's relationship with ghosts and hauntings, in part because they are easily recognizable to anyone who has ever attended a theatrical event. Little technical knowledge of the theatre's inner workings is necessary for a cursory understanding of props and dramatic pauses onstage. In addition, these two themes dovetail nicely with each other, because they both rely upon audience engagement to form meaning and symbolism within the story of a play. The focus of this paper is the spectrality in an audience's unique interac-

tions with theatrical performances. These two themes, props and silence, provide a familiar foothold to facilitate an in-depth and accessible analysis of this broad and abstract concept.

In order to ground this conceptual discussion in a concrete theatrical example, the aptly named play *Ghosts* by Henrik Ibsen will be used as a lens through which to explore the themes of this paper. Though it has been speculated that all plays could bear this title due to their repetition and reliance upon memory, Ibsen's plays in particular deal with the past's intrusion upon the present and the return of people and memories thought dead (Carlson 1). There is no better example of these themes than *Ghosts* itself. The characters of Ibsen's piece are not haunted by corporeal apparitions in their attic; no actor is employed to portray the role of the protagonist's deceased husband. Instead, these are ghosts of lies, suppressed desires, and even concepts such as duty. Actors cast in *Ghosts* must summon to life that which never lived in the first place: the spirit of a thought within a fictional world. Additionally, it is partly through the use of props and carefully timed silences that this theatrical sleight of hand is accomplished.

Before considering the spectrality of a specific prop in *Ghosts*, the question must first be posed: what makes any object ghostly? Objects are, after all, inanimate—lifeless and devoid of meaning in and of themselves. Yet, as Alice Rayner points out, objects often become extensions of the humans who use them (Chapter three). There is nothing intrinsically alive or meaningful about a cane, for example. Yet when it is employed to help a person walk, it takes on the role of a third limb for that individual—a phantom limb of sorts. Does that association not breathe life into that inanimate cane in some way, granting it a spectrality that a cane tucked away in an attic cannot possess? Consider, too, the way that possessions inherited from a deceased relative take on significance that would mean nothing to a stranger. Not only are these objects' sentimental values disconnected from their intended uses, but they seem infused with the presence and very life of their original owners. Spectral and liminal, these objects hover somewhere between their practical everyday function and their newly-endowed spiritual symbolism.

A prop that is employed early in *Ghosts* will provide an ideal starting place to discuss the ghostliness of props. The play begins with the protagonist, Mrs. Alving, entertaining old friend and religious authority Pastor Manders. Her son, Oswald, has recently returned home to take a break from his career as an artist. While Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving are talking, Oswald appears in the doorway smoking a pipe. The following conversation takes place:

OSWALD. I found my father's pipe in my room—

MANDERS. Aha—then that accounts for it!

MRS. ALVING. For what?

MANDERS. When Oswald appeared there, in the doorway, with the pipe in his mouth, I could have sworn I saw his father, large as life.

OSWALD. No, really?

MRS. ALVING. Oh, how can you say so? Oswald takes after me.

MANDERS. Yes, but there is an expression about the corners of the mouth, something about the lips—that reminds one exactly of Alving: at any rate, now that he is smoking. (*Ghosts* Act 1)

The pipe that belonged to Oswald's father, then, has a double meaning for the characters

within the narrative. The pipe is nothing more than a pipe; there is nothing particularly special or interesting about it. But because of its place in the Alving family history, it is able to evoke the memory of Mrs. Alving's husband so completely that Manders actually mistakes the son for the father. The pipe is also a tactile remnant of a lost family member. It is inscribed with the spiritual memory of its owner, yet it also has a physical presence (both within the world of the play and within the performance). It, like a ghost, hovers between the physical and the spiritual world, unable to singularly inhabit either.

The pipe takes on further spectrality when the subtext of the above excerpt is layered into the performance. Mr. Alving had a reputation as a noble man, but that reputation was a fabrication invented by his wife, in part to protect her son from the knowledge of what his father really was. The Mr. Alving that Oswald and Pastor Manders envision is incongruent with the Mr. Alving that Mrs. Alving knew. No wonder Mrs. Alving protests at the assertion that Oswald looks like his father—she has spent her whole life trying to ensure that Oswald grows up to be nothing like him. Later in the play she specifically mentions to Manders that she “was determined that Oswald, my own boy, should inherit nothing whatever from his father. . . . My son shall have everything from me—everything” (*Ghosts* Act 1). Even something as innocuous as a pipe becomes laden with meaning. For Manders and Oswald, it is a remnant of an upstanding and noble father figure. For Mrs. Alving, it is a reminder of the lies she has told and the sacrifices she has made to protect her son from his own father.

But before the pipe can even make its appearance onstage, it must occupy a peculiar stopping place: the props table, organized carefully backstage so that each performer and crew member knows just where to locate each critical prop night after night. “Especially when they are simply sitting backstage or in the prop room prior to their uses in a performance, bereft of both text and performance, prop objects can seem suspended between both worldly and fictional uses,” says Rayner (Chapter three). In terms of the narrative, the props are indeed suspended between use and neglect, between reality and fiction. But for the performers that will bring the story to life, the props can be infused with a further level of spectral meaning available only to those who might have worked with this particular theatre company before. Most theatres maintain collections of props that they can pull from for multiple productions. Since actors often return to the same theatres again and again to participate in productions, their relationship with props that have been reused can be as complicated and multifaceted as a character's relationship with an object within a play. The actor who will portray Oswald in a production of *Ghosts*, for example, may have been in an earlier production of a stage adaptation of Sherlock Holmes. The pipe that he will soon clamp between his teeth may once have played a role in the story of that famous detective. Indeed, the pipe may have collected stories and meanings from dozens of actors, designers, and directors over the years. “While objects are mastered by (and master) actors in performance, they also function as secret talismans in systems of superstition and familial inheritance on and off the stage,” notes Aoife Monks (150).

Therefore, when an actor steps onstage as Oswald with his pipe in a production of *Ghosts*, he is accompanied by myriad symbols and meanings. The pipe may contain countless stories from other productions, the ghosts of which will follow the actor onstage into an entirely new story, past invading present, memory invading immediacy. Within this new world that he and his prop currently inhabit, the pipe carries the added weight of the dead father his character never knew. It also carries the ghosts of his mother's lies and omissions of truth, embodying her memory of who Mr. Alving truly was and the way that she has erased that truth from her son's life.

Yet we have so far failed to discuss one group of people who have the power to assign meaning to props (or any part of a production): the audience itself. As is the case when viewing any piece of art, every individual's interpretation will be unique and specific, influenced by a host of personal factors that the artist has no control over. But in this case, the audience is in a unique position: viewers have the power to affect the art they are viewing directly. In many ways, the audience is just as responsible for the creation and meaning of the performance as the actors, director, and designers. Erica Fischer-Lichte describes this effect as "atmosphere"—something that cannot be summoned by the presence of any single element on or offstage, but arises from the unique interactions of many individual factors, such as the interaction between the audience and the performers (70-71). And the actors are engaged in an incredible sleight of hand as they actively reveal secrets about their character to the audience that the character is not even aware of yet, implicating the audience in unraveling the meaning behind the dialogue before the story itself does (Whitaker 711). Because of the immediacy of live performance, the audience's interaction with the narrative plays as important a role as any of the performers. Few conditions can affect a production more than the condition of an audience: a restless audience can alter the energy in the performance space so dramatically that it may utterly transform the tone of that night's show. The quality of a performance often hinges on the willingness of an audience to laugh at appropriate moments or maintain silence during others. As Peter Malekin and Ralph Yarrow claim:

Theatre... is potentially a living communion based on the bonds of sympathy, a kind of direct magnetic sensing, a 'being with' other beings and other modes of being. A 'dead' audience receives information and, perhaps, changes its ideas; a 'live' audience potentially transmutes being and consciousness—not merely the content or objects of consciousness (59).

For example, a dead audience might not engage with the multitude of questions that the pipe raises or the layers of meaning it holds for every person on and offstage. Although not everyone has performed in a stage play, almost all of us can relate to the sinking feeling of addressing a crowd that is disengaged from the subject at hand, and how difficult it is to keep that uncomfortable knowledge from impacting your performance. While the performance might not be utterly derailed, the actors in a production of *Ghosts* would almost certainly recognize the symptoms of a disengaged audience, and they might struggle to give a performance identical to one in which the audience is actively taking part in the creation of meaning in the play.

Silence is a key barometer for judging how engaged an audience is with a story being portrayed onstage. Silence is one of the very building blocks of theatre: without it, the audience would be chattering over the actors' lines. In a way, the audience is spectralizing itself for the purposes of the production, silencing its own voice to allow the world of the play to overtake it. This peculiar unspoken agreement between cast and audience can be broken with something as simple as a poorly timed sneeze during a crucial moment in the play. Yet the play goes on, only momentarily wrenched out of the moment. For a moment, the illusion hovers on the cusp of actualization as the audience reconnects with the story and once again willingly forgets that it is an audience and not a part of the play's world. In cinema, too, the audience is expected to break the silence only when appropriate, such as after laugh lines. But there is also a clear difference in the natures of these two silences: in cinema, an inappropriate breach of silence is disruptive only to the audience. In theatre, it is

disruptive to the performance as well. In no other art form can the audience so immediately and so effectively engage with a concrete narrative as it is created before their eyes. Though the audience is not present in the world of the play, its ability to affect the story promotes it to an active player in the way that the story is told. The audience as at once present and absent in the narrative. Malekin and Yarrow explain, “Theatre is a communal event...both performers and receivers are affected; both individual and shared experience occurs; what occurs involves at least a crossing of borders—borders between self and other, life and death, between ‘reality’ (itself largely imagined) and imagination, the entry into different parameters of existence” (62).

To reverse the perspective for a moment, this breakdown of borders is just as crucial to the actors as it is to the audience. As in the case of an audience unwilling to participate in developing the layers of meaning of the pipe, the actors rely on an audience’s engagement with their narrative, even as they must deny this reliance for the purposes of maintaining the conceptual fourth wall. They feed off the audience’s reactions, however microscopic, even though according to the narrative they are telling, the audience does not exist (and in most cases, must not exist for the purposes of storytelling). The performers hover somewhere between acknowledging and ignoring the audience’s presence—putting the audience in a spectral and liminal position of half-existence within the story.

One of the ways that this peculiar relationship between audience and actor is felt is when an actor takes a pause onstage. Silences in cinema exist in an utterly different world, because they are timed to the millisecond and tell the same story every time. Though it is obviously up to each audience member to determine the meaning of the pause, any single interpretation is not going to influence the tone of the film or the length of the silence. In theatre, however, the silence is immediate. The actors onstage are responsible for recreating a specific moment of silence at every performance, though of course that silence will never exist precisely the same way twice. Even if the actor were capable of perfectly recreating an exactly timed pause, the audience’s interpretation and interaction with the performance would render the silence utterly different each night. Speaking of the immediacy of space in the theatre, Malekin and Yarrow note, “I cannot enter this space if I am walled off in habit or in ego. Performers need to cross these boundaries, to interact and interfuse, to be open and available to each other and to the audience. I have to flow. I have to lose ‘myself’” (60). The myriad of meanings that the audience members assign to every pause influences the way they watch the play, which affects the energy between the stage and the audience, which can affect the length, tone, and intensity of the pause. And this creation of meaning can be achieved not only with dialogue, but also with silence—not the presence of spoken words, but the absence of them. Yet that absence has a tangible presence of its own as it draws the audience in and engages them with a fictional world that they do not inhabit.

Once again, the world of Ibsen’s *Ghosts* provides an ideal jumping-off place for discussing the spectrality of theatrical silence. Whether they are pauses written into the stage directions or characters deliberately omitting some portion of the truth, the silences in *Ghosts* are just as important as the dialogue and sometimes even more so. Aristotle posited that attending a play is an act of catharsis. The audience members are not only escaping the reality of their own lives but vicariously experiencing a fictional character’s problems and thus feeling more capable of handling their own. Theatre is meant to help make sense of a chaotic world (Pizzato 176-177). But Ibsen was not in the business of comforting his audiences by providing them with easy answers. Instead, his plays posed questions. His aim was to stage something closer to real life, where answers are not as clear-cut as they often are in

the stories we tell (Durbach 124). This withholding of answers is reflected not only in the ambiguous conclusions that Ibsen's plays are known for, but in the subtext-laden dialogue that often layers more meaning into what isn't said than into what is.

Take, for instance, the following exchange in act two. Oswald has just revealed to Mrs. Alving that he is suffering from syphilis. His doctor has informed him that this disease is generally inherited from a licentious parent, but since Oswald is still submersed in the illusion of his father's morality—the illusion that Mrs. Alving herself has instilled in his mind—he has come to believe that he somehow brought this disease upon himself.

OSWALD. . . . If it had only been something inherited—something one wasn't responsible for! But this! To have thrown away so shamefully, thoughtlessly, recklessly, one's own happiness, one's own health, everything in the world—one's future, one's very life—!

MRS. ALVING. No, no, my dear, darling boy; this is impossible! [Bends over him.] Things are not so desperate as you think. (*Ghosts* Act 2)

Here again, the “ghosts” of the narrative exist in the truths that each character is trying to subvert. The audience is aware by now of Mrs. Alving's secret (the true nature of her departed husband) and so the subtext in her dialogue is distinct and immediately recognizable. Oswald is almost begging for Mrs. Alving to reveal the truth to him, yet Mrs. Alving is still dancing around the truth. She could alleviate his fears with a few words, but she still opts for mollifying platitudes that only hint at the truth. As in the case of the dual meaning of the pipe, the two versions of Mr. Alving that exist in the characters' minds—the saintly father and the degenerate husband—seem to hover over the text, ghosts in their own right. But there is another unspoken truth beginning to insert itself into the narrative. Later in the script, Oswald will reveal that his disease will eventually rob him of his mental acuity, leaving him with the intellect of an infant. The prospect of losing his mind so terrifies Oswald that he will eventually extract a dangerous promise from his mother: that when the time comes, she will help him take his own life rather than living out the rest of his days with the mind of an infant. Long before the disease itself is acknowledged onstage, the audience should feel the presence of something haunting that hides between the lines of Oswald's dialogue—just as it should sense the contradiction between different characters' perceptions of the late Mr. Alving long before Mrs. Alving verbally acknowledges the untruths she has spread about him. This urgent, desperate terror that Oswald refers to as “this killing dread” (*Ghosts* Act 3) is a specter that follows him onstage at his very first entrance and never leaves his side. It should also be noted that though it represents one of the major conflicts of the play, the word syphilis is never used in the dialogue—an intentional omission indicative of the way that Ibsen layers his silences with meaning (Vardoulakis 52).

Beyond the subtext, there are also silences written into Ibsen's script. There is, of course, a great scope for silences to be added in by directors and actors; but when a pause is literally written into the text of a play, it cannot be deviated from because it is just as significant as any line of dialogue. Consider the following excerpt (which takes place just before Mrs. Alving reveals the truth about her husband to Pastor Manders):

MANDERS. . . . verily, Mrs. Alving, you are a guilt-laden mother! This I have thought it my duty to say to you.

[Silence.]

MRS. ALVING. [Slowly and with self-control] You have now spoken out, Pastor Manders; and to-morrow you are to speak publicly in memory of my husband. I shall not speak to-morrow. But now I will speak frankly to you, as you have spoken to me. (*Ghosts* Act 1)

Imagine these lines being spoken without observing the bracketed stage directions. Imagine depriving the audience of the opportunity to engage with that haunting silence. By now it is obvious that Mrs. Alving has been keeping secrets from the pastor, and during the silence the audience is grappling with the same question as Mrs. Alving: is this the moment she will reveal her great secret? Without the pause, this moment would seem flat and predictable because it would seem that Mrs. Alving had already made up her mind to tell Manders, and the audience might disengage from the tension of the scene altogether. This silence is also indicative of another specter that haunts all the characters of the play: the specter of duty. No matter what each character resorts to in the name of personal freedom (such as Oswald pursuing a career in the arts or Mrs. Alving taking her son's upbringing into her own hands), they cannot escape the haunting of society's expectations and restrictions (Tabasum and Khalid 4). Therefore, the silences and subtext become as necessary as Oswald's pipe in act one; without them, the story could not be effectively told.

Silences, like props, are methods of inviting audiences to engage with a performance and take part in ascribing meaning to its story. Both allow audiences' interpretations and layers of meaning to interact with actors' (and characters') in the immediacy of a live performance. Without the pacing of a silence, the story might as well be told in the form of a novel; without the immediacy of the silence onstage and its unique ability to engage with the live audience, the story could be told through the medium of film. It is this in-the-moment engagement between audience, actors, and characters that makes theatre so spectral. Similarly, without a physical pipe in Oswald's hand, the audience might spend more effort on imagining a non-existent object than it would on unpacking the symbolism of the object itself.

The audience (which cannot be acknowledged by the characters within the play) is actively participating in the storytelling by interpreting symbols such as pipes and pauses. They themselves are ghosts that intrude upon the insulated world of the story, yet their presence and engagement with the narrative is crucial to the very telling of that story. "Even the theater's most 'realistic' images are shared illusions," Thomas Whitaker points out (701). And those illusions cannot exist without the participation of the spectators. The actors could be putting on the most riveting performance of their lives, but without an audience to imagine those opposing versions of Mr. Alving, his ghosts would exist only in the minds of the performers. With it, the ghosts become a dynamic intersection of the imaginations of both audience members and actors. Theatre provides a liminal space where fiction is alive and real (if only for the span of a single evening's performance) and the combined efforts of spectator and artist can summon a ghost on command.

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