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Human Remains: Acting, Objects, and Belief in Performance

Aoife Monks

In 2008, a real skull appeared as Yorick in a production of *Hamlet* by the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford. The skull remained in the role for the Stratford run of the show, but when the RSC transferred to London, the skull was withdrawn, returned to the archive, and replaced by its plastic replica in performance. The brevity of the skull's stage appearance was due to its discovery by the British press. It was "outed" as the skull of André Tchaikowsky, a classical pianist and Holocaust survivor who, having been diagnosed with terminal cancer in 1979 at age 46, bequeathed his organs to medical research and his skull to the theatre, writing in his will that the skull "shall be offered by the institution receiving my body to the Royal Shakespeare Company for use in theatrical performance."¹

Pascale Aebischer tells the story of how the RSC's props department received the skull after Tchaikowsky's death in 1982, to "the evident delight of the department's dog,"² relating how the skull was aired on the rooftop of one of the company's buildings (for two years according to the André Tchaikowsky website)³ in order to dry and bleach it, before it was consigned to a specially made box in the theatre's prop store. There it languished for twenty-six years, momentarily coming to life in a photo shoot with Roger Rees in 1984 and appearing in rehearsals for Mark Rylance's *Hamlet* in 1989, only to be replaced by its cast replica in performance.⁴ The actors felt unable to employ Tchaikowsky's skull, arguing that "it would be inappropriate to use a real skull during the performances in the same way that we would not be using real blood etc."⁵ Here, the skull's story appeared to come to an end, and it waited tirelessly in the props room for its moment in the limelight, until finally, in August 2008, Tchaikowsky's remains appeared in the role of Yorick. Playing alongside the skull was the actor

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¹ For this quote and further details of Tchaikowsky's life and work, see www.andretchaikowsky.com (accessed 1 June 2012).

² Pascale Aebischer, "Yorick's Skull: *Hamlet*'s Improper Property," *EnterText* 1, no. 2 (2001): 206–25, quote on 207.

³ See <http://andretchaikowsky.com/miscellaneous/skull.htm> (accessed 1 June 2012).

⁴ Pascale Aebischer, *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies: Stage and Screen Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 86–87.

⁵ Claire Van Campen, the show's musical director, qtd. in *ibid.*, 86.

David Tennant as Hamlet (fig. 1), famous for his leading role in the BBC science-fiction series *Doctor Who*,⁶ and Patrick Stewart as Claudius, famous for his role in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.⁷

Greg Doran, the director of the show, justified his use of the object by explaining that he had wanted “to make the performance as real as possible.”⁸ However, when the skull’s own reality emerged—its name, occupation, history, desires, trauma—it was hastily withdrawn and returned to the archive for fear of “‘toppl[ing]’ the show”⁹ and “distract[ing] the audience.”¹⁰ Demonstrating a mimetic know-how that would have impressed even Plato, the RSC replaced the skull with its exact copy, expecting that the second-order status of the replica would do less to distract the audience. However, during the Stratford run, the skull’s moment in the limelight was by no means assured when the RSC discovered that it needed a permit from the Human Tissue Authority to employ the skull onstage.¹¹ During the previews therefore Tennant performed instead with another real skull, this one coming to the stage not with an autobiography, but with a performance history as the prop that had been used in 1813 by the great nineteenth-century actor Edmund Kean. Tennant’s acting therefore accessed the “reality” of this replacement skull by virtue of its inheritance, as Doran described: “A piece of theatre history happened that night on the Stratford stage as David Tennant, a 21st-century Hamlet, stared into the empty eye sockets that a nineteenth-century Hamlet had used. For those of us watching, a little shiver of connection occurred.”¹²

This story, then, is of a ghostly object that arrives at the theatre with a set of injunctions, demanding action and remembrance. The object is met with prevarication, indecision, and rehearsal, but no acting. It haunts the rooftops of the theatre building, while it is imitated by its likeness onstage. Finally, it appears in the name of truth and then disappears in fear of discovery. It is tempting to read this as the story of the RSC as Hamlet and Tchaikowsky’s skull as the ghost of Hamlet’s father.

It is easy to dismiss the media frenzy about this story as an instance of morbid prurience during the silly season. Nonetheless, the power ascribed to the skull—its imagined ability to produce truthful acting and to topple the show, once discovered by the audience—expresses some interesting assumptions about the role that human remains might play in the practices of acting. Objects are imagined to function like

⁶ *Doctor Who* is a science-fiction television series that has played on and off on the BBC since 1963. Its central premise is that the doctor—a “time-lord”—is reborn in new bodies (a highly convenient logic to support changes in casting). Tennant played the tenth doctor and proved highly popular with television audiences, which bolstered the publicity for the RSC’s production of *Hamlet*.

⁷ From 1987 to 1994, Stewart played the role of Jean-Luc Picard in the US science-fiction television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

⁸ Simon de Bruxelles, “At Last, for Yorick. Bequeathed Skull Stars in Hamlet,” *Times* (London), 26 November 2008, 27.

⁹ Qtd. in *ibid.*

¹⁰ “Human Skull Abandoned by Hamlet,” *BBC News*, 3 December 2008, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/7762012.stm> (accessed 1 February 2011).

¹¹ See de Bruxelles, “At Last, for Yorick.”

¹² Qtd. in “David Tennant to Revive Partnership with Real Skull for BBC’s *Hamlet*,” *Telegraph*, 24 November 2009, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/6644720/David-Tennant-to-revive-partnership-with-real-skull-for-BBCs-Hamlet.html> (accessed 22 January 2012).



Figure 1. David Tennant as Hamlet, holding André Tchaikowsky's skull.
(Photo: Tristram Kenton, reprinted with permission.)

catalysts for “real” acting, and human remains—particularly a skull with a past—are viewed as especially powerful for this process. However, just as they seem to offer actors potent stimuli for performance, human remains also threaten to derail this process by insisting on their autonomy from the illusion and the claims of the actor. Once the audience becomes aware of their presence, remains are seen to disrupt the secret equilibrium between actor and object.

The language I use here, of “catalyst” and “stimulus,” is not accidental. What undergirds this approach to human remains, I argue, is the residue of Stanislavskian acting theory, whose investment in the real status of objects onstage informs the ways in which these human props have been imagined in performance. Stanislavski’s interest in the theories of Pavlov and the science of behaviorism renders the theatrical world of objects a source of stimulus for the psychophysical transformation of the actor. Stanislavski’s theories were influenced, as Joseph Roach argues, by the behaviorist notion that “objectively controlled manipulation of the physical environment will alter the inward man.”¹³ However, the equilibrium of the inner-actor/outer-object relationship is a fragile one, and while remains are viewed by artists like Doran as particularly powerful vehicles for the production of a truthful performance, they also threaten to reveal the precariousness of acting and the ambivalent subject status of actors.

This essay examines a range of strategies employed by actors to harness and contain the disruptive powers of human remains. I will begin by looking further at how they might be imagined through Stanislavski’s complex and often contradictory approach to objects in performance, and argue that their use onstage resembles that of religious relics. I will consider the ways in which communion with objects might facilitate and displace virtuosity in acting, then examine how Ron Vawter controlled the power of the cremated ashes that he used in his 1992 performance *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* by making all of his theatrical strategies public—apart from his use of human remains. These examples help me to investigate how the language of possession, the anamorphic powers of relics, and the struggles over authority and agency in performance feature in the imagined role that human remains play in producing acting. I argue, furthermore, that the abject qualities of relics may function as powerful and disturbing metaphors for the process of acting itself, by underscoring the loss of self that the actor must undergo in order to act. Before I examine these performances, however, I want to spend some time thinking through the ways in which remains have been imagined to work onstage and how they might occupy a Stanislavskian economy of actor/object relations.

Anamorphosis, Belief, and the Relic

In the newly curated theatre galleries of the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) sits a human skull that is missing most of its teeth. Its cranium is signed with names, in blue felt-tip marker, and it is surrounded by paraphernalia of the stage: a portrait of Mozart, a Pink Floyd poster, the score to *Jesus Christ Superstar*. This is the skull that played Yorick in the 1980 Royal Court production of *Hamlet* starring Jonathan Pryce, famous for his depiction of a Hamlet possessed by the ghost of his father. The skull, the V&A online catalog tells us, was signed by the cast and entered as a raffle prize

¹³ Joseph R. Roach, *The Player’s Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 198.

at the end of the production. In an oddly Dickensian twist, it was sent to the museum in a cardboard box, like a foundling: "It was accompanied by a short note, which explained that the donor had been given it as a present by someone who had won it in a raffle. The donor, who confessed to being superstitious, clearly did not want to keep the skull at home and thought we might like to have it for our collections."¹⁴ This story is noted by the gnomic statement in the museum's catalog: "Given anonymously."¹⁵

The skull arrives at the V&A having traveled through a series of "regimes of value," in Arjun Appadurai's term,¹⁶ moving from self to thing, from commodity to gift, from theatrical metonym to member of a collection. In doing so, it marks the shifting status of human remains as body, theatrical property, conduit for acting (it is accompanied by a picture of Pryce addressing the skull), memento mori for audience and Hamlet alike, debased object-as-prize, and, finally, evidence of a lost performance. Perhaps we can identify in this shifting state the great attraction of human remains for the theatre. Skulls personify our ambivalent relationship to bodies, functioning simultaneously as objects and as the remains of selves. Like the Pryce prop, Tchaikowsky's skull was once "somebody" or "somebody's"; it was once a self, or owned by a self, and was then owned by a theatre, employed by an actor, and is now the possession of the RSC archive. Its murky status as a property makes visible the dialectical relationship between subjects and objects; it makes concrete the frailty and fragility of subjectivity. The skull stands as a memento mori not only for our impending deaths, but also for the precariousness of our selves.

However, this memento-mori quality is not necessarily latent in the skull, but is brought to life through the actor's interaction with it—through touch, as Alice Rayner argues of stage props.¹⁷ In the 2009 BBC film of the RSC's *Hamlet*,¹⁸ first the gravedigger and then Hamlet confronted the skull, coming face to face with a subject turned object. Cradling Yorick in his hands and staring intently into its eye sockets, Tennant's Hamlet addressed his lines to the skull, pausing occasionally to pick at its bristles, teeth, and bone. It was the combined act of looking and touching that brought Yorick (and Tchaikowsky) to life; it was the skull's incorporation by the actor, Tennant's embodied act of narrativization, which bestowed it with subjectivity. Here, Tennant's touch produced the anamorphosis identified by Andrew Sofer¹⁹ in bestowing life and subjectivity to the skull, while simultaneously asserting all the more the skull's inanimate tangibility. By gaining a story and a name, the skull began to look back, returning Tennant's mildly cadaverous stare with the puppet's uncanny gaze.²⁰

¹⁴ The story of the skull's arrival at the theatre was related to me by e-mail from the Theatre Archives inquiry system on 12 December 2011.

¹⁵ See "Skull" in the V&A online catalog, available at <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O138197/skull/> (accessed 10 October 2011).

¹⁶ See Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63, quote on 15.

¹⁷ Alice Rayner, *Ghosts: Death's Double and the Phenomena of Theatre* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2006), 73–109.

¹⁸ The Illuminations Production Company filmed the show on location in a disused Jesuit seminary in 2009. I base my analysis of the graveyard scene on the DVD of this film.

¹⁹ Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 92.

²⁰ For an excellent discussion of the skull's role as anamorphic memento mori that "turn[s] others into its props," see *ibid.*, 89–116.

It is in this unstable state between subject and object that Sofer identifies the power of the stage skull's anamorphic tendencies, in how it "leap[s] from the 'literalization' of the memento mori skull as prop to its personification as character—its refusal to be reified into a dead thing."²¹ This ability of a skull to move from its status as object to becoming an uncanny kind of subject always comes with the risk of upstaging the actor who plays across from it, producing a perspectival shift in the theatre audience that is similar to what Stephen Greenblatt describes of the affects of the skull in Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*: "[W]e must distort and, in essence, efface the figures in order to see the skull."²² Sofer and Greenblatt point to the anamorphic power of skulls to disrupt the semiotic and phenomenal planes of the reception of artworks for the spectator. I want to refocus this argument on a study of the imagined relationship between acting and human remains. This approach draws attention to the ways in which actors, in order to produce belief, deliberately harness the skull's anamorphic powers. This belief is imagined to fuel real and truthful acting.

"Real" and "true" are terms that are often used interchangeably and, I argue, emerge from the legacies of Stanislavskian acting theory in which belief, truth, and the real operate in a circular, and often tautological, relation. We can see this circularity in Stanislavski's argument that "what is conscious and credible gives birth to truth, and truth evokes belief."²³ Stanislavski suggests that this belief is produced through the relationship between a real object onstage, and the actor's concentrated and active focus on this object. Belief emerges through this focus, moving the actor "out of the world of objects and into the world of the imagination."²⁴ Objects therefore function as vehicles for transformation within the actor, and the reality of these objects is crucial to the successful production of truthful acting: "the more real surroundings are onstage, the nearer to nature the actor's experiencing should be."²⁵ This close attention on a real object enables actors to achieve Stanislavski's aim of manufacturing the experience of being: "completely taken over by the play. Then, independent of his will, [the actor] lives the role, without noticing how he is feeling."²⁶ Actors therefore ideally lose themselves, or an aspect of themselves, through the medium of the object, and the object is also transformed: "it ceas[es] to exist in its initial form and disappear[s], as it were, to emerge in another, stronger form, fortified by your imagination."²⁷

By focusing closely on an object, actors are transformed by it, forgetting themselves in the process, while at the same time transforming the object by incorporating it into their theatrical world. Based on this system, it is possible to see why human remains might be viewed as so powerful by the inheritors of the Stanislavskian tradition. Here, human remains become the equivalents of religious relics in their ability to act as a conduit for belief, and in their particular and peculiar effects on representation. Alex-

²¹ Ibid., 94.

²² Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More To Shakespeare* (1980; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 20.

²³ Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, trans Jean Benedetti (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008), 18.

²⁴ Ibid., 69.

²⁵ Ibid., 154.

²⁶ Ibid., 17.

²⁷ Ibid., 111.

andra Walsham defines the construction of a relic as the process in which objects are imbued with an "autonomous ability to prompt an intense human response."²⁸ Relics work as a catalyst for belief and as a conduit of it, transfiguring the worshipper's relationship to reality. In the rhetoric surrounding the use of skulls onstage, we can see that human remains work like religious relics for actors by asserting their "realness" and commanding the actor's attention in service to the truth—transforming both actor and object in the process.

Of course, the imagined power of remains relies on a system of faith that imbues the materials of the body (and other forms of remains, such as clothes, souvenirs, burial cloths, and so on) with the status of relic in the first place. An object that has already been interpolated into a broader structure of collective faith therefore affirms individual belief. To complicate things further, belief is not only affirmed, but produced through this process. Relics therefore both reflect and structure a broader system of belief and the relationship to the material world, reflecting, as Walsham argues, "the logic and grammar of the human and social relationships that such items express and mediate, and which, moreover, they create as active agents."²⁹

What we see therefore in the rhetoric used by directors like Doran is a faith in the power of human remains to inspire belief in the theatre. Actors make belief through their interaction with human remains on which they have bestowed the status of relics, harnessing the narrative resonances of these remains to the labor of believing. These relics thereby transfigure the perceptual landscape of actors, who enter into a system of belief that enables them to make believe. This tautological and circular practice chimes with Stanislavski's approach to the material world onstage, which Shomit Mitter sums up as "[t]rivially, an action is true because the actor believes in it; far more importantly, the actor is able to believe in the action because it is true. Stage truth displaces actuality by becoming it."³⁰ The act of make believe through communion with an object produces the making of belief, which reorganizes the materials of the stage to "beget an order of reality which we cannot possess in life."³¹ By investing remains with a narrative status that competes with the representational language of the stage, and then by investing this narrative with the status of the real, relics become a conduit for belief that enables actors to relinquish their own reality, in order to access a greater "truthfulness," as Stanislavski puts it: "truth is inseparable from belief, and belief from truth."³²

Nonetheless, as Sofer and Greenblatt suggest, harnessing human remains in service to belief and the production of acting is a risky business. The question of upstaging may be profound—Doran's fear that Tchaikowsky's skull could topple the play suggests that this relationship among belief, object, and the actor's subjectivity hangs in a delicate balance. If awareness of any one of these elements begins to become too

²⁸ Alexandra Walsham, "Introduction: Relics and Remains," *Past & Present* 206, suppl. 5 (2010): 9–36, quote on 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁰ Shomit Mitter, *Systems of Rehearsal: Stanislavsky, Brecht, Grotowski and Brook* (London: Routledge, 1992), 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

³² Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 154.

prominent for the audience or the actor, there is a danger of the edifice crumbling and of the actor's presence, or the object's, disrupting the system of belief. After all, human remains propose a challenge to the status of theatre as a representational art, continually insisting on their own distinctive history and autonomy. As Walsham argues, "[a] relic is ontologically different from a representation or image: it is not a mere symbol or indicator of divine presence, it is an actual physical embodiment of it."³³ This may be why the cast of Rylance's *Hamlet* rejected the use of a real skull just as they would reject real blood: the "realness" of these artifacts ran the risk of piercing the illusion, uncoupling the dramatic sign from its referent.

The problem of remains becoming too perceptually prominent for actor or audience mimics the tensions between self and object within the actor that is demanded by Stanislavski's system, relying upon, as Mitter argues, a "combination of censorship and propaganda."³⁴ Actors perform "independent of their will" in service to the role, and must sacrifice some of their agency and authority in order to act. To account for this form of surrender, Stanislavski imagines the actor as fundamentally divided: half communing with the object, half observant of this process, as his fictional protégée Kostya puts it: "I, as it were, split down the middle. One half was the actor, the other watched like an audience."³⁵ Actors objectify their acting selves, watching and controlling the self critically, as spectators. The actor's communion with objects necessitates a form of estrangement from the self who performs, producing a secret, repressed relation to things that functions at a distance from the controlling, knowing subject, ensuring that the realness of the actor does not get out of hand and disrupt the sanctity of the illusion.

Of course, as Sigmund Freud reminds us, the process of repression always runs the risk of what is repressed making an uncanny return. In *The Uncanny* (1919), Freud demonstrates how the "*unheimlich*" is comprised of what was once familiar and has been repressed, making a return that is frightening and strange.³⁶ He particularly emphasizes how the newly rational approach to death represses earlier superstitious beliefs, which "live on in us, on the look-out for confirmation."³⁷ This, Freud argues, explains the fear of corpses and remains, which is an atavistic one from an animist age, citing "the old idea that whoever dies becomes the enemy of the survivor, intent upon carrying him off."³⁸ In the fear that Tchaikovsky's skull might topple the RSC's *Hamlet*, we might see some of this magical thinking in operation, centered on the ways in which the repression of the actor's authorial self might make a reappearance in a competing "actor"—the uncannily animate figure of the skull. The RSC's replacement of the Tchaikovsky skull with its copy seemed motivated by the fear that this self would "carry off" the precarious and delicately balanced system of repression out of which Stanislavskian acting emerges.

Equally, perhaps, the skull in *Hamlet*, and the other kinds of relics (ashes and costumes) I will consider below, confronts actors with an image of their own art. What we see in the skull, and its source of power, is the limits of the autonomous subject, revealing

³³ Walsham, "Introduction," 12.

³⁴ Mitter, *Systems of Rehearsal*, 8.

³⁵ Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 527.

³⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (1919; reprint, London: Penguin Books, 2003).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

the boundaries of the self. The uncanny qualities of the cadaver, which Julia Kristeva describes as the "abject," show us the losses of the "I" through its inadequate traces in this inanimate object. She describes the corpse as "the most sickening of wastes, [which] is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, 'I' is expelled."³⁹ In the corpse, we see the extinguished "I," the subject that is no more, and in doing so we experience the limits and borders of subjectivity in the living. The uncanny quality of corpses is to be found in how they bring to light all that the subject must reject and repress in order to maintain the fantasy of autonomous subjecthood: "corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live."⁴⁰ Of course, as Judith Butler has pointed out in a meditation on the limits of the sexed subject, the abject is a condition of subjectivity and therefore comprises its constitutive aspect, even as it is imagined to function "outside" or "beyond" the borders of the self.⁴¹ The corpse, and its remaining relics, therefore functions to unsettle the subject by demonstrating the precariously deathly constitution of life itself.

Kristeva's theory of the abject is useful for thinking about human remains onstage, not least because her description of the abject might apply to the ways in which acting is imagined by Stanislavski and his inheritors. Actors also stage the uncanny boundaries of the self in their apparent ability to give up their own agency, repress their own will, in order to be inhabited by another self—voice, subject, and character. The rhetoric used by actors in relation to the risks of acting is often mocked, but perhaps Jill Bennett's claim about playing Gertrude in the Jonathan Pryce *Hamlet* that "I feel I am taking my life in my hands" was not simply empty histrionics?⁴² In drawing attention to the contingencies of subjectivity, the skull stages the practice of acting itself. Actors must take their "I" into their own hands and repress it in favor of becoming a kind of meaningful relic for the audience—a conduit for the spectator's belief through narrative accumulation, numinous materiality, and a precarious formation of a self at the limits of subjectivity.

With this process in mind, we can see that human remains are highly potent objects for the production of acting, but that they, at the same time, threaten the very art of acting by competing with the actor for the limelight, by acting as an uncanny manifestation of the actor's process of repression, and by functioning as a memento mori for the actor's staging of the limits of the self. The skull reminds actors of what they stand to become, what terrors they invite, by the very act of performing. Perhaps, then, the rhetoric that often surrounds modern Shakespeare performance, and that indeed emerges from stage fright as Nicholas Ridout has pointed out, comes from this repression of the self necessitated by Stanislavski's system of acting.⁴³ To act is to rely on things—and to risk becoming one.

³⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3–4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3 (emphasis in original).

⁴¹ "The subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is after all 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation"; see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3.

⁴² Qtd. in Christopher Logue, "Such a Risky Business Interpreting the Complexities of the Character of Hamlet," *Times* (London), 30 June 1980, 12.

⁴³ See Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 39.

Virtuosity

I have argued so far that human remains function onstage to induce belief in the actor, facilitating the repression of their authorial selves in the process. In this section, I want to consider how Stanislavski's system uses objects as a means to circumvent and reconfigure virtuoso performance. The actor's repression of self, I argue, results in imagining acting as a form of possession by an object, and the practice of possession seems particularly acute when a relic is in play. However, I want to suggest that virtuosity does not disappear in this system, but rather is displaced onto an object (or relic) whose job is to take on the monstrous aspects of the virtuosic self that must be repressed within the actor.

One of the outcomes of the division of the self that we see in Stanislavski's system of acting is the problem presented by virtuosity for the relationship among the actor, the object, and the audience. After all, the technical prowess of the virtuoso risks asserting the actor's authorial self and disrupting the fragile equilibrium of actor, object, and illusion. As Gabriele Brandstetter argues, this is actually a tension that emerged much earlier, in the mid-eighteenth century, when the virtuosic performer was viewed as a challenge to the theatrical illusion, setting up "a field of conflicting authorities: the authority of the text on the one hand and that of the performer (or interpreter) on the other."⁴⁴ Virtuosic performance therefore constitutes a competing authority with the text and its realization through the theatrical illusion, by introducing a rival narrative of actorly presence through "the ethos of the person displaying their individuality."⁴⁵ The cultural suspicion of virtuosity, Brandstetter argues, emerges in a rhetoric of monstrosity through the virtuoso's apparent ability to exceed technical constraint and appear super-human: "a fascination with the technical, with the phantasm of the human-machine, clings to the virtuoso's image, lending him a demonic aspect."⁴⁶

We might see in the anecdotes about human remains an anxiety regarding the potential "virtuosity" of relics onstage. The talent of relics for accumulating narrative resonances inserts a competing "self" into the narrative field of the performance, and the relic therefore takes on a monstrous aspect. After all, in the case of Tchaikowsky's skull, Yorick performed doubly, having chosen the role for himself and coming to the part as both Tchaikowsky and Yorick. Tchaikowsky's will—both legal and spiritual—introduced a parallel history, name, value, and actor into the theatrical field. In this, the skull functioned in a very similar way to a virtuosic celebrity actor. Michael Quinn has incisively sketched out the disruptive qualities of the star actor, arguing that "[t]he celebrity figure is an alternative reference, competing with and structuring the role of the stage figure as it promotes its own illusion."⁴⁷ In the RSC's use of the skull, we see a double and uncanny celebrity effect, with Tennant's accrued persona as Doctor Who interacting with his Hamlet, just as Tchaikowsky's history and will disrupted and shored up Yorick's deathly presence. In both cases, the RSC was at pains to protect the illusion of *Hamlet* from these competing narratives. Tchaikowsky was replaced by his replica onstage, while audience members were forbidden by the

⁴⁴ Gabriele Brandstetter, "The Virtuoso's Stage: A Theatrical Topos," *Theatre Research International* 32, no. 2 (2007): 178–95, quote on 182.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁴⁷ See Michael L. Quinn, "Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting," *New Theatre Quarterly* 6, no. 22 (1990): 154–61, quote on 160.

RSC from turning up and brandishing memorabilia from *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who*.⁴⁸ The company desperately attempted to corral two elements of the theatrical apparatus that should be silent and still—skulls and spectators—but that kept on insisting on getting messily out of hand.

In this, the actor who plays Hamlet must face down an object that has come to resemble a fellow performer, exerting an uncanny form of virtuosity by dint of its impossible and monstrous animacy. By virtue of its anamorphic presence, the skull exceeds the technical constraints of the stage, bringing the virtuoso's seeming transcendence of the material world into direct communication with the abject. Indeed, virtuoso performers might be another category of the abject, in Kristeva's terms, in how they apparently exceed the boundaries of the subject to such an extent that they no longer appear human. The ability of a skull to be unfeeling and yet animate, to be unconscious and yet disrupt the narrative illusion, and to be rigid and nonetheless command the audience's attention is a kind of excessive virtuosity that might well define "bad acting" in Stanislavski's terms. As Declan Donellan says of Stanislavski's system, with ironic resonances for the analysis of a skull in performance: "the first question must always be 'what is good acting?' And the answer will remain the same: 'when it is alive!'"⁴⁹ Despite its failure as a Stanislavskian actor, the skull's virtuosity renders it a worthy adversary for the actor who plays against it (which may partly explain why the role of Hamlet is seen as such a test of the actor's art). Yorick challenges the actor's stage presence, his ability to compete with the skull's powers.

This may be why Jude Law insisted on using a 200-year-old real skull to play his Hamlet in New York in 2009, following Tennant's RSC performance, and suggested that Tennant had not been actor enough to play against Tchaikowsky's skull: "the guy who was playing Hamlet got a bit fed up with the way the skull was upstaging him, so he changed the skull."⁵⁰ Michael Grandage, the director of the show, suggested that the "chemistry" between Law and the skull was too precious to replace, suggesting that he had a greater ability to cope with the anamorphic powers of the object than Tennant did.⁵¹ The skull, then, presented a challenge to, and affirmation of, Law's ability to remain in control of the materials of the stage and the audience's gaze. Real skulls compete with the semiosis of the character of Yorick or his equivalents, and with the actors who play against him. In doing so, real skulls display a kind of virtuosity, a monstrous ability to exceed human capability and transcend the imagined boundaries of performance. By coming to "life" onstage and asserting its presence as real, the skull is turned into a star actor.⁵²

I have presented virtuosity so far as a challenge to Stanislavskian acting practice, and certainly the assertion of an autonomous virtuoso persona problematizes the re-

⁴⁸ See Caroline Briggs, "Doctor Who Signing Ban at Hamlet," *BBC News*, 24 July 2008, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7523210.stm> (accessed 1 February 2011).

⁴⁹ Declan Donellan, "Introduction," in Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, ix–xv, quote on x.

⁵⁰ Qtd. in Tim Walker, "Jude Law Guilty of 'Skulduggery' Over His Dig at David Tennant's Hamlet," *Telegraph*, 6 October 2009, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/celebritynews/6266384/Jude-Law-guilty-of-skulduggery-over-his-dig-at-David-Tennants-Hamlet.html> (accessed 1 June 2012).

⁵¹ Grandage, cited in *ibid.*

⁵² Of course, this "starry" quality is inscribed in the history of the text itself, with the ghosting of Yorick by the figures of William Kemp and Richard Tarlton, the famous Elizabethan clowns, which may have added a further extra-narrative resonance for contemporary audiences; see David Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 11.

pression of self that Stanislavski imagines to be so crucial to the production of acting. However, this is not to say that virtuosity does not appear in his system; rather, the actor is imagined to be taken over by objects so that it is as if the object itself, rather than the actor, exerts a powerful persona on the stage. The experience of possession is the means through which the actor can repress his actorly "I," while at the same time displacing a virtuosic persona onto stage objects. In a remarkable passage from Stanislavski's *An Actor's Work*, we can see this peculiar and indeterminate virtuosity of objects at work.

Stanislavski's surrogate younger self, Kostya, and his fellow acting trainees are told to choose a costume from the theatre's stock, by their teacher, the older Stanislavski stand-in, Tortsov. We are offered the correct approach to objects in Kostya's response to an old coat he finds in the store: "It was remarkable for the unusual material from which it was made, a sandy grey-green color I'd never seen before. It was faded and covered in mildew and dust and ash. I felt anyone in that coat would look like a ghost."⁵³ His response to the coat is not only to look, but he also experiences an immediate emotional shift within himself: "I felt something vaguely rotten and repulsive, and at the same time fearful and lethal stirring."⁵⁴ Despite leaving it behind him in the wardrobe, his response to the coat does not end there. Kostya becomes possessed by the coat; over the next week, his initial impressions of the coat creep into his nervous system, his dreams, even into his physiology.

Kostya's brief encounter with a mildewed coat in the theatre wardrobe has a radically transformative effect on his sense of self. The appearance of the coat, then—how it makes him look—is irrelevant; what counts is how it invades him through the experience of possession, division, and transformation. Kostya therefore succeeds in repressing his authorial self, and instead facilitates the emergence of an alien self through his communion with the object. Perhaps this is why he imagines that it would make him look like a ghost; the coat asserts a spectral presence within him, turning him into a host for an alien life that is apparently not his own. Kostya's use of an inherited object from the costume store, like Tennant's communion with the skull owned by Kean, organizes his relationship to the object in a similar way to a relic, with the coat functioning as a kind of "body" that has been left behind by another actor to form a catalyst for Kostya's production of belief and truth onstage.

Indeed, Kostya finally uncovers the character that has been plaguing him when he wears the coat again while preparing to go onstage, to be that of the Critic: "'That's him, that's him!' I exclaimed."⁵⁵ It turns out that the character emerging from the communion with the coat is not, in fact, alien at all; instead, Kostya has been possessed by his own internal critic, and when he arrives onstage to perform for Tortsov, he discovers himself insulting his teacher in a violently shrill and unfamiliar voice: "I was amazed at my own insolence, the hostility of my tone."⁵⁶ In the moment of a younger Stanislavski berating the older one in a repressed critical voice that has emerged through the communion with an object, we can see the staging of an uncanny return in which

⁵³ Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 520.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 523.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 524.

an old coat “performs” through Kostya, enabling him to speak to his older self with a secret hidden voice that is, and is not, his own.

However, despite the centrality of the coat to Kostya’s performance, it does not seem to figure at all in how Tortsov reacts to the character. He responds to Kostya’s behavior, not to his clothing, and is pleased by Kostya’s possession, not by his coat. Tortsov overlooks the surface of the costume in order to experience the truth of Kostya’s performance. While the coat might have been central to Kostya’s access to the role, it is superfluous to the spectator’s experience. The coat is instrumental to brokering the relationship between actor and audience, asserting a kind of virtuosity through the vehicle of Kostya, while Kostya displaces his virtuosity onto the coat, and yet it is oddly absent from the reception of his performance. Objects are essential for, but do not necessarily make a visible appearance within, Stanislavski’s system of performance, becoming instead crucial and repressed elements in the imaginary world of actors.

However, of course, what this story also makes visible is Kostya’s struggle to harness the power of the object. The story shows us how the coat threatens to control and overpower him, necessitating Stanislavski’s vision of the actor as fundamentally divided, with Kostya’s objective spectatorial self observing this possession dispassionately, just as Tortsov does. We can see, then, that Stanislavski’s system of acting imagines virtuosity as emerging from the communion with an object, which takes over the actor and releases the secret and repressed aspects of the actor’s unconscious self. What is crucial is that the object enables the actor to produce a virtuosic performance inadvertently, whose disruptive qualities are displaced onto an old coat. Objects, or more specifically relics like skulls and coats, take on the role of the monstrous virtuoso.

Secret Possessions

Stanislavski’s idea of an object that speaks through, and reveals, its medium’s most secret and dangerous self comes remarkably close to the objects from fairytales and myths that threaten and terrorize their possessors. This animistic view of objects comes forth most visibly in the uncanny qualities of ventriloquism with, as Brian Catling puts it: “the theme of a malevolent dummy that becomes psychologically dominant over its master, stealing and warping his personality.”⁵⁷ The notion that the act of communion with an object is structured as a form of possession chimes remarkably with Kostya’s coat, which works as a kind of incorporated, all-body dummy. Bringing objects to life and speaking through them, then, is an activity fraught with the possibility of the actor being taken over and used as a medium by the thing itself. This possibility is exacerbated by the employment of human remains, where the abjected aspects of the actor’s self run the risk of a return through the uncanny mouthpiece of the relic.

With the dangers and uncanny powers of relics in mind, it is possible to situate a somewhat unexpected inheritor of Stanislavski’s legacies in the work of Vawter. In 1992, Vawter, a founding member of the Wooster Group, impersonated two dead men onstage in his show *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith*. In doing so, he produced an archival performance in which he became both ventriloquist and dummy. The men he played were Roy Cohn,

⁵⁷ Brian Catling, “Arthur Worsley and the Uncanny Valley,” in *Articulate Objects: Voice, Sculpture, Performance*, ed. Aura Satz and Jon Wood (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 81–93, quote on 88.

the Republican homophobic lawyer,⁵⁸ and Jack Smith, a New York filmmaker and performance artist, whose chief aesthetic strategy was high camp.⁵⁹ Both men died of AIDS-related illnesses in the 1980s, and Vawter performed these roles while infected with the HIV virus, which was to lead to his death in 1994. Vawter's performance was concerned with the relationship among homosexuality, secrecy, and disease and was centered on a transformative relationship with human remains.⁶⁰

In an interview with Richard Schechner after the first run of the show, Vawter revealed the archival process of research that informed his preparations to play the roles, beginning with contact with objects owned by both men: by going through Smith's belongings, and by being fitted for a tuxedo by the same tailor as Cohn.⁶¹ Objects then became the media through which to commune with two dead men, and, like Kostya, the aim was not to inhabit these roles, but instead for the objects to inhabit Vawter. While Vawter insisted that the performance was "not an impersonation,"⁶² the process of rehearsal that he describes suggests that the performance was a form of "incorporation"—a kind of theatrical ingesting of the stuff of the two men he played. Objects became a means through which Vawter commemorated and ventriloquized the dead.

Roy Cohn/Jack Smith was fundamentally concerned with how social repression had produced the polarities of Cohn's self-hating homophobia and Smith's excessive camp. Vawter claimed that "I think repression is still far more destructive to the homosexual than the AIDS virus."⁶³ However, he did something more complex than making repression visible: namely, he showed how the "secret" of homosexuality is always/already visible within systems of repression. As he said of Cohn: "he brought one of his regular boyfriends to the White House three separate times. So he didn't hide it, he just verbally denied it."⁶⁴ Vawter therefore made apparent the already visible secret of Cohn's homosexuality by performing an imaginary speech to the American Family Association that was "the most intelligent persuasive denunciation of homosexuality that we could possibly muster."⁶⁵ In the excessive qualities of the speech, whose exaggerated hatred began to deconstruct its own certainties, Vawter performed the public secret of Cohn's homosexuality, just as he demonstrated the repressed secret of Smith's excessive camp, in how it functioned as a symptom of repression. As his sleeves pulled

⁵⁸ Cohn (1927–86) was an attorney and the chief counsel on Senator McCarthy's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. He also appears as a character in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991).

⁵⁹ Smith (1931–89) was a film director and performance artist, best known for his 1963 film *Flaming Creatures*. His work is discussed in detail in Dominic Johnson, *Glorious Catastrophe: Jack Smith, Performance and Visual Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

⁶⁰ The show was first performed in the Performing Garage (the home of the Wooster Group) in New York City in 1992, before touring nationally and internationally. It was directed by Greg Mehrton. The Cohn section was written with Gary Indiana, while the Jack Smith section took the form of a partial reconstruction of Smith's 1981 performance piece *What's Underground About Marshmallows?* In 1994, Jill Godmilow made a film of the performance, in which she spliced the two halves into a montage. My analysis is based on both a video of the original stage show, viewed at the Performing Garage archives, and Godmilow's film.

⁶¹ Ron Vawter, "Ron Vawter: For the Record—an interview by Richard Schechner," in *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance*, ed. Holly Hughes and David Román (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 444–55.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 452.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 453.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 446.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

up to inadvertently (or perhaps intentionally) display the sarcomas that marked Vawter's skin, Cohn's secret illness emerged through Vawter's diseased performing body.

However, Vawter's own theatrical strategies functioned as a kind of compensation for the repression that formed both Cohn's and Smith's personas. Vawter laid his theatrical apparatus bare by making his own infection with AIDS visible to the audience through his nightly introduction to the piece, and through his display of the sarcomas and sores of his illness on his torso.⁶⁶ In doing so, he insisted on revealing his own controlling, inward spectator, the aspect of his performer-self that Stanislavski's Kostya keeps hidden away: "the remarks I make to the audience before are as rehearsed as the pieces themselves. . . . I want the audience to know that there is another personality at work in the room, apart from those created ones."⁶⁷ Vawter foregrounded the repressed and secretive dimensions of Stanislavskian acting, while also calling attention to the structures of repression that underlay the formation of Cohn's and Smith's subjectivity.

This aesthetic of theatrical revelation was visible in the opening of the second section of the show, in which Vawter appeared onstage dressed in the elaborate costume and makeup worn by Smith. On a Walkman, he played a recording of Smith, making Smith's uncannily live voice audible to the audience. The recording played out a voice from beyond the grave. Putting on headphones, Vawter made Smith audible only to himself, and he began speaking "in" Smith's voice. Allowing the audience to hear the recording before he went on to mimic it, Vawter made the Walkman a kind of ventriloquist's dummy, playing out Smith's voice from afar. He then turned himself into the dummy—or another kind of Walkman—by becoming the mouthpiece for the object and the recording. However, the effect was not so much of Vawter speaking in Smith's voice, as Smith speaking "through" Vawter. Vawter became a medium for a voice that was not his own, turning the performance into a séance in which he mimicked the telephonic structures of spiritualism, as Steven Connor puts it: "the [dead voice] must be thought of as being facilitated rather than produced by the medium, who acts as a telephonist rather than as a telegraphist, making the connection rather than herself interpreting the signal."⁶⁸

The recording not only facilitated access to the direct and uncanny voice of the dead man, but it also became a metaphor for acting itself. Just as the recording relayed an uncanny voice from the dead—both alive and dead—so also did Vawter function as an object on which voices are imprinted, and as a channel for voices to pass through. He claims he did so by bypassing his own subjectivity and working as a conduit—or, in Connor's terms, "a switchboard operator"⁶⁹—explaining that listening to tapes of Smith and Cohn "gives me a lot of unconscious feed."⁷⁰ In doing so, the uncanniness of the dead recorded voice made the uncanniness of acting itself visible, laying bare the actor's status as medium.

⁶⁶ These tumors were visible onstage when Vawter's sleeves pulled up "accidentally" in the guise of Cohn, and in his half-naked state when dressed as Smith. See also Tim Etchells's reminiscences about visiting Vawter backstage and seeing his exposed torso covered with tumors ("Repeat Forever: Body, Death, Performance, Fiction," in *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment* [London: Routledge, 1999], 113–24).

⁶⁷ Vawter, "Ron Vawter," 453.

⁶⁸ Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 364–65.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁷⁰ Vawter, "Ron Vawter," 449.

Vawter's aim, then, was for transformation and possession: "there's a moment where you pass over. . . . What I have to be able to do is get to that flip."⁷¹ His aim was to surrender to a voice that was not his own. However, while the use of the recording laid this process bare, the performance of *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* contained its own visible secret. Vawter recounted how, in preparing to play Smith, he was given some of Smith's cremated ashes, and

because Jack's sense of how to paint himself for a performance was so extreme, . . . I thought, well I'm going to use the ash, I'm going to return him to his own makeup. . . . So I use the ash for every performance. I mix it with the glitter I put on my eyes and it charges me. It empowers me in a way that—I mean, when I'm sitting there and I know that Jack is on my face literally . . . something spooky comes through.⁷²

Vawter wore the remains of Smith's body in order to imitate him, constructing and wearing a literal death mask—a mask made of the dead. In doing so, he was transformed and possessed by Smith's presence and voice. However, crucially, the role of the ashes in this transformation and possession was never made available to the audience: unlike the role of the Walkman or Vawter's diseased body or his commentating persona, the ashes functioned solely to produce an internalized state for the actor. Even as the audience saw the glittering eye makeup on Vawter's face, the presence of Smith's ashes remained hidden in plain sight. Instead, the ashes enabled a dying actor to commune with a dead one, becoming the visible secret of the show.

The ashes were imagined by Vawter to enable him to achieve possession and surrender. It was the archival world of objects that allowed him to lose his self in service to the performance: "[when] I'm amidst this whole world of his I've carefully engineered to have around me—the slides, the reconstruction of space . . . I get a very, very heavy charge which pulls me through the performance."⁷³ Again like Kostya, Vawter employs a language of possession in which Smith's ashes speak through him and articulate their shared disease. As Connor points out, the voice during exorcisms is imagined to articulate the state of possession and its cause: "[the voice] gives disease not only a name but also a tongue."⁷⁴ Here, the dying man speaks to the dead, and the dead man speaks through the dying; the voice that emerges is one of the disease itself.

There is something profoundly uncanny about Vawter's description of his acting process. By wearing the ashes on his face, he transformed himself into an anamorphic and anachronistic figure: both alive and about to die, both subject and cadaver. In a sense, by wearing the remains of another dead body, Vawter turned himself into his own skull. In doing so, he embodied the process of displacement necessitated by Stanislavski's system by rendering his own body as an object through the wearing of ashes, and by incorporating the abjection of his disease into the service of his virtuosic performance. The ashes became a means for Vawter to treat his own body just as Kostya harnessed the powers of the old coat, by turning himself into a relic that became a means for communion and the production of belief. We can therefore see in Vawter's performance a dividedness that also characterizes Kostya's practices, where an actor actively chooses to commune with a relic that possesses him, speaks through

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 451.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 114.

him, and unleashes unconscious voices that render him as a medium and an object—a vessel through which other voices can be heard. Vawter's body issued forth a subjectivity that was not his own, assuming the role of both ventriloquist and dummy. And yet, at the same time, in his interview with Schechner, we see his agency as an actor, his willful engagement with relics to facilitate his own objecthood, making available retrospectively the secret dimensions of his art.

Conclusion: The Anecdote

Smith's ashes functioned as a crucial mechanism for Vawter's performance while remaining hidden in plain sight from the audience until he chose to bring them into "view" through an anecdote in an interview. In this way, the anecdote enabled the ashes to make a retrospective appearance onstage, sanctioned by Vawter's narrative control over their theatrical presence. A similar desire for narrative control may have been ultimately why the RSC withdrew the Tchaikowsky skull and replaced it with its replica in performance. The skull's secret presence was made available prematurely through an anecdotal intervention by the media, which was beyond the company's control, thus bringing the skull's claims to agency, history, and death to light and interrupting the imaginary sanctified and transformative communion between actor and object. This, then, may be why the RSC replaced the skull with its copy, whose mimetic and second-order status diffused the threat that the relic presented to the stability of the illusion and the private communion of acting.

Or did the RSC replace it? There is a twist to this tale. In November 2009, the *Daily Telegraph* reported, with some indignation, that the RSC had admitted to having fooled its audiences. The RSC had not withdrawn the skull after all; rather than replacing it with its replica, Tchaikowsky's skull had remained in role, disguised as a copy of itself. Doran explained that "André's skull was a profound memento mori, which perhaps no prop skull could quite provide."⁷⁵ In the end, Tchaikowsky continued to play Yorick under the cover of semiotic subterfuge. The RSC had pulled his skull from its brief sojourn in the limelight, returning it to the secret world of actors and the secret struggle for mastery, communion, and memorial from which audiences were excluded. In doing so, the RSC had used the containing and regulating powers of the anecdote against itself, countering narrative with narrative and reincorporating the skull's powers in service to its own illusion.

Crucially, however, the second admission of the skull's presence onstage by the RSC was permitted by its retrospective place in the history of the performance. The skull could feature correctly as anecdote now that the show was safely over, now that the BBC version of the performance had been filmed and Tennant had moved on to new roles; now, the skull of Tchaikowsky could make a sanctioned reappearance through the anecdote, taking its place in the stories that circulate around stage objects and starring ultimately as a figment of a narrative that was not its own. This relic, which had momentarily emerged as an actor in performance, was reabsorbed into the secret world of the peculiar art of acting.

⁷⁵ Qtd. in "David Tennant to Revive Partnership."