

EDITED BY ROBERT KNOPF



THEATER AND FILM

A COMPARATIVE ANTHOLOGY

Theater and Film

A Comparative Anthology

Edited by Robert Knopf

Yale University Press

New Haven and London

Published with assistance from the Louis Stern Memorial Fund.

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Set in Adobe Garamond type by The Composing Room of Michigan, Inc.
Printed in the United States of America by Vail Ballou Press, Binghamton,
New York.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Knopf, Robert, 1961–

Theater and film : a comparative anthology / edited by Robert Knopf.

p. cm.

Includes filmography.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-300-10336-0 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Motion pictures and theater. I. Title.

PN1995.25.K58 2004

791.43'6—dc22

2004042046

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Theater and Film

For my children, Ally and Lara, who know a good performance
when they see one

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the R. F. Johnson Fund and the Hodgkins Fund for providing the funds for the film stills that illustrate this book. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the ConnSharp Fund for Faculty-Student Research Partnerships. My research assistants, Mary Ellen Osborne, Kristin Knapp, and Jeremy Make were invaluable in helping me locate potential essays for this volume and organize the massive amount of bibliographic as well as filmographic data. Cara Gabriel, Anthony Cantrell, and Vanessa Luke contributed greatly to the organization and preparation of the manuscript. My editors, Lauren Shapiro and Harry Haskell, and my copyeditor, Joyce Ippolito, provided invaluable editorial assistance and support throughout the process. James Welsh's suggestions and support helped me broaden the appeal and comprehensiveness of this volume. And my wife, Elizabeth Pascal, was unbelievably patient in reading drafts of the introduction more times than any one reasonable person would or should.

Last, my thanks to my parents, Richard and Florence Knopf, for always letting me stay up late to watch the end of the movie.

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Introduction

Robert Knopf

For as long as film has existed, comparisons have been made between the ancient mother, theater, and her youthful offspring, film. The two media have a lot in common, not the least of which is that their predominant end has been storytelling. Yet the two differ in many ways as well, most of which have been noted by the critics and theorists found in this book, who have carried on a scholarly debate that extends over the greater part of the twentieth century. At base, we can probably all agree that theater is live and exists in the moment, whereas film consists of a performance or story preserved, indeed most would say *constructed*, on celluloid.

Traditionally, the study of most theater-and-film courses has centered on the adaptation of dramatic texts to film, and it is precisely this focus that *Theater and Film: A Comparative Anthology* aims to challenge. For the adaptation of plays to film is a small, albeit significant, portion of artists' and scholars' investigation of the relationship between theater and film—a relationship that begins with the birth of film in 1895, when the earliest showings were exhibited in theatrical houses and, a short while later, as “acts” within vaudeville bills.¹ The

time has come to broaden the scope of this inquiry by expanding the “lens” through which we view theater and film. For this reason, the essays in this volume focus less on adaptation and more on the economic, aesthetic, cultural, and technological relationships between theater and film. To examine theater and film in this context, we must therefore look beyond the products—the theatrical performance and the cinematic screening—toward the interweaving of influence and differentiation between the two media, to borrow the terminology (first used by A. Nicholas Vardac) that had its roots in the days of pre-film and early cinema.² Only by doing so can we see the complexity of this relationship, which extends far beyond the initial question of how to transfer a story from one medium to another.

Vardac was the first, or at least the most prominent, scholar to note that cinema’s precursor may be detected in the spectacle theater of the nineteenth century. As he states in this volume, there was a cultural push toward a realist-romantic aesthetic that first developed in melodrama and spectacle theater. A growing cultural desire to see the world in precise detail, to locate the audience as closely as possible to both the spectacular and the everyday, created, in a sense, the appetite for the invention of film. For despite all of the advances of the nineteenth-century stage—seen most clearly in the stage spectacles and melodramas of Steele MacKaye, Henry Irving, and David Belasco—film could bring audiences to places they could not travel and position them closer to events than might otherwise be safe in person.

The historical section of this anthology therefore sets up the give-and-take between the two media and seeks to help students and scholars of theater and film chart the course of the technological, aesthetic, and economic interaction between the two media. Film was initially, and in many cases still is, considered the more visual medium. Yet how much of this bias comes from the simple fact that the first films were silent? Not truly silent, for music, either recorded or live, accompanied most “silent” films, and words were relegated to intertitles, literally detaching the dialogue from the characters. Conversely, how much of the bias toward seeing theater as the more verbal medium stems from the fact that the first twenty-five hundred years of Western theatrical production disappeared into thin air, not preserved by the camera and leaving predominantly one concrete trace of its existence—the script?³ So, even though early Greek tragedy and comedy were frequently filled with the spectacle of masks and a dancing chorus, as well as the sound of music (now lost to the ages), and even though silent theater predates the more language-based theater of Aeschylus,

Sophocles, Euripides, and their brethren,⁴ theater is often categorized as the more verbal, or text-based medium.

Yet the assumption seems to linger that film is primarily a visual medium and theater primarily a verbal one. Certainly this need not be the case. We need look no further than Julie Taymor's productions—for example, *The Lion King* (1997) and *The Green Bird* (2000)—for a predominantly visual theater and Neil LaBute's films—such as *In the Company of Men* (1997) and *Your Friends and Neighbors* (1998)—for a predominantly verbal cinema. Both these artists, moreover, have shown themselves able to switch media and emphasis with ease. So where does this initial and enduring visual-verbal assumption come from? Most scholars have accepted the notion that these qualities are inherent in the media, but I prefer to categorize their view as just one “lens”—a particular way of looking at the issue that shapes the conclusions one may draw. Instead, I would like to propose a historical explanation for the widespread belief that film is inherently visual and theater is inherently verbal. First, let us examine the assumption that theater is a verbal medium.

Although many contemporary theater historians suggest precursors to theater in shamanism, Egyptian rituals, and other “primitive” performances, for just as many the ancient Greek theater remains the first truly significant one that we can fully imagine. Why? Because it is the first theater with a significant number of extant scripts. Greek theater also claims the first significant dramatic critic and theorist: Aristotle. Both the preservation of scripts and Aristotle's *Poetics* (ca. 335–323 B.C.) lead us to think of the “great” contributions of theater as words, scripts, plots, and characters. The scripts can be revived, retranslated, and reimaged. And Aristotle, in ranking his six elements of theater, put text-based elements of theater (plot, character, thought, and language) in the top positions and visual and sensual elements (music, spectacle) in the bottom two spots. Aristotle's relative rankings of dramatic and theatrical elements may be explained, in part, by the fact that he was writing approximately one hundred years after the great Greek tragedians had written and produced their plays. Many scholars have pointed out that the quality of theatrical production in Aristotle's time had declined, and for this reason among others he preferred scripts to productions. The time has come to put aside these useful, though perhaps outdated, assumptions and examine the relationship between theater and film afresh.

Even if we look at each medium and examine its supposed strengths and weaknesses, the medium does not irrevocably determine the form of any par-

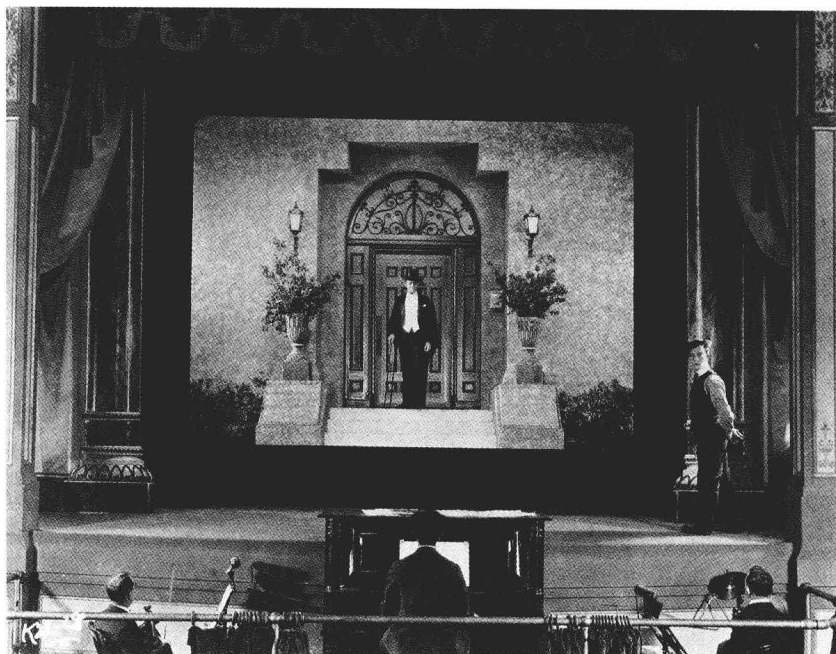


Fig. 1. Buster Keaton in *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924). Keaton drew his influences from vaudeville magicians, combining their magic acts with new cinematic techniques that he and his cameraman invented to create new screen magic. Courtesy of BFI Stills, Posters and Designs.

ticular film or play. Whereas it is true that many playwrights and screenwriters write with the medium, and often particular actors, theaters, and production companies, in mind—the most famous example being none other than William Shakespeare, who wrote his plays with the Lord Chamberlain's Men and the Globe in mind—it may be most useful and liberating for artists, scholars, critics, and students to see conditions of production as a challenge rather than a limitation. Whenever something appears to be impossible in theater or film, someone invents a way to make it happen anyhow. And it is through productions that creatively cross the border between what was considered impossible, and what is then found to be realizable, that both media grow and change.

Film may offer greater visual possibilities, but that does not prevent theater professor-turned-film director Neil LaBute from writing screenplays that are as highly verbal as his plays.⁵ At the same time, it would be difficult if not impos-

sible to categorize some of the most exciting and popular theater in New York as verbal. What of Bill Irwin's "new vaudeville" pieces, *Largely New York* (1989) and *Fool Moon* (1993), productions that are virtually silent? What of experiential and nearly nonverbal productions such as Blue Man Group's *Tubes* (1991) and De La Guarda's *Villa Villa* (1998), both still running as of 2003 to sold-out houses? These productions do not happen to be successful in spite of their neglect of the supposed strengths of their chosen medium. It is, to my mind, precisely by choosing to overcome the limitations of their medium that these artists achieve success, for what greater thrill can there be than to see either art form transcend the boundaries that we have become accustomed to assigning to it?

In her seminal essay "Film and Theater," Susan Sontag concludes that most scholars and critics see theater and film as either inherently separate or inherently interchangeable. Thus, for most scholars and critics, film is film and theater is theater, or film can be theatrical and theater can be cinematic, points of view that are problematic only to the extent that any one individual makes claims to "truth" and fails to recognize that the relative balance between the verbal and the visual is a matter of choice, regardless of medium. By comparison, Sontag calls for a new notion of the relationship between film and theater without proposing one, thereby provocatively challenging us: "We need a new idea. It will probably be a very simple one. Will we be able to recognize it?"⁶ What might this new idea be, and how might we go about discovering it? This anthology is structured on the premise that a new notion of the relationship between theater and film must be based not only on the history and theory of the two media but also on the contributions of the artists who have been most influential in them; that the inherent differences in the media provide different options but do not predetermine what kind of film or theater can be created; and that there is no single "idea" that can answer Sontag's bold challenge. Rather, there is a multiplicity of answers, and the scholar's or artist's journey toward a particular answer will ultimately be personal, depending upon the "lens" through which he or she views the two media.

To the above, I would add one more observation: both media are constantly changing in terms of technology, style, economics, and their influence on each other. For example, one of the most-quoted, though probably apocryphal, tales of early cinema concerns the first Parisian audience's viewing of film footage of a train coming into a station in the Lumière brothers' *Arrival of the Paris Express* (1895). As the story goes, audience members screamed when the train appeared to come toward them, temporarily unable to distinguish palpable reality from

cinematic imagery. In those early days of film, its novelty as technological innovation was its principal draw. Yet film does not have a monopoly on new technology; theater has been swayed by its own flirtation with technology and special effects. The first audiences who saw *Miss Saigon* had a sensation similar to the Lumières' audience when a helicopter appeared to land on a Broadway stage.⁷ For this reason, all claims to the inherent discreteness of theater and film as media are spurious and subject to the yet-to-be-seen influences of future technological innovation on both these art forms.

In 1917, when Hugo Münsterberg observed that theater is bound by causality whereas film is not, the use of simultaneous action and non-causal action on the avant-garde stage had just begun. By 2003, the computerized light boards of contemporary theater, which allow easy cross-fades from one location to another, have changed the nature of theater as a medium and continue to revolutionize it, so that Münsterberg's observation becomes less and less accurate with time.⁸ And with today's generation of young playwrights having been raised on film, plays are no longer being written predominantly in the "well-made-play" form. Episodic theater, jumping from place to place and time to time, is on the rise—though anticipated by medieval mystery plays by a mere five hundred years or so. And with the Internet encouraging contemporary artists to see time and place as non-linear, I believe we can expect further experimentation with shifts of time and place in new drama and film.⁹

If there is an inherent quality of theater that I would isolate at this point, it is the fact that theater performance, by virtue of its "live-ness," disappears as soon as it is spoken, leaving texts (scripts) as the primary record and most widely consumed "artifact" of the theatrical event. Film performance, by nature of its preservation on celluloid and now videotape and DVD, is kept "alive" in a way that theater performance, even in the best-taped performances or in written documentation, cannot be.¹⁰ The cinematic artifact, therefore, is the film itself, whereas the theatrical artifact is the script.

Yet the theatrical artifact (the text), though subject to exhaustive and (occasionally exhausting) scholarly debate, should not be confused with the theatrical product, whereas the cinematic artifact *is* the product. Plays and films are made to be seen, and therefore the focus on the dramatic text shines the spotlight on the words to a degree that is not always commensurate with their significance in production.¹¹ With the possible exception of the plays of Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, and perhaps George Bernard Shaw, theater audiences by and large remember fully realized, staged moments of a play with greater frequency than lines from the text. All of which begs the question, why is theater

considered the more verbal form and, even if it is, does this change the theater's capacity in any significant way?

I believe that the answer lies in the way that plays and screenplays develop into production and films. For the dramatic text leaves open a multitude of interpretations during its artistic life, and these interpretations can be realized in production without rewriting a word of the script. Films, however, are sometimes remade, and this process rarely, if ever, has been based word-for-word on the original screenplay—a fact indicating that play texts are viewed, at least by a significant minority, as sacrosanct, whereas screenplays are not. Yet this need not be the case, and the overall validity of this generalization tells us more about the power of producers, directors, and writers in each medium. A theater director like the late Jerzy Grotowski, who used to adapt or radically reinterpret other playwrights' texts, is labeled "experimental" (among other adjectives), whereas a filmmaker such as Martin Scorsese can completely rewrite a movie like *Cape Fear*, and his "remake" has its own legitimacy as a separate work of art. Whether a cinematic remake has any more independent validity as a work of art than an experimental theater production can be examined only on a case-by-case basis, however. I would observe, moreover, that theater produces a greater number and range of interpretations of its most esteemed scripts than film does of any of its screenplays.

One dominant quality to which both film and theater have often aspired is life-likeness—what often comes under the terms "realism," "naturalism," or simply representationalism. Indeed, it has often been said that theater's ability to mimic reality has been surpassed by film, because films can capture behavior in actual environments to an extent nearly impossible in theater. Whereas theater enthusiasts could point to the sensory appeal of theater—its ability to communicate to all five senses of the audience—as evidence of its greater life-likeness, film lovers will counter with film's capacity to bring the audience closer to the actors' behavior, in circumstances that are "real" and not "staged." Yet theater and film have always tried to claim, and still do claim, representationalism or life-likeness as their own special province. From the earliest days of film, we clearly see *theatrical* innovators such as André Antoine, Konstantin Stanislavsky, and Duke of Saxe-Meiningen experimenting with numerous ways of making the theater more lifelike. Antoine put carcasses of beef on stage in *The Butchers* (1888), Stanislavsky incorporated extensive environmental sound in his productions of Anton Chekhov's plays at the Moscow Art Theater, and as early as the mid-nineteenth century the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen used real trees, rocks, and foliage on many of his sets.

At the same time, film's first significant achievements occur both in the realm of representationalism (in the Lumière brothers' short, slice-of-life films, such as *Arrival of the Paris Express* and *Passengers Descending from the Brooklyn Bridge* [1896]) and in the realm of fantasy (in the magical films of George Méliès, such as *A Trip to the Moon* [1902]). And while early film artists were exploring these two possible directions for cinematic art, theatrical realism was being challenged by the non-realistic experiments of the avant-garde, seen first in the Symbolist theater of the 1890s and then in the bizarre antics of Alfred Jarry's character King Ubu, who first appeared on the professional stage in 1896. So, from the beginning, both media displayed the capability of achieving realism or non-realism. And because some of the earliest exhibitions of films occurred in vaudeville houses, interspersed between live variety acts, we can see that either medium was able to contribute "variety" to vaudeville's already wide range of styles. The economic competition and technological developments of the two media thus result in their being polarized at times, drawn together at others, like two magnets whose ends either meet or repel.

For example, the greater economic pressure on film, caused by film's larger audiences, led Hollywood to adopt a more realistic and cost-effective norm, as Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson have convincingly argued.¹² Theater is bound less by such economic factors, as the audience for any production is much smaller and therefore so are the budgets and financial risks. Avant-garde theater, which tends to be lower budget, can take greater chances, whereas Broadway and the West End productions are confined by the financial risks of their larger budgets. Only a project with a guaranteed audience, like *The Lion King*, finally brought the work of the experimental director Julie Taymor to Broadway and West End audiences. Artistically, the two media influence each other, then, while economically they push each other further apart in an effort to carve out their own niche and audience.

Technological innovations (at the time, some would have called them "changes," but not truly innovations) like the introduction of spoken words to films, which becomes the dominant practice between 1926 and 1929, change the relationship of these two media or magnets, as I have referred to them above.¹³ Once sound recordings of dialogue became the norm in film, Hollywood needed scripts with extensive dialogue—not merely because Hollywood wished to take advantage of sound's capabilities but also because the earliest sound equipment required indoor studio sets and nearly static camera work to preserve the quality of the recording. Combined with audiences' interest in seeing actors speak, the static camera thus impelled studios toward dialogue-