This article discusses my theatrical adaptation of Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) for the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (2008). Freud's concept of the uncanny (1919) was treated as a purely aesthetic phenomenon and related to late nineteenth century social and literary preoccupations such as Christianity, the supernatural and glorious, criminal homosexuality. These considerations led to a conceptual ground plan that allowed for experiments during rehearsal in a form of theatrical shorthand.

In this article I will discuss my approach to adapting Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) for the Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2008. The essay will address the uses that were made of a conceptual ground plan, which took the form of a set of very simple, but in practice very productive, assumptions drawn from the source material considered in its cultural-historical context. These framing assumptions were then deployed in the processes of both writing and staging the script. A pre-production script, almost entirely derived from language within the novel itself, was developed through a series of drafts before being tested and revised in the rehearsal room. The play had to be ready for performance in only two weeks; in addition, as is typical with productions tailored for the Edinburgh Fringe, the performance length had to be agreed upon with the producers several months before starting rehearsal — in this case, the piece had to come in under 55 minutes. With these parameters in mind, the ground plan, which started life as an attempt to address the problem of what to include and what to exclude, became a thematic road map; it was inevitably selective, as well as being subject to continual revision as the production took shape. We will broadly follow the chronological development of those ideas that went into the ground plan, in addition to describing how at the same time they collided with the demands of rehearsal. To speak of how the concepts behind the production evolved further in performance would take another article, and is not my concern here. I want instead to focus on the process of developing abstract ideas into rehearsal procedures.

**Practitioners' Perspectives**

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Abstract

This article discusses my theatrical adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) for the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (2008). Freud’s concept of the uncanny (1919) was treated as a purely aesthetic phenomenon and related to late nineteenth century social and literary preoccupations such as Christianity, the supernatural and glorious, criminal homosexuality. These considerations led to a conceptual ground plan that allowed for experiments during rehearsal in a form of theatrical shorthand.

**Keywords**

conceptual ground plan theatrical shorthand the uncanny
defamiliarisation
To expand on this: the ground plan became a useful strategy for adaptation mainly because it led us towards making experiments in a kind of theatrical shorthand. The simplest definition of theatrical shorthand would be: more is suggested than is seen or heard by the audience. This has always been a central tenet in my work as a writer, deviser and director of theatre. I would argue that theatre-making - even in its most literate-minded formations - must deploy a form of shorthand, where the audience is invited to complete the gaps using their imaginations, even if only by virtue of certain practical constraints upon theatrical representation such as time, money, human ingenuity and so on. For the game of shorthand to work upon the audience, it is required that we put our attention on the thing signified as it presents itself to our imaginations. In practice, this proposition may entail a use of devices that may seem quite familiar to an audience, perhaps even clichéd. Yet the fact that a device - or the set of associations it calls to mind - has a certain familiar smack to an audience may well be essential to its effect. And this is the case if we are dealing, as we will be here, with the uncanny.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is a novel which relies upon an uncanny event as its plot mechanism. A beautiful young man wishes he could switch places with his own portrait, so that he will remain young and beautiful in appearance while the face of the portrait will show the signs of aging and experience; shortly after he has wished for this impossibility, he discovers it is literally, inexplicably, coming true.

The spectre of Freud, who published his essay Das Unheimliche in 1919, hovers more than ever over the subject of the uncanny. It has been well observed by such critics as Nicholas Royle, in his exhaustive treatment of the subject (Royle 2003), that Freud sought to reverse the traditional understanding of the word unheimlich when he describes it as 'that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar' (Freud 1975: 220); indeed, it is an uncanny fact that the archaic root of the word 'canny' already contains its own opposite signification of 'uncanny' (see Royle 2003: 11). Freud, who appears to relish the paradoxes inherent in the term, says that something must be added to what is unfamiliar in order to make it uncanny, and this something is, perhaps surprisingly, a secondary meaning of the word heimlich itself as 'concealed, kept out of sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it, withheld from others' (Freud 1975: 223). Freud's agenda is to establish this old and familiar thing as a childhood anxiety which has been repressed and returns in the moment of the uncanny event. One critic has in fact read Wilde's novel as a parable of child abuse, though to be precise this is not, strictly speaking, child sexual abuse (Rashkin 1997).

In a curious manoeuvre, even though he acknowledges a debt to literature for furnishing him with the greater part of his evidence, Freud seems at the same time to devalue the literary uses of the uncanny as being disconnected from real life:

The situation is altered as soon as the writer pretends to move to the world of common reality. In this case he accepts as well all the conditions operating to produce uncanny feelings in real life [. . .] But in this case he can even increase his effect and multiply it far beyond what could happen in reality, by bringing about events which never or very rarely happen in fact [. . .] We react to his inventions as we would have reacted to real experiences [. . .] But it must be added that his success is not unalloyed. We retain a feeling of dissatisfaction, a kind of grudge against the attempted deceit.

(Freud 1975: 251)

Any doubts we may harbour about Freud's hypothesis of the uncanny as it is manifested in the psyche arise, it would seem, from contradictory examples that we find only in fiction. Thus 'we should differentiate between the uncanny that we actually experience and the uncanny that we merely picture or read about' (1975: 247). But my point would be that we do not differentiate between the two. In fact, as Wilde would no doubt have reminded us, real life imitates art here too: I would argue that we learn to apply uncanny feelings to inexplicable events in life at least in part by virtue of our contact with the uncanny in fiction. In an interesting inversion of Freud's own unease, Wilde has Dorian Gray become fascinated by an actress while she is performing a play by Shakespeare: the moment she declares she wishes to abandon her art because, compared with her 'real' feelings for him, her art seems false, he becomes disgusted by her and rejects her. Again, Dorian's willful journey into an abyss of degradation is shaped in large part by another work of fiction, known mysteriously as
Freud is, nonetheless, prepared to acknowledge that flirting with the supernatural can work well in fiction, as long as the writer "keeps us in the dark" about "the precise nature of the suppositions on which the whole theory about life is based" (1975: 251). That was useful for our purposes, because it led us towards our first translation of theatrical shorthand: an aesthetic of concealment. This notion was not directly written into the script, but did greatly inform my intentions with respect to both the overall atmosphere of the play and the individual scenes. From the outset the stage was not replete: we used no scenery and no furniture at all. Taking Freud at his word, I decided to experiment with leaving both the characters and the audience in the dark at times, as in a sequence we devised to dramatize consciously Dorian's falling under the influence of the "yellow book". I wanted to suggest the idea of accumulating moments of depravity without robbing the actors of their sense of dignity, which we defined in terms of distance from the material. The scene was performed in near total darkness, with the audience's focus directed as far as possible by the actors themselves using lights hidden in their palms. They were able to indicate a face, a hand, a piece of a kimono, and so on. Throughout this, the actors cooly delivered pieces of narrative—those were only related to their movements in an indirect fashion—to the audience.

From ideas of concealment we moved towards a concept of defamiliarization in the sense defined by Viktor Shklovsky of "making strange" (Shklovsky 1990). We sought out a choreography that defamiliarized quotidian behaviour—such as walking, sitting, standing, eating, drinking, smoking—a sort of the quality of fog. We never tried to put fog onto the stage, or have characters reacting as if they were in fog. Following the lead of Jacques Lecoq who devised a programme of exercises he called The Neutral Mask (Lecoq 2002), the actors attempted to move in such a way that their motion had something of the actual quality of fog itself, something of its concealment and surprises, its atmospheric thickness that slows everything down a bit. In their descent into criminality. These transitions were achieved in low key, carefully directed shafts of hand-held light, so that the puppet was never fully seen. Instead, the audience was directed to a movement of the scene as the puppet suddenly burst into speech (although its mouth did not move), or its hand produced a cigarette seemingly out of nowhere, and similar flashes of gesture and reaction. It is a conventional horror movie technique in which the monster should not be revealed in its full glory until it becomes possible of course, here the technique was borrowed in order to fragment the puppet's presence into isolated images of specific body parts in movement and thus give the impression of Dorian locking himself away from the world of daylight like a vampire.

In order to do its work upon us, the rhetoric of the uncanny must be premised upon a conception of the world as a place that still contains dark corners of the inexplicable, inexplicable, that is, in scientific language (except as deception or self-deception as in Freud). Arguably it is true that what might be happening through directing one's eyes to the reaction of a face, a hand, a piece of a kimono, and so on. Throughout this, the actors cooly delivered pieces of narrative—those were only related to their movements in an indirect fashion—to the audience.

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In 1882, the French physiologist E. J. Marey built a gun-shaped camera able to take repeated photographs over short durations using paper-roll film in place of gelatine plates (see Rhodes 1976: 131). His chronophotography and cinematography offered a compelling imagery to the new camera-the time-and-motion studies and Futurism amongst other cults. The automaton, with its worrying implications for biology and free will, became central
with Lord Henry and Basil about his sudden engagement to Sybil, we
played this out in a bar, where a visual echo of Mazet’s uncannily ambigu-
ous painting Le Bar aux Folies-Bergere/Bar at the Folies-Bergere (1882)
helped to disguise the obvious theological associations of a glass of red
wine. In this case, the performer who played Sybil Vane was also silently
serving the drinks in this scene, her presence intended to foreground the
interaction between the audience and the barmaid as an object
within the discourse of the male characters, as if existing only for their
pleasure. Thus we attempted to embed the theological within other cultural
assumptions to provide a rich visual-symbolic texture.

There were other reasons for this attempt at blended, or embedded
imagery. The decision to pursue religious symbolism can be justified by
the narrative’s structure, which, as we have noted, loosely resembles a
parable. In fact, there were reviews in Christian magazines which saw it as
such and praised it as such at the time. But a difficulty arises when we
read the preface. There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book.
Books are well written, or badly written. That is all. (Wilde 2006: 3). To
reduce this temporarily to biography: it may be little more than a rear-
guard action against the aggressive criticism of high-minded Victorian
readers, some of whom condemned the novel as depraved. Why did they?
Surely this book is a clear-cut example of a story about the wages of
sin, and thus not immoral at all, but on the contrary, having the ethical
authority of a Christian fable? Is it very easy to read the book as depraved—
from within a late Victorian bourgeois context. This is made possible by
the interaction of the assumption that a supernatural event is the mani-
festation of a wish with other root assumptions of that culture, namely
that a crime is a guilty secret and homosexuality is a guilty secret, and
thus homosexuality is a crime—which for many Victorians was of course
no mere metaphor but a literal fact. And that is the important point here:
for Wilde’s reading public, a supernatural explanation of homosexuality as
a real crime in the real world was not required. Nevertheless, these
assumptions call up the spectre of the uncanny, as Nicholas Royle
indicates when he argues that by its very nature the uncanny is queer and the
queer is uncanny (Royle 2003: 43). In addition, the very notion of the
uncanny can be viewed as threatening to the comforting stability of reli-
gious belief (Royle 2003: 21). The principle of the uncanny deepens one’s
reading of the novel since it allows us an insight into a key strategy of
Wilde’s to use it as a technique for prizing apart and thus defamiliarizing
concepts of late Victorian culture, based as they seem to be in a
simple metaphor given the status of a common-sense truth.

We found ourselves theologically in further trouble when we arrived at
another concept at work in this novel: that a book is a toxic agent, as in
the sequence following Dorian’s journey through various attempts to
gratify his senses, in imitation of the notorious fictional figure des Essaints
in J. K. Huysmans’ A Rebours (1884). This metaphorical concept inher-
ted from a simpler, deeper one: that Immoral ideas are poisons. This
be immoral. The book itself postulates the concept that books can be
immoral, as here: Dorian Gray had been poisoned by a book. There were
moments when he looked on evil simply as a mode through which he
would realize his conception of the beautiful (Wilde 2006: 124). Thus, the
status of this assumption is rendered radically ambivalent: uncannily, it is
both true and not true at the same time. To recognize that certain power-
ful and rational assumptions are distorted in this way through contamination
by the uncanny is to begin to understand the subtle power of the frame.

In rehearsal we played with picture frames, for sure, but also in furniture,
but as demonically proliferating, moving and transforming in the space.
They became doors, bar tops, windows, banisters, mirrors, balconies;
frames in movement, held by the actors, shifting one’s perspective without
ever really coming to rest. Our intention was to foreground the act of framing
itself, ‘framing’ here suggesting the attempt to hold down the spreading influ-
ence of the uncanny in the story. When Dorian first visits a theatre in the East
End and spots Sybil Vane on stage, the actors produced a miniature proce-
sionary arch at which Dorian gazed from a distance using opera glasses.
Into the space of this frame appeared the audience’s first image of Sybil: a Victorian
porcelain doll that I found in a market, whose torso we replaced with cloth
and who we dressed as a boy and transformed into another rod puppet,
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conceptual handling connects with general ideas about crime in Victorian society. One useful context for me was the psycho-physiology of feelings. We attempted to codify the relationship between inner states of feeling and their powerful cultural charge—Darwin's concepts were rewritten, as both a series of folk commonplaces about the criminal mind and a set of pseudo-scientific rationalizations for punitive measures against the disprivileged, most notoriously in Cesare Lombroso's infamous categorizations of criminal types based upon inherited physical features of the skull and face like jutting jawbones and shifty eyes (Lombroso 2006). For our purposes, there were much more useful ideas to be dug out of Darwin's text than this.

Almost comically literal transposition might suggest, for example; he writes: 'Under a keen sense of shame there is a strong desire for concealment,' then adds as a footnote, 'Mr. Wedgwood says that the word 'shame' may well originate in the idea of shade or concealment, and may be illustrated by the Low German schad, shade or shadow' (Darwin 1998: 320).

A cultural assumption, harking back to The Book of Genesis, can be inferred here, that feelings of shame are shadowy places. Jack the Ripper's notorious crimes, which clearly lurk behind Wilde's novel, were committed in the dark, and offered up a new and particularly vicious turn on the familiar tropes of evil as darkness, truth as light and seeing as understanding. Such tropes may take a particular cultural form, as they do in the Bible for example, but however clichéd they may seem to us, their powers of attraction persist because they operate at a very basic level of embodied meanings (see Turner 1996). Freud had an intimation of this in his additional explanation of the uncanny effect as a result of animistic beliefs, as elaborated upon by Robin Lydenberg:

Animism—which finds its rhetorical expression in apostrophe—is the basis of narration, for it gives bodily form to the disembodied. And animation defies the work both of the writer, whose imaginative creativity animates what is not there, and of the reader, who animates the figure and voice of the narrator. Ghostwriter and ghost reader participate in the same magical procedure.

(Lydenberg 1997: 1083)

Thus, as one would expect, the crimes in Dorian Gray happen in shadowy places. But, again, Wilde seems to find the connotations here in need of some unpacking through a process of defamiliarization. The most thrilling of these revisions occurs in the episode where Dorian visits the opium den in the East End, imaged generally as a very underlit place where (naturally) crimes happen, and reflecting something of that same fascination for the voyeuristic and exploitative visitor as the Empire did within British culture (see Warwick 1999: 81). James Vane, who, without ever having met Dorian, holds him responsible for the suicide of his own sister, corners him at gunpoint in a dark alley near the docks. When Dorian's face is revealed to him under a lamplight, Vane suddenly believes he must have the wrong person, since Dorian does not look old enough to be the man he has sought for twenty years. So Vane lets Dorian go free. It is assumed here that we will have a common-sense assumption that the marks of crime would show on
lifted from an uncanny event, what was formerly unheimlich becomes heimlich; the once hostile world becomes habitable again" (Tatar 1981: 182). This observation, which is both true and not true since the unheimlich and the heimlich are always bound together, nonetheless returns me to the ambivalence, the uncertainty at the heart of my own aesthetic practice. That is to say, the insistent demand that theatre must make things manifest, without which there can be no theatre, is also a betrayal of the very thing which makes theatre most compelling to me: the thing that refuses to be represented as theatre.

The attempt to stage the idea of sudden repulsiveness led me back to a refinement of the word 'uncanny'. Now it took on a revised meaning for me as an aesthetic phenomenon, not in Freud's sense of 'aesthetic', simply referring to its deployment in art or even that further sophistication of his by critics such as Royle as inherent in the very act of reading, but instead as a principle of 'beauty'. Beauty can be seen, and in our times, typically is seen, as consisting in the appearance of glamour: Glamour, a dictionary definition, it makes its first appearance in the early eighteenth century and, like the term 'uncanny', by the mid-nineteenth century its concept of mysteriously exciting or alluring physical attractiveness, or deceptive charm or beauty. We see Dorian in his glamour; he embodies a principle of physical beauty; traditionally, physical beauty was equated with virtue, as we find in countless examples in Ancient Greek art and philosophy, medieval iconography, Renaissance iconography, and poetry, and in the multitudinous figurations of the Romantic Agency such as the Gothic novel creates physical beauty from virtue. Wilde's rhetorical strategy of inversion is well-trodden critical ground; however, in Dorian Gray the principle of disassociation produces an uncanny ambiguity. This ambiguity exists because in discriminating between physical beauty and moral beauty, Wilde is attempting to dismantle a very basic assumption; one that, like evil itself, is darkness, true light and being is understanding, discerned over historical and cultural boundaries until it is embedded in our imaginations as to seem both banal and prurient, and at the same time without traceable origins the concept that physical perfection is moral perfection.

Writing about acting, George Lewes speaks of the ideal of a mind 'in vigilant supremacy controlling expression, directing every intonation, look, and gesture' (Roach 1993: 189, original emphasis). For Lewes, Dorian Gray offers us the utter strangeness of a mind severed from its connection to the body, so that physical perfection is shown to have no authentic relationship to moral perfection. This is not merely the predictable technique of Wildean inversion: if that were so, the effect would be as expected – decorative and amusing rather than uncanny. What is at stake here is a fundamental operation of the psyche, its very capacity to know truth or evil. The mind of Dorian, as it seeks out various experiencers in the manner of the Marquis de Sade, has no outward manifestation on the body. It is possible to connect this with Lewes' acting theory: the demonic becomes synonymous with the absence of outward signs of

ance life. This is understood as deeply unnatural, but of course the guilty secret of criminal sexuality in Victorian London did at times leave no socially identifiable physical marks, and thus was not brought to light except by chance. This was the case in the example of the Cleveland Street Scandal, which happened not in the East End but in the West End of London, did not involve bestial-looking lower class thugs, but aristocratic young clients who paid young men at the local post office for sexual favours: this was what led W. S. Henley to splutter that the novel was aimed at "outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph-boys" (Wilde 2006: xxii). Lord Henry says, 'Crime belongs exclusively to the lower orders. I don't blame them in the smallest degree. I should fancy that crime is to them what art is to us, simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations' (Wilde 2006: 179). Simon Joyce, arguing as I do here for an unashamedly serious and sincere version of Oscar Wilde, believes that Dorian Gray offers an exemplary critique of the notion of the 'privileged offender' as "the product of a wish fullness which had the usual effect of diverting attention away from genuine social problems of poverty, unemployment and labour unrest" (Joyce 2002: 503). For Joyce, a key tactic for achieving this critique of crime as a fine art is the focus on motiveless actions – an uncanny strategy, of course, Wilde has substituted the terms of the assumption so they now read: physical perfection is the focus of moral wrongness. Does Dorian have a conscience, or does he simply play with the idea of having a conscience?

We played with the concept of physical perfection in workshops. We found, perhaps not surprisingly given our own culture's gender-inflected obsession with the subject, that it was more easily grasped – or rather, grasped as a performance – by our female participants than by our male ones. As a result, the casting of all-female actors played men and women in the drama. This helped us to achieve a defamiliarization of certain elements of the narrative which at times struck us, and some critics, as misogynistic. Having an all-women cast offer us an opportunity for a theatrical distancing from that same misogynistic impulse. In rehearsals, we worked upon an imitation of a certain mode of masculinity that foregrounded its radical ambivalence of Wilde or the complexities of camp. Dressed similarly to Oscar Wilde, they give the impression of being exquisitely washed and refined, and the same time without traceable origins the concept that physical perfection is moral perfection.

Writing about acting, George Lewes speaks of the ideal of a mind 'in vigilant supremacy controlling expression, directing every intonation, look, and gesture' (Roach 1993: 189, original emphasis). For Lewes, Dorian Gray offers us the utter strangeness of a mind severed from its connection to the body, so that physical perfection is shown to have no authentic relationship to moral perfection. This is not merely the predictable technique of Wildean inversion: if that were so, the effect would be as expected – decorative and amusing rather than uncanny. What is at stake here is a fundamental operation of the psyche, its very capacity to know truth or evil. The mind of Dorian, as it seeks out various experiences in the manner of the Marquis de Sade, has no outward manifestation on the body. It is possible to connect this with Lewes' acting theory: the demonic becomes synonymous with the absence of outward signs of

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provocation for technique, as it were. My own justification for doing this is that the concept is rather more of an aesthetic phenomenon than Freud himself would have cared to admit, since almost all of his evidence for it is from fictional sources such as Hoffmann. These assumptions led us towards a set of context-bound solutions to the issue of making things manifest. As we have tried to show, the theatre cannot avoid the effort and the contradictions involved in making things manifest. For me, this is crucial since it inter­sects with my personal aesthetic of a theatre that is in essence always ‘incomplete’, always uncomfortable with the claustrophobia of illusion. The game of theatrical shorthand is an extremely useful tool for helping us to create meaning out of that necessary incompleteness. There lies the key to its uncanny power.

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