

# It

## Joseph Roach

Everyone will have some idea of what I'm talking about. *It* is a word that remains poised on the tips of many tongues whenever theatre people meet. When someone asks, at an audition, perhaps, or at any other similarly probative spectacle of uncertain human possibility, "Has she got it?" or "Does he have it?," the interlocutors rarely require elaboration. They think that they know it when they see it, and very often they do. Even innocent civilians now test their acumen while viewing a cable TV cross between *A Chorus Line* and *Survivor* called *The IT Factor*, BRAVO's entry in the "factor" genre of reality shows, up against O'Reilly and fear. Following a group of aspiring young actors "as they try to prove they have 'it,'" the show is accompanied by a website whose text implies that "it" is self-evidently visible: "Want to see for yourself that Ingrid has it? Click here."<sup>1</sup> But what does everyone see, really? What do they think they know? What do they actually know? In deference to the larger mystery suggested by these questions, *it*, as a pronoun aspiring to the condition of a noun, will hereafter be capitalized, except where it appears in its ordinary pronominal role. Poets have It. Saints have It. Actors must have It, or they don't work much. By *It* I mean the easily perceived but hard-to-define quality possessed by abnormally interesting people.

Some are born with It; others have It thrust upon them. Those of the first type are truly blessed—or cursed—by their gift: they are always interesting. Those of the second type require a lucky break or a lurid calamity—the fortuitous convergence of personality and extraordinary circumstance—to activate the fickle prurience of average people. Those of the first type, the ones who seem to come by It naturally, complicate the question of whether It can be implanted artificially—the allure and dubious promise of so many of our BFA and MFA degree programs. Only on the stage or screen—not in dance, not in music, not in fine art—can an untrained beginner walk on and make a success (this doesn't happen often, but it can't ever happen in the ballet or a symphony orchestra). The power of It can magically enable such a prodigious accident. It isn't the same thing as talent, but the two tend to show up together. A shade or two closer to skill, talent is a gift for making something difficult, like juggling or yodeling, look easy. Talent may draw a crowd, but it alone will not hold one for long unless the performer also has It. Talents abound. Fewer have It, but those who do make charisma look easy. True, not every actor who has It becomes a celebrity or even a success, but no one stars without It.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.Bravotv.com/The\\_It\\_Factor\\_Los\\_Angeles](http://www.Bravotv.com/The_It_Factor_Los_Angeles).

The much-discussed phenomenon of theatrical and cinematic celebrity offers a promising place to start an investigation of the largely unexamined nature of It. It is not celebrity. It is the precondition of celebrity—its oxygen, its food. Celebrity feeds on It, as magical personalities publicly devour themselves in media-saturated spectacles, but hungry fans also take a prominent place at the table of this cannibalistic feast. Whenever the subject turns to the distribution and reception of human aptitude, as any analysis of It must, the nature-culture conundrum is likely to come up. In *Celebrity* (2001), Chris Rojek summarizes three approaches to this question as it pertains to the popular performer: “Subjectivism,” which, encompassing most of what is written about stars today, posits that they possess innate, “God-given” gifts, and that they possess them uniquely and inexplicably; “Structuralism,” which, under the aegis of the Frankfurt School, explains that the culture industry creates and promotes specific talents to serve and perpetuate the sociopolitical structures of capitalism; and “Poststructuralism,” which locates the production of celebrity neither in the mystified gifts of the individual artist nor in the demystified economic structures of modernity, but rather in the metastasizing web of pomo mass-mediation.<sup>2</sup>

The first approach lets It stand alone, the divine fiat of a singular “chemistry.” Anyone who has spent time in the company of gifted performers has felt the power of the Subjectivist argument: fifty talented hopefuls turn up for an audition, but suddenly the astonished room has eyes for only one. A light seems to shine not only *on* the chosen one, but also *from within* him or her. Every witness can take some pleasure, masochistic or otherwise, in attributing this electrifying perturbation to supernatural origins or simply to *genius*, a secular portmanteau term for the occult attraction exerted by the ineffably fascinating. For all its anti-intellectual charms, however, Subjectivism fails to reckon with the audience, or with any social context for that matter, including the effects of high consumer demand on the limited supply of It. That won’t do. At the same time, Structuralism can prove so grudgingly pompous in its killjoy reductions (and Poststructuralism so verbosely diffuse) that they may threaten to crush (or vaporize) the butterfly before it approaches the net. There has to be a more delicate middle way toward an analysis of Its properties, one that respects the testimony of theatre-makers themselves, even as it provides a theoretical framework for the interpretation of their art and the role of the public in creating it. In this quest, three world-historic theorists of acting—Stanislavski, Diderot, and Zeami—offer variously helpful guidance, and each will be consulted, the last most extensively, as practical philosophers of performance.

In common usage, speakers employ various synonyms for It, such as *charm*, *charisma*, and *presence*. They also have recourse to a well-stocked slang lexicon, including *stuff*, *spunk*, and *moxie*. Under its own name, It has a relatively recent history as a one-word idea cynically planted by Hollywood press agents, though its roots strike deeply into the longer and richer history of performance. In its cinematic iteration, It will always be associated with Clara Bow (1905–1965), “The ‘It’ Girl,” whose brief yet dazzling career in silent pictures epitomized the flapper era.<sup>3</sup> Her story

<sup>2</sup> Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 29–45.

<sup>3</sup> For biographical details on Bow, I am indebted to Joseph Morella and Edward P. Epstein, *The “It” Girl: The Incredible Story of Clara Bow* (New York: Delacorte, 1976), and David Stenn, *Clara Bow: Runnin’ Wild* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).

reveals the intimate relations between and among charismatic performer, script, audience, and the image-makers who manipulate them all. Bow's career exemplifies the disruptive impact, usefully theorized by Michael Quinn, of the personal qualities of the celebrity actor on the materials of the scripted character, story-line, apparatus of production, and public consciousness of the work. "The shift of perception that celebrity allows," Quinn notes, "is a key one, and is extraordinarily powerful: the audience's attitude shifts from an awareness of the presence of fictional illusion to the acceptance of an illusion, however false, of the celebrity's absolute presence."<sup>4</sup> Behind the refractory celebrity of which Quinn speaks lurks the prior condition of It. The practically-minded Constantin Stanislavski (1863–1938) similarly describes Its disruptive effects in a four-page chapter of *Building a Character* (1949) called "Stage Charm." Because this beguiling quality spoils the all-important "sense of truth," the eruption of charm into the otherwise disciplined representations of his theatre always puts the exasperated narrator and director-figure "Tortsov," Stanislavski's alter ego, in an especially bad mood. His predicament recalls that of silent-film director Clarence Badger editing scenes with Clara Bow, forced against his artistic judgment to use crowd-pleasing close-ups of the star whenever the It Girl's endearingly impulsive fidgets had wrecked the master-shot. Tortsov makes the telling point that charm turns even annoying quirks into assets for the lucky but obnoxious ones who possess it: "What then is the basis for the fascination they exercise? It is an indefinable, intangible quality; it is an inexplicable charm of an actor's whole being; it transforms even his deficiencies into assets. His idiosyncrasies and shortcomings become things to be copied by his admirers. Such an actor can permit himself anything—even bad acting. All that is required of him is that he come out on the stage as frequently and remain as long as possible, so that his audience can see, gaze upon and enjoy its idol."<sup>5</sup> Stanislavski recognizes the power of It, conspiring with the all-too-willing audience, to displace competing artistic considerations, including taste, by imposing the personality of the actor on them all. What Quinn calls "the illusion of absolute presence," a good working definition of stardom, emerges from an apparently singular nexus of personal quirks, irreducible to type, yet paradoxically the epitome of a type or prototype that almost everyone eventually wants to see or be like. In this sense, there was only one Clara Bow, there will never be another, yet even seventy years after her reclusive retirement and forty years after her death, she still remains everywhere to be seen.

How?

The ascription of "It Girl" was developed for Bow in 1927 by the management at Paramount, drawing upon the treatment hatched by the Hollywood social arbiter and screenwriter, romance novelist Elinor Glyn. "It" was a pulpy novella written by the self-fashioning British expatriate so that it could be adapted into a screenplay for a motion picture of the same name, featuring a male lead possessed of the magical eponymous quality. But the arrival of a more compelling opportunity upset Glyn's

<sup>4</sup> Michael L. Quinn, "Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting," *New Theatre Quarterly* 22 (1990): 156. See also Bert O. States, "The Actor's Presence: Three Phenomenal Modes," in *Acting (Re)Considered: Theories and Practices*, ed. Phillip B. Zarrilli (London: Routledge, 1995), 22–42.

<sup>5</sup> Constantin Stanislavski, *Building a Character*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1949), 238.

storyboard. The studio moguls had the script rewritten to feature Bow, a former bun-slicer at Nathan's on Coney Island who got to Hollywood by winning a screen test in a contest sponsored by the publisher of *Motion Picture* magazine. An abused dropout with a painful stammer and hole-in-the-bucket self-esteem, she was sixteen at the moment of her discovery. Her exploitable looks—bobbed red hair, huge mascara-circled eyes, and bee-stung lips—became a bankable commercial Look, prominently associated with the latest in lingerie. First touting her as the “Brooklyn Bombshell,” her handlers calibrated her onscreen roles to titillate public interest in her offscreen life as an astounding sexual athlete, and vice versa. For a fee of \$50,000, Glyn was persuaded to lend her orphic voice to say that Bow had “It.” Rivals complained that this coup made Glyn, at fifty grand per word, the highest-paid writer in Hollywood, but the moniker stuck fast to the actress until its re-ascription to Marilyn Monroe and periodic recirculation in popular culture thereafter.

Now, resurgent again, the phrase seems to mark a kind of impudent, postfeminist nostalgia. Deborah Davis, a Hollywood story editor, writing in *Strapless* (2003), retrofits it to her description of the model for John Singer Sargent's scandalous portrait of *Madame X* (1884): “Virginie Amélie Avegno Gautreau, the striking French Creole woman who posed for the painting, was not conventionally attractive. Yet even with her unusual paller and her exaggerated features, she was a celebrated beauty: Paris's hottest ‘It Girl.’”<sup>6</sup> The downplaying of conventional beauty is a recurring theme in the literature on the subject, but in crowning Gwyneth Paltrow as the leader of “The ‘It’ Parade” in a forty-page photo essay on her competitors, *Vanity Fair* quotes, by way of historical context, Truman Capote's summary critique of Babe Paley's benchmark version of It in the 1950s: “She had only one fault: she was perfect; otherwise she was perfect.”<sup>7</sup> It, the 1927 Paramount Bow-vehicle, recently returned in the form of a musical comedy, *The It Girl* (2001), by Paul McKibbins and B. T. McNicholl, boasting, “She'll Turn Your Sadness into Gladness!” As Marvin Carlson has shown, a celebrity actor is “entrapped by the memories of the public, so that each new appearance requires a renegotiation with those memories.”<sup>8</sup> Carlson calls this phenomenon “ghosting,” and it need not end with the retirement or death of the star. In that sense, Bow's screen persona was ghosted yet again by the title character in the flapper revival *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (2002), whose promoters breathlessly asked, “Will Millie become this season's ‘It Girl?’” She did.

Elinor Glyn's own definition, set forth in the foreword to her novella, offers a point of departure for a broader inquiry into the history and theory of It. Despite her association with the packaging of Bow as the “It Girl,” Glyn professed to believe that the quality she named transcends gender: “To have ‘It,’ the fortunate possessor must have that strange magnetism which attracts both sexes. He or she must be entirely unselfconscious and full of self-confidence, indifferent to the effect he or she is producing, and uninfluenced by others. There must be physical attraction, but beauty is unnecessary. Conceit or self-consciousness destroys ‘It’ immediately. In the animal world ‘It’ demonstrates [itself] in tigers and cats—both animals being fascinating and

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Davis, *Strapless: John Singer Sargent and the Fall of Madame X* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2003), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Truman Capote, quoted in Eugenia Peretz, “The ‘It’ Parade,” *Vanity Fair* (September 2000), 313.

<sup>8</sup> Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as a Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 9.

mysterious, and quite unbiddable.”<sup>9</sup> Here Glyn peels away the outer layers of It to discover its basis in an attraction that, as the oft-heard rationalization goes, “isn’t just physical” or, more plausibly still, is fundamentally polymorphous. At the same time, this attraction presupposes a certain element of danger—of rejection at least, if not worse. Glyn had a quirky interest in animal magnetism, and she did not withhold merited attribution from nonhuman performers: Rex, the Hollywood Wonder Horse, also had It, she claimed. But the most interesting point she makes about It across the species concerns the “unbiddable” nature of tigers and other cats. A perceived indifference counts heavily in the production of this special allure; evidently, dogs try too hard. Although her distinction between physical attraction and beauty seems disingenuous coming from a knowledgeable industry insider, she had support from the entry for *It* in the *OED*, which cites Rudyard Kipling’s 1904 usage: “’Tisn’t beauty, so to speak, nor good talk necessarily. It’s just It. Some women’ll stay in a man’s memory if they once walk down a street.” While Glyn did not disavow the double entendre of “it” as slang for sexual intercourse, her support of gender equity in the assignment of It was consistent. She joined others in promoting the young stuntman Gary Cooper as the “It Boy,” and he appeared with Bow in *Children of Divorce* more heavily made up than she, with a towel around his neck over a silk dressing gown, she with a feather boa over her chemise, romantically linked bookends of Itness. Although the “It Boy” title quickly faded into oblivion, Cooper’s magnetism certainly did attract both sexes on screen and off over a long and full career.

Why?

Cooper shared with Bow a quality matched only by their predecessors and successors at high points in the history of It: the power of projecting contradictory essences in the same role, even in the same gesture. This quality points to a definition of It that moves beyond the tautology of innate charm and enters into the realm of theatrical and cinematic technique. Theatrical performance is the simultaneous experience of mutually exclusive possibilities—truth and illusion, presence and absence, face and mask. Performers are none other than themselves doing a job in which they are always someone else, filling our field of vision with the flesh-and-blood matter of what can only be imagined to exist. With an intensity of focus beyond the reach of normal people, those with It can embody before our eyes these and other antinomies. From moment to moment on the stage or on the set, they must hold them together with the force of their personalities, but in the service of a representation to which their personalities are supposedly excrescent. Stanislavski, phobic about idiosyncratic “charm” though he was, developed his System of acting around the often contradictory processes of inner personal emotion (“the actor works on himself”) and outer imitation (“the actor works on his role”). Lee Strasberg (1901–82) notoriously developed the American Method out of the first part of Stanislavski’s dyad as “affective memory,” but he also insisted on the actor’s identification with the character’s emotions. Deb Margolin recalls her first acting teacher’s aphoristic introduction to the Method: “She maintained that acting was simple: One only needed to say one thing while thinking another.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Elinor Glyn, “It” (New York: The Macaulay Company, 1927), 5–6.

<sup>10</sup> Deb Margolin, “Mining My Own Business: Paths between Text and Self,” in *Method Acting Reconsidered: Theory, Practice, Future*, ed. David Krasner (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 128.

Such a precarious center, at once self-expression and self-erasure, cannot hold, but for the two-hour traffic of our stage, the contending forces remain in play, while their contingent interaction generates an intense, charismatic radiance that emanates from their unstable source—It. As in all melodrama, the outcome of the struggle between implacable opposites must be deferred to maintain suspense, but at the end, a dark secret remains untold, and even in the afterglow of the most illuminating disclosure, there is an uncanny translucence without transparency, a silhouette. Nor do such contentions always unfold as high drama, for in moments of quiet absorption they can also appear as the flickering play of light and shadow barely perceptible as a disturbance in the soul. But in the most sensitive instrument the subtlest turbulence has its effect as well as its affect, and from the perspective of the audience, we find that inchoate urges, desires, *and* identifications have been stirred in us without claiming anything so vulgar as a name. That being the case, we can't take our eyes off of It.

Using a different extended metaphor, the novelist George Meredith wrote a prescient description of this phenomenon in *Beauchamp's Career* (1876). In the key scene, Cecelia, an aristocratic English beauty, gazes fixedly on the photograph of her less beautiful but nonetheless apparently invincible rival for the love of novel's hero. That rival is Renée, Madame de Rouaillont, and her image keeps the jealous, fascinated beholder "enchained" along with everyone else who encounters it. Here's why: "Dark-eyed Renée was not beauty but attraction; she touched the double chords within us which are we know not whether harmony or discord, but a divine discord if an uncertified harmony, memorable beyond plain sweetness or majesty. There are touches of bliss in anguish that superhumanize bliss, touches of mystery in simplicity, of the eternal in the variable. These two chords of poignant antiphony she struck throughout the range of the hearts of men, and strangely interwove them in vibrating unison. Only to look at her face, without hearing her voice, without the charm of her speech, was to feel it."<sup>11</sup>

Meredith's concluding "it" is It. Cecelia, with her statuesque beauty and considerable fortune, should have It, but the quality possessed by Madame la marquise remains irresistibly "dark" in its superior attraction, unsettling not only to the putative order of romantic inclination and the hierarchy of sexual selection, but also to every other character's peace of mind. Nor does the capacious scope of the Victorian novel offer the only venue in which the wanton shackling of opposites expresses the itness of It. The journalistic retrospection occasioned by Marlon Brando's death demonstrated a similar turbulence of prose, rendered necessary to describe adequately the embodied contradictions that underlay that actor's uncanny appeal. In his elegy, A. O. Scott asked on behalf of many fans, "Has the desperate vulnerability that underlies the male drive toward sexual domination ever been explored with the raw precision of 'Last Tango in Paris'?" In no other section of the *New York Times* would the oxymoron "raw precision" be likely to pass by the editor unchallenged, but it seems apposite in the farewell cover story of "Arts & Ideas," eulogizing the creator of the role of Stanley Kowalski by linking male "sexual domination" with "vulnerability" in the same hot breath.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> George Meredith, *Beauchamp's Career*, ed. G. M. Young (1876; London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 331.

<sup>12</sup> A. O. Scott, "Marshaling His Talent To Battle His Fame." *New York Times* 13 July 2004, B7-B9.



What Meredith calls “poignant antiphony” bestows a preternatural strangeness on It and often a certain social apartness on those who possess it. In children’s games, the player ritually chosen to be “it” is simultaneously elected and ostracized. There is a kind of freakishness to having It; and despite the allure, a potential for monstrosity, which haunts the meaning of *it* as the proper neuter pronoun of the third person singular, used to refer to things without life, of animals when sex is not specified, and sometimes of infants (*OED*). Charles Addams capitalized on this disturbingly elastic sense of the word by naming a beguilingly amorphous character “Cousin It.” Stephen King did the same by titling a horror-thriller *It* (1986). P. T. Barnum anticipated them both by billing his leading side-show geek “What-is-It?” More discursively, the philosophe Denis Diderot (1713–84) explored the psychological basis for the tremor of repulsion that thoughtful spectators may feel even as they succumb the seductions of It. In *The Paradox of the Actor* (1778), Diderot spoke of what he perceived as the chilling neutrality of soul characteristic of the “great actor,” presumably David Garrick (1717–79), who fascinated and distressed the encyclopedist by fluently representing the most wrenching emotions without experiencing them, a “poignant antiphony” at the heart of the paradox of the actor.

There is no doubt that Garrick, as much as or more than any performer in history, had It, but Diderot, while allowing that the great actor’s presence in England made a trip to London more aesthetically edifying than a trip to Italy to see the ruins of Rome, does not exempt him from the social isolation of other self-exhibiting freaks, a fate their gifts cannot defer but might actually hasten. “Anyone in society who wants to please everyone, and has the unfortunate talent to be able to,” Diderot wrote, in a desolating definition of It, “is nothing, possesses nothing which is proper to him or distinguishes him, nothing which might bring delight to some and tedium to others. He talks all the time, and always talks well; he is a professional sycophant, a great courtier, and a great actor.”<sup>13</sup> But the great actor’s personal absence, a kind of affectively disabling autism, paradoxically enables his creation of the illusion of absolute presence: “It’s because he’s nothing that he’s everything to perfection, since his particular form never stands in the way of the alien forms he has to assume.”<sup>14</sup> Diderot locates the paradox of the actor in the professionalization of the most fundamental of all human contradictions: “One is oneself by nature; one is another by imitation; the heart you imagine for yourself is not the heart you have.”<sup>15</sup> “Unbiddable” as a cat, the Janus-faced quality of It thus manifests itself in expressive behavior that people who don’t think of themselves as actors may find off-putting or bizarre, even as they crave to experience its seductive glamour and participate in its public adulation. The audience clamors for It and punishes it too, sometimes at considerable psychic cost to the designated paragon and victim. As an associate said of Clara Bow not long before her contract-ending nervous breakdown: “She has a way of being crazy that photographs pretty well.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Denis Diderot, *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. Geoffrey Bremer (London: Penguin, 1994), 133.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Stenn, *Clara Bow*, 208.

From far above and beyond the psychological meaning of It, however, beckons the aesthetic, which is also the social. It, on its way to celebrity, constructs itself in the imaginative space inspired by the performer but ratified and amplified by the audience: having It depends to some degree (though not entirely) on being known for having It. It, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, but not solely there. It is a resource that audiences locate and consume, but also renew. It is a public trust or utility, like the statuary on courthouses and city halls, but mobile and dynamic, like electricity. "I have a high opinion of the talent of a great actor," Diderot concludes, meaning to take some of the chill out of his bleak view of the supposed vacuity of the exceptional performer: "Such men are rare, as rare and perhaps greater than poets."<sup>17</sup> To that comparison the philosophe then adds great statesmen. To speak of the social aesthetics of It is to rely on the historic meaning of the word *aesthetic* as the sensuous vitality of material designs and expressive events within a cultural polity. The product of neither a pure democracy nor a dictatorship, It holds office within a meritocratic republic of art. As such, it can be cited and interpreted in ancient as well as modern constitutions. As Walter Bagehot notes in his classic, *The English Constitution* (1867), speaking of the "visible" aspect of representative government as reflected in the glamour of its iconic, aristocratic figures: "The higher world, as it looks from without, is a stage on which the actors walk their parts much better than the spectators can."<sup>18</sup>

To its shame, the theatre has contributed its share to the onerous legacy of prejudice and segregation that Bagehot's description of institutionalized snobbery invokes, but the stage, hungry for It wherever it can find, also became the second oldest profession to admit women, and it has always recruited largely—indeed, almost exclusively—from the ranks of those who weren't born into "the higher world." While the contradiction between face and mask represents the fundamental antimony of acting, the demographic fact that the theatre has historically tapped the working and lower-middle classes to deck its stage with kings confirms an underlying social contradiction in the production of It. From Roscius (c. 162–20 BC) to the "African Roscius," Ira Aldridge (1804–67), and at many points in between and beyond, the possession of It has provided upwardly mobile performers with a tool to carve out a space of freedom and renown in the unpromising bedrock of a world that would otherwise enslave them, though the expatriate Aldridge found the digging easier everywhere but here. Across class and eventually ethnic and racial lines, the driving motive of marginalized performers to attain celebrity mirrors that of the public to identify with and to desire the excluded, the secret sharers of their fears and dreams. As Gordon Rogoff rightly observes, glossing sociologist Max Weber: "Charisma is, by definition, a description of shared needs."<sup>19</sup> Calling the roll of exemplary charismatics, every theatre historian will have his or her special list, and a number of artists' names come up in what follows, but an inquiry into the nature of It must go beyond a census of worthies to develop a theory that technically explains the special powers shared by them all.

<sup>17</sup> Diderot, *Selected Writings*, 133.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (1867; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 248.

<sup>19</sup> Gordon Rogoff, "Burning Ice," in *Stanislawski and America: The "Method" and Its Influence on the American Theatre*, ed. Erika Munk (1966; New York: Fawcett Books, 1967), 264.



The most extensive and searching exploration of this question in the history of performance belongs to Zeami (1363–1443), the pioneering practitioner of Noh drama, in his Zen-inflected treatises on the art of acting. Among his keywords are *hana* (Flower) and *yūgen* (something like Grace, but also “that which lies beneath the surface”). Depending on the context, either of these terms might be translated as “It,” but the former is the far more inclusive concept, reflecting the entire scope and depth of an artist’s native gifts and acquired skills. At the apex of these blooms “The Flower of Peerless Charm,” the highest of nine levels of histrionic attainment. In stressing that this concept cannot be adequately defined in words or, at least, in expository writing, Zeami gestures to the foundation of theatrical attractiveness in the artist’s capacity to embody mutually exclusive essences and the audience’s capacity to respond to them. Elliptically describing the Flower of Peerless Charm, he quotes the Zen aphorism: “In the dead of night, the sun shines brightly.”<sup>20</sup> The Flower is both conscious technique and unconscious creative inspiration. The Flower is both an innate gift and the work of a lifetime: full-time training, to have any efficacy, begins at age seven; at age eleven or twelve there might be a temporary bloom based on childish charm, but it is not yet “The True Flower”; at age seventeen or eighteen the first, false bloom is lost in adolescent awkwardness, and the audience finds the actor risible; at age twenty-four or -five, however, “the limits of the actor will be fixed by his training and self-discipline”—the Flower begins to open; by age thirty-four or -five, the artist has attained the True Flower—or not; by forty-four or -five, the Flower is fading, and he must find new ways of showing his skills; from age fifty and up, not much more worthwhile can be done, alas, but the Flower can still survive, even when growing in a rotten log (4–9). The roots of the True Flower are in neither nature nor culture solely, but rather somewhere in the middle of the two, and the tensions produced by their polygenesis excite others.

*Hana* is a concept built on paradox: the True Flower is both Changeless and Changing, in that innovation is possible only within a tradition that has been perfectly internalized. With the attainment of Peerless Charm (in a manner of speaking, “It plus”), the Flower registers on the audience as *omoshiroki* (Fascination), which is a result of *mezurashiki* (Novelty). Fascination is a consciousness of Novelty in the sense of surprise or wonder, but just as Novelty can be meaningfully attained only by those who have wholly mastered the constituent arts of dance and chant (Genuine Perfect Fluency), so true Fascination with an actor who possesses the Flower of Peerless Charm is given only to “spectators of discernment. Ordinary spectators, on the other hand, will merely find that his performances are enjoyable in some mysterious fashion” (98). This is true on the level of physical technique as well as that of aesthetic abstraction. Spectators respond to physical oppositions; hence, Zeami recommends a regime of “Violent Body Movement, Gentle Foot Movement” contrasted with “Violent Foot Movement, Gentle Body Movement” (75–76). Such reciprocal asymmetry represents the kinesthetic expression of the underlying contradictions of It.

<sup>20</sup> *On the Art of the No Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, trans. J. Thomas Rimer and Yamakazi Masakazu (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 120. Subsequent references will be given parenthetically.

In *The Secret Art of the Performer* (1991), Eugenio Barba explains the worldwide pervasiveness of similar oppositions in compelling physical performances: "The performer develops resistance by creating oppositions: this resistance increases the density of each movement, gives movement altered intensity and muscular tone."<sup>21</sup> Particularly noted in Asian dance theatre, opposition and hence resistance also appear in Western performance, as suggested by the term *contraposto*, which describes a position in which the performer turns in different directions at the knees, the hips, the shoulders, and head, making an interesting line of the body. "Resistance" is another way of describing the novelty-inducing asymmetries identified first and most cogently by Zeami as appearing interdependently in psyche and soma. The fascination they create in the audience stems from the performer's unique capacity to bring them together, joining impossible contradictions precariously at the balance point, and to hold them there for a miraculous moment, contained—resisted—even as they are visibly or audibly expressed. Thus a principle of restraint (not doing) informs everything that an actor who possesses the Flower does: "When you feel ten in your heart," Zeami advises, "express seven in your movements" (75).

Telegraphic as the foregoing summary must be, the salient point is that Zeami, a chronologic contemporary of Geoffrey Chaucer, worked out a basic theory of It from the experience of his artistic practice. The legacy of his thinking appears today in the Japanese institution of the "Living National Treasure," a performer whose possession of It is recognized as a public trust. To revise and re-energize acting theory today, practitioners would do well to build on Zeami's insights, attending to the actor's capacity simultaneously to embody and communicate apparently irreconcilable contraries. They would also do well to cite inspiring theatre-historical examples of charismatic performers, while translating their contradictions into terms that resonate for students today. These fundamental but newly articulated contraries would be of two kinds, personal and technical. The former exist as psychological or physical characteristics prior to their expression in performance, but they must be articulated through technique and tested on audiences. Any number of oppositions might be proposed as exemplary contradictions in the dialectic of It, varying according to the temperaments and capacities of individual performers, but for purposes of illustration and by way of speculation, let the following sets suffice: first, the contrary personal characteristics of innocence and experience matched with their technical counterparts, novelty and inevitability; second, the attributes of strength and vulnerability linked to the technical devices of projection and introspection.

*Innocence and experience.* Contemporary performers with It tend to have unusually large features, especially large eyes in proportion to the rest. By itself such an anomalous countenance might suggest unmediated childlike curiosity, a condition of permanent wonder. The employment of younger and younger fashion models shows the utility of innocence as a marketing ploy today. But these eyes must be knowing as well as wide. Their continuing wonder at the world must be seen to have survived the precocity of their unexpectedly advanced experience or intuitive apprehension of our secrets. It—in this case the phenomenon of poised contradiction between surprise and

<sup>21</sup> Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer* (London: Routledge, for the Centre for Performance Research, 1991), 184.

foreknowledge—makes us wonder what they are thinking. In fact, It always makes us wonder what they are thinking. Here the personal characteristics of innocence and experience come out through the techniques of *novelty* and *inevitability*. As audience members, we crave the appearance of spontaneity that satisfies our prior expectation that we are seeing something that is happening now for the first time. The stress that William Gillette quite sensibly lays on the importance of the “illusion of the first time in acting” offers an indirect explanation of the nature of our fascination. Gillette cautioned the actor to avoid the potentially deadening effects of rehearsals and repeated performances in a long run, but rather to appear every time to have experienced the events of the drama for the first time, along with the character and the audience.<sup>22</sup> Yet total surrender to the shock of the new would fatally weaken the character and deflect the actor’s concentration from what Stanislavski calls the “through-line of action” of the play. W. C. Fields, fearing the outbreak of novelty unmediated by inevitability, wanted children and animals painted on the scenery. With apparent effortlessness, the actor who has It reliably executes in repeated performances the daunting stage direction that Ibsen writes for Rebecca in *Rosmersholm*: “As if surprised.” This ability secures for the representation the pleasures of novelty, which evokes innocence, just as surely as a sense of inevitability gives equal and reciprocal pleasure by evoking experience.

Setting aside the anomaly of Rex the Horse, Glyn was on to something in her placement of It in the taxonomy of the animal kingdom. Cats are merely “dumb animals,” but they seem to know something, maybe a lot, that we don’t. Meeting their gaze offers an object lesson in the illusion of absolute presence. At the heart of the fascination exerted by innocence and experience is a play of conscious and unconscious motives and actions. This is why Stanislavski labored for decades to develop a reliable technique of simultaneously engaging the conscious and the unconscious, the mental and the physical in acting, and why animal exercises have, alas, become clichés of acting class, with a disproportionate representation given over to felines. This is why the most quotable classroom instruction of a successful American acting teacher is: “Drop into your panther.” Once engaged, the inertial forces of the event must proceed to a preordained end at the tempo required by aesthetic logic and/or audience expectation. This telos or through-line of theatrical action appears in the form of the purposefully concentrated intention that Stanislavski described but did not monopolize as the key to living the role as if spontaneously.

George Bernard Shaw found the dialectical play of human and animal, consciousness and unconsciousness, worldly human experience and Edenic innocence utterly beguiling in the acting of Eleonora Duse (1859–1924). Here is how It looked to Shaw: “She is ambidextrous and supple, like a gymnast or a panther; only the multitude of ideas which find expression in her movements are all of that high quality that marks off humanity from the animals, and, I fear I must add, from a good many gymnasts. When it is remembered that the majority of tragic actors excel only in explosions of those passions which are common to man and brute, there will be no difficulty in understanding the indescribable distinction which Duse’s acting acquires from the fact

<sup>22</sup> William Gillette, “Illusion of the First Time in Acting” (1913), in *Theatre in the United States: A Documentary History*, ed. Barry B. Witham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1:225–27.

that behind every stroke of it is a distinctly human idea. In nothing is this more apparent than in the vigilance in her of that high human instinct which seems to awaken the deepest responsive feeling without giving pain."<sup>23</sup> The oxymoron "high human instinct" discloses Shaw's appreciation of the great actress's simultaneous embodiment of contradictory truths, the characteristic attribute and the technique of It.

*Strength and vulnerability.* This dichotomy, now widely heralded among acting teachers, has a long history: Achilles was a more compelling hero because of his heel, not in spite of it. Visible or invisible, the wound leaves its emotional trace in every expression, especially the strongest: Humphrey Bogart was a more persuasive leading man because of the twitch, not in spite of it. The first authority to articulate the paradox of strength and vulnerability in its present terms was Tony Barr, the dramatic programming director for CBS-TV in the 1980s.<sup>24</sup> Following his formula, casting directors aver that strength without vulnerability lacks dramatic interest, while vulnerability without strength is just disgusting. Theatrical history supports their preferences. Some of the early forerunners of modern celebrity, for instance, attest to the importance of an actor's ability to hold these volatile contraries in close proximity. Each career unfolded in the particularities of its historical milieu and under different theatrical conditions, but each resembles the others in one key respect. In the long but productive twilight of his reign on the English stage, Thomas Betterton (ca. 1635–1710) was physically limited by his gout-ridden physique and grumbling voice. He exploited his weaknesses, however, to dramatize the vulnerabilities of Shakespearean heroes, notably Hamlet, Othello, and Lear, even as he capitalized on his venerable dignity to represent their tragic strength. Sarah Siddons (1755–1831) parlayed a gift for conveying the helplessness of outraged or distressed maternity into the very icon of moral authority, cast not only as *The Muse of Tragedy* in Joshua Reynolds's famous portrait, but also as Britannia herself in a national celebration of thanksgiving in St. Paul's Cathedral. Edwin Forrest (1806–72) displayed a famously powerful physique in roles such as Spartacus and Metamora, where the crux of the characterization requires, above all, pathos in the face of annihilating defeat. In each case, the magic derived from the ability to command the recursive co-presence of mutually exclusive characteristics. That's It.

Strength and vulnerability are made manifest by the techniques of *projection and introspection*, which revive the ancient distinction between concupiscible and irascible passions: the former radiate dynamically outward to act upon the world; the latter withdraw reflexively inward. Taken singly, either of the two is not uninteresting, but in combination they are riveting (think Brando, Pacino, De Niro). Projection resembles "negative capability" as defined by John Keats: the capacity to negate or suspend oneself in the empathic act of imaginatively penetrating the character of someone else—indeed, of many others. This capacity, which Keats found preeminently in Shakespeare as a playwright, also defines the histrionic sensibility of excellent actors, including Richard Burbage (ca. 1567–1619), who created many of the greatest Shakespearean roles. Burbage was remembered as a "Delightful Proteus," after the shape-shifting river god who could transform himself at will, but also as that admirable kind

<sup>23</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *Dramatic Opinions and Essays* (New York: Brentano's, 1928), 1:138.

<sup>24</sup> Tony Barr, *Acting for Camera* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1982), 298–99.

of actor who keeps up his part while listening as well as speaking, even to the extent of staying in character behind the scenes. This latter capacity suggests a power of self-absorption, however, which is the necessary concomitant of negative capability. Introspective concentration, intensified to the level of “public solitude,” is basic to the technique imparted by Stanislavski. Paradoxically, introspection, like a lens, creates the focal point of concentration where projection originates. Theatre history offers a clarifying anecdote, which does not have to be verifiable to have become everyone’s favorite, even Diderot’s. Taking the part of Electra, the Greek actor Polus (fourth century BC) used the cremated remains of his recently deceased son to represent those of Orestes, filling the theatre with grief-stricken cries from a heart that was at once, sublimely, the one he had imagined *and* the one he had. Actors with It have eyes that focus both outward and inward because there is much of importance to be seen in each direction, and the audience members know it, even if their own vision is more limited or unfocused. “The eyes look ahead,” as Zeami describes the disciplined double consciousness displayed by the actor who has attained the Flower of Peerless Charm, while “the spirit looks behind” (81).

There is something that resists summary about a popular concept so fugitive that it requires fourteenth-century Zen philosophy to elucidate its meanings. Zeami aside, George Meredith’s phrase is perhaps the most descriptive: “These two chords of poignant antiphony she struck throughout the range of the hearts of men, and strangely interwoven them in vibrating unison.” Accounts of Clara Bow on the set of *It* attest to spontaneous eruptions of her genuine childlike innocence, which mesmerized the director and cameramen already wholly attentive to the deeply seasoned poise of her erotic calculation. In the moment, It fits—only under scrutiny do the components appear to contradict themselves and break apart. Erving Goffman prefaces his *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) with a quotation from George Santayana that captures this hard-to-grasp, hard-to-hold union of disparate entities, an underlying truth claimed by his philosophy, but a discovery of the privileged kind that most audience members make only in a flash of desire under the hallucinatory aegis of It: “Masks are arrested expressions and admirable echoes of feeling, at once faithful, discreet, and superlative. Living things in contact with the air must acquire a cuticle, and it is not urged against cuticles that they are not hearts; yet some philosophers seem to be angry with images for not being things, and with words for not being feelings. Words and images are shells, no less integral parts of nature than the substances they cover, but better addressed to the eye and more open to observation.”<sup>25</sup> It belongs not to people who can understand what Santayana is saying, but to those who can *do* what he means. It, like charisma, resides in the gifted but stems from a mutual need, a longing based on the unspoken anxiety that feeling of the kind that Santayana has evoked, if left undone, will be lost to us utterly or indefinitely deferred. In *Mourning Sex* (1997), Peggy Phelan, speaking of all performance as disappearance, mentions Pliny’s lovely account of the invention of painting: a girl traces her lover’s shadow on the wall before he departs on a long journey. “I used to stare at the wall of the living room,” Phelan recalls, as if in empathic solidarity with the

<sup>25</sup> George Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies* (1922), quoted in Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959; Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 1973), epigraph.

girl, "willing your shadow to fill up."<sup>26</sup> The phenomenon I have been calling "It" resembles that outline, Phelan's "shadow," ever beguiling in shape as long as it remains empty, "unbiddable."

It is something most of us would want to have, presumably, if we didn't have to pay the price or, probably, even if we did. In any case, It is rare and expensive to own. Most of us experience It vicariously, which is part of its fabulous success. *Vicarious* is a very suggestive word in this context. Cognate to *vicar*, as in "Vicar of God," meaning the pope or the king of England, it suggests the office of a deputy or the process of deputization. *Vicarious experience*, *vicarious sacrifice*, and *vicarious bleeding* all impart a sense of surrogacy, the substitution of one person or process for another. Perhaps then, by extension, actors with It are not merely there *for* us; they are there *instead* of us—there to live the sort of lives we can imagine and desire but for which we lack the courage, the gift, or the luck—in short, the It—to live for ourselves. In that sense, we are also there for them. This possibility prompts me, by way of conclusion, to speculate that the seemingly impossible demands for contradictory qualities, such as vulnerable strength and experienced innocence, stem from a deep ambivalence on the part of the consumers of It. As the possibilities of their own lives narrow, It seems to defy the limits of ordinary mortality. It keeps its options open, its outline on the wall. It is not merely youth, but it very much resembles what young people are like in their capacity to embrace contradiction without embarrassment as an opportunity for creative self-invention. That is the enduring—and fleeting—charm of It.

<sup>26</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (London: Routledge, 1997), 124.