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Christopher Grobe

WHY IT'S "EASIER TO ACT WITH A TELEPHONE THAN A MAN"

Hollywood is ruled by conventional wisdom—or, as it's known when it takes off its coat and tie, magical thinking. Certain factors, they say, make for a surefire hit; certain others mean you'll never make a buck. Some of the rules sound silly, but, really, why tempt fate? Listen to director Bill Condon as he slips one of these showbiz credos into a recent interview: "You know, they say for a great performance you need a great telephone scene."[1] To the uninitiated, this may sound strange—*surely an outlying tenet of the faith!*—but Hollywood's belief in the "telephone scene" is curiously devout. And unlike other Tinseltown lore, with its murky past and fractured provenance, this tale of the telephone is easy to track to a single event nearly eighty years ago.

In 1937, Luise Rainer won an Oscar for her performance in MGM's lavish biopic *The Great Ziegfeld*. The role was smallish and had little to recommend her for such an honor. In fact, Louis B. Mayer nearly forbade her to accept the role at all. Too piddling a part, he scoffed, for his next Greta Garbo![2] But whatever it lacked in size or substance, it made up for in one exquisite scene: a conversation by telephone.[3] As legend has it, not only did this two-minute scene clinch the Oscar for Rainer, it inexplicably won her the Best Actress Oscar for what was clearly a supporting role. In short, the telephone magnified her—first in the short-term memories of those who saw the film and then in the enduring lore of Hollywood.

Just search for the phrase "telephone scene" in the archive of any newspaper and you can watch the legend grow and change over time.

> 1953, ROME: Edmond O'Brien swallows his pride and accepts low billing for *The Barefoot Contessa*, but only after his director points out the parallels between O'Brien's predicament and Luise Rainer's.[4] Ten years later, O'Brien would confess with a sigh, "I had already read the script and I knew what that frantic telephone scene could do for me."[5] Well, at least he won an Oscar for his troubles.

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> 1963, HOLLYWOOD: Geraldine Page gets an Oscar nomination for *Sweet Bird of Youth*, thus fulfilling one commentator's prediction: "She does a telephone scene that has Academy Award written all over it."[6]

> 1974, LOS ANGELES: Valerie Perrine turns heads with her performance in the biopic *Lenny*. One journalist remarks, "When a lovely actress, with her face seemingly ravaged by drugs and liquor, starts sobbing into a telephone, it is time to start dusting off the gold statuette."[7]

The more examples I found, the more I was reminded of that old parlor game—the one where you whisper a message around the circle, then laugh at how much it changed as it went around. As those whispered messages go, so went this legend—turning weirdly specific and utterly vague by turns—until finally it arrived at the generalizations of Bill Condon and his ilk. By 2000, the phrase was a dead metaphor altogether, at least for one major studio executive: "You really get recognized" in Hollywood, he said, "if you have what's called the telephone scene, a big emotional scene that everybody remembers."[8] And this is the most startling development of all: that, in the end, a "telephone scene" might have no telephone in it.

At this point, we could throw up our hands and simply laugh at what passes for wisdom in the movie biz, except for one inconvenient fact I haven't yet shared. The notion that telephone scenes are an actor's dream or that phones draw the very greatest performances from our actors didn't start with Luise Rainer. In fact, it predates *The Great Ziegfeld* by many years, and it emerged not in Hollywood, but in Paris, London, and New York—that is, in the theatre. Writing in 1923 about recent British theatre, Petre Mais mused, "Perhaps it is easier to act with a telephone than a man. I at any rate have never seen anyone fail to 'get away' with a telephone scene."[9] American theatre critic George Jean Nathan concurred in 1928. There has never been an actor, he confidently declared, "who didn't seem completely convincing in a telephone scene. If I could figure out the reason, I'd write an essay on the subject."[10] Both writers delivered these remarks not with a provocateur's wink and nudge but with the casual shrug of a man who knows you'll agree. A full decade before Hollywood found its faith in the phone, the theatre was already full of devotees.

Luise Rainer, for one, knew all this. By the time MGM put her on the big screen, she had long been a star of the stage. She had toured widely around Europe and read deeply in drama, so she knew what Mais and Nathan knew and what Louis B. Mayer did not. When she pled with Mayer for a crack at *The Great Ziegfeld*, she insisted she knew how to "do something with" that long scene on the telephone, and what she did, in the end, was make sure it resembled a play.[11] With her director's permission, she literally "rewrote [the scene], stealing a bit from Jean Cocteau's *Beloved Voice* [*La Voix humaine* (1930)]," a play made entirely of a single telephone call.[12] Variant drafts of the *Great Ziegfeld* script have not survived, so it's difficult to know just what Rainer took from Cocteau, but it's easy to see why this scene made her think of that play. Like *La Voix humaine*, her scene features a woman speaking to an ex-lover by phone. Like that play, this scene trains our attention entirely upon this woman; we neither see nor hear the man's side of the conversation.[13] And in both, there's a notable gap between

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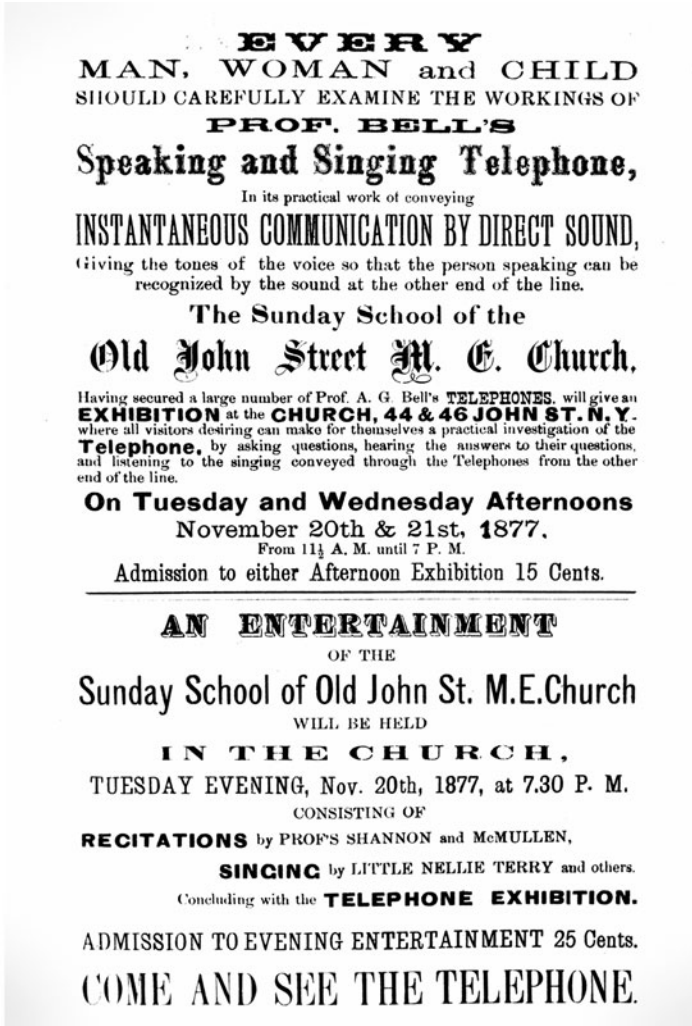
what she says—especially about her own feelings—and what we, in the audience, suspect to be true. We feel we know (because we *see*) the truth, as the man on the line cannot. Imagining his limited perspective, even as we enjoy the fullness of our own, we marvel at the gap between voices and bodies, between language and the truth it conveys. *La Voix humaine* is a hit with scholars nowadays. In fact, it's frequently offered as a definitive statement on the telephone.[14] Eckart Voigts-Virchow, whose essay on stage telephony takes as its title a line from this play, gives strong voice to the party line on this subject: "The telephone conversation is the ideal way to expose a lie and discredit the illocutionary dimension of a speech act," he says. "The telephone is an ideal medium to destabilize identities and initiate verbal role-playing."[15] Cocteau was *avant la lettre* before it was cool.[16]

It can be unsettling, then, to encounter early responses to this play—among which I count Luise Rainer's reuse of it. *The Great Ziegfeld*, you may be surprised to learn, does little to explode the West's metaphysics of presence. And while we may be wowed by *La Voix humaine*, with its ostensibly unsettling perspective on identity and mediation, most critics of the time were neither thrilled nor appalled. *La bourgeoisie*, I'm afraid, was not the least bit *épatée*. Instead, they nodded knowingly and filed their reviews: in a word, ho-hum! "Theatrically, the piece is a very ingenious monologue," wrote one critic for *The New York Times*, "but, after all, the various devices by which an author can suggest to an audience what the character before them is supposed to be hearing have all been used before."[17] From this critic's perspective, *La Voix humaine* was simply continuing a tradition—by then, already half a century old—of putting a telephone where you might otherwise need a scene partner. Cocteau acknowledged as much in his preface to the play. In writing this play, he limited himself strictly to the most mundane materials: the theme of "love and that banal property of modern plays, the telephone."[18] In other words, *La Voix humaine* wasn't *avant*-anything. It was normcore.

In this essay, I tell the history of the stage telephone, from its fresh-faced theatrical debut in the late nineteenth century to its Oscar-clinching role in *The Great Ziegfeld*. Although I begin with tales of how the telephone first stole the spotlight, my true interest lies in what happens when it fades into the background—when it has so sedimented itself into the mainstream of performance that its effects go unnoticed or are attributed to something else altogether.[19] This something else, evidently, is most often an actor's performance. How else can we explain the critical consensus—first in theatre, then in film—that the mere presence of a telephone guarantees that great acting will occur? Since the effects I'm highlighting are, above all, mundane and pervasive, I will not let classic stage telephones steal the scene. Instead, I will insist that they share the boards with their more forgettable contemporaries. I do this in the spirit of what Franco Moretti calls "distant reading"—pushing beyond the familiar canon and into a greater totality of culture.[20] Something remarkable lies concealed in this shared banality, in these routine thrills.

As I look for a solution to this mystery of the telephone's power, I may at times seem to echo the common refrain that telephones deconstruct or destabilize

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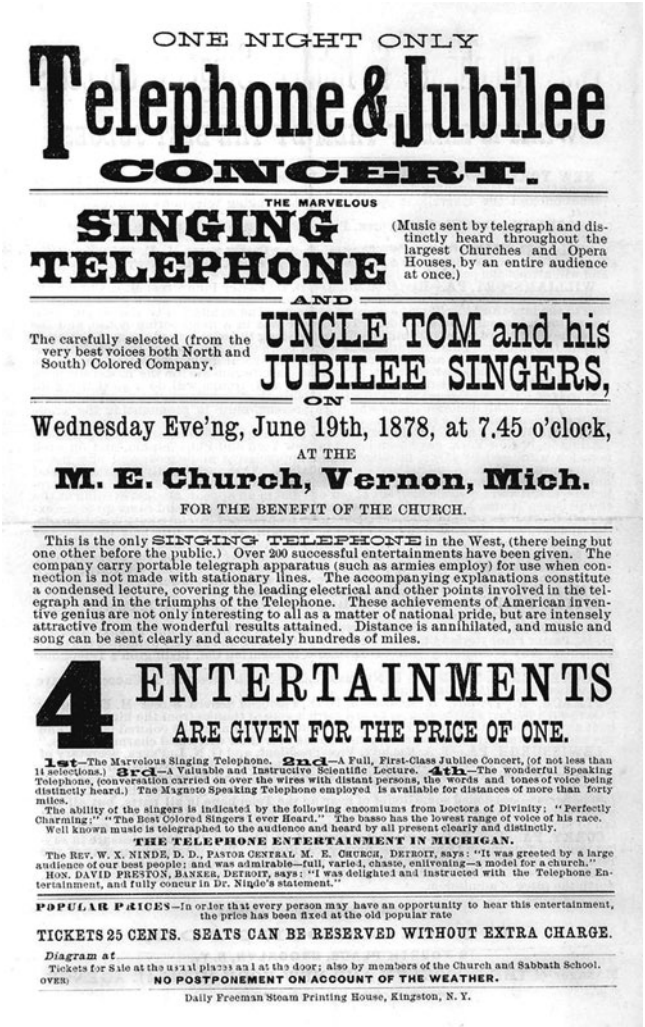


EVERY
MAN, WOMAN and CHILD
SHOULD CAREFULLY EXAMINE THE WORKINGS OF
PROF. BELL'S
Speaking and Singing Telephone,
In its practical work of conveying
INSTANTANEOUS COMMUNICATION BY DIRECT SOUND,
Giving the tones of the voice so that the person speaking can be recognized by the sound at the other end of the line.
The Sunday School of the
Old John Street M. E. Church,
Having secured a large number of Prof. A. G. Bell's TELEPHONES, will give an EXHIBITION at the CHURCH, 44 & 46 JOHN ST. N. Y. where all visitors desiring can make for themselves a practical investigation of the Telephone, by asking questions, hearing the answers to their questions, and listening to the singing conveyed through the Telephones from the other end of the line.
On Tuesday and Wednesday Afternoons
November 20th & 21st, 1877.
From 11½ A. M. until 7 P. M.
Admission to either Afternoon Exhibition 15 Cents.

AN ENTERTAINMENT
OF THE
Sunday School of Old John St. M.E.Church
WILL BE HELD
IN THE CHURCH,
TUESDAY EVENING, Nov. 20th, 1877, at 7.30 P. M.
CONSISTING OF
RECITATIONS by PROF'S SHANNON and McMULLEN,
SINGING by LITTLE NELLIE TERRY and others.
Concluding with the TELEPHONE EXHIBITION.
ADMISSION TO EVENING ENTERTAINMENT 25 Cents.
COME AND SEE THE TELEPHONE.

Figure 1.
An 1877 handbill advertises a performance by "Prof. Bell's Speaking and Singing Telephone." Courtesy of AT&T Archives and History Center.

the apparent simplicity of an actor's presence. In fact, I want to turn this argument on its head. Far from demystifying stage presence or unsettling the ideal of coherent character, the telephone played a crucial role in mystifying these things in the first place. With the telephone's help, actors discovered a new approach to their craft. They learned to signify invisible realities, to be varied yet coherent characters, to be present onstage "subconsciously," as one actress would put it. In other

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ONE NIGHT ONLY

Telephone & Jubilee CONCERT.

THE MARVELOUS

SINGING TELEPHONE

(Music sent by telegraph and distinctly heard throughout the largest Churches and Opera Houses, by an entire audience at once.)

AND

The carefully selected (from the very best voices both North and South) Colored Company,

UNCLE TOM and his JUBILEE SINGERS,

ON

Wednesday Eve'ng, June 19th, 1878, at 7.45 o'clock,

AT THE

M. E. Church, Vernon, Mich.

FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE CHURCH.

This is the only SINGING TELEPHONE in the West, (there being but one other before the public.) Over 200 successful entertainments have been given. The company carry portable telegraph apparatus (such as armies employ) for use when connection is not made with stationary lines. The accompanying explanations constitute a condensed lecture, covering the leading electrical and other points involved in the telegraph and in the triumphs of the Telephone. These achievements of American inventive genius are not only interesting to all as a matter of national pride, but are intensely attractive from the wonderful results attained. Distance is annihilated, and music and song can be sent clearly and accurately hundreds of miles.

4 ENTERTAINMENTS

ARE GIVEN FOR THE PRICE OF ONE.

1st—The Marvelous Singing Telephone. **2nd**—A Full, First-Class Jubilee Concert, (of not less than 14 selections.) **3rd**—A Valuable and Instructive Scientific Lecture. **4th**—The wonderful Speaking Telephone, (conversation carried on over the wires with distant persons, the words and tones of voice being distinctly heard.) The Magneto Speaking Telephone employed is available for distances of more than forty miles.

The ability of the singers is indicated by the following encomiums from Doctors of Divinity: "Perfectly Charming;" "The Best Colored Singers I ever Heard." The basso has the lowest range of voice of his race. Well known music is telegraphed to the audience and heard by all present clearly and distinctly.

THE TELEPHONE ENTERTAINMENT IN MICHIGAN.

The Rev. W. X. Ninde, D. D., Pastor Central M. E. Church, Detroit, says: "It was greeted by a large audience of our best people; and was admirable—full, varied, chaste, enlivening—a model for a church."

Hon. David Preston, Banker, Detroit, says: "I was delighted and instructed with the Telephone Entertainment, and fully concur in Dr. Ninde's statement."

POPULAR PRICES—In order that every person may have an opportunity to hear this entertainment, the price has been fixed at the old popular rate

TICKETS 25 CENTS. SEATS CAN BE RESERVED WITHOUT EXTRA CHARGE.

Diagram at

Tickets for Sale at the usual places and at the door; also by members of the Church and Sabbath School.

OVER) **NO POSTPONEMENT ON ACCOUNT OF THE WEATHER.**

Daily Freeman Steam Printing House, Kingston, N. Y.

Figure 2.

An 1878 leaflet announces that "The Marvelous Singing Telephone" will open for a group of jubilee singers. *Source*: Advertising leaflet published by the *Daily Freeman* (Kingston, NY), 1878.

words, telephones were the training wheels that steadied their first wobbly attempts at realism. If this is true, then it's no wonder critics found actors "completely convincing" on the telephone: after all, this device had helped create what we call "convincing" in the first place.

Critics' darling, matinee idol, star of stage and screen: what more could a young technology desire? But it hadn't always been this way. Like many an

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actor before and since, the phone worked its way up painstakingly, from sideshow to legitimate theatre and from thankless cameos to the roles that define a career. In Figures 1 and 2, you see two pamphlets from those earliest days: the first announcing an appearance at a New York church by "Prof. Bell's Speaking and Singing Telephone," the other revealing that "The Marvelous Singing Telephone" will open for some jubilee singers in the Midwest. These were cheap and wholesome entertainments. There wasn't any future in them.[21]

We know that the phone then moved into the popular theatre, but this phase of its career is rather thinly attested. Presumably, it cut its teeth on parts once played by the telegraph (e.g., having its wires cut by the villain and patched by the hero)[22] and those ancient roles once played by the messenger (going off for help, coming back with news)[23]—but it was awfully hard to break out of those old lines of business. Rather than use the telephone for novel effects, most playwrights simply spruced up the old tried and true. Is eavesdropping getting a bit threadbare as a plot point? Then why not tap a telephone?[24] Does the ticking telegraph send your audience into throes of suspense? Then how much more will they quiver when the telephone rings onstage?[25] This was, in essence, the telephone's role in most comedy: whether stressing out stage clowns, exposing adulterers, or enabling meddlesome schemers, the phone was just one more squirt of nitro in the engine of farce.

The first opportunities the phone had to originate roles came in burlesque, vaudeville, and low comedy. It had a knack, it turned out, for playing the implacable straight man, so it quickly won esteem by mocking hotheads and ethnic outsiders. In 1880, for instance, the telephone got big laughs for making a fool of the title character in *Our German Senator*.[26] No script of the play survives, but it surely resembled later bits that mocked Swedish secretaries, old cranks, Jewish tenants, and "suburban 'simp[s]'" for their failure to use the telephone properly.[27] Time and again, we find, these characters are too stupid to use the phone and too alien to be understood once they figure it out. Far juicier roles came the telephone's way in the more romantic sort of comedy: as a rival in love or a yenta for wire-crossed lovers. Take as an early example the 1893 one-act *Per Telephone*, the first of many plays to pose the exact same sexist joke: a woman is so busy gabbing on the telephone, she never realizes that the man right in front of her is trying to propose.[28] As in all of these comedies (the most famous being Menotti's operetta *The Telephone*), the man discovers a way to win his phone-addled sweetheart's attention. He leaves the room, of course, and rings her up.

It's against this backdrop of tired roles and frantic gags that a classic of telephone drama first appeared, André de Lorde's Grand Guignol thriller *Au téléphone* (1901). I call it a classic not merely because the phone was central to its plot (and its title)—one could say as much, after all, for *Per Telephone*—but because in this play, for the very first time, theatre and telephony transformed one other. In short, the telephone extended what theatre could do, while the theatre strained at the limits of real-world telephony.

The play's plot is simple and vivid. Scene 1: the wind howls and the rain pours down as André Marex prepares to leave his wife, Martha, and their child. He has business to conduct in Paris, and although his country house is isolated

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Figure 3.

This 1910 advertisement for the Bell Telephone System asks rural folks to imagine a moment when they might have "a real vital need for" a telephone —for instance, when a mother is alone at home or when a husband is far away on business. *Source: Theatre Magazine* 10.105 (November 1910), ix.

and the region a bit unsavory, he leaves with confidence, knowing that a male servant will stay with them, that a loaded revolver is at the ready, and that their newly installed telephone will keep them all in touch. As he leaves, he promises to call from a friend's house along the way. As the night wears on, though, strange things

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begin to happen. A tramp arrives with a letter that calls Blaise, the male servant, away. As Martha and her maid await his return, strange noises outside begin to spook them, and to assuage their mounting fears they call André. As the curtain falls, they wait anxiously for the call to go through. Scene 2: the curtain rises on another house, where a telephone is ringing. It's Martha Marex on the line, and, as luck would have it, André has just arrived. He calms her fears, but as soon as he has, events take a dire turn. The women hear new "noises—steps—creakings" just outside their door. Danger seems imminent; the revolver is missing; the shutters rattle and crack. André begs them to run, but it's already too late: they are raped and killed as he listens in impotent terror. "Help!—Murder!—Murder!—Help!" he cries, and he "continues to scream as the curtain falls" one last time.[29]

The French public was thrilled—and so was the American telephone industry. Most scholars who have written about this play argue that *Au téléphone* makes a mockery of technological man—that it destroys, in the person of André Marex, our smug confidence in such toys.[30] The industry's unbridled enthusiasm, though, should point us in another direction. In *The American Telephone Journal*, for instance, amid articles with titles like "Something about Repeating Coils" and "Telephone Finance: An Illustration from Wisconsin," you can find breathless reports on the Paris premiere of *Au téléphone*.[31] When, two months later, the play hit the stages of London in an English translation, these US telephone industry insiders could barely contain their excitement:

> Presumably after this London success the telephone drama will very shortly make its appearance on these shores. So far the telephone has only been shown on the stage as a vehicle for very inferior comic opera or burlesque, or merely as a more or less badly carried-out detail … of some broker's or merchant's office. As the keynote of a stirring drama it will be quite a novelty.[32]

In a cynical mood, I'd feel compelled to point out that they had their reasons for feeling pleased. American phone companies were, at precisely this moment, making their first big push into rural markets, and home security, naturally, was a key talking point for salesmen.[33] (Consider the Bell ad in Figure 3 from a few years later, which basically follows the plot of *Au téléphone*—except that rape and murder have slipped between the lines.) But let's fend off this easy cynicism and consider why else industry officials might have thrilled at this play.

During the telephone's apprenticeship in the theatre, its earliest job was to perform communication failure. *Au téléphone*, by contrast, presents an almost science fiction vision of the telephone's incredible powers. As our trade-journal reviewer is quick to point out, the short story that lent *Au téléphone* its plot "paid a wholly undeserved compliment to the French long-distance telephone service, for the clearness with which the husband in Paris heard everything that was going on in … the suburbs of Marseille."[34] De Lorde did shorten the distance of the call, this reviewer approvingly notes, by setting scene 2 not in Paris but a mere carriage ride away. But this telephone remains, for all that, an astonishing

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machine. As André soothes his wife over the phone, for instance, he can't help but enthuse over its clarity:

> Don't you think it's wonderful? You are close to me—I hear the slightest inflection in your voice—almost every movement—can very nearly see you—yes, I see you, little wife.[35]

The em-dashes here don't just break up his speech; they deliberately fragment his meaning. A "movement," of course, you might hear, see, or feel, but André's grammar leaves us guessing just which he has done.[36] This ambiguity quickly gives way to outright synesthesia: "I see you," he says, with no "virtually," "practically," or "as if" to qualify the claim. In the very next line, he nearly touches her, too. As he makes kissing noises at his wife through the phone, his blushing friends exclaim,

> RIVOIRE: If we had not been here—
> MADAME RIVOIRE: To what lengths might they not have gone! (398)

De Lorde's title character, then, is no mere telephone: it has televisual, nearly teletactile powers. How's that for an "undeserved compliment" to French telephony?

If de Lorde's audience does come to accept this phone's extraordinary powers, it's because he methodically trains them into this belief. The whole play takes place in the chamber of an ear as miraculous as the phone gives André. The dark and stormy night, for instance, is not merely a horror cliché; it's also an excuse for the sound-effects man to empty his bag of tricks.[37] But even amid such clamor, de Lorde persuades us to hear—or to think we hear—faint noises impossibly well (384). The play's very first line sets the pattern de Lorde will follow:

> ANDRÉ: (*stopping and listening*) Is that the carriage? (383)

We in the audience immediately crane our necks forward to see what *we* can hear, and this straining to hear becomes the play's chief activity—onstage and among the audience.

The true star of scene 1, then, and perhaps the telephone's true costar, is a character I haven't yet bothered to name: Nanette, the female servant who is always standing by Martha's side. This early exchange, as they await André's carriage or "fly," sets the tone for the women's interactions.

> NANETTE: *(listening)* I hear wheels.
> MARTHA: Yes, it's the fly this time *(A noise of hail heard.)*
> NANETTE: It's coming through the wood. (386)

Not only has Nanette heard—through wind, rain, and woods—the faint sound of clattering wheels, she has also, by merely saying so, caused Martha to hear it too and to supply the inevitable interpretation: the carriage will soon arrive. Later, as the women's fears mount, this will happen again and again—except that as the

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sounds Nanette hears point to ever-more-unthinkable conclusions, Martha takes longer and longer to admit that she hears them and to supply their horrible meaning.

NANETTE: (*Stops suddenly.*) Madame, what's that? Don't you hear—?
MARTHA: What? Again?
NANETTE: Someone whistling.
MARTHA: (*dryly*) No, nothing; it's the wind howling. (*Nanette takes up her knitting.*) Did you pay the laundress?
NANETTE: (*rises, puts her knitting on the arm-chair, and crosses to the door.*) There, again! That's not the wind. Don't you hear it?
MARTHA: (*going to her—listening.*) The dogs—they're growling. Well? [. . .] They often bark like that. You are too absurd!
NANETTE: Not like that. They're rushing about.
MARTHA: (*listens—beginning to get nervous*) Yes.
NANETTE: Ah, Madame, they're coming nearer—they are chasing someone—they are quite close; now they're further off. Ah, the footsteps are coming nearer! I hear them on the gravel.
MARTHA: Nanette! Nanette! (393)

Imagine the vortex of aural attention around Nanette; feel it grow stronger over the course of this scene. Watch it pull Martha in and push her around as she nears her breaking point. And then feel how de Lorde unleashes this force, at last, on the audience. As flies to wanton boys are we to de Lorde! There's no reason, after all, for the sounds to come close, then go farther away, then draw nearer once more—no reason, that is, but to make us feel helpless as Nanette's grip tightens around our minds. She brings a phantom world to life for us, something just beyond that door; she pulls us out, then in, then out of the obscured middle distance. And the very moment de Lorde makes us feel this imaginary momentum, he's ripped a tiny hole in the fabric of theatrical space. With those final, frantic repetitions of her name, Nanette has won. Martha is now in her thrall, as surely as the telephone will enthrall André.

When, in the second scene, the telephone gives Nanette-like ears to the otherwise feckless André, the phone takes over her role and is invested with her powers—or better yet, it casts André as his own Nanette, both vortex and victim simultaneously. As the first scene taught us to do, we sign our senses over to André, and with the help of the phone, he repays us in phantom action. "It's cracking! Being forced! Impossible! The shutters are solid," he shouts on a static stage (400). We're on the edge of our seats, peering into this invisible world, but just as we lean out furthest over the abyss, André blows us back into our seats with "a piercing cry" (401). Michel Chion once insisted that certain films are entirely designed to unleash a single scream. In the theatre, the same could be said of the Grand Guignol.

> Nothing is spared in order to reach the screaming point. Twenty-story gorillas are invented, a thousand-foot-tall building is set ablaze, deluges of fireworks, symphony orchestras, the most ingenious and sophisticated details of production. . . . For, in these films, at a certain moment, all disparate plot lines converge and break at . . . the woman's scream.[38]

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Except in this case, de Lorde denies us the *woman's* scream. What we get is André's "piercing cry" instead. Reading this scene, however, I can't help feeling that somehow *her* scream has just issued from *his* mouth. The very next thing he says is, "Oh! who was that who screamed!" (401). No doubt this is a delayed response to whatever he just heard on the telephone, but it's also his horrified reaction to his own uncontrollable voice.

Is a woman's scream so powerful a thing that it transcends all mediation? Has André been so absorbed by the scene he overhears that he becomes a flesh-and-bones amplifier of it? Or is something still more uncanny happening here? The more I mull over this scene's climactic scream, the less I can banish these words of Yeats from my mind,

> It was her mouth, and yet not she, that cried.
> It was the shadow behind her mouth. [. . .]
> Look at her shivering now, the terrible life
> Is slipping through her veins. She is possessed.[39]

In Yeats's play, it's a goddess who has possessed this woman, making her suddenly screech like a hawk. André, too, is possessed; he shivers with a terrible life. Whose? Well, if a human actor can perform in a mask, why shouldn't the telephone wear André Marex's face?

At long last, here is a play that seems to justify the praise we've heard heaped on the telephone scene. With the telephone putting a vivid reality just beyond our reach, the actor has the flattering task of bringing it near. And because we depend on him utterly—since we need his every word, his every twitch to mean so much, we may surprise even ourselves with the attention we pay to his performance. In the end, we may lose all ability to distinguish between our need and his skill, crediting his performance for the lushness of our own dark imaginings. In a play like this, the depths of which are so teasingly withheld, what actor alive could fail to seem profound?

But there's a problem with concluding too much on the basis of a play like this. Like *La Voix humaine*, this is an exceptional play, and what our critics proposed was, instead, a general rule. Even controlling for glibness or hyperbole, one thing is clear from Mais's and Nathan's remarks: they are thinking of scenes far more common, less extraordinary than what we saw in *Au téléphone*. If we want to solve this mystery, we need to adjust our habits of mind. Refusing to limit ourselves to the trailblazing or the exquisite, we must attend to the mass of unremarkable plays. Fortunately, these have never been in short supply—least of all in the opening decades of the twentieth century.

One sociologist has claimed that "few Americans found the telephone dramatic beyond about 1910."[40] At precisely that moment, when the phone grew less "dramatic" it was suddenly everywhere in drama. And precisely because it was always onstage its presence was scarcely noticed at all. Only its rare absence from the stage was worthy of comment. One American critic, reviewing the now-forgotten Avery Hopwood play *Sadie Love* (1915), joked that "its manuscript should be placed under a glass case in some world-famed museum as being the only telephone-proof modern play in existence."[41] The next year, a writer for

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Puck cracked a similar joke: "Are there any novel features in this play of yours?" a producer asks. Well, the playwright replies, "there isn't a telephone scene . . . in the entire show." "That's enough," says the producer, ". . . I've been waiting all season for something that offered a startling innovation."[42] But my favorite evidence of the telephone's overexposure is this anonymous poem first published in the *Evening World* in 1916, then eagerly reprinted in the trade journal *The Telephone Review*:

THE HELPFUL TELEPHONE
Oh, what would we do in the drama to-day
If there was no telephone handy?
It's in ev'ry playlet and in ev'ry play.
An adjunct that's certainly dandy.
The villain, of course, has to 'phone the sweet maid.
The hero must 'phone the detective;
Without it the drama could hardly be played,
Unless it were plainly defective.
It's helpful indeed in the planting of plot,
It cuts down the cast half a dozen.
And atmosphere! Gee, but it offers a lot,
With all of its ringin' and buzzin'.
"First aid to the author"—they've nicknamed it well:
Each week he should really be sharing
The royalties paid him with Alex G. Bell,
And thus a just debt he'd be squaring.[43]

From its 1901 debut as "the keynote of a stirring drama," the phone had fallen already to the status of a playwright's cheat—a way of dodging the difficulties involved in establishing a plot, then moving it along.

Nowhere does this critique land harder than in J. M. Barrie's *A Slice of Life* (1910), a hilarious parody of contemporary drama written as a curtain-raiser for John and Ethel Barrymore. As the play begins, a maid enters and goes straight to the phone: "Are you there? No, it does not matter who you are . . . I want *you* to ask *me* who I *am*." With the help of this nobody-in-particular, she sets the scene in no time flat. The next character to enter makes another beeline for the phone: "Is that you, MAMA? I am Mrs Hyphen-Brown—your daughter—do you remember?" To judge from the speech that follows, her mother remembered practically nothing about her. But Barrie's satire cuts deepest when Mr. Hyphen-Brown enters and by mistake speaks into the "tassel of [the] curtain."[44] What does the phone itself matter, after all, to the playwrights whom Barrie is mocking in this play? If they value it only as a shortcut past the stern demands of dramaturgy, then they might as well address their plays to the draperies.

Even playwrights who used the phone a bit more wisely felt defensive against this (evidently common) line of attack. One British playwright, for instance, basically apologized in the opening stage direction of his 1922 play: "Close to the desk, on a little table, the inevitable telephone," he writes. Sure

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enough, the play then begins with three pages of telephone calls.[45] Even George Jean Nathan, champion of the telephone scene, had to acknowledge the absurd cliché to which it had devolved. In his 1933 book parodying recent popular theatre, Nathan listed among the achievements of the modern stage "the farce in which an ingénue . . . reaches to pick up the . . . receiver and picks up a banana instead," the melodrama where the heroine "nervously jiggl[es] the telephone hook in a desperate effort to get the District Attorney's office," and "One-character plays in which, instead of presenting the venerable scenes between the mistress and her keeper, . . . the author causes his lone actress to conduct them over the telephone, occasionally varying the procedure by having her tell what happened either to her pet dog or French doll. . . ."[46] (Note that this last entry begins as an obvious send-up of Cocteau's *La Voix humaine*, which had premiered three years earlier—a helpful reminder of that play's ostentatious normality.) Comedy! Suspense! Startling revelation! Even Nathan can tell how thin this all is wearing.

Critics nonetheless insist that within these writerly ruts there is fertile ground for actors. For instance, Petre Mais's celebration of telephone scenes comes amid his lukewarm review of a justly forgotten play, Clemence Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement*. On its surface, this play's brief telephone scene is wholly unprepossessing. If you didn't happen to be obsessed with telephones onstage, you'd surely skim right past it. Sure, the content of the call packs a melodramatic punch—on the morning of her mother's remarriage, the speaker's father has escaped from an asylum where he's been held against his will for ten years—but the call itself is notable for just how little its words evoke.

SYDNEY: [*She takes off the receiver*] Hullo! Hullo! . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . [*To her aunt*] It's a trunk call.

MISS FAIRFIELD: Who on earth—?

SYDNEY: Yes . . . Hullo! . . . Yes . . . Mrs. Fairfield's out. Shall I take a message? . . . This is Miss Fairfield speaking . . . All right. I'll hold on . . . [*To her aunt*] Auntie, it's from Bedford. It's about Father. [*Into the telephone*] Yes . . . This is Miss Fairfield speaking . . . What? . . . Good Lord!

MISS FAIRFIELD: Sydney, don't say "Good Lord!"

SYDNEY: But you should have let Mrs. Fairfield know! . . . Only this morning? Oh, I see . . . No, we've heard nothing. When did you find out? . . . What makes you—? I see . . . No, he's not here . . . Of course we'd let you know . . . Then you'll let us know at once if anything . . . yes . . . *Miss* Fairfield. Mrs. Fairfield is going away very soon . . . Thank you . . . Good-bye.

[SYDNEY *hangs up the receiver and turns around*]

MISS FAIRFIELD: Well?

SYDNEY: Father's got away.[47]

Mais calls this telephone scene "certainly one of the best," but it's difficult at first to understand precisely why. The playwright seems to relish whatever is least substantial in the scenario. Her faithful adherence to the long protocols involved in

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connecting a long-distance "trunk call," all those *yes*'s and *I see*'s and ellipses that pepper Sydney's speech, all the half-revealing (but still inscrutable) remarks that fill the body of the call make for a stubbornly unrevealing scene. But to quote Jean Cocteau's proud assessment of *La Voix humaine*, perhaps there's some value in this text being "unreadable": its very thinness makes it an excellent "pretext for an actress."[48] In fact, this speech *was* written with a particular actress in mind—one whose special skill was to perform what Dane left unwritten. Meggie Albanesi was renowned in London for her "repose and depth" onstage.[49] "Silence louder than tumult," one poem about Albanesi begins, before meditating upon "the secret of [her] vast restraint."[50] A scene at the phone—yes, the thinner the better—was just the thing to showcase such skills.

The deeper I press into the history of the telephone scene, the more I confront this explanation for their appeal. No matter how well or how poorly they may have been written, these scenes are ripe with the pleasures we take in realist



2e acte de « *Au Téléphone* ».
Mme de Nys, M. Antoine, M. Kemm.

Figure 4.
André Antoine, in the role of André Marex, builds a fourth wall by striking one of his famous audience-spurning poses. *Source*: De Lorde and Foley, *Au téléphone* (Paris: Tallandier, 1910), 49.

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acting: talk foregrounded, action deferred, reaction and interaction privileged, depths withheld, the sources of behavior rendered unconscious or automatic. Indeed, it seems like more than a coincidence (though less-than-direct causation) that the telephone and realist acting emerged together.



Figure 5.
Monsieur Rivoire (Jean Kemm) tries to rip the telephone away from a horrified André Marex (Antoine) late in scene 2. *Source*: De Lorde and Foley, *Au téléphone* (Paris: Tallandier, 1910), 61.

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Oh, perhaps it's not a bridge too far to say that the telephone *caused* realist acting. One actress, at least—Marjorie Wood—claimed to have learned from the phone a new way of being onstage, a mode of performance we'd surely want to label realist. She was playing Wanda Kelly, the lead role in David Belasco's production of William C. deMille's *The Woman* (1911), which happened to be the role of a telephone operator, when she got this note from Belasco at an early rehearsal: "You are the telephone girl to the life, only you will have to learn how to listen."[51] So she did. As she reports in an article about the experience, she began to visit the central exchange each morning before rehearsals:

> I studied the expression of their eyes, nostrils and above everything else of their mouths and chins … and little by little I began to observe that the girl who made her living at the switchboard listens in a way which, while it is alert and spirited in one sense, is at the same time mechanical in another. In other words, she listens subconsciously, automatically. … The times in the first act when I just sit there like a "bump" on a log … it was agony until I had learned to do it "subconsciously."[52]

She finally arrived at this "subconscious" state with the help of a Belasco trick. He "had the telephone I used in the play connected with the switchboard in the Belasco offices upstairs. … This obviated the effects on the ear of the 'dead' telephone because you know there's all the difference in the world between the feel of … an open wire … and a merely dead and unattached instrument."[53] A live wire zaps the actor's interiority to life.

Whether as a metaphor or a practical experience, telephony had helped Marjorie Wood achieve a deep state of reactive presence to the world onstage—the very state most valued (in different guises) by every realist acting theory to come.[54] And she wouldn't be the last to take a telephonic shortcut to this state, either. Consider Uta Hagen, whose influential *Respect for Acting* (1973) recommends the telephone as a tool for building the "fourth wall" of the realist stage. "Watch yourself for a few days every time you are at home at your phone," she instructs her readers, in order "to see where your outer, secondary focus goes while your inner attention seems to be given totally to the content of the phone call."[55] This sphere of soft, "secondary" focus, she says, is the stage world, and it will replace your debilitating awareness of your audience. You'll be "relieved," she swears, of the "burden of audience intrusion."[56] In fact, they'll intrude further, but you'll no longer feel a thing.

How fitting, then, that the man who originated the role of André in de Lorde's *Au téléphone* was the world's first master builder of "fourth walls": iconic naturalist actor André Antoine (Figs. 4 and 5). "Naturalist" might seem a strange term to attach to the Grand Guignol and "realist" likewise, but when de Lorde gave up the gore and turned to the telephone, this was the style his theatre began to cultivate. Not only there, but throughout popular performance culture in the West, a new consensus in acting was emerging under the sign of realism. To emphasize the breadth and demonstrate the range of what I mean by "realist acting," I want to end by comparing *Au téléphone* to two American plays, each as distant from the Grand

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Figure 6.
Images of Ermete Zacconi's "expressions diverses" in the role of André Marex. *Source*: De Lorde and Foley, *Au téléphone* (Paris: Tallandier, 1910), n.p.

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Guignol in genre as in geography. The first will show how compatible *Au téléphone* might be with emerging ideas of realist character; the second will demonstrate that the broad-based consensus I'm calling "realist" extends beyond any narrow definition of that term.

Comparison 1: The brief telephone scene in the first quote below, from James Herne's play *Margaret Fleming* (1890), generally considered the first example of Ibsenite realism on the American stage, precisely matches the telephone scene in the second quote, from one of *Au téléphone*'s least spectacular passages.

> PHILIP: (*The telephone rings.*) Excuse me, doctor. Hello. Oh, is that you, Margaret? How is Lucy now? Good! I knew she'd be all right. Yes, of course. Do bring her. (*To the* DOCTOR) She's bringing baby to the 'phone. Hello, Lucy. Many happy returns of the day. Good-bye. Yes, I'll be home at twelve sharp. Apple pie? Yes, of course, I like it. That is, your apple pie. (*He leaves the phone with a joyous air.*)[57]

> ANDRÉ: Has he gone to bed? No? You're waiting for Blaise?—That will be better —Ah!—he's asleep—the bell woke him up. Bring him and let him say good-night to me.—Good-night my pet, were you asleep? If you have been very good when I go back (*Turns to the* RIVOIRES, *laughing.*) He doesn't know how to hold the receiver. (*Into the telephone.*) Tell him he shall perhaps have his little sister. I have been thinking it over, I think I can promise him one—(*Laughs.*)[58]

Both passages show us, for a moment, the man of business as a family man. Both stage a conversation with wife, then child, then wife again, evoking the clamor of domestic life. Both go out of their way to give us a sampler-ready image of pure patriarchal bliss: de Lorde ends with intimations of motherhood, Herne sees that and raises him "apple pie." And the light comedy in each—Philip's ironic formality with his uncomprehending daughter, André's delighted reaction when his toddler can't use the phone—is meant to draw from the audience a single, climactic sound. To paraphrase Michel Chion, all plot lines converge and break at the sound of an audience going *Aww!* But in each case, this reaction gives way quickly to shock. You already know where de Lorde is heading next. (A few sentences later he takes another step that way: "What's the matter? Nanette hears something else?" [397].) Likewise, in *Margaret Fleming*, the very next line will expose Philip as an adulterer with a bastard child. What the telephone accomplishes, then, in both of these cases, is to vividly sketch what the playwright aims soon to destroy. These are the writerly uses of these scenes, but there are actorly ones as well. By bringing a vivid elsewhere onstage for a moment, the phone permits the actor to unleash other sides of his character. He might usually do this laterally, from scene to scene. Now they nest inside each other like *matryoshka* dolls: the indulgent father, the teasing husband lie latent in the tense businessman. All the variety inherent in a realist understanding of character—psychologically deep and socially contingent—is played here in polyphonic counterpoint.

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Comparison 2: Proust once wondered why no artist "had yet painted … [a] scene … entitled 'At the Telephone' [i.e., *Au téléphone*] in which there would come spontaneously to the lips of the listener a smile all the more genuine in that it is unconscious of being observed."[59] This is the other main pleasure—adjacent to realist acting—that *Au téléphone* (and other telephone scenes) supplied. In Figure 6, you see collectible images of the first Italian actor to play Marex, Ermete Zacconi. The mere existence of such images suggests that when audiences delighted in telephone scenes, they were enjoying the play of expression on a listener's face. A telling comparison, just because it shares so little else with de Lorde's play, are these images of an actor from a minor Victor Herbert musical comedy, *The Only Girl* (1914) (Figs. 7 and 8). "The main business of the telephone," generalized one American journalist, "is to call into play, on the mobile face of the actor, every emotion which the exigencies of the plot or the delight of the audience may demand."[60] And this, perhaps, is the only thing Antoine the Frenchman or Zacconi the Italian ever shared with Scottish comedian Ernest Torrence: his "face is so versatile," wrote one critic of Torrence, "that it can suggest an entire situation and express any emotion without even moving."[61] The phone, then, was something like a bridge from melodrama to realism—from burlesque comedy to legitimate drama. The world offstage and the world inside became inseparable when the phone was at hand. The reach of one was taken to portend the depth of the other. Thus, the phone gave audiences all the depthless detail of melodrama's revealing starts and asides, now layered over something else, something happening on a separate plane. As Cocteau wrote in his preface to *La Voix humaine*, scenes on the phone give the actor "the chance to play two parts: one when she speaks, the other when she listens and limns the person who speaks only in silence."[62] That person, of course—the one who speaks in silence—is the secret sharer of the one who speaks in words. It is the actress, after all; it is the character herself, talking to herself forever.

This may sound mystical or farfetched, but it actually happened one night to Marjorie Wood, the actress who claimed that the telephone taught her to exist "subconsciously" onstage. She was celebrating her 100th performance as Wanda Kelly in *The Woman* at the Olympic Theatre in Chicago, when suddenly her switchboard was patched through to the stage of the Republic Theatre in New York. There, at an identical desk, sporting an identical outfit and hairstyle, was her secret sharer: the Wanda Kelly of the New York production, Mary Nash (Figs. 9 and 10). Marjorie found herself at the end of act 1 and Mary had reached the end of act 2, but they were in perfect sync on the telephone wire. As the audience watched in wonder, they chatted with each other for five minutes, until Belasco himself strolled onto the New York stage. Grabbing the telephone himself, he began to address both audiences. "Mr. DeMille," he proclaimed, "has sensed the essential poetry of Bell's invention."[63] *I* have sensed it, he might have said in a franker mood. It is the poetry of a double meter uniting Chicago and New York. It is the poetry of rhyming persons, held in a couplet by the telephone.

We're ready now to circle back to the scene with which this all began: Luise Rainer's famous, Oscar-winning performance. What might have seemed at first like an example of classical Hollywood's melodrama looks in this light like a

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Figure 7.
Ernest Torrence in *The Only Girl* (1914). *Source: The Theatre* 21.168 (February 1915): 87.

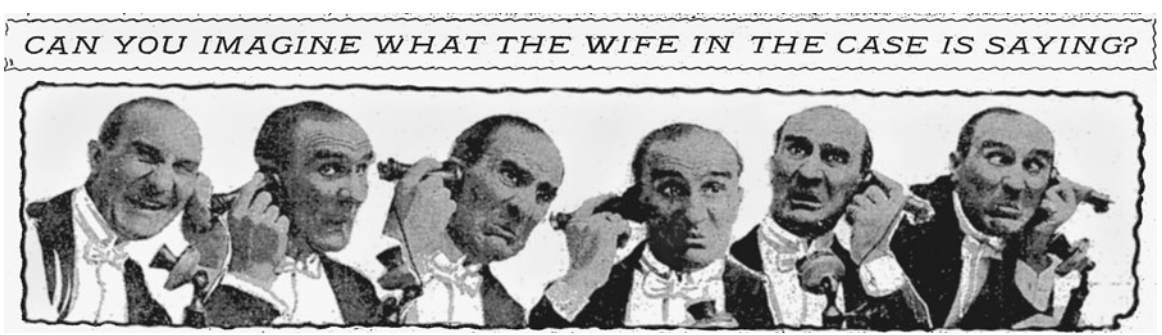


Figure 8.
Ernest Torrence in *The Only Girl* (1915). *Source: The Washington Post*, 16 March 1916, 3.



ON THE STAGE IN CHICAGO.
Marjorie Wood as "Wanda Kelly" in "The Woman" on the 100th night of the play at the Olympic Theatre, Chicago, receiving congratulations from David Belasco and the New York "Woman" Company by long distance telephone.

Figure 9.
Marjorie Wood, midperformance, speaks by telephone with her double and her director in New York. *The Woman*, Olympic Theatre, Chicago, 7 March 1912. *Source*: "Some Significant Long Distance Talking," *Telephone Review* 3.3 (March 1912): 61.



ON THE STAGE IN NEW YORK.
David Belasco, on the stage of the Republic Theatre, New York, congratulating the Chicago "Woman" Company over the long distance telephone on the occasion of the 100th performance of the production in that city, March 7, 1912. Mary Nash as "Wanda Kelly."

Figure 10.
Mary Nash, midperformance, listens on as David Belasco speaks with Marjorie Wood and her audience in Chicago. *The Woman*, Republic Theatre, New York, 7 March 1912. *Source*: "Some Significant Long Distance Talking," *Telephone Review* 3.3 (March 1912): 61.

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transitional example of film realism. As the scene begins, Rainer's character, performer Anna Held, has just read news of her ex-husband's sudden remarriage to another woman. She asks her maid to put in a call—wanting to congratulate him (she says)—but she almost immediately regrets the impulse. Too late: he's standing by. Shaking the ragged edges off her voice, she takes a deep breath, then exclaims in bell-like tones: "Oh, it's all so wonderful! I'm so happy—Yes, and I hope you are happy, too." The very instant she speaks these words, however, her body belies their meaning. With stiff smiles, choked sobs, and maniacal glares, her face performs a fevered melodrama. (Her voice barely manages to deny it.) It's Cowardesque dialogue, but it's coming from a Grand Guignol body. On the other end of the line, the man surely hears a wide range of emotions in her voice, but the one he doesn't quite hear (so we're meant to believe) is her utter devastation. She may look to us like a woman with minutes to live, but on the line she sounds like polished silver.

This may sound like a scene of simple, melodramatic ironies (she's distraught but manages to sound glad, or she says one thing but embodies another) but the scene's power, in fact, is much weirder than that. As the conversation wears on, we begin to slip (and so does Rainer) into a more ambiguous realm, one where drawing-room sentiments and gallows passions seem difficult to wrench apart. The more times I watch this scene, the less certain I feel when assigning emotions or intentions to Anna's lines. At one point Rainer exclaims, in a tone I still can't place, even after a hundred viewings, "Oh, I'm so glad for you, Flo!" It's emphatic but exhausted. It brims with despair—and with relief. There may even be some erotic pleasure in it. In short, it's a line reading that compels our belief precisely by staying a few inches beyond our understanding.

In a *TDR* interview from 1964 called "Working with Live Materials," Lee Strasberg told a story about the rehearsal tactics of director Bertolt Brecht: Brecht's wife, Helene Weigel, had a telephone scene in which she was meant to receive tragic news. But when she picked up the phone, there was Bertie on the line—telling her corny jokes, of all things! Brecht's hope, Strasberg suggested, was to draw out of Weigel a more complex affect in performance.[64] Again and again, we find, the telephone is the key to inventing such layered complexities. Not only does it drive a wedge between inside and out, onscreen and offstage; it also blurs the line between the self one simply is and the self one is variously hailed to be by others—man or machine.

For the moment, I can't think of a better definition of what realist acting achieves.

ENDNOTES

1. Robert K. Elder, *The Best Film You've Never Seen: 35 Directors Champion the Forgotten or Critically Savaged Movies They Love* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 186.

2. "Meyer [*sic*] felt . . . the part was too unimportant for me." Rainer, unfinished memoirs, 218, typescript, Box 1, Folder 18, Luise Rainer Collection, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University Libraries. (I specify "typescript" or "manuscript" because these memoirs consist of two interleaved documents—one handwritten, one typed—each with its own continuous pagination.)

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3. *The Great Ziegfeld*, directed by Robert Z. Leonard (1936; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2004), DVD. This scene is available on YouTube at "*The Great Ziegfeld* (1936) Telephone scene w/ Luise Rainer," http://youtu.be/cJEpszcDyqQ, accessed February 2015.

4. Bob Thomas, "Winning an Oscar Is War of Nerves Says O'Brien," *Springfield (MA) Union*, 18 April 1955.

5. "Drinks Soften O'Brien's Will," *Springfield (MA) Union*, 24 February 1963.

6. Bob Thomas, "South Gets Going Over in Upcoming Picture," *Springfield (MA) Union* 24 February 1962.

7. "Valerie Perrine Flirting with Oscar," *Springfield (MA) Union*, 20 December 1974.

8. Quoted in Patrick Goldstein, "Following the Club Rules," *Los Angeles Times,* 11 January 2000, http://articles.latimes.com/2000/jan/11/entertainment/ca-52750/2, accessed 22 January 2016.

9. Stuart Petre Brodie Mais, *Some Modern Authors* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1923), 267.

10. George Jean Nathan, "The Theatre: Fragmentary Meditations," *American Mercury* 15 (September 1928), 117–22, at 117.

11. Rainer, unfinished memoirs, typescript, 218.

12. Rainer, unfinished memoirs, manuscript, 119. That she calls it *Beloved Voice* suggests that Rainer read the play (or saw it) in her native German, the only language in which the title was translated loosely: *Die geliebte Stimme*.

13. Film scholars have presumed that "split-screen techniques" and "parallel editing or cross-cutting" are the "obvious parameters for putting telephony on the screen," but the *Ziegfeld* scene uses neither technique. Jan Olsson, "Framing Silent Calls: Coming to Cinematographic Terms with Telephony," in *Allegories of Communication: Intermedial Concerns from Cinema to the Digital*, ed. John Fullerton and Jan Olsson (Rome: John Libbey Publishing, 2004), 157–92, at 158. Instead, it keeps us firmly on Rainer's side of the conversation. Although most instances of telephony in film are indeed cross-cut, scenes labeled as "telephone scenes" tend to take this peculiarly minimalist approach. (The *Lenny* scene mentioned above is the rare exception that proves the rule.) You might even call this approach theatrical in its refusal to transport us to the other end of the line.

14. The play features pivotally in key works of critical theory and media studies: e.g., Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 11. And it is always cited in connection with what John Durham Peters calls "the telephonic uncanny." John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 195.

15. Eckart Voigts-Virchow, "'Your Voice Is Around My Neck'—The Media History and Poetics of Theatre Telephony," *Forum Modernes Theater* 19.2 (2004): 131–51, at 141, 138.

16. Let me make this point a bit more seriously here. In contemporary academia, we tend to agree (1) that identities are multiple and unstable; (2) that we perform such identities into stability only through our use of language; and (3) that the link between such language and its referent is tenuous at best. Jean Cocteau seems appealingly ready to flatter these beliefs.

17. Philip Carr, "Drama by the Seine," *New York Times*, 9 March 1930, 118.

18. Jean Cocteau, *The Human Voice*, trans. Carl Wildman (London: Vision Press, 1951), 7.

19. David Trotter grounds his theory of literary "e-Modernism" on a similar attitude toward the phone among novelists and their characters. "What I am calling e-Modernism began when—and only when—the event [of the telephone call], however ritualized in itself, did not necessarily acquire symbolic proportions in and for the literary text." David Trotter, "E-Modernism: Telephony in British Fiction 1925–1940," *Critical Quarterly* 51.1 (April 2009): 1–32, at 6. Many of the arguments Trotter makes about telephony and its effect on novels (especially on their plotting) might be applied with equal force to dramatic literature, but my focus on acting means that I must postpone this dramaturgical thesis. Trotter's periodization, too, is nearly my own—though the telephone's mundanity, I will argue, hits the theatre a full decade sooner—except that, as I argue elsewhere, theatre's "e-Modernity" begins with the heyday of telegraphy onstage in the 1880s and 1890s.

20. Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (Jan.–Feb. 2000): 54–68, at 57. With the support of a grant from the Council on Library and Information Resources, I

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am developing a database that, by indexing the prop lists at the back of acting editions in the Samuel French Collection at Amherst College, will allow theatre historians to sort large corpora of plays by the objects they feature onstage. Once this tool exists, a more thorough study of this kind will be possible.

21. I'm being glib, of course. For a fascinating overview, see Alan Galey, "The Victorian New Media Demo as a Performance Genre," *Floating Academy,* 13 August 2013, *http://floatingacademy.wordpress.com/2013/08/13/the-victorian-new-media-demo-as-a-performance-genre/*, accessed 11 February 2015.

22. For a late example, see Lincoln J. Carter's *Bedford's Hope* (also called *The Great Rescue*), in which "the telephone wires have been cut; no communication can be had," etc. ["Review of *Bedford's Hope*,"] *Theatre Magazine* 6.61 (March 1906): 58–9, at 58.

23. See, for example, Rex Beach and James MacArthur's *The Spoilers*: "There is nobody about. But there is a telephone. She faintly calls for help through it. He tears it out. She struggles, breaks away, he in pursuit like a devil with a pitchfork"; ["Review of *The Spoilers*,"] *Theatre Magazine* 7.74 (April 1907): xii–xiii, at xiii.

24. This is what Scott Marble does in his 1896 stage western, *The Great Train Robbery*.

25. This is what Victor Mapes and Winchell Smith discovered while updating Bronson Howard's 1887 Wall Street comedy *The Henrietta* for a 1913 revival as *The New Henrietta*. In 1913, Howard's venal stockbrokers had a telephone cord to juggle with their ticker tape.

26. "Amusements," *New York Herald*, 6 January 1880.

27. I'm thinking of the following published, recorded, and reported telephone scenes, in order: Marjorie Benton Cooke, "What the Janitor Heard," in *Modern Monologues* (Chicago: Dramatic Publishing Company, 1903), 33–40, at 39–40; William Dean Howells and Mark Twain, *Colonel Sellers as a Scientist,* in *The Complete Plays of W. D. Howells* (New York: New York University Press, 1960), 205–41, at 233–4; Joe Hayman, *Cohen on the Telephone,* Columbia A-1516, 1914, 78 rpm (one of several recordings of this character and situation); and a popular vaudeville sketch by Harry Watson Jr., mentioned in "Pantomime Again Becoming Popular," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 10 July 1921, 8, which is quoted in the text.

28. Margaret Montgomery, *Per Telephone: A Farce in One Act* (Boston : Walter H. Baker & Co., 1893).

29. André de Lorde and Charles Foley, "At the Telephone," in *One-Act Plays for Stage and Study*, ed. Walter Prichard Eaton, 2d ed. (New York: Samuel French, 1925), 383–401, at 399.

30. For this typical reading of *Au téléphone*, see David Crane, "Projections and Intersections: Paranoid Textuality in *Sorry, Wrong Number*," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 17.51 (2002): 71–113, at 77–80. See also the oft-cited article on *Au téléphone* and its silent film adaptations, which Crane is echoing in his essay: Tom Gunning, "Heard over the Phone: *The Lonely Villa* and the de Lorde Tradition of the Terrors of Technology," *Screen* 32.2 (1991): 184–96.

31. "A Telephone Drama," *American Telephone Journal*, 11 January 1902, 26.

32. "Foreign Currents," *American Telephone Journal*, 8 March 1902, 153.

33. See a social historian's account of this rural push in Claude S. Fischer, *America Calling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 95.

34. "A Telephone Drama," 26.

35. De Lorde and Foley, "At the Telephone," 398. Subsequent citations by page are given parenthetically in the text.

36. In the original French ("je sens les moindres inflexions de ta voix … de tes gestes"), this sensory blurring is even more pronounced. The verb *sentir*, meaning variously to sense, to feel, and to smell, is ambiguous from the start, so it takes as its object the *inflexions* (modulations or bendings) of both her body and her voice. André de Lorde and Charles Foleÿ, *Au téléphone, suivi de Un concert chez les fous et de La Nuit rouge* (Paris: Librairie illustré Jules Tallandier, 1910), 53.

37. "Sound effects as a whole were treated with great seriousness at the Grand-Guignol," write two experts on this institution, citing as a key example *Au téléphone*'s incessant "offstage sound." Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson, *Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre of Horror* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2002), 64.

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38. Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 77.

39. W. B. Yeats, "At the Hawk's Well," in *Collected Works,* vol. 2, *The Plays,* ed. David R. Clark and Rosalind E. Clark (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 297–306, at 303.

40. Fischer, 243.

41. Grace Kingsley, "At the Stage Door," *Los Angeles Times*, 29 September 1915.

42. Untitled joke, *Puck*, 29 July 1916, 10.

43. Quoted in Dorothy Thorne, "The Telephone in Sock and Buskin," *Telephone Review* 7 (October 1916), 293. The suggestion that playwrights owe money (or homage) to Bell is a surprisingly common one. One theatre critic, for instance, jokes that playwrights ought to "[erect] a monument to Bell." "Telephonic Drama," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 February 1915.

44. J. M. Barrie, "A Slice of Life: An Advanced Drama," unpaginated typescript, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Cambridge, MA.

45. Alfred Sutro, *The Laughing Lady* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1922), 11.

46. George Jean Nathan, *Since Ibsen: A Statistical Historical Outline of the Popular Theatre since 1900* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1933), 7, 27, 102.

47. Clemence Dane, *A Bill of Divorcement*, in *Representative British Dramas: Victorian and Modern*, new revised ed., ed. Montrose J. Moses (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1931), 713–45, at 724.

48. Cocteau, 8.

49. Frances Gray, "Meggie Albanesi: A Life in the Theatre," lecture for the Winter Lecture Series of the Society for Theatre Research, London, 16 February 2011, *www.str.org.uk/events/lectures/archive/lecture1102.shtml*, accessed 11 February 2015.

50. Quoted in ibid.

51. Marjorie Wood, "'Hello' Girls' Part Is Difficult to Master," *Oregonian*, 6 October 1912, 9.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. If you revel, as I do, in the silent stretches of video artist Christian Marclay's "Telephones" (1995), you're already familiar with the pleasures of such presence. Available on YouTube at *http://youtu.be/yH5HTPjPvyE?t=4m45s*, accessed February 2015.

55. Uta Hagen and Haskel Frankel, *Respect for Acting* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 110.

56. Ibid., 111.

57. James Herne, *Margaret Fleming,* in *Representative American Plays from 1767 to the Present Day*, 7th ed., ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957), 513–44, at 525.

58. De Lorde and Foley, "At the Telephone," 397.

59. Marcel Proust, *The Captive,* quoted in John Brooks, *Telephone: The First Hundred Years* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 119–20.

60. Thorne, 296. Thorne is speaking here specifically of telephones in movies, but as Figures 6–8 show, her observation was equally true of the theatre.

61. Yetta D. Geffen, "Some Recent Hits," *Theatre Magazine* 21.168 (February 1915), 87–8, at 87.

62. Cocteau, 52. This is my own translation; for Wildman's, see 8–9.

63. "Some Significant Long Distance Talking," *Telephone Review* 3.3 (March 1912): 60–1, at 61. For another account of this event, see "Inter-City Stage 'Phone: Operators in Play Here and in Chicago Exchange Congratulations," *New York Times*, 8 March 1912.

64. Lee Strasberg and Richard Schechner, "Working with Live Material," *Tulane Drama Review* 9.1 (1964): 117–35, at 119.

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