Since the turn of the twentieth century, dramatic theatre has relied on the invisibility of craft as a marker of quality, emphasising an internalised performance process that is predicated on the erasure of the scripted play. In spite of the necessary shift away from naturalistic theatre that new aesthetics, shrinking arts budgets and black-box theatres have facilitated, classical theatre, that is, stagings of scripts from the global dramatic canon, continues to encourage a fourth-wall performance aesthetic of its actors, even when the design, direction and text itself make apparent other possibilities. Since Stanislavsky’s formulation of a technique based on experiential acting processes that positions the embodiment of authentic feeling (often framed as artistic ‘truth’) as the cornerstone of performance, conventional stagings of scripted drama have striven for a verisimilitude of naturalism, even when the play is famous and unavoidably recognisable as a repetition. Alastair Coomer, the National Theatre’s head of casting, suggested that ‘acting is often at its best when it is least noticeable’ (Gardner 2018), and even the great theatrical innovator Peter Brook has lauded the invisibility of performance when he noted that when performing Hamlet, Adrian Lester is ‘an actor that can be so at ease with this complex language that he can make you feel he is inventing it’ (Croall 2018: 87).

This concealment of craft is driven by the assumption that a famous play is a predictable thing, and is to be decoded through performance. As objects to be interpreted, therefore, stagings are often seen as offering opportunities to transcend the materiality of the text and access something quintessentially and authentically human. Moreover, performance’s emphasis on liveness is equally an attempt to repudiate classical theatre’s dependence on human acts of repetition by denying the iterative nature
of the famous text as it is passed down simultaneously through print and performance. For example, as audiences flock to see Adrian Lester in Brook’s *Hamlet* because he is a famous actor, directed by a famous director, performing a famous role, they seek out something that is both immediately recognisable and entirely fresh, searching for new understanding and insights into an already well-known object. This chapter explores this contradictory impulse and it does so by reconceptualising the well-known object – that is, the play and all that it encompasses – as a celebrity whose materiality must be accounted for in theatrical staging, and examines the pressure that such celebrity, manifest as it is in an admiration of ‘Great Roles’, exerts on its actors.

As both Coomer’s and Brook’s observations of acting indicate, stagings of Shakespeare – by which I mean stagings of classical plays that are presented in a naturalistic style – are often evaluated in terms of plausibility, recognising ‘plotted possibility as a bounded field or closed set’ (Sack 2015: 30). As such, stagings are unhappily required to balance the expectations of an ephemeral performance occurrence with the false sense of stability regarding what the well-known play is. David Cote articulates the contradictory impulses that drive fandoms of the famous plays in his giddy review of Ruth Negga’s 2020 portrayal of Hamlet. Cote defines theatre attendance as an accumulative practice of consumption when he explains that theatre lovers collect Lears, Medeas and Blanches DuBois the way others accumulate random matchbooks or Apple earbuds. The Great Roles are routinely assayed over the years, and one stuffs the memory of them in a miscellaneous drawer thinking that they might be useful one day. Critics keep lord knows how many Hamlets in that drawer: some live, some on film or via NT Live. I’ve just acquired a new melancholy Dane that is so fresh, aching and aflame with life, I want to savour it before squirreling it away. (Cote 2020)

Cote’s example illustrates the challenges that face performance scholars and audiences alike. He defines Lears, Medeas and Blanches in performance as individual, discrete objects, while simultaneously gathering them up as part of a larger definition of singular literary ‘Great Roles’. The objectification of these roles, and by extension the plays themselves, contradicts any suggestion that in performance studies we ought to view Shakespeare as a medium or a platform through which other messages are disseminated.

Famous plays are objects that maintain an onstage presence and resist the subjection that meta-critical performance would demand of them.
Worthen’s (2014) theorisation of Shakespeare as a performance medium is well suited to an avant-garde performance practice that draws attention to the text only to deconstruct it, but the alternative position that M. J. Kidnie adopts is fundamentally appropriative, imagining performance as a sequence of rewrites of an ‘original’ text, suggesting that ‘textual-theatrical instances are productive of the work’ (2009: 64), eliding the problem of how the play itself is manifest. Stagings of Shakespeare challenge performance theory because they conceptually undermine Shakespeare’s universality by standing on equal footing with print culture, and the authority of performance allows most contemporary stagings to claim a reiterative fealty to the script and promise authenticity while presenting the play in a fresh historical or aesthetic context. Cote’s suggestion of collectibles, however, invites us to think about the power of the plays as celebrity objects and explore the materialist value of the text as it shapes its performance. An object-oriented approach enables a more critical approach to those productions that appear somewhere between original practices and the avant-garde and considers the ways in which the celebrity object exists in a dialogic adaptive relationship with the ideological forces that engage with it.

In spite of a significant celebrity network that is organised around the interplay of texts and their Great Roles as celebrity objects, theatre reviewers continue to perpetuate an unrealistic expectation of surprise, and a demand that a performance obscure its text to represent events, thoughts and feelings as if they were happening for the first time. This is the reality of performing famous texts and creates a problem for the classically trained Stanislavskian actor who seeks to model Coomer’s invisible craft by inhabiting a Great Role that is already laden with expectations. Rory Kinnear acknowledged this anxiety as he worried about how to navigate ‘a certain degree of the train track that lies ahead’ (Croall 2018: 108) when he played Hamlet in 2010. Paul Taylor’s criticism of Benedict Cumberbatch’s 2015 Hamlet further exemplifies the contradictory expectations placed on an actor when he notes that ‘we don’t sense that he [Cumberbatch] is laying himself bare, as is the case with the greatest exponents of the role such as Mark Rylance and Simon Russell Beale’ (Croall 2018: 123). Even if such a comparison feels a little unfair to Cumberbatch, the critique is typical of theatre reviewers who have seen countless Hamlets, and who walk into the theatre with an acute sense of what they believe Shakespearean theatre is (or should be). The misplaced optimism that Taylor exhibits in his anticipation of Cumberbatch reinventing this particular wheel simultaneously recognises the value of Cumberbatch’s fame, and in essence, privileges it over Hamlet’s. Taylor assumes that Cumberbatch, as a great actor taking his place
in a continuum of leading men, will validate his fame by single-handedly transforming *Hamlet* into a new experience for his audience. Moreover, Taylor’s critique unwittingly proves Cote’s point – his complaint evinces the affective power of *Hamlet’s* celebrity as it demonstrates the way the play’s fame has already shaped the criteria by which Taylor will consume Cumberbatch’s performance.

**Performance Studies and the Celebrity Text**

Postmodernism, and the subsequent changes that have occurred in theatre studies since the late twentieth century, has manifested itself in the emergence of a performance theory that defines theatre primarily as an event, giving precedence to unscripted or deconstructed performances that make art out of the stage’s own artificiality. This popular critical conception of performance as an event has dominated scholarship since Hans-Thies Lehmann’s 1999 theorisation of post-dramatic theatre. By defining performance as a singular, unrepeatable event, because of performance’s ephemerality, performance theory implies that *Hamlet* can only exist once in the moment that it happens – it is potentiality, it occurs, it becomes history. But the script retains traces of these material events, of its prior assemblages, and these attachments manifest themselves as part of the object’s celebrity impacting the past, present and future of its staging. Scripts, then, become objects that ‘tantalise and hold us in suspense, alluding to a fullness that is elsewhere, to a future that, apparently, is on its way’ (Bennett 2010: 32). Daniel Sack attributes this richness to the performing body, but if we apply it to the classical theatre, a play becomes more than ‘an instrument of performance’ (Worthen 2014: 97) because it retains its affective power, manifest in the imagined authority of the Great Role.

As long as it separates the textual object from its labour of realisation, then, performance theory is of limited use to much contemporary Shakespearean performance. William West notes how ‘a performance-centred approach seems required to choose between the relative (but also frustrated) immediacy of a current production, or to rely on archived documents of various kinds to reconstruct performance practices that have already disappeared’ (West 2006: 31), implicitly acknowledging the extent to which the script is erased from theoretical visibility once one identifies staging as an event. Critics invite us to dismiss the text in favour of its context, and yet, in spite of a recognition that, in the twenty-first century, theatre is ‘a compound of media’ (Lavender 2016: 9), performance theory’s tendency to facilitate a mistrust of scripted language that would
erase the materiality of the text entirely creates challenges for those of us who study well-known texts as they move from one staging to the next. While Lehmann elsewhere boldly declares Shakespeare’s theatre to be one with ‘no restrictive unity of style, no atmosphere without ambiguity’ (2004: 104), he returns dogmatically to the script in order to validate such ambiguity. Elsewhere, Lehmann claims that ‘Shakespeare’s characters and plots prove compelling precisely because essential aspects have an unclear or contradictory motivation’ (2006: 238), illustrating a simultaneous desire to shake off the presence of the script even as he recognises its centrality to new performance. Famous plays, Lehmann implies, sustain an elusive energy that requires us to filter them through our own subjective positioning, but to adopt the stance that the script is no more than a medium elides its inevitable presence as it shapes both production and reception.

As Andrew Hartley notes, to unequivocally position performance as an event results in an ‘overly dogmatic and intellectually suspect’ erasure of a play’s value (2006: 91), and too often critics end up discussing something other than Shakespeare. Original practices aside, many Shakespeare stagings eschew historicism, instead utilising the popular belief in Shakespeare’s universality to play with a production’s aesthetic and attributing this freedom to the timeless genius of Shakespeare, rather than acknowledging the potent materiality of the text. David Cote once more illustrates this point when he critiques Jude Law’s ‘yoga Hamlet’, defining the audience’s anticipation in terms of the play itself:

“When will you know that you’ve seen a truly great Hamlet? For one thing, you won’t be glad when Ophelia drowns in the brook. You will shed a tear for the fratricidal Claudius as he vainly prays for forgiveness. You will not check your watch during the Act V funeral, impatient for the duel. You will find yourself alternately loving and loathing the title character, as magnificent a portrait of human cogitation and self-revelation as ever put on paper. (Cote 2009)”

Even though he somewhat derisively describes how ‘the lean movie star pads about the stage barefoot in stretchy pants and a clingy T-shirt, often squatting and lunging with the sinewy ease of a Bikram vet (downward-facing Dane, perhaps?)’ (Cote 2009), Cote is enthusiastic about Law’s Hamlet as it offered the satisfaction of a new aesthetic, and the opportunity to dwell in his favourite moments of the play. For Cote, fidelity to representation is not bound up in fidelity to historicist staging, which is why he can gently mock the production’s style, but not let it be the
defining factor in his evaluation – Cote welcomes the appropriative impulse that drives stagings of this famous play. As Komporaliy notes, ‘there is a close connection between the processes of stage adaptation, instances of new writing, elements of devising and the theatrical and literary canon’ (2017: 7–8). The propensity towards appropriation that characterises stagings of classical plays, however, is part of their appeal, and for audience members such as Cote it creates a continuity that undermines the idea of performance as discrete, separate entities.

To return to a performance theory that posits staging as an event, then, inadvertently reinforces a historicist theoretical framework because it can only recognise the text as an archival performance document, rejecting the ‘determinative or clearly causal’ relationship between text and performance in favour of new iterations and unrepeatable events (Hartley 2006: 82). Although I would not subscribe wholesale to the assumption that the trajectory from script to performance is ‘clearly causal’, as Hartley does, I would like to cautiously walk back the methodological reliance on context as the defining feature of performance and more carefully unpack West’s suggestion that ‘performance is less an event than the management of a rhythm or repetitions – a practice of filling an ordinary gesture, word, or phrase with meaning through iteration, spacing, and change’ (2006: 35). That these repetitions can be fruitfully destabilised implicitly acknowledges the degree to which a classical text is imaginatively constructed because of the recognition it has achieved through a long history of diverse and celebrated productions.

The ‘oddly timeless and consistent’ (Hartley 2006: 78) visibility that Shakespearean drama maintains on stage is a direct result of its celebrity. I wish to draw from the ideas of Jane Bennett to interrogate how we might approach the famous play, known variously through its narrative, its language, its images and occasionally other elements (such as music), as a variable celebrity object that is endowed with an almost limitless capacity for meaning that does not so much yield its secrets as make visible the artistic labour that occurs as we interact with it in performance. Performance, particularly as it pertains to actors, must navigate this celebrity, and by thinking about the performance text as one singular object, it is possible to see how celebrity text lays out its certain degree of train track as a speculative, entelechial construction that moves forward (as opposed to the backwards-facing memory machine of Marvin Carlson [Carlson 2001]). Vibrant materialism enables the performance event to be absorbed within the scripted object, and suggests staging as an attempt to materialise what the text could be. When we think, therefore, about how performance materialities activate
unpredictable elements (such as the competing fame of directors, performances and spaces), we must also recognise the object-power of the script. Such intersecting materialities generate new networks of meaning that are defined by these subjective relations. The celebrity play makes demands of an actor that routinely confound the desire for invisibility of craft.

From a semiotic standpoint, the stage is a place where ‘human being and thinghood overlap’ and slide in and out of one another (Bennett 2010: 4), and as such, both performer and stage properties become affective objects to be read by the audience. Even though it is not as materially present as props or actors, I wish to establish a space for the famous play as equally agential an object as the performing body. Recognising the similarities of text and the performing body (particularly the celebrity body) poises performance at a place of absolute presentness, in which the past is made visible and the future is made possible, and we, as performers, practitioners, spectators and objects, exist as part of this transition between what has been, what is and what could be. A new materialist approach allows us to ‘throw out, or at least question, the opposition between subject and object and the idea of the artwork as a fixed endpoint (of making) or a fixed beginning point (of interpretation)’ (Jones 2015: 32). That is to say that these Great Roles, these celebrity objects, are definable only insofar as we acknowledge them through relations to other material objects. Shakespeare performance, then, is an entelechial process that continues to evolve, but resists any identifiable resting point at which the play becomes revealed as essentially and entirely Shakespearean. As we gather up and collect these Great Roles (either through acts of theatrical creation or participatory spectatorship during a staging), the objects themselves remain unchanged by our interactions, retaining a vitality that attracts us with their celebrity and invites us to attach other material objects that give them the shape they find in performance.

**Object Celebrity and Vibrant Matter**

Celebrity, or ‘it’ according to Joseph Roach, is at its very essence thing-power (Roach 2007). Although celebrity studies ‘remains ever tethered to a live body’ (Holl 2013: 6), celebrity indicates ‘a vitality intrinsic to materiality’ (Bennett 2010: 3). Celebrity is, in essence, a subjective phenomenon that has the capacity for thing-power, only unleashing its vitality when put into relational perspective. That is to say, ‘it’ is always there, vibrant and present, but its capacity to work on us, its capricious agency, is unleashed when understood in context with other matter – that is, celebrity objects
are ‘never entirely exhausted by their semiotics’ (Bennett 2010: 5). As such, they are not fully containable nor autonomous, as the humanistic-driven scholarly studies of celebrity would have us imagine. A popular character such as Hamlet is a perfect example of this object–human collapse that celebrity affords. For the last four hundred years, the role of Hamlet, which has sustained a quasi-embodied existence straddling page and stage, has been in possession of a celebrity that is both culturally ubiquitous, yet most clearly visible when attached to a performing body. As Sean Redmond notes, ‘celebrity representations carry the range of politicised values and means that are attached to their image when in circulation’ (2018: 36), because celebrity is presumed to perform something unique and essential about the famous person and, like performance, celebrity puts forward an agreed-upon lie that both recognises and disavows the medium that facilitates it (Mills 2010: 192). Object celebrity makes explicit a thing’s affective power as communities continually reposition themselves in relation to it, as it remains seemingly unchanged, accessible yet alien, refusing to give up its secrets. Think, for example, of the US Constitution. Although it exists in the Barthesian realm of text, subject to intellectual play, the material thing itself – paper, ink, words and signatures – is a quasi-mythical object, validated by the names inscribed upon it and wielded by pundits on CNN and Fox News alike as a locked cabinet of solutions to political and civic issues. From medieval reliquaries to Stonehenge to the Mona Lisa, celebrity objects are recognised for an immanent vitality, and are put into a reinscriptive process that continually strives to contain their energy by defining it in contrast (or as complement) to other objects, and that changes as cultural material values evolve and mutate.

Celebrity depends on both the combination of intimacy and distance and its ability to take shape only in relation to other objects. This proposition works well for the Shakespeare text as it is manifest in a variety of media, offering different experiences across (and beyond) transmedia. Douglas M. Lanier’s proposition (2011) that Shakespeare is ‘post-textual’ recognises the shifts that occur as the medium of Shakespeare collapses and conflates, understanding Shakespearean celebrity as infinitely mutable, depending on how we position ourselves in relation to it. What Lanier is implicitly acknowledging here is the celebrity of a text such as Hamlet that is present in its material presence – the black clothes or Yorick’s skull portray Hamlet as effectively as the ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy does. Hamlet, then can be present in stagings, in adaptations and in slight, convoluted allusions that draw from the celebrity of Hamlet to denote something (usually gravitas) – it is an ‘immanent vitality flowing across bodies,
objects, and space’ (Bennett 2010: 75). Stagings of Shakespeare highlight the expectations placed on celebrity objects, because, as Cote repeatedly ponders, a great play is at once familiar by its cultural ubiquity and mysteriously refreshed by the production materialities that manifest it anew. Cote’s pleasure in 2020 at the ‘new melancholy Dane that is so fresh, aflame, and aching with life’, for example, actually speaks more to Hamlet’s celebrity that it does to Ruth Negga’s performance (Cote 2020). As a textual object, a play offers a similar combination of knowledge and mystique, and in many ways is a more ‘pure’ celebrity object than a human subject, because as a mere ‘thing’, a product of humanity, it stops just shy of having agency of its own until it is put into relationship with other objects, a process that we recognise as performance.

To understand Hamlet’s celebrity is to recognise the play as one of Lanier’s ‘post-textual’ Shakespeare objects that both absorbs and transcends the language that signifies it, engaging with adjacent materialist networks and becoming recognisable through image and association, in much the same way that, for example, Marilyn Monroe is signified by a dress, or Brad Pitt’s fame is as indelibly affiliated with the actresses he has married as it is with the roles he has played. Mills observes that human celebrities are ‘able to carry their star persona across texts’ (2010: 192), and new materialism suggests ways in which this is true for a post-textual Shakespearean celebrity object, as it traverses genre, media and text, all the while remaining identifiable as Shakespeare. Moreover, celebrity maintains its own networks of meaning, which, as both Kim and Blackwell observe in this volume, can be either complementary or critical (and occasionally both) of the ideological structures of knowledge that underpin any Shakespeare play.

In the theatre, during its performance, the vibrancy of the celebrity play is rendered visible, and, rather than watch a repetition or an iteration of the text, we participate in a process of actualisation that occurs when material objects are put into a contextualising network. The realisation of a text that performance promises becomes apparent during a staging of the play but, by virtue of theatre’s ephemerality, is not necessarily completed, because no interpretation, iteration or repetition can stabilise the ontological insecurity of the vibrant play. During a Shakespearean production, we participate in a partial realisation, a coming-into-being that performance practitioners more commonly define as embodiment and limit to the corporeal presence of the actor. In her work tracing celebrity back to the early modern stage, Holl suggests that celebrity is dependent on the semiotics of theatre, ‘in which the momentary spectacle of live performance produces a
tension-laden environment that gives rise to heightened affectivity, simulating the bonds of intimacy’ (2013: 18). On the stage, material objects and visual culture are inextricable from one another and conflate human and non-human objects in Holl’s simulated bonds of intimacy that cannot be construed as the ‘real’ thing. Moreover, in spite of their careful placement by a set designer or a stage manager, visual objects – a chair, a gun, an actor’s body parts – become performative on their own terms, and their capacity to ‘make things happen, to produce effects’ (Bennett 2010: 5) as they engage with one another habitually exceeds the intentionality of the human subjects that set them. A Great Role is no exception to this premise. Holl’s emphasis on intimacy manifests itself in a definition of celebrity that can be equally applied to the Shakespeare text: a sign, a recombinant amalgam of an individual’s enacted roles (broadly defined) and publicised personal life conflated with cultural fixation, all projected on to the bodies of living individuals (Holl 2013: 12). That such signification is also projected on to the classical play is not an extreme claim to consider and renders explicit the play’s instability. Moreover, to claim the celebrity play as vibrant matter highlights its dependence on the political ecologies that not only create it, but speculate on it, and consume it as audience members. Thus, stagings of famous plays become an ongoing process of material negotiation between actor, text and audience that, as Cote suggests, does not necessarily end when the staged event concludes, but instead attaches new material connotations to the play-object, further enhancing its celebrity.

A conative Shakespeare identity that ‘is distributed across a mosaic’ (Bennett 2010: 38) results in matter that engages with other archontic materialities, such as set design, props and bodies, which sustain cultural memory and put forward a material semiosis that can (and often does) exist interchangeably with human agency. As Cote demonstrates, because of what we might consider as a widespread affective Shakespeare fandom, the very act of attending a famous play’s production is an implicit acknowledgement of this distribution of agency by the audience. Moreover, if we view a playtext as a vibrant object, loaded with potentiality rather than ghosted, then the question of performance as the realisation of a text can never be resolved. This interminability challenges the idea of performance as event, and instead looks to a larger process of actualisation and accounts for the impenetrability of Great Roles. Unlike Sack’s performance-based potentiality, which is rooted in the intentionality of the performing body, a text-based potentiality recognises the ‘federation of actants’ that contribute to the experience of staging and watching a celebrity play (Bennett 2010: 28).
Applying a combination of affective celebrity and vibrant materialism to the classical text (in this case, the Shakespeare play) highlights the limitations of framing a performance as an event, preferring instead to regard the production of a play as part of a larger accumulative materialist progression that accommodates, but does not always adhere to, human intentionality. If we view a Shakespeare play’s fame as archontic, something that accrues meaning, developing its own archive, then, in theory, performance becomes interminable (DeKosnik 2016). The theatrical production is absorbed in a longer process of materialisation that can never fully conclude because the celebrity text, defined by its relationship to mechanisms of fame and culture, is constantly repositioning itself and generating new meaning. As a play becomes better known, a celebrity in its own right, its performance is speculatively consumed in advance and stagings offer glimpses of what Shakespeare could be when the text engages with other performance materials. Sack’s dismissive recognition that, ‘regardless which possibility the actor utilises in pursuit, the objective remains the same; the event is tamed’ (2015: 45), not only presumes a homogeneity to the performing body, and a stability to the transience of language, but evinces a peculiarly conservative approach to the transhistorical and cultural permutations of literature. Futurity makes its presence felt when a text is a sufficiently known quantity to be remediated, reframed and detached from the bounded space of authorial intent. As the text accrues value, historical specificity falls away and authorial intent is diminished – historical connotations of word choice, acting styles, stage management practices are stripped of their usefulness. Under these circumstances, a script connotes and exists on its own terms – the best example being Pinter’s famous pauses. Moreover, increased accessibility of translations, editions and annotations offer ongoing opportunities to renegotiate meaning, and outside materialities draw our attention to unpredictable elements. For example, the denial in 2017 by the Albee estate of permission for a cross-racial cast in an Oregon production of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* illustrates the futility of intentionality as a means of circumventing speculation and controlling the meaning of a playscript. The publication of the estate’s denial, only noteworthy because of the play’s fame, worked against their intentions by inviting a speculative reconsideration of the racial politics not only of the play under discussion, but of Albee’s work in a more general sense. The overall result, then, is that Pinter’s pauses are no longer authorial directions, but markers of a Pinter play’s stylistic identity, straddling both print and performance – they become as laden with celebrity meaning as the Marilyn Monroe dress or Judy Garland’s slippers.
If we accept the script as Bennett’s vibrant matter, it becomes an entelechially infused object that exists as part of the larger federation of actants when it is staged. Its progression towards actualisation is made visible through performance and yet, as a famous play whose future iterations are both assured (by its cultural value) and unknown (because its affective power shifts as cultural values change), it can never be fully realised. Rebecca Schneider correctly notes that ‘performance . . . becomes materialisation’ (2015: 12), but when this materialisation is integrated with a play’s ongoing celebrity, meaning becomes fruitfully dependent on the shifting semiotic grounds that its contemporary performances offer, whether they be rooted in the avant-garde or original practices. By retracing our steps back to the text, then, we might resist the complacency that tells us that ‘agency is also bound up with the idea of a trajectory’ (Bennett 2010: 32) and recognise that the vibrancy inherent in the classical text is negotiated by both actor and audience with unexpected results. A play’s object-celebrity generates a capacity for its own autonomy and potentiality in performance that conflates both the literary and performed text as part of the theatrical existence.

The vibrant materiality of the classical play, then, acts upon the audience member by eliciting an affective navigation between what they experience and what they have anticipated. In performance, agency is ‘distributed across a mosaic’ (Bennett 2010: 38) and elicits a meta-critical engagement with the play’s materialities that is generally only made explicit in postmodern performance. Keith Hamilton Cobb’s American Moor, for example, interrogates Shakespeare’s place as an archontic object in an attempt to separate it from the networks of institutional racism that habitually exclude actors of colour in the United States. In particular, Hamilton Cobb’s choice to intersperse meditations on institutionalised racism in American classical theatre with performed chunks of Othello is designed to highlight the artificiality of Shakespearean language as much as it draws attention to Hamilton Cobb’s dexterity, but few people would recognise his play as particularly experimental in its form. The classical script, variably constructed as it is across time, space and media, contains these multitudes of ongoing negotiation that American Moor dramatises, and consistently confounds our desire to see the text through fresh eyes, even in stagings that do not openly call attention to the text. Recognising the play’s celebrity allows for ways to conceptualise stagings on their own terms, rejecting notions of textual fidelity in favour of participatory and interactive play, even when they appear in less obviously appropriative performative texts such as the yoga Hamlet. A theory of the celebrity text,
then, allows us to think more theoretically about performances such as Phyllida Lloyd’s 2017 *Julius Caesar* or Watermill’s 2001 *Rose Rage*, as well as recognising the dialogic performative relationship that a play such as Taylor Mac’s 2019 *Gary* has with *Titus Andronicus*.

When a Shakespeare play acquires a celebrity of its own, the willing suspension of disbelief becomes considerably more difficult to achieve as performance conditions us – both as practitioners and critics – to assume an anthropomorphic stance and assume that the role will always yield to accommodate the body that intends to control it, even when the role is familiar to the point of being a trope. Staging *Hamlet* elicits paratextual expectations that are defined partly by the play – think, for example, of Hamlet’s madness, his acerbic humour, or the technical requirements of the soliloquies – but also by its status as a Great Role. *Hamlet*, described by Oskar Eustis (2017) as ‘the greatest dramatic work in the history of literature’, is unarguably the definitive role of an actor’s career. Susannah Clapp (2015) echoes Roach’s understanding of celebrity when she explains that for Hamlet, ‘what matters is not the order of the speeches, or some adventurous departure – not even the range of his performance. Another, more elusive quality is crucial’. While Clapp (2015) cannot quite define what this thing is, she articulates it in terms of fame; it is, she suggests, ‘the difference between a thinker and an administrator, and perhaps between a classical actor and a star’. Only a fellow celebrity, she implies, can fully explain Hamlet.

Performances of *Hamlet*, therefore, are arguably as defined by its status as ‘one of the glories of world literature’ (Croall 2018: 1) as they are by the text itself. Put simply, when it comes to Hamlet, its celebrity is frequently conflated with heroism, by virtue of its identity as a Great Role, and compounded by the renown of those who play him. In spite of Hamlet’s ineffective grandstanding during *The Mousetrap* or at Ophelia’s funeral, his misogyny, and a level of self-obsession that can, for example, only value Horatio’s life for its capacity to tell his story, Hamlet’s affiliation with Clapp’s elusive star quality makes it the domain of leading male (and occasionally female) actors, who subject Hamlet to the tropes of masculinity that are often attached to leading men in both popular entertainment and commercial theatre culture. Hamlet’s celebrity, rather than his personality, make him magnetic, and this makes demands on producers who are then perhaps required to choose between a classical actor and a ‘star’, and also works on actors who want to prove themselves worthy of the role. These political ecologies are essential for objects to contribute as active things. *American Moor*’s discussion of the limited classical roles available to actors
of colour shows the extent to which all of these processes are shaped by external ideological, cultural and economic factors.

**Celebrity Intersections in Sam Gold’s *Hamlet***

In 2017 the Public Theatre presented a mildly controversial production of *Hamlet*, directed by Sam Gold and featuring movie star Oscar Isaac. The production had previously been scheduled as part of Theatre for a New Audience’s (TFANA) 2017 season, but the ‘pretty aggressive adaptation/cut of the play’ was deemed unsuitable ‘because Theatre for a New Audience does not produce Shakespeare adaptations’ (Barone 2016). TFANA’s attempt to isolate the text away from the adaptive collaboration of Gold’s direction returns us to the paradox of the inescapable yet invisible script. It is perplexing, to say the least, that an artistic director of a classical theatre company would insist on the sanctity of text, but TFANA’s sour observation that the replacement play, *Measure for Measure*, ‘would make half the money than “Hamlet” would have’ made acknowledges the extent to which the celebrity of the text matters (Barone 2016). Gold conceptualised the play as a domestic contemporary tragedy, with a cast of nine and a small, flexible, red playing space in the Anspacher Theatre upstairs at the Public’s Astor Place building, with audience on three sides, and no constructed set, only props. These practical choices not only shied away from the paratextual myth of Hamlet’s nobility, but promised a subtle rejection of authenticity, ostensibly teasing its ability to redistribute the matter of the play and find something new. This meta-critical production framework, when combined with the paratextual production drama, established a degree of uncertainty as to the fidelity of the production, and drew attention to the script.

The uneasily juxtaposed acting styles at play within the production suggested the diverse ways in which the celebrity text exerted its agency on different actors. Isaac, a lead actor in the newest *Star Wars* movies, is a charismatic, established movie star, following the pattern of handsome, young, well-credentialled actors taking on the role of Hamlet. Public Theatre artistic director Oskar Eustis’s accompanying programme note makes clear the assumption that Isaac has earned his right to play the Danish Prince. Eustis tells the story of watching ‘the brilliant young Oscar’ at his first audition, then lists Isaac’s considerable Shakespearean accomplishments for the Public Theatre before reminding the audience that ‘he has since gone on to extraordinary stardom and recognition’; he acknowledges that even though Isaac’s performance in *Show Me a Hero* is ‘one of the greatest
television achievements of the millennium’, ‘his roots have always been in the theatre’ (Eustis 2017). Eustis’s note demonstrates the celebrity paradox facing actors who, as ‘stars must be able to play a range of characters in order to show their skill . . . while at the same time each performance must hold to the sense of the star in order for the associations of that star to imbue the performance with meaning and pleasure’ (Mills 2010: 192). This paratextual material is only unusual in how it makes explicit the rationale that so often drives the casting of Hamlet. Nonetheless, Eustis’s rationale is indicative of Hamlet’s celebrity as part of a larger ecology of Shakespeare that is ‘lively, affective, and signaling’ (Bennett 2010: 117), absorbing human exceptionalism as part of a larger materialist assemblage. Framed as an aspirational role, then, Hamlet demanded a particular performance from Isaac that was psychologically realistic, the ‘method’ acting that movie stardom celebrates, to reify Isaac’s skills and validate Eustis’s praise (Eustis himself, as a celebrity director, brings his own affective network into play). As a result, Isaac’s Hamlet was required to continually negotiate the enforced absence of the fourth wall in his performance. As Gold’s Hamlet manifests itself as an unstable Shakespeare object, both intimate and strange, it makes visible Isaac’s work towards inhabiting a Hamlet that is predicated on twentieth-century psychological interpretation and haunted by the spectre of Great Actors. Isaac’s performance, framed as it was by Eustis’s fanfare, ostensibly resisted the play’s ‘thing-power’, but the search for new insights only led him to other objects, particularly as he sought to illustrate Hamlet’s madness. Isaac walked around in his underwear, hurled lasagne around the stage, and sat in a reserved seat in the audience, speaking to patrons as though they were part of the performance. Sitting in the front row of the audience for the beginning of The Mousetrap, Isaac spoke his comments to audience members, waiting delightedly for their uncomfortable responses before moving to sit with Ophelia and watch the play. Isaac’s use of audience members as props speaks to the interchangeability of object and human in the theatrical space, drawing attention to the presence of the script even as he maintained his character.

The casting of Keegan-Michael Key, of Key & Peele fame, however, more overtly recognised the ways in which the materialities at play shaped his performance, arguably to greater payoff. Comedy is a genre that thrives on the detachment of its performers, thereby activating its own set of (occasionally disruptive) expectations upon the theatrical assemblage. Key’s casting, however, recognised the celebrity power of the text as it worked on him and continually drew attention to performance’s transparency in a manner that ultimately endowed his performance with great emotional
affect. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in spite of a career equally as prestigious and popular as that of Isaac, Key’s casting lacked the equivalent fanfare. The reasons for this are varied. Key is a television actor and a comedian, which stands in stark opposition to Isaac’s reputation as a ‘serious’ actor in film which, as Eustis’s note explained, generated ‘extraordinary stardom and recognition’ (Eustis 2017). Key is also an African American actor and subject to the ‘parameters and limitations imposed by racial bias’ that Keith Hamilton Cobb explored in his play American Moor (qtd in Yargo 2019); he also lacks the ‘Internet’s boyfriend’ heart-throb status that Isaac enjoys. Unexpectedly for a comedian, Key was not cast as the gravedigger, but instead he doubled as both Horatio and the Player King. As well as contributing to the materialist value of his celebrity, Key’s profile as a comedic celebrity in his own right was empowered by the detached critical eye that comedy demands. Comedy is a style of performance ‘at odds with the dominant realist tone of classical Hollywood’ (Mills 2010: 194) and is a style that ‘plays with modes of representation and performance, offering audiences pleasure in such disruption and experimentation’ (Mills 2010: 194) because it facilitates a more participatory experience. A clown invites recognition of the extrafictional status of staged classical theatre, treating the objects on stage – including the audience and script – as his own ludic props. Hamlet, therefore, worked on Key differently than it did Isaac, encouraging a more self-consciously visible process that, as Ben Brantley (2017) notes, enabled the audience to ‘pass the four-hour production with some of the best storytellers [it has] ever met’.

As a comedian, Key’s deliberate positioning outside the drama empowered him to explicitly confront the textual materiality of performance – ‘when you cannot abject your abjection . . . you laugh’ (Limon 2000: 74) – and the laughter he generated reflected the corporeality of the text as the basis of his performance. At the opening of the play, Key greeted the audience members as they found their seats, gleefully informing us all of the four-hour run time and ad-libbing jokes about Hamlet and the audience’s response to his announcement. Because of the small company, the actors were required to be on stage for the duration of the play, and as Brantley (2017) noted, they engaged the audience: ‘many of their observations are pitched directly to us, as if the audience were their grievance committee’, which further heightened the stand-up element of Key’s overall performance. As the Player King, Key further drew attention to the artificiality of performance by deliberately overacting in The Mousetrap. The contrast between acting styles was made further evident when Isaac delivered the ‘speak the speech’ instructions
with particular emphasis at Key. Hamlet’s warning, to ‘o’erstep not the modesty of nature’ (III.ii.17–18), sets up a paradigm of invisible performance, and his emphasis on the modesty of nature is particularly applied to the clown, whose excess threatens to undo the imitation of humanity that Hamlet craves. For Hamlet – and for Isaac – successful performance rests on the actor’s ability to mitigate the text’s artificiality, to ‘beget a temperance that may give it smoothness’ (III.ii.6–7), but for a clown, success is defined by the visibility of the text, and the warning falls flat.

Key made a mockery of overblown acting styles during his protracted and comical death in *The Mousetrap*, which led Isaac’s Hamlet to sit with his head in his hands – a moment in which these two diverse acting styles potently overlapped. By allowing a performance that both drew attention to and was affected by his own particular celebrity, Key participated in a rich materialist history of clowning in relation to Shakespeare. In the Player King’s transition from a nuanced performance of Hecuba to the slapstick demise of Gonzago, Key’s deliberate choices to disrupt the text provided much-needed comic relief in the lengthy production. The Player King’s choices were treated with an affectionate indulgence by Isaac that threatened to destabilise his own commitment to his role, as he smiled wearily at *The Mousetrap*, and for a split second, as I wondered if the actor was fighting back a giggle, the performance was destabilised – arguably, in addition to newness, these are also the moments that fans of the celebrity text live for. Rather than alienate his audience, however, Key’s affective acting style was crucial to the pathos of the production, and reinforced Gold’s vision of the play as a domestic tragedy. Doubling of roles inevitably leads to the conflation of a performer’s attributes across the parts they play, and the collapse of the Player King and Horatio, as the only characters that Hamlet seems genuinely to profess enthusiasm for, intersected Key’s vibrant performance with Isaac’s. At the close of the play, the absurdity of the Player King’s death was powerfully mirrored in Horatio’s gently humorous offer to demonstrate himself as ‘more an antique Roman than a Dane’ and commit suicide with his friend. The offer, matched with an exaggerated mock drinking from Hamlet’s poisoned cup, disrupted the melodrama of the moment, turning the gesture into a comic act specifically designed to make his dying friend smile. Ironically, Key’s recognition of the artificiality of the text he was performing resulted in one of the most unexpectedly moving moments of the production, and offered (for this audience member anyway) the type of revelation that Cote so consistently craves, and that brings us back to favourite plays time and again.
Coda: Never-ending Performance

This chapter has relied primarily on my own recollection of Gold's *Hamlet*, as well as Ben Brantley's *New York Times* review of the play, and at present the production is not available in digital form. The material traces left by Brantley, other critics, fans and even this chapter are now a part of *Hamlet*'s performance archive, inviting memorial or speculative reconstruction that will, in turn, contribute to perpetuating the fame of Hamlet as a Great Role. Theatre is, at its core, an act of imaginative good faith, and as such, the theatrical staging can be expanded to accommodate all dimensions of the spectator experience – the paratextual expectation (or imagining), the onsite experience itself, and the memory (or speculation for those unable to attend the performance) leave materialist traces that contribute to an archontic celebrity of *Hamlet* that draws from its vibrant matter and tries to contain it. New materialism alerts us to the affective visibility of the Shakespearean text on stage, and what is dramatised is the ways this affective object works on its actors and audience as part of a longer process of dramatic growth. Through their engagement with the text as a vibrant celebrity object, both Isaac and Key inserted themselves into an ongoing materialist history of the play, both drawing from, and contributing to, its enduring fame.

Notes

1. Hans-Thies Lehmann defines dramatic theatre as ‘anchored in bourgeois life’ (2016: 300), and as a movement that is primarily located between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. I, however, apply the term more broadly to refer to performed productions that are defined by their linearity and adherence to a script, and the postmodern deconstructed performance form that Lehmann terms ‘post-dramatic’. Work by, for example, the RSC, the ASC, the National Theatre and many other mainstream companies falls into the ‘dramatic’ category; performances by such organisations as The Wooster Group, Forced Entertainment and Punchdrunk belong to the ‘post-dramatic’.

2. There are, of course, other materialist values to consider. As Blackwell and Sawyer implicitly suggest, the networks of a celebrity play are often expressly utilised for economic profit and shaped through connections with other known quantities, such as actors, theatre companies and sites.

3. Even Blackwell’s excellent work on Richard III’s recent celebrity attaches him to the person, centralising embodiment as she recognises the two facets of Ricardian celebrity – ‘first, the interconnected and self-sustaining distinctiveness of the theatrical Richard and second, that of the stars who
perform or adapt him’ (Blackwell 2018: 144). As Loren Glass (2015) illustrates, studies of ‘literary celebrity’ almost exclusively centre around the author and not the work.

**Bibliography**


