

A Critical Analysis of Michael Quinn's 'Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting'

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Michael Quinn's 'Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting' explores the impact which the 'growth of celebrity phenomena'¹ has had on society, the media and entertainment industries, and on the acting craft itself. Since an in-depth critical analysis of the entire article would be extremely wide-reaching, I have chosen to focus specifically on the points which Quinn makes about the influence of celebrity culture on the semiotics of *theatre* acting, and the effect which the casting of 'star performers' has had on a number of theatrical productions.

Following a close textual and critical analysis of the relevant aspects of Quinn's article, and application of his views to a variety of productions, reviews and contrasting critical theories, I will evaluate the extent to which Quinn's conclusions with respect to the celebrity sign, the subversion of authority and the aesthetics of celebrity acting are applicable in the theatrical context.

One of the facets of celebrity culture tackled by Quinn is the impact which a detailed knowledge of an actor's personal life can have upon a theatre-going audience. He explains that famous Hollywood icons possess:

an overdetermined quality that exceeds the needs of the fiction, and keeps them from disappearing entirely into the acting figure or the drama. Rather their contribution to the performance is often a kind of collusion with the role, sometimes hard to accept.²

Quinn's reference to 'an overdetermined quality' probably alludes to the fact that the 'public identity of the actor'³, which has been moulded by the overexposure of his or her personal life and 'transmitted by entertainment news'⁴, makes audiences so hyperaware of the celebrity standing before them that they find it impossible to disengage from their preconceptions or allow the actor to 'disappear' into the character. Quinn explains that 'The whole acting sign [is linked] between the life of the performer and the knowledge of that life that the audience brings to the performance'.⁵ One could infer from this statement that if the audience's 'knowledge of that life' is too extensive, then the 'acting sign' becomes problematic and distorted.

This certainly seemed the case to theatre critic Maureen Boyle when she reviewed Ralph Fiennes in Jonathan Kent's production of Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*, which was performed at the Gate Theatre in Dublin in 2009. Boyle described how, by following 'a trend in British theatre of using big-name Hollywood actors on stage'⁶, the audience's perception of Fiennes as a 'heartthrob', and their pre-existing expectations about his much publicised

¹ Michael Quinn, 'Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 6 Number 22 (1990), p.154

² Ibid., p.155

³ Ibid., p.154

⁴ Ibid., p.156

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Maureen Boyle, 'Celebrity Friel' *Fortnight*, No. 442 (Fortnight Publications: March: 2006), p. 31

charisma and charm, meant that not only were spectators 'overwhelmingly female', but that this led to 'the singularly strange and unsettling experience of watching a Friel play in an atmosphere in which there seemed always to be the possibility that someone would throw their knickers onto the stage'.⁷ This 'strange and unsettling experience' appears to have stemmed from the odd juxtaposition of a gritty and understated piece of theatre being performed by a glamorous actor whom the audience associated with a jet-setting, womanising lifestyle. Quinn's observation that the collision of a celebrity with a role is 'sometimes hard to accept' was certainly reiterated by Boyle's description of the 'unsettling restiveness in the audience',⁸ which could not seem to resign the 'life of the performer' to the 'performance' itself – effectively warping Fiennes' 'acting sign'.

Another of the issues which Quinn addresses also relates to the pre-existing expectations and prior knowledge of a theatre-going audience. The fact that individuals are unable to separate the character a celebrity is portraying on stage from the well-known roles which he or she may have played in the past means that they:

always resist, to some degree, the transformation of the actor into the stage figure required for the communication of a particular fiction.⁹

Quinn's observation has been developed by the theatrical critic Marvin Carlson, who notes that 'even when an actor strives to vary his roles, he is, especially as his reputation grows, entrapped by the memories of his public, so that each new appearance requires a renegotiation with those memories'.¹⁰ Both Quinn and Carlson concur that these lasting memories, upon which celebrities often build their careers, have a damaging impact on the semiotics of acting; with the latter noting that 'the recycled body of an actor, already a complex bearer of semiotic messages, will almost inevitably in a new role, evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles if they have made any impression whatever on the audience'.¹¹ According to Quinn, 'this relatively direct exchange of expressive signs and outside knowledge splits the acting sign',¹² and the result is a character with whom audience members are unable fully to engage. Instead, they are distracted by the constant 'renegotiation' of the memories of past roles which celebrity actors preserve.

Carlson has used Ben Brantley's *New York Times* review of *Macbeth*, starring popular television actor Kelsey Grammer, to support his theory. The 'scathing'¹³ article mocks the audience's reaction to a comedic celebrity who is 'familiar as a very un-Macbeth-like character',¹⁴ and questions the director's decision to cast an actor who is inextricably associated with such a different type of role.

It is, however, important to note that not all theatrical critics corroborate the theories of Quinn and Carlson. The theatrical reviewer for *The Telegraph*, Charles Spencer, openly addresses the issue of 'ghosting' in his review of *Equus*, starring the iconic *Harry Potter* star, Daniel Radcliffe. He describes how 'Radcliffe brilliantly succeeds in throwing off the mantle of Harry Potter, announcing himself as a thrilling stage actor of unexpected range and depth',¹⁵ apparently coming to the conclusion that if an actor is sufficiently talented, any

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Quinn, p.155

¹⁰ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003) p.9

¹¹ Ibid., p.8

¹² Quinn, p.156

¹³ Ibid., p.9

¹⁴ Carlson, p.9

¹⁵ Charles Spencer, 'Radcliffe's naked talent makes *Equus* a hit', *The Telegraph*, 28 February 2007

existing memories or associations with the celebrity can be cast aside and the ‘acting sign’ which Quinn describes may remain intact.

One of the key issues which Quinn tackles in his article is the fact that the presence of a celebrity in a theatrical production often results in ‘conflicting structures of authority’¹⁶, which may subvert conventional roles. One reason for the structure of authority being conflicted relates to the fact that, according to Quinn,

Only one human subject can use the fiction of the artwork to suture an illusion of presence; the celebrity has the power, as both sign object and producer, to subvert or pre-empt the efforts of other artists to authenticate themselves through fictions of absolute authority.¹⁷

The fact that only ‘one human subject’ is able to use a piece of theatre to ‘authenticate themselves’ for their own artistic gain seems to imply that a piece of theatre can only possess one ‘artistic sign’. This could explain why ‘leading actors commonly receive the major attention of the play or playwright and almost certainly above that of the director or any other contributing artist’.¹⁸ In light of this revelation, Quinn insists that ‘the celebrity can find no place in an ‘ensemble’’¹⁹ because the multiplicity of signs which it inevitably creates becomes distracting to the audience.

This was certainly the case for the production of Arthur Miller’s *Resurrection Blues*, which was performed at the Old Vic in 2006. Described as a ‘a celebrity-studded production’²⁰, it encompassed the collective efforts of Kevin Spacey as artistic director of the venue, ‘Hollywood veteran’²¹ Robert Altman as theatrical director and several famous actors including Matthew Modine, Neve Campbell, James Fox and Oscar winner Maximilian Schell. With so many celebrity contributors, there seemed to be a consistent battle for artistic authority and, as a result, the ‘various styles [of the actors] never cohered’²² and Altman’s ‘negligent direction’²³ came to create a ‘bizarrely awful’²⁴ piece of theatre after which ‘the taste and judgement of Kevin Spacey’s Old Vic regime [were] called into question’²⁵. According to Michael Billington, this multiplicity of celebrity signs meant that Miller’s play was ‘not [...] given a fair chance’²⁶.

In contrast, when authority is allocated to a single celebrity, as Quinn considers advisable and even necessary if a piece is to succeed, the results can be very different. Nicole Kidman’s 1998 performance in *The Blue Room* met with rave reviews – arguably because her authority was unthreatened and the ‘acting sign’ was allowed to remain intact. One critic noted that ‘Whatever reservations existed about the play – and there were plenty – these were swept aside in collective adoration of its leading lady’²⁷, thus emphasising that a single celebrity presence may be appreciated for being novel and exciting without necessarily overwhelming the work in which he or she appears. Similarly, Ben Brantley of *The New York Times* commented that ‘Theatre ghouls who thrive on watching big stars from another medium stumble onstage have nothing to dine out on here. Ms. Kidman gives a winningly

¹⁶ Quinn, p.156

¹⁷ Ibid. p.157

¹⁸ Carlson, p.69

¹⁹ Quinn, p.156

²⁰ Paul Taylor, ‘First Night: Resurrection Blues, Old Vic, London : A misfiring show to add to Spacey’s catalogue of Old Vic blanks’, *The Independent*, Friday 3 March 2006

²¹ Richard Brooks, ‘Spacey’s shows cancelled as audiences quit Old Vic’, *The Sunday Times*, April 9th 2006

²² Taylor, *The Independent*, Friday 3 March 2006

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Taylor, *The Independent*, Friday 3 March 2006

²⁶ Michael Billington, ‘Resurrection Blues’, *The Guardian*, 3 March 2006

²⁷ Ben Wolfe, ‘Naked in the warehouse’, *The Telegraph*, 10 October 2002

accomplished performance, shifting accents and personae with an assured agility that never stoops to showing off or grandstanding'.²⁸

Another aspect of authority which Quinn feels is subverted by the inclusion of a celebrity, 'and the area that produces the most damning press',²⁹ is that of criticism. Quinn explains that, in his opinion:

The absolute qualities of the celebrity threaten the evaluations of the critic.³⁰

In this respect, Quinn implies that the unbiased stance of a theatre critic – which lends the critic his or her sense of authority – is removed when the critic is called on to evaluate the performance of an acknowledged star. The 'absolute quality' which Quinn describes probably refers to the fact that celebrities tend to possess an established critical persona, meaning that all reviews are, to an extent, influenced by pre-existing perceptions.

Toby Young of *The Independent* takes Quinn's arguments further by suggesting that theatrical reviewers tend to react with particular resentment to this subversion of their authority. Stating that 'Drama critics like bashing movie stars who wander on to their patch because they can't resist the urge to topple some big shot',³¹ he relates this critical hostility specifically to Jude Law's participation in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in 2009, noting that 'rarely have the critics' knives been so far out of their scabbards. To begin with, he's a movie star and nothing is more likely to raise the hackles of a self-respecting drama critic than a celebrity taking a break in their busy schedule to do twelve weeks in the West End'.³² Young shows that, when forced to review a celebrity's performance in a piece of theatre, a critic may lose his or her ability to remain impartial, and may even become petty and hostile – thus resulting in a review which lacks integrity.

One of the most interesting subjects tackled by Quinn in 'Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting' – and one which closely relates to theatrical performance – is his approach to the so-called 'aesthetics of celebrity acting'. According to Quinn the:

celebrity provides viewers with a constructive principle, a context for evaluation. When celebrity and role merge in an art work that both validates the performer's identity and fulfils general aesthetic expectations of beauty, pathos, humour etc. The work is good art by most criteria.³³

It seems that, according to Quinn, the presence of a familiar celebrity in a play or theatrical production affords audience members a form of benchmark for assessing how successful the piece is. If, in their opinion, the performer's perceived persona realises the 'aesthetic expectations' of the character whom he or she is playing, then it is easy to judge the performance as aesthetically pleasing and, therefore, a piece of 'good art'.

Certainly, Ian McKellan has received consistently positive reviews for his performances in Shakespearean productions, being described as an 'avuncular, petulant and, finally, spine-tinglingly magnificent Lear'³⁴ and 'the Iago of the 20th century'.³⁵ These rave reviews stem partly from the fact that, by frequently acting in the genre, his identity as a performer is validated: you 'can't help thinking about Shakespeare when you're with

²⁸ Ben Brantley, 'Fool's Gold in the Kingdom of Desire', *The New York Times*, Monday, Monday December 14 1998

²⁹ Quinn, p.157

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Toby Young, 'Jude Law may have underdog appeal as Hamlet', *The Independent*, Sunday 24 May 2009

³² Ibid.

³³ Quinn, p.158

³⁴ Anon., 'Sir Ian McKellen: The Bard and Me', *The Independent*, 19 December 2008

³⁵ Ibid.

McKellen'.³⁶ His 'commanding physical prowess',³⁷ 'intelligence and sheer theatrical might'³⁸ fulfil the aesthetic expectations of a serious, Shakespearean actor and, as a result, he possesses the necessary criteria required to produce 'good' performances.

Quinn takes this exploration of the 'aesthetics of celebrity acting' even further by examining how theatrical audiences may react to a famous actor who does not necessarily reflect the aesthetic expectations of a character or play:

When celebrity and role more clearly collide, then two kinds of effects are possible. Either the celebrity is perceived as meeting a challenge, as achieving a stretch – a personal growth that provides a pleasure of audience approval to augment a drama – or the celebrity might be perceived as out-of-place, miscast at best, at worst an overreacher.³⁹

Quinn seems, ultimately, to draw the conclusion that by defying the expectations of a theatrical audience, and casting a celebrity who might not necessarily fit the conventional aesthetic mould of a character, the viewers' reactions will be polarised – either they will be very pleasantly surprised and fully endorse the celebrity, or they will be overwhelmingly critical.

Certainly, in recent years, different theatrical productions have experienced such conflicting responses. Jude Law's starring role in *Hamlet* was, at first, met with cynicism and sceptical conjecture; after all he is a celebrity who has become the 'poster boy for overexposure',⁴⁰ and is often associated with somewhat vapid Hollywood blockbusters. Aesthetically, it was felt that he would lack the gravitas and or pathos required to take on such an iconic role. However, ultimately, his performance received, for the most part, rave reviews – the theatrical reviewer for *The Telegraph*, Charles Spencer, described 'a performance of rare vulnerability and emotional openness',⁴¹ and Toby Young of *The Independent* depicted Law as an 'underdog'⁴² who had defied all expectations.

In contrast, Kiera Knightley's role in Moliere's *The Misanthrope* evoked disdain and intense criticism. Not only was she considered unable to fulfil the aesthetic requirements of her precocious and magnetic character – being described by Quentin Letts of *The Daily Mail* as possessing 'all the charisma of a serviceable goldfish',⁴³ – but she also lacked the technical prerequisites for a theatrical actor. Letts explains that 'The occasional word here and there, a longing look into the camera, and hey, presto, you're an international celeb. On stage you have to project, not just in the voice [...] but also the whole being, physically, emotionally'.⁴⁴ This inability to project such aesthetic qualities resulted in the perception that the director's decision to cast 'the underpowered Miss Knightley ... [was] merely indicative of his lack of self-knowledge'.⁴⁵

Having critically analysed Michael Quinn's 'Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting', and having applied his theories to recent theatrical productions, it is clear that many of the Quinn's opinions can be substantiated.

Quinn's declaration that 'celebrity [...] is not composed of acting technique but of

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ David Benedict, 'King Lear/The Seagull', *Variety*, 1 June 2007

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹ Quinn, p.158

⁴⁰ Young, *The Independent*, Sunday 24 May 2009

⁴¹ Charles Spencer, 'Hamlet, at Wyndham's Theatre: Review', *The Telegraph*, 4 June 2009

⁴² Young, *The Independent*, Sunday 24 May 2009

⁴³ Quentin Letts, 'The Misanthrope after Moliere', *The Daily Mail*, 18 December 2009

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

personal information,⁴⁶ supports his theory that, when a famous personality takes part in a play, audiences apply this 'personal information' – whether it be about their private lives or previous roles in which they have appeared – to the piece of theatre they are watching. This 'outside knowledge'⁴⁷ often 'splits'⁴⁸ and distorts the 'acting sign' – something which was, for example, demonstrated by Ralph Fiennes' appearance in *Faith Healer*. Quinn's hypotheses about the ways in which the presence of celebrities in theatre ultimately subvert the established structures of authority are also, for the most part, corroborated by recent theatrical productions: who, for instance, could forget the disastrous, star-studded, version of Miller's *Resurrection Blues*? Finally, Quinn's arguments with respect to the 'aesthetics of acting' are supported by a number of theatrical reviews and critical perceptions, whether relating to celebrity actors such as Ian McKellen, who fulfil the necessary criteria, or Hollywood starlets like Kiera Knightley, who fail to meet the aesthetic and technical requirements for a theatrical role.

To claim that all of Quinn's theories are universally applicable would be to oversimplify the complex nature of theatre. There have, after all, been a number of recent productions – such as that in which Jude Law played 'Hamlet' – which (at least once the run has been established and media attention has died down) have confounded the expectations associated with celebrity status. It would, however, be fair to state that Quinn's views provide an influential insight into the impact which celebrity performers have upon the semiotics of acting and various aspects of the theatre. It is, moreover, certainly the case that, whether the result be positive or negative, 'celebrity productions [often make] for a strange experience'.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Quinn, p.156

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Maureen Boyle, 'Celebrity Friel' *Fortnight*, No. 442 (Fortnight Publications: March: 2006), p. 31

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