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1. Hopper and the Stage

- 1 An empty stage typically signals a moment of transition between the reality the audience occupies outside of the performance and their emersion into the representation of reality presented on the stage. An empty stage at the start of the performance is an invitation for the audience to examine the objects before them and anticipate the action to follow. An empty stage at the end of a performance is an invitation for the audience to reflect upon what they have just seen. This latter moment is captured in one of the most famous passages from *The Tempest*:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea all which it inherit, shall dissolve;
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff,
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. 1238, 4.1.148-158.

- 2 A work of theatre does not exist, or exists only in parts to be assembled, before the curtain rises, and ceases to exist as soon as the curtain falls. Impressions of the work may persist, but, setting aside preparation such as rehearsal and set building, a work of theatre exists only for the length of a performance. The empty stage, or the emptying of a stage, I seek to argue, is a recurring theme in the work of Edward Hopper.

- 3 There has been a broad consensus from both amateur and professional critics that Hopper's work produces consistent effects upon viewers. As Jean Gillies asserts, "in almost every article that has appeared on this artist, such words as 'alienation,' 'silence,' and 'timelessness' have appeared. These words seem to be interrelated, which suggests that there is a universal experience or response to Hopper's paintings that has been interpreted as content" (404).¹ The dominant response to Hopper's work is a sense of loneliness—while Hopper's paintings are too complex and varied for a totalizing description, one can assert that throughout his seven-decade career he shows a recurring interest in depeopled spaces. Where human figures do appear in his works, their sight lines rarely meet, sometimes suggesting the solipsistic experiences of individuals who share a physical space but are disconnected emotionally; Kunsthalle Wien asserts that Hopper's figures often "wait, their gaze a 'mild stare' resting on something invisible to the beholder" (9).
- 4 The themes of emptiness and internality in his works connect, I seek to demonstrate, with another common theme which runs across the universal experience of Hopper's work; the sense many viewers experience of Hopper's paintings as evocative of theatre. Alfred Barr asserts, for example, that Hopper's paintings often include foreground horizontals such as railroad tracks, roads, and streets which act "like the edge of a stage beyond which drama unfolds" (127); Rolf Renner states of *Hotel Window* (1956) "everything we see through the window is as inert as a stage set" and of *Summer Evening* (1947) that the figures are "lit as if they were on a stage" (71, 73); Geoffredo Fofi contends that Hopper appears in his works to have "set up lights and decided their brightness. He is the set designer who has arranged the objects, who has organised the space" (84); Richard Elovich detects in Hopper's works a "stage-like atmosphere"; and Sapietro reads them as "constructed like the one-act plays of chamber theatre (even when they depict a landscape or are set in the open air), in which the objects have the symbolic function of a stage" (101). Bryan Robertson and his editor at *The New York Review of Books* saw fit to title Robertson's review of Lloyd Goodrich's *Edward Hopper* "Hopper's Theater." Hopper's works have also given rise to theatrical productions such as the 2000 production *Nighthawks* by Lynn Rosen.
- 5 These correspondences between Hopper's works and theatre are not, Robert Hughes, suggests, incidental. In charting Hopper's influences, he contends:
- Nor should one discount the theatre, whose staging and lighting Hopper often invoked. His rooms and landscapes have a constant air of expectancy. When empty, they seem to have been just vacated by actors; when peopled, the figures are posed and lit as though by a director, and their casual 'ordinariness,' their lack of ostentatious drama, is itself a charade. (229)
- 6 Hopper was famously fond of, and strongly influenced by, film—a debt which he repaid many times over.² He and his wife Josephine were also avid theatregoers with catholic tastes. In her extensive and authoritative biography of Hopper, Gail Levin notes that during the 1920s the couple kept a record of every performance they went to see:
- Hopper carefully saved each pair of ticket stubs which he labelled with the plays' titles. Almost always he and she economized by purchasing balcony seats. Their choice of plays spanned the immense variety then available in New York. They saw modern European drama such as Arthur Schnitzler's *The Call of Life* (October 9, 1925), revival classics such as Shakespeare (*Hamlet* on October 27, with Ethel Barrymore as Ophelia), as well as the work of American contemporaries, such as Channing Pollock's *The Enemy*, an antiwar tract starring Fay Bainter (April 6, 1926). They were adventurous in their taste, even going to see the first English

adaptation of the Moscow Habima production of *The Dybbuk* (March 30, 1926), at the Neighborhood Playhouse on Grand Street, where a permanent company had staged experimental theatre since 1915. The Hoppers patronized the Theatre Guild, which had its roots in the Washington Square Players with whom Jo had acted and which still employed some of her old acquaintances. They saw a double bill of George Bernard Shaw's *A Man of Destiny* and *Androcles and the Lion* and the Guild's new playhouse, the Klaw Theatre, on December 30, 1925. (196)

- 7 Evidence of Hopper's interest in theatre abound in his works; *Solitary Figure in a Theatre* (1902-1904), *At the Theatre* (1916-22), *Two on the Aisle* (1927), *The Balcony* (1928), *The Circle Theatre* (1936), *The Sheridan Theatre* (1937), *First Row Orchestra* (1951), and *Intermission* (1963) all describe the architecture and audiences of playhouses, in the words of Elovich "temporal spaces before, during intervals and after dramas, when the audience is waiting for something to take place" (112). As several critics (Hughes 229 and Renner 40, for example) have noted, Hopper also drew direct inspiration from Joe Mielziner's sets for Broadway when composing *Early Sunday Morning* (1930), a work to which we will turn in more detail later.
- 8 American theatre transformed a during Hopper's lifetime. During the nineteenth century gas and electric lighting had replaced lime and the proscenium stage had largely replaced the apron. Theatre of the late nineteenth century was typified by elaborate sets and costumes modelled after the visually extravagant theatrical work emerging from London and Paris. The pictorialism of this period produced valuable dialogue between painting and theatre, typified by the work of, among others, Robert Smirke, and is perhaps exemplified by John Singer Sargent's haunting image of Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth (1889). The early twentieth century saw a move away from stage pictorialism and a preference for uncluttered sets. Swiss theorist Adolphe Appia, author of *The Work of Living Art: A Theory of the Theatre* (1921), was one of the primary architects of the changing fashions in theatre during the early twentieth century. He argued against overly elaborate staging, asserting, ironically, that "the actor is a most inconvenient necessity for our scene painters; they do not exactly resent him, but they make him feel how out of place his presence is in front of their fine painting" (14). The locus of the problem, for Appia, was the approach to lighting:

How is the actor lit? Alas, not at all; the painting [the scenery and costumes] has taken all the lighting for itself. Those long rows of electric lamps which run parallel to the slices of scenery, or which even run right round the stage, are designed to let us see the painting clearly. No doubt they also let us see the actor clearly, lit from all sides at once But is that *Lighting*? Would a sculptor have thought of lighting in this way his bronze or marble dreams? (14)
- 9 Appia, like Edward Gordon Craig who took up many of his ideas, was influential as a theorist, but had few opportunities to put his theories into practice. Their works proved influential, however. Innovations such as Mariano Fortuny's use of light dispersed through silk screens and Adolph Linnenback's use of projected images onto a plaster "cyclorama" at the back of a stage facilitated a form of theatre where lighting provided mood, setting, and scenery and facilitated a shift away from elaborate sets toward actor-driven theatre.
- 10 These innovations were coupled with other important developments in theatre. Konstantin Stanislavsky introduced new approaches acting designed to produce greater psychological depth and verisimilitude, while movements in realism, surrealism, and innovative approaches to the stage changed the types of plays being produced and the ways in which they were staged. These innovations in theatre began

in Russia, Italy, France, Germany, and England, and made their way to America. New York was a key site for the reception of European art theatre in the US and grew to be the epicentre of American theatre. The European-style art theatre company the New Theatre opened in 1909 and lasted two seasons. American audiences were provided with a taste of European theatre through visits from the Abbey Theatre group in 1911, Max Reinhardt's *Sumurūm* in 1912, Harley Granville-Barker's company in 1915, and Jacques Copeau's *Vieux-Colombier* in 1917. These visits were accompanied by the establishment of the New York-based European company *Le Théâtre Français des États-Unis* in 1913 and led to the formation of subscription-based "little theatres" which produced European and classic plays and sought to cultivate an American playwrighting tradition. One such company was the Washington Square Players, which included Josephine Nivison (later Josephine Nivison Hopper) among their members. The Theatre Guild, which the Hoppers patronised, established art theatre in New York, and produced plays by American playwrights such as Maxwell Anderson, Elmer Rice, Eugene O'Neill, and Robert E. Sherwood.

- 11 The 1920s were, in the words of Harold Clurman the "high point of American theatre" (3). The plays which the Hoppers went to see during this period embodied much of the spirit of European art theatre but did not employ all of its technology. The use of permanent cycloramas and projected scenery, seen in Europe, were impractical in American theatres. Instead, American companies used curtains on a curved track, which would be lifted as needed, as backdrops. American designers and lighting technicians nonetheless made use of a range of lighting equipment with various colour gels and intensities to achieve effects in mood and setting. A true innovator of this period was Abe Feder, who, from 1930 onward, created a system of numbering lighting instruments, created permanent lighting systems, and established the firm Lighting by Feder.
- 12 These innovations in design and lighting in theatre, I wish to demonstrate, were a recurring influence on Hopper's works. Two of his paintings, *Girlie Show* (1941), and *Two Comedians* (1966) depict figures on stage. In both cases the stage is bare, and the backdrop is simple and unlit. In *Girlie Show* a dancer enters a stage. She is wearing high heels and a G-string with a piece of fabric (perhaps a skirt or a shawl) billowing behind her.³ Her posture suggests a practiced elegance. The main curtain is down and so the stage on which she stands is small. The curtain is dark and folded and offers a backdrop for the scene. One might assume that at a later stage in the performance the main curtain would rise, revealing more dancers. She is lit by a spotlight which makes her body bright and casts the rest of the scene in sombre tones. In the foreground we see the audience, the most visible member of which is facing away from the dancer in apparent conversation. Also visible are the tops of instruments and what may be a footlight (or perhaps a music stand).
- 13 In *Two Comedians*, two figures wearing white stand at the front of a stage caught in the moment before a bow. To the right of these figures we see layers of flat green scenery which serve as "legs" to mask the theatre wings and could, presumably, be rolled out to offer a backdrop. The curtain is up, and the backdrop is unlit so that the space behind the figures, from right to left, goes from dark blues to black without offering any sense of the contours of the space beyond. As with *Girlie Show*, a bright light picks out the figures, creating stark shadows in folds of their costumes. The light edges of the stage suggest that while a spotlight is centred on the figures, the house lights are also up.

- 14 In both paintings the human forms are off-centre, putting the viewer is at an angle to the action. In *Girlie Show* the figure is in the centre of the painting but to the right of the stage, with a portion of unlit stage stretching to the left. In *Two Comedians* the figures are closer to the viewer, but we are positioned, as with *Girlie Show*, to the left of the stage. In both cases we have the sense of being situated in the audience. There is a correspondence here to the Hoppers' theatre-going experience; as Levin notes, in the quote above, the couple were generally happy to buy cheaper seats with a slightly restricted point of view; Hopper's own experience of theatre was perennially at an angle to the stage. We see in *Two Comedians*, in the empty black space behind the figures, the retreat from pictorialism and are reminded of Appia's arguments for a theatre centred upon the actor: "if we leave aside painting for a moment and attempt really to light the actor ... what happens? All the vast apparatus of the stage would suddenly lose its *raison d'être*, and the actor would suddenly find himself in ... a veritable void" (14). In both paintings the figures are set against the void Appia describes—there is no elaborate scenery (indeed, no scenery at all) to draw our attention away from the performers.
- 15 The innovations in theatre lighting during the early twentieth century allowed Hopper to explore his interest in light. Hopper was, in the words of Carter E. Forster "an absolute master of light and tone" (25); Henry Geldzahler, similarly asserts "[h]is subject is, first of all, light—the depiction of light and the definition of scene and mood by light" (115). Theatre lights in *Girlie Show* and *Two Comedians* create sharp contrast between lit and unlit spaces; the dancer's skin seems to glisten and her shawl—the centrepiece of the composition—contains multiple shades of blue which contrast against the dark background, embodying, in the words of Hughes "Hopper's fondness for relieving a low-toned background with a sudden distant poke of a primary colour" (228). Such is Hopper's sensitivity to stage lighting that we can tell that the footlight at the front of the stage is off because there is no secondary light source to soften the distinct and large shadow that she casts. The light in *Two Comedians*, similarly, creates hard blacks beneath the collars and in the folds of the figures' outfits.
- 16 To this point in the paper, I have sought to demonstrate that Edward Hopper's paintings contain elements which rhyme with early twentieth century theatre, particularly the use of light. An interest in theatre is not necessarily exclusive to Hopper—his contemporaries such as Everett Shin, also took the stage as a subject. Thomas Hart Benton's *Poker Night (From A Streetcar Named Desire)* (1948) is drawn directly from the 1947 Ethel Barrymore Theatre version of the play and includes a stylised image of Marlon Brando. The argument that Hopper's works are in dialogue with contemporary stagecraft is not, on its own, especially revelatory—as the sources invoked to this point suggest, critics have detected theatrical elements in Hopper's works for decades and there are other American painters whose works engage more directly with New York's theatre scene. In the second part of this paper I seek to develop this argument, then, to suggest a thematic resonance in Hopper's paintings which engages the question of the empty stage and, ultimately, to the ephemerality of theatre.

2. The Empty Stage

- 17 The sense of Hopper's works as drawn from the early twentieth-century American stage is, on its surface, somewhat at odds with one of his dominant themes: that of spaces absent of human life. For Charles W. Millard, the platonic ideal of a Hopper painting is a scene, either rural or urban, containing no human forms:

The more one studies the pictures themselves the more one realizes that figures are present in them not for sentimental, nostalgic, or 'expressive' reasons, but as a means of forestalling the extreme abstraction toward which his art tended and which he seems always to have resisted. Whatever personal associations individual figures may have had for him ... their pictorial function is almost always ambiguous and frequently detrimental to the quality of the works in which they appear It was as if he could not accept the pictorial starkness of the unpeopled compositions that best suited him, or could not believe that empty' compositions could be as good or as ambitious as figural compositions, and introduced the figure as a means of alleviating these supposed problems. (393-394)

- 18 Millard here uses the term "empty," a word which appears elsewhere in Hopper criticism such as the work of Emily C. Burns and borrows from the title of Hopper's *Sun in an Empty Room* (1963). For convenience and consistency with earlier criticism, I use the same term here, although some clarification is required; none of Hopper's works are empty in the sense of having no content, rather, they often describe spaces in which one would expect to be occupied by people, such as homes or streets, absent of human figures. Hopper's Paris scenes, composed between 1906 and 1910, represent his most sustained period of depicting depeopled urban and semi-urban spaces but it was a theme he returned to throughout his career in, for example, *Coast Guard Station* (1927), *Cape Cod Sunset* (1934), and *Seven A.M.* (1948).⁴ Many critics have found in these empty spaces the loneliness and even foreboding described previously; Richard Bretell, for example, describes Hopper's Paris paintings as "des poèmes visuels de l'enfermement où abondent des escaliers vertigineux, des angles morts, des rues en impasse, des ponts massif et écrasants Le Paris de Hopper est sombre, menaçant et vide, c'est une prison de pierre ou de plâtre sans habitant" (34).
- 19 The recurring theme of emptiness in Hopper's work seems to contradict the elements of stagecraft described previously—if Appia's ideal for theatre was a stage stripped of scenery and centered upon the actor then a stage without an actor seems to contradict such impulses. Clearly, then, the images of empty cityscapes employ a different mechanism to the images described above. I seek to propose, however, that a consideration of Hopper's empty landscapes and cityscapes as an empty stage, as it were, can yield further insights. One means by which we can understand these works through the lens of theatre is to examine them in relation to the works of William Inge, a playwright who emerged from the milieu described in the previous section. I do not wish to argue here that Hopper's works are in direct dialogue with Inge, rather that both bodies of work embody similar themes from early twentieth-century American theatre—themes which revolve around and require an empty stage.
- 20 Empty stages appear in the work of Chekhov and Ibsen, who shaped much of theatre in the early twentieth century, and in the work of American playwrights such as Williams, O'Neill, and Miller. It is in Inge's plays, however, that we find the most consistent and deliberate use of the device. Three of his four major plays open with an empty stage. His script for *Picnic* (1953), for example, begins with a detailed description

of the setting followed by “[w]hen the curtain goes up the stage is empty” (6). An empty stage, Susan Koprince argues, calls “immediate attention to the setting. We, the audience, are not yet focused on the story or the characters; we are simply conscious of the ‘stage picture’ in front of us” (127). This should not be confused with the pictorialism of earlier eras of theatre—the setting of Inge’s plays can be evoked with minimal scenery (a fence, a washing line etc.), and the play is not typically staged such that the *mise en scène* draws attention from the action. Rather, when a curtain rises on an empty stage there is a period of silence during which an audience is forced to interpret the space before them; “[f]or a few moments the audience is free to examine the dramatic scene,” Koprince asserts, “and to become aware of its symbolic import” (127). The objects on the stage and the way these objects are lit can give us information about the time period, the place, and the time of year in which the scene is about to occur, and allows us an opportunity to anticipate the role that the various objects may play in the ensuing drama.

- 21 This function of the empty stage in theatre rhymes with many of the critical responses to Hopper’s works. Emily C. Burns, for example, argues that Hopper’s Paris paintings “suggest extended grounding in space, architectonic study, carefully structured compositions and improbable depopulation. The lack of inhabitants jars any sense of the familiar and projects an imaginary city that is empty” (113). Joseph Anthony Ward, similarly, argues that Hopper’s empty city scenes invite the viewer to consider the spaces he depicts anew: Hopper “paints deserted streets, empty houses, motionless trains, unpopulated segments of cities and towns, and idle factories. He defamiliarizes the commonplace by ... requiring us to observe the most banal features of a society at a time or in a situation when they are rarely observed” (170). Both Burns and Ward see in Hopper’s work, in other words, an invitation to find meaning in the everyday—an idea which parallels the empty stage. The questions which, Thomas Kilroy argues, the empty stage provokes might equally be asked of Hopper’s empty urban and rural spaces: “What is this place? Why are we here? Why are we being shown this?” (ix).
- 22 The painting which best exemplifies the empty stage in Hopper’s work is *Early Sunday Morning* (1930) which, as critics such as Hughes have noted, bears a resemblance to Joseph Mielziner’s set design for Elmer Rice’s *Street Scene* (1929). Hopper borrows from the set the series of upper-story windows (from which, in the play, characters often emerge). The painting departs from Rice’s work in tone, however—the play’s script calls for a “‘walk-up’ apartment house in a mean quarter of New York ... [an] ugly brownstone ... built in the nineties. Between the pavement of large gray flagstones and the front of the house is a deep and narrow areaway, guarded by a rusted, ornamental iron railing. At the right, a steep slight of rotting wooden steps” (qtd. in Palmien, 88). Hopper’s painting, conversely, contains a series of store fronts rather than a stoop. The store fronts and windows repeat, with slight variations, in a pattern which runs across the length of the work. The sidewalk runs parallel to the bottom of the frame, providing a stage onto which an actor might step. Sunlight comes from the edge of the scene, producing long shadows such that the signs which hang from the store fronts are visible only through their shadows. The low angle of the sun suggests, as per the title, a street early in the morning, before its inhabitants have emerged and daily life has begun. Nothing is rusted or rotting and there is no palpable sense of danger, poverty, or decay; as is typical of Hopper’s work, the scene itself offers no clear message. We are invited to contemplate what the space may mean, to what use it may be put (the greens and browns of the scene are interrupted by a pop of color from a

striped barbershop pole but the names of the shops are obscured), and who its inhabitants may be. And yet we are not provided enough information to answer those questions. Hopper's rendering of the space further departs from that of Mielziner and Rice in that it depicts a quiet moment before a city street awakens, whereas Rice's play calls for a large cast and the constant background noise of a busy city.⁵

- 23 Hopper, then, seems to depict a moment from *Street Scene* which never occurs in the play—where, in an Inge-esque silence, the audience is invited to anticipate the narrative which will unfold before them. This promise of action is reflected in Ernest Brace's 1937 description of *Early Sunday Morning*, in which he finds in the scene an abundance of life by implication: “[w]ithout the use of a single figure [Hopper] is able to import to a row of commonplace buildings ... a haunting sense of life and heedless human activity. Action, drama even, seems more subtly inherent in them by not being manifest” (275). There is a pregnancy to the scene, then. It seems, as with the opening of an Inge play, to demand or anticipate a figure who might to step forth to direct our attention.
- 24 Hopper's depeopled spaces, then, produce an effect comparable to that of an empty stage—a phenomenon perhaps best exemplified, among Hopper's contemporaries, in the work of Inge. To this point we have only considered the effects produced by an empty stage at the opening of a play, but this is not, of course, the only moment in a production when a stage may be empty. Inge's work also makes use of an empty stage at the close of a play to quite different effect. *Bus Stop* (1955) ends with a single character on stage. “One senses her aloneness,” writes Inge in the stage directions. She sighs, departs and “the curtain comes down on an empty stage” (29). As with the beginning of *Picnic*, there is a pause at the end of *Bus Stop* in which the audience faces a stage without actors. The moment of considering a narrative which has ended is quite different from anticipating a narrative which is about to begin. Koprince writes of the end of *Bus Stop* “only the audience remains behind, locked into that desolate small-town restaurant. Engulfed in darkness, and confronted with a bare stage, we feel the emptiness of Inge's provincial setting, as well as the haunting loneliness of his characters” (135).
- 25 The theme of loneliness, of course, finds resonance with common critical responses to Hopper's works. Hopper was not a narrative artist; none of his works represent the end of a story which is known to the viewer. Nonetheless, if we return to the two examples of his works which render figures on a stage, we find a sense of finality, or of an ending, to his engagement with a stage.

3. The Ephemerality of Theatre

- 26 As argued above, Inge uses an empty stage at the end of *Bus Stop* to signal loneliness and desperation, but elsewhere in theatre we also find empty stages used to call attention to the ephemerality of performative art. One recalls Prospero's speech at the end of the wedding masque in *The Tempest*, quoted at the opening of this paper. Hopper's *Two Comedians* resonates with *The Tempest* in that both have traditionally been read as a creator saying farewell to his art; *The Tempest* has long been considered Shakespeare's last complete work and at the close of the play Prospero drowns his books and asks the audience to “set me free” (1243, Epilogue 20).⁶ *Two Comedians* was, similarly, Hopper's last work and the bowing characters are typically read by critics such as Hughes as

representations of the artist and his model/collaborator Josephine Hopper—the two artists bidding their audience goodbye as it were. By imagining himself and his wife as performers, Hopper draws a circle, as it were, beginning with *Soir Bleu* (1914), an early work which features a clown, to his final years. The stage on which the two figures stand is not yet vacant, but we are aware that it soon will be, and when they have departed, we will be left only with the void.

- 27 The sense of a stage soon to be vacated also appears in *Girlie Show*. Renner describes *Girlie Show* as a “frank celebration of sex” in-keeping with Hopper’s other depictions of the female form (49).⁷ Fryd, similarly, asserts:

In *Girlie Show*, Hopper ... seems to render his wife as the object of desire. The painting thus appears to present the polarization between artist/model, masculine/feminine, voyeuristic/exhibitionist, and active/passive. The men in the audience are the surrogates for the artist's masculine gaze. The woman, on the other hand, exists as a spectacular, sexual, and silent female body—a fascinating representation, given Jo's refusal to be silent. Within the context of the art magazines of the 1930s, Hopper's *Girlie Show*, as well as his other female nudes, masks the 'pseudo-pornographic' arousal for sexual pleasure in the guise of 'high art.' (68)⁸

- 28 My own response to the painting differs from that of Renner and Fryd: I read *Girlie Show* as a departure from Hopper’s other renditions of the female form in that its primary subject is sexual ennui. The woman's age belies the title, as does the indifference of the man in the foreground, whose attention is elsewhere. Her makeup is thick, and her blush makes her cheeks seem sunken; she is, Troyen asserts, “more grotesque than alluring” (55). One is reminded of Reginald Marsh’s *The Irving Place Burlesque* (1930), where the viewer's attention is drawn not to the dancers cavorting on the stage to the left of the image, but to two bored audience members to the lower left and right of center, both have downcast faces and one cups his chin in his palm. As Vivian Green Fryd notes, a:

preliminary drawing for *Girlie Show* shows the dancer’s position on stage as she prances naked after removing her skirt. The pose is roughly the same as in the final painting, but the woman's body differs, with more curvaceous hips and larger, rounder breasts. The woman's face in the drawing, although heavily made-up, appears warmer than in the painting because of her softer features and rounder cheeks. The dark shadow beneath her chin that hardens her face in the painting looks lighter and smaller in the drawing. (56)

- 29 She concludes that the initial sketch was based upon a genuine burlesque show, whereas the model for the painting was Jo Hopper, with whom the painter had a tumultuous and often toxic marriage. The woman in *Girlie Show* does not meet anyone's gaze—either the figures within the scene or the gaze of the viewer. She looks over the heads of her audience, as indifferent to them as they are to her. There is something both routine and tragic about the performance; the dancer’s posture and confidence suggest that she is a master of her craft and yet, like the two comedians and Prospero, she has become old. Her work requires that she entice her audience and, as the bored viewer in the foreground suggests, she cannot move men as she once did. One is reminded, once more, of Prospero: “Now my charms are all o’erthrown/And what strength I have’s mine own,” a speech followed with the stage direction “He awaits applause, then exit” (1243, Epilogue.1-2). The dancer, the work suggests, is soon to make her own exit.
- 30 This theme of ennui and retirement is suggestive of the history of burlesque in New York at the time of composition. By the mid-1930s burlesque had become one of the

dominant forms of stage entertainment in New York, appearing in many of the theatres of Forty-Second Street and elsewhere in Times Square. Theatre was in decline during this decade, but burlesque remained popular (Macnamara). In 1937, however, mounting pressure from church groups and others concerned with public morals forced the License Commissioner of New York, Paul Moss, to ban the art form. HM Alexander, writing in 1938, documented the rapid disappearance of the burlesque show:

For the present the strip tease and burlesque are through in New York. It's true that the reformers have temporized a little, allowing some theatre to reopen. But the operators can't use the tease; the off-color blackouts are forbidden; the word 'burlesque'; is taboo. The Minskys aren't even allowed to put their own names on the marquee. The jerks pass the theatres by. The one or two houses remain open are in the red. (qtd. in Macnamara 186)

- 31 By the time Hopper completed *Girlie Show* in 1941 Burlesque theatres had, with a few exceptions, been closed for four years. A year later Commissioner Moss would stop granting any licenses to burlesque theatres. The stage Hopper paints was, at the time of composition, empty. The painting is thus historical; it depicts a form of stagecraft which, at the time of composition, no longer existed, and the image of an aging dancer reflects this pending decline. We should not go so far as to read *Girlie Show* as an act of protest—Hopper's paintings are restrained in their politics—but I believe we can assert that Hopper, whose love of theatre emerges in both his personal life and his work, here evokes the soon-to-be-empty stage as a small tragedy and a loss to the richness of performing arts in interwar New York.

4. Conclusions

- 32 Campbell, Giovine, and Keating assert that “[a]s a state, emptiness necessarily invokes what is not present; it is in some ways a condition of absence” (1). An empty stage is an invitation for the audience to consider how the space will be used, or to consider how it has just been used. It is a point of entry into a performance and a point of departure from it. It makes us conscious of the reciprocal nature of performing arts. Styan writes of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*:

With the half-light, [Madame Ranevskaya's] house seems half deserted: in due course it will be peopled, and at that time the audience will seem to people it too. At the beginning, we are the empty house waiting to be inhabited. At the end, the stage will look like this again, and again we shall seem to be the house that has been abandoned. (249)

- 33 An empty stage, like all effective theatrical effects, engages and implicates the audience. The sense we have of peopling an empty space resounds throughout Hopper's work, where the sense we have of loneliness and alienation many report is often that of an outsider looking in; to return to a tired but true, observation, the figures in *Nighthawks* are not lonely—it is the viewer, standing outside of the pool of light, looking in, who experiences the sense of being separate to the rest of human life.
- 34 Hopper's *Early Sunday Morning*, *Girlie Show*, and *Two Comedians*, this paper has sought to demonstrate, depend upon and are in dialogue with the theatre of his time, particularly in his evocation of contemporary approaches to theatrical lighting. On a thematic level, Hopper shows an interest in the effect of an empty stage upon an audience to both draw an audience into a performance space and to provoke reflection. *Early Sunday Morning* exemplifies this effect. This sense of emptiness further informs his works

which take theatre as a central concern—the stages of *Two Comedians* and *Girlie Show* depict stages which are soon to be empty and thus invite the viewer to contemplate the end of a performance and the ephemerality of performative art.

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NOTES

1. Hopper, characteristically, was resistant to totalising visions of his work; the recurring theme of loneliness, in his view, was "overdone" in critical responses (qtd. in O'Doherty, 15).
2. Hopper's interest in theatre overlaps with and is complimentary to his well-documented interest in film. Hopper's cinema habits are documented in Gail Levin's

Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography. Carol Troyen notes that “Hopper went to the movies ... as often as three times a week” (54). Demetrio Papparoni describes Hopper’s paintings as “lifted from the storyboard of a movie” (70). For more on the ways in which Hopper has influenced and was influenced by film, see Holthof; Fischer; Fiofi; and Lipiński.

3. In an early sketch the piece of fabric is a skirt which the dancer has raised. In the later incarnation it does not attach around the waist and so the question of function (of which part of her body it might ordinarily cover) is ambiguous.

4. The critical consensus has been to focus on the absence of figures in these images (see, for example, Bretell, Burns, and Ward), which may be an overstatement of Hopper’s approach. There are figures crossing the bridge in *Le Pont des Arts* (1907), for example, and two seated figures feature prominently in the foreground in *Le Bistro* (1909). It may be more accurate to suggest that human figures are not a central feature of these works (in a sense of both formal composition and theme) and that they give a sense of an absence of human life.

5. Rice was inspired by French artist Claude Lorraine who often painted scenes with “a group of figures in the foreground” (qtd. in Palmien, 94).

6. *The Tempest* was once read as an early work and straight-forward readings of the play as autobiographical allegory are weakened by the fact that Shakespeare continued to collaborate after *The Tempest*—his last play was likely the far less popular *Two Noble Kinsmen*. For more see Emma Smith, *This is Shakespeare*.

7. Hopper’s female figures are more mature and have more of a palpable inner life than those of his contemporary Gil Elygren, but the two share a conventionally heterosexual masculine fixation with the female form. As Renner asserts, in Hopper’s work the female body “points up longing, desire, and sexual challenge” (52); in *Hotel Lobby* (1943) a woman’s extended legs draw the viewer’s gaze while her attention is drawn, unthreateningly, to a book in her lap; in *High Noon* (1949) a woman stands in a doorway, her dressing gown open, and in *Office at Night* (1940) a woman (named ‘Shirley’) adopts what Carolyn Coccoa, in her analysis of the semiotics of female bodies in superhero narratives, calls the “broke back” pose—she twists her body in such a way that both her buttocks and breasts are presented to the viewer.

8. Fryd’s argument is more complex than this excerpt suggests and includes a discussion of female power. It nonetheless differs significantly from the argument I present here.

ABSTRACTS

This paper seeks to argue that Edward Hopper’s *Early Sunday Morning* (1930), *Girlie Show* (1941), and *Two Comedians* (1966) all show interest in the ephemerality of stage art. These paintings, I argue, depend upon innovations and fashions in lighting and set design from Hopper’s era. These influences, I further contend, extend beyond the mechanical to the thematic; if these paintings resemble the stage, it is significant that the stages he depicts are vacant of actors or signify either a scene which is about to occur or one which has ended. By evoking the empty stage, Hopper’s work, I seek to demonstrate, invites meditations on the impermanence of stagecraft.

INDEX

Keywords: Edward Hopper, theatre, twentieth century, painting

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