



## Write a critical analysis of Michael Quinn's, 'Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting.'

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Michael Quinn, in his article 'Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting', considers, 'There is something about dramatic performance that causes spectators to seek information about the personal life of the performer, to cast that life in the mould of celebrity'.<sup>1</sup>

The power of the stage actor to mesmerise, intrigue, and fascinate his audience is central to the power of the theatre itself. For hundreds of years, those who have reached the highest pinnacles of stage drama have become public figures. Acclaimed actors will automatically develop an individual reputation and a public persona that influences the way that people see them as artists. David Garrick and Sarah Siddons, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, are prime early examples of stage actors who transcended their profession to become celebrities in their own right. Theatre, therefore, is capable of creating celebrities. Recently however it has become common practice for celebrities from other realms of artistic life to be imported, 'ready-made', into theatrical productions. This adds an interesting new dimension when thinking about performance theory and the actor.

Michael Quinn uses a semiotic approach, drawing on structuralist theory, to consider the implications of celebrity in theatrical production. This essay will assess the usefulness of his approach in relation to two recent London theatre productions; *The Blue Room* at the Donmar Warehouse in 1998, and *Equus* at the Gielgud Theatre in 2007. Both productions were sensationalised in the press due to the casting of a celebrated film actor; the critical and financial legacy of each production will be considered in the light of Quinn's article. Essentially this essay will argue that Quinn's approach to the celebrity actor as a sign is successful in many ways, but that he fails to take enough account of the celebrity as a person and an artist who is dependent upon, dictated by, and actually projected by the public. The relationship between the celebrity and the public, in this theatrical context, is two way, and features more reciprocity and interdependence than Quinn acknowledges.

Quinn states that in a given production, 'the presence of the celebrity is, by testimony of cliché, magnetic'.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that the mere appearance of a celebrity in a production can foster a sense of presence that makes an impact upon the audience. 'Stage presence' is a term often used to describe some innate quality in an actor that allows them to dominate the stage and inhabit the role in a way that transfixes the attention of the audience.<sup>3</sup> Joseph Roach calls this elusive quality 'It'. In *Equus* and *The Blue Room*, starring Daniel Radcliffe and Nicole Kidman respectively, all the pre-show speculation was on whether the star actors could justify the hype and prove that they had 'It'. 'But what does everyone see, really?'<sup>4</sup>

It seems that it is possible to distinguish between two types of 'presence' in this context – actorly presence – the genuine article that speaks of artistic proficiency – and

<sup>1</sup> Michael Quinn, 'Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol.6, No.22, (1990), pp.154-161, p.154.

<sup>2</sup> Quinn, p.158.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Goodall, *Stage Presence*, (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Roach, 'It', *Theatre Journal*, Vol.56 (2004), pp.555-568, p.555.

celebrity presence, engendered by audience proximity to an actor of star status. One review of Nicole Kidman's performance demonstrates the initial frisson of excitement created by celebrity presence – 'It takes a moment acclimatising to having Nicole Kidman within a hair's breadth'.<sup>5</sup> Quinn argues that this celebrity presence is merely an 'illusion of presence' and essentially a falsity; it is the presence of a public persona which is by definition a false construct.<sup>6</sup> He states, 'to demonstrate the self is to represent, to cease to offer the thing itself in favour of its use as a sign'. But this may be a reductive approach. Sometimes performers can embody both types of presence – 'There are cases when an individual who surrounds himself with dash and flash actually harbours some corresponding electricity that generates the real charge at the centre of a show'.<sup>7</sup> When Daniel Radcliffe appeared in *Equus* in 2007, the main attraction of the performance for the popular press was that this international teen icon was appearing, at some points nude, in person on a London stage. However the critical response to his performance commended his 'rare natural charm' and 'electrifying stage presence', showing that it is possible for a performer to possess both types of presence.<sup>8</sup>

Some critics question why, in recent years, so many film actors have made the leap to performing on the London stage. Usually the financial remuneration from performing in theatres, particularly small fringe venues like the Donmar, is negligible compared with the salary of a screen star. In general the reason for performers to 'put their heads on the theatrical block' in this way is in pursuit of artistic credibility.<sup>9</sup> Moving from the glitz of Hollywood blockbusters to the smaller and, some say, more technically demanding environment of theatre shows a commitment to the artistic craft and a quest for legitimacy as a professional actor. Returning to the stage is often seen as the acid test for a performer, and an opportunity to prove themselves. In the case of Radcliffe, *Equus* was his first expedition into roles outside of the Harry Potter franchise and the film industry. A play which confronts issues of sexuality, religion, and psychiatry, *Equus* represented a very serious and 'intellectual' challenge for a performer acclimatised to children's blockbusters.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Nicole Kidman's decision to perform at the Donmar Warehouse, a well-renowned subsidised theatre that stands apart from the commercial West End, represents an attempt to dissociate herself from commercialism and prove her artistic range. But is this transition in itself credible? Quinn advances that 'even a symbolic return to the "legitimate" stage... shrinks to yet another ritual of authenticity'.<sup>11</sup> This was not lost on critics, in the case of *Equus*, who feared that Radcliffe's casting would overshadow the play's artistic credibility - 'The casting choice seems specifically designed to use the cultural capital of the "legitimate theatre" to establish Radcliffe's commodity value as an actor'.<sup>12</sup> The performance of a celebrity in what may appear to be an artistically driven production can in fact be a commercial tactic to advance their professional profile.

Quinn argues further that the star performer subverts critical authority. He argues that even when a star actor fails artistically, 'the pleasure of the celebrity's authenticity still remains as a dominant factor in the star vehicle'.<sup>13</sup> Roach agrees: 'Such an actor can permit himself anything - even bad acting. All that is required of him is that he come out on the stage

<sup>5</sup> Carole Woddis, '"The Blue Room" review', *Herald*, 24<sup>th</sup> Sep 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Quinn, p.158 and p.159.

<sup>7</sup> Goodall, p.122.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Spencer, 'Radcliffe's naked talent makes "Equus" a hit', *Telegraph*, 28<sup>th</sup> Feb 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Billington, 'The hardest act', *Guardian*, 22<sup>nd</sup> Sep 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Baz Bamigboye, 'The bare facts are: Radcliffe's a revelation', *Daily Mail*, 27<sup>th</sup> Feb 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Quinn, p.160.

<sup>12</sup> Ryan Claycomb, 'Middlebrowning the Avant-Garde: "Equus" on the West End', *Modern Drama*, 52:1, (Spring 2009), pp.99-123, p.111.

<sup>13</sup> Quinn, p.157.

as frequently and remain as long as possible, so that his audience can see, gaze upon and enjoy its idol'.<sup>14</sup>

It is possible to see flaws in this idea. Although star names may initially garner publicity, attract backers, and provoke advance ticket sales, if they prove themselves inadequate to the role, the consequences for the production and for their future career can be significant. Although celebrities may at first appear to subvert critical authority, they in fact depend upon critical approval for the advancement of their career and the success of the production. As Charles Spencer points out, 'Hollywood stars don't always deliver the goods on the London stage'.<sup>15</sup> Keanu Reeves was widely hailed a disaster in a Canadian production of Hamlet, and Keira Knightley's recent foray into theatre, with Moliere's *The Misanthrope* at the Comedy Theatre, was not a critical success – 'She has all the charisma of a serviceable goldfish'.<sup>16</sup> Bad reviews at one production will not spell the end of a career built around glamour and physical attraction as much as talent. But for actors who seek credibility, it would damage their career longevity and limit their future offers of stage and screen work. As Iain Glen, Kidman's co-star in *The Blue Room*, explains, 'if you can tap into each medium.. you've got more chance of doing the work that you want'.<sup>17</sup> Kidman achieved critical success in *The Blue Room* – this resulted directly in an explosion of offers from acclaimed directors like Baz Luhrmann and Stephen Daldry. Kidman acknowledges that '*The Blue Room* basically changed my life'.<sup>18</sup> Radcliffe's excursion into 'intellectual' theatre allowed him to transcend his reputation as a child star – 'Radcliffe brilliantly succeeds in throwing off the mantle of Harry Potter'.<sup>19</sup> If he had failed in this role, so early in his career, his future prospects would have been thrown very seriously into question.

Quinn's assertion that celebrity subverts critical authority is therefore perhaps premature – he does not acknowledge the extent to which even celebrity actors rely on good reviews to give them control over their own careers.

Quinn also argues that celebrity 'threatens to subvert the economic structure of authority... by introducing the actor as a singular quantity rather than a supply'.<sup>20</sup> It is true that the market for 'displayed personality' requires personification of the actor in order to elevate them to star status. King agrees that this personification 'serves Hollywood's capitalist structure by making stars famous not for their technical skills.. but rather for their personal features, which makes them easier to market as commodities'.<sup>21</sup>

When considering *Equus* and *The Blue Room*, it is possible to see the celebrity actors being marketed as commodities in this way. Nicole Kidman's physical attributes formed a large part of the press coverage of her appearance. Like *Equus*, this performance contained nudity, and Kidman's brief flash of exposed flesh famously caused Charles Spencer to label the production 'pure theatrical Viagra'.<sup>22</sup> But the commercial motivation of casting Kidman, a worldwide sex symbol, in this role is clear. The play is structured around a string of sexual encounters where Kidman plays 5 different women in clearly sexualised roles. Similarly, the marketing material for *Equus* plays up to the clamour and fascination around Radcliffe's 'transition from boy wizard to sex symbol',<sup>23</sup> featuring 'the sexualising of [his] image-body' (see Appendix).<sup>24</sup> Undoubtedly this approach was a successful one – *Equus* grossed £300,000

<sup>14</sup> Roach, p.557.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Spencer, "'The Blue Room" review', *Telegraph*, 23<sup>rd</sup> Sep 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Quentin Letts, "'The Misanthrope" review', *Daily Mail*, 18<sup>th</sup> Dec 2009.

<sup>17</sup> In Mark Shenton, "'Blue Room" interview', *In Theatre (Broadway)*, Dec 1998.

<sup>18</sup> In Matt Wolf, 'Naked in the Warehouse', *Telegraph*, 10<sup>th</sup> Oct 2002.

<sup>19</sup> 'Radcliffe's naked talent'.

<sup>20</sup> Quinn, p.157.

<sup>21</sup> King in Karen Hollinger, *The Actress: Hollywood acting and the female star*, (London: Routledge, 2006), p49.

<sup>22</sup> 'The Blue Room review'.

<sup>23</sup> Alice Jones, 'Thea Sharrock: "Equus" director reveals naked ambition', *Independent*, 15<sup>th</sup> Feb 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Claycomb, p.116.

per week at full capacity, even though it required the highest set-up cost of any straight play in the West End.<sup>25</sup> *The Blue Room* similarly gained the Donmar £30,000 in additional sponsorship through their Friends of the Donmar scheme, and tickets were rumoured to be changing hands through touts for up to £500.<sup>26</sup>

Claycomb points out *Equus*'s entanglement with the Harry Potter franchise. Radcliffe's performances, both in London and on Broadway, were timed perfectly to lead up to the release dates of the film *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* and the final book in the series. The imbrication of the production with the commercial industry that surrounds Radcliffe is clear. But is the situation really as straightforward as Quinn presents it – who actually possesses the economic 'authority' here? Although both *Equus* and the Hollywood franchises undoubtedly gained from their involvement with one another, the production's success was not a foregone conclusion. There were actually a number of groups and companies heavily invested in Radcliffe's performance – had the production been received differently, the outcome could have been damaging for these investors.

Radcliffe's adoption of a role that was so far removed from his clean-cut child star image, particularly when he had not yet relinquished the part of Harry Potter, could have been disastrous. Warner Bros film studios, who produce the Harry Potter films, were said to be 'utterly dismayed' by production shots featuring the young star partly nude.<sup>27</sup> They feared that such an openly controversial role could damage their stars reputation and, in turn, their film franchise. After months spent carefully building publicity for the new Harry Potter film, which featured his first screen kiss, their star had taken to the London stage and embraced 'full frontal sex'.

This production was in fact not a predetermined commercially certified success, but rather a risky venture that depended upon Radcliffe as an individual to deliver in the role. The relationship between the celebrity and the economic authority that surrounds them in is fact more complex than Quinn suggests. The celebrity as an individual and their commercial machinery are interdependent.

Kidman also makes this point, maintaining that the Donmar's decision to mount her British stage debut was 'a big risk for them'.<sup>28</sup> She continues, 'so much of being an actor is the fear of letting everybody else down'.

In both cases, the failure of Kidman or Radcliffe in their roles would have resulted in consequences that went beyond their own career or the production's reception – the effects would have reverberated outwards to the many groups invested in their reputation. Ultimately both roles were beneficial to the stars' careers, but this may not have been the case. Gillian Perry points out that 'commercial interests may well run contrary to the personal interests of the celebrity'; acting according to purely commercial interests Radcliffe would not have taken the *Equus* role.<sup>29</sup> These productions demonstrate that economic authority is not entirely subverted by the presence of a celebrity – 'you cannot simply cash in on pre-existing fame'.<sup>30</sup>

It is arguably harder for a celebrity to fully embody a role in the eyes of an audience, because they are already familiar in their own right. Quinn explains that: 'The personal, individual qualities of the performer always resist, to some degree, the transformation of the actor into the stage figure required for the communication of the fiction'. The more famous the actor is in their own right, the more magnified this statement becomes. Celebrities bring

<sup>25</sup> Dominic Cavendish, '"Equus": the naked truth', *Telegraph*, 30<sup>th</sup> May 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Dan Glaister, 'Theatres boosted by star attractions', *Guardian*, 19<sup>th</sup> Nov 1998.

<sup>27</sup> Anon., 'Tonight's the night Daniel dares to bare', *Daily Mail*, 17<sup>th</sup> Feb 2007.

<sup>28</sup> 'Naked in the Warehouse'

<sup>29</sup> Gillian Perry, *Spectacular Flirtations: viewing the actress in British art and theatre, 1768-1820*, (New Haven; London; Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2007), p.38.

<sup>30</sup> 'The hardest act'.

an ‘overdetermined’ quality to the role which Stanislavski says spoils the ‘sense of truth’.<sup>31</sup> In the case of *The Blue Room* this concept is further problematised, as Kidman is required to perform as five separate characters over the course of the play. This could be seen to fracture the unity of her stage figure and instead bring her celebrity to the fore, because the audience are unable to fix her in their minds as one unified ‘dramatic character’.

In his article Quinn analyses the operation of the actor using the Prague School analysis. This theory breaks down the ‘actor’ into three components; the performer’s own personal characteristics, an immaterial ‘dramatic character’ formed in the minds of the audience, and the ‘stage figure’, an image of the character, created by all the different elements of the production, that acts as a signifier.<sup>32</sup> The inclusion of this third component, the semiotic and ‘referential’ element of the actor, is what allows us to consider appropriately celebrity performance by ‘allowing a conceptual wedge to be driven between celebrity and performance’. The approach taken by Quinn here is a very useful one and relevant to the study of celebrity as stage figure and as a sign. Towards the end of the article though, Quinn amends the structure, adding an additional ‘mediating element’. To the three original concepts – actor, stage figure, and audience – he adds a third, called the ‘celebrity figure’. This acknowledges the public persona of the celebrity as an entity separate from their real identity. It furthers the idea that what we know of celebrities is not the real person, it is merely how they perform themselves. This inclusion acknowledges in theoretical terms that in fact we cannot consider the celebrity just as a commodified ‘sign’ – they must also be considered as a real individual.

An interesting development in this thinking can be seen by looking at the work of founding structuralist, Otakar Zich, of which the Prague School theory was a later development. Zich also divides acting into sections, but he, like Quinn, uses four rather than three components. In addition to the ‘actor’, ‘stage figure’ and ‘dramatic character’, he includes ‘the actor’s individual person’.<sup>33</sup> Where Quinn includes this ‘mediating element’ only in the case of celebrity actors, Zich’s original work included it in the case of every actor, on the assumption that the material an actor has to work with – his ‘individual person’ – is distinct from his self as an artist. Joseph Chaikin also uses this idea in his study of the acting craft, explaining that:

‘When we as actors are performing, we as persons are also present and the performance is a testimony of ourselves...An actor’s tool is himself, but his use of himself is informed by all the things which inform his mind and body – his observations, his struggles, his night-mares, his prison, his patterns – himself as a citizen of his times and society’.<sup>34</sup>

By looking at this original theory we can see that the theory used to consider the celebrity actor is necessarily the same as that used to consider the non-celebrity actor. Each actor has two layers – a ‘material’ or ‘tool’ of self that is distinct from their real self which can never be performed. In the case of celebrity, this public persona may carry more weight, but the components of the acting craft are the same for all actors. Celebrities, like all actors, have a self distinct from their referential function.

It is possible to see some very useful elements in Quinn’s semiotic approach to acting when considering the implications of celebrity upon the acting sign. He emphasises the importance of the actor’s public persona and reputation, and the ways in which this can affect

<sup>31</sup> Stanislavski in Roach, p.557.

<sup>32</sup> Quinn, p.155.

<sup>33</sup> In František Deák, ‘Structuralism in Theatre: The Prague School Contribution’, *TDR*, Vol.20, No.4 (Dec 1976), p.85.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph Chaikin, *The Presence of the Actor*, (NY:Theatre Communications Group, 1991), p.6.

success in a role and the relationship with critical and economic authority. However when looking at the productions of *Equus* and *The Blue Room*, Quinn's analysis is shown to be slightly reductive. By reducing the celebrity to merely a sign invested with values, he does not take enough account of the celebrity as a person and as an artist. This essay has shown that rather than subverting traditional authority and working independently of the dynamics of the theatre industry, the cult of celebrity actually relies upon cooperation with it; stars are dictated and created by their own public. The Prague School divides acting into three components, one of which is 'the audience's conative contribution'. This demonstrates the effect to which a large part of what we know of an actor, a dramatic character, and even more so, a celebrity, is in fact constituted by our own projections. Celebrity is created by and relies upon its public to sustain it, and this is no different when celebrities take to the stage; the relationship between celebrity and culture is more complex and reciprocal than Quinn envisages. It is a relationship of interdependence. Star quality, as Roach explains, 'is a resource that audiences locate and consume, but also renew'.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Roach, p.562.

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**Appendix**



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Production shot 2, *Equus*, 2007.  
(Peter Thompson Associates/Uli Weber/Associated Press)



*Equus* frontage at the Gielgud Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue.  
([http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/9/9f/Gielgud\\_Theatre.jpg/639px-Gielgud\\_Theatre.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/9/9f/Gielgud_Theatre.jpg/639px-Gielgud_Theatre.jpg))