

Introduction

Curtains of Light

THE FIRST STIRRINGS OF THIS project occurred during a late night screening of George Sidney's 1956 musical biography, *The Eddy Duchin Story*. I was forcibly struck, during the film's concluding scene—in which Tyrone Power's Eddy is metaphorically, and heartbreakingly, ushered into death through a subtle elimination of his figure from a theatrical performance in progress—by the ways in which film space, and the space designated for a musical number inside it, kept confusing their boundaries and transforming into each other. The film's final resolution of its tension depends on the viewer experiencing film reality and the theatrical frame as deeply, inextricably, connected. In the film's closing shot, once Eddy has surprisingly disappeared from the film's ongoing present tense, the camera slowly pulls away from the interior space where Eddy's son, Peter (Rex Thompson), continues to play what had moments before been a duet with his father on two joined pianos, and takes us onto an outdoor patio, where we view the living room through an interior frame. Chiquita (Victoria Shaw), Eddy's wife, is also present in the room with Peter, and both seem to have moved past the point in time where Eddy has died and have arrived at an acceptance of loss. There has been no cut to separate this "later time" from the just concluded moment when Eddy was still in their midst. It is impossible, while watching this brief passage, which boldly announces its artifice with

no sacrifice of the reality of the enveloping tragedy, to fix the boundary between theatre and film realms. It is equally impossible to say in which realm the emotional power and weight of the ending resides.

One of my central guiding questions throughout this study is “What counts as theatre space in film, and how are we led to recognize it?” Gilles Deleuze, discussing Jean Renoir’s films, refers to the challenge of determining “where theatre leaves off, and life begins” (86). This manner of presenting the difficulty is misconceived. Theatre is not a realm apart from film life but ever in the midst of it, penetrating its borders stealthily and then often sneaking away again without having been recognized, or caught. Call it the half-light of theatre space’s presence. Jacques Rivette, more discerningly, has addressed the ways in which cinema, in its various summons to theatre or its conscious attending to it, is able to “examine its own operations yet also maintain as part of its self-reflection, a certain distance” (Kouvaros, 133). Film can look at itself obliquely, in the form of an “elder brother,” theatre: “If you take a subject which deals with the theatre to any extent at all, you’re dealing with the truth of the cinema. . . . Because that [truth] is the subject of truth and lies, and there is no other in the cinema: it is necessarily a questioning about truth, with means that are necessarily untruthful” (Rivette, 27). Being on film



Figure 1.1. Eddy (Tyrone Power) prepares to traverse the pendular swing-set curtain that sways between him and Peter (Rex Thompson) in *The Eddy Duchin Story*.

is never far removed from being onstage, with the significant (but not decisive) removal of the “live event.” The arrival of theatre consciousness at any narrative juncture in a film can, as André Bazin noted, “open a distance within its flow of representation,” or provide an accessible bridge to conditions where gathering experiential pressures in a dramatic scene temporarily relax their grip (quoted in Kouvaros, 134).

Consider, for example, the memorable first appearance of Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer) in Jacques Tourneur’s great film noir, *Out of the Past* (1947). It is part of a flashback sequence narrated by the erstwhile detective investigator in hiding, Jeff Markham (Robert Mitchum). Kathie appears to him, as if in a vision, as he rouses himself from a doze in an Acapulco cantina. He talks about himself in voice-over as we watch him, seated at a table in a beer-fragrant darkness, seeing her, clad in a white, low-cut dress with a matching broad-brimmed hat, “coming out of the sun.” She is viewed by us at a distance as she walks toward him casually, taking no notice of Jeff (or so it seems) as he beholds her in a charged moment that is nearly out of time. There is no hint of a theatre stage in this realistic environment, but one vital component of the scene is certainly the resemblance to a theatrical entrance. Kathie will have a series of such entrances as the film proceeds, all linked with the first one and conveying the possibility that each reappearance has the dispensation of a new beginning, a will to start over, and the power to bring it off. In the second half of the film, when Jeff’s vision of her is infected with skepticism and irony, he begins to duplicate Kathie’s tactic of making sudden, destabilizing theatrical entrances himself, attempting to catch her in moments of exposure, unprepared. During Kathie’s first entrance, as Chris Fujiwara notes in his study of director Tourneur, *The Cinema of Nightfall*, “she is surrounded by an aura of illusion, reinforced from several directions: by the sunlight that silhouettes her, by the [visible background] presence of a cinema across the street [the Cine Pico], and by the fact that Jeff has just awakened from a doze” in his regimen of waiting (145). Jeff, in fact, comments, in furtherance of the atmosphere of illusion, that it was music from the movie playing in the next door theatre that jarred him awake.

What sort of deceptiveness does the presence of a movie theatre in a movie betoken? And how are we to distinguish between those image-based appearances that aren’t to be trusted from those that are? Surely the film wishes us to accept the material surroundings of the cantina, the location of Acapulco, Jeff’s position at the table, and the fact of Kathie’s arrival from the sun-drenched street as substantial impressions, drawn

from Jeff's reliable memory. He is clearly endeavoring to tell the truth in this flashback confession to his current girlfriend, Ann (Virginia Huston). I think Fujiwara is suggesting that the "aura of illusion" is chiefly created by the sudden highlighting of a theatrical effect in Kathie's entrance, as though there is a dividing line that we are suddenly conscious of between the film reality that exists before the entrance and something conjured up in the midst of it. It is assuredly not the case that Kathie, at this stage, is orchestrating her movement in order to manipulate Jeff's perceptions. We have no indication that she has spotted him prior to sitting down at her own table. Nor is she nervously anticipating the presence of a possible pursuer. She appears to be absorbed in her own thoughts, and not conscious, despite the care with which she has dressed herself, of being watched. Finally, she is viewed from a distance. We have no close range access to her face or possible intentions until after she has seated herself. It is Jeff's way of apprehending her, and narrating the impact of this first visual encounter, that instigates our awareness of theatre. The time of Kathie's role-playing with Jeff is "not yet." But given the fact that he is telling a story of romantic betrayal and disappointment, it is unsurprising that his narration and the images accompanying it mingle erotic enchantment with the forecasting idea of theatrical equivocation. Theatre is an avenue of perception subtly introduced in *Out of the Past*, which is equal parts Jeff's projection and a need to get at some dimensions of Kathie that still, at the narrating moment, are concealed from him.

Another memorable instance of the conversion of realistic film space into theatre space occurs late in Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* (1937). Joan Graham (Sylvia Sydney) and her husband, Eddie Taylor (Henry Fonda), are both being pursued by the police after Eddie has killed a priest during a prison escape, and both of them have performed a string of small crimes in order to survive on the road, en route to Canada. At one point we see Joan deciding to purchase a pack of cigarettes for her husband from an outdoor vending machine at the Star Motel, where she has briefly stopped. We watch her pause to make a selection and find the necessary change in what is clearly designated as film reality: an ordinary, nocturnal setting. A sound then awakens the motel manager from sleep. His room is situated very close to the machine, and he can observe Joan through a barred window next to the chair where he is resting. At first he observes her neutrally, in much the same fashion as the film spectator in the previous shot. She is not completely in focus for him because he is not fully alert and has set aside his glasses. When he puts on his glasses and looks again, he considers her more carefully,

thinking he may recognize her. After a short pause, he shifts his gaze to a wanted poster containing her photo. When his gaze returns to Joan through the cross barred window frame, the space has yielded to what he takes to be his new, incriminating knowledge of who she is. The frame acquires a theatrical dimension as her identity is suddenly caught in an immediate, fixed role: that of a wanted criminal. From the beginning of the film, Joan's husband, Eddie, has been consistently viewed by nearly everyone he encounters as, first, an ex-con and three time loser, and, after his trial for robbery and murder, as one who belongs on death row. The film leads us to understand how constricting and reductive these mechanical modes of recognition are. The motel manager's gradual ability to focus on Joan outside his window is the first time that Joan is subjected to the deadly, dehumanizing gaze that is Eddie's habitual torment. Joan, however, does not detect the motel manager's presence, and as a result of his isolated judgment, a police trap is set up that will swiftly result in the pair's violent death. The motel manager's seeing action therefore carries a significance far greater than we realize as it happens. What is striking is how Joan is lifted from involvement in ordinary, considerate behavior into a visual position where she is stripped of everything except for an impression of furtive villainy. We partake of the motel manager's gaze, and involuntarily assent to his transformation of Joan into an object of suspicion, one who inhabits the theatre of criminality, glimpsed in the nick of time. The motel manager thinks that his vision is improving steadily in the course of the scene. And, considered literally, it is. But in another sense, the more he is able to see theatrically, the less he sees of Joan as a person. Lang does not distort her previous appearance in the course of this complex sighting and emotional deforming, but the way her action is imprisoned in the window frame establishes a fittingly artificial space for her to occupy.

Theatre space can also be invoked or brought into play to magically repair damage, or to renegotiate possibilities for human connection even after performances of particular needs and intentions have failed. The dilemma of "how to act" or how to manipulate another's behavior in a chosen environment can make a viewer aware that a sudden manifestation of stage illusion or self-conscious theatrical deportment has been achieved.

I have already introduced the fact of theatre's frequent resort to surreptitious interventions and effects. There are innumerable instances in film where theatre space is not entirely concealed, but is rather half-hidden, partially recognized by characters but its potential for release, imaginative transformation of life circumstances, and the prerogatives

arising from artifice not fully grasped. And this “hiding” of the theatrical space can equally involve the film’s viewer. A telling example of persistent spectator blindness to the theatrical form can be found in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*. All of Madeleine’s early, silent appearances to Scottie when he is pursuing her as a detective—in Ernie’s, the flower shop, the art gallery, the McKittrick Hotel, Fort Point, the Golden Gate Bridge—are theatrical stagings, carefully blocked and performed for an audience of one. But a spectator of *Vertigo* might watch the film many times without thinking of Madeleine’s behavior and movements in terms of the various stages that director Gavin Elster has chosen for Scottie’s controlled beholding of her. Theatre is also undeniably part of Madeleine’s secret preparation and is a major key to self-presentation, including her eventual disclosures through speech, but Hitchcock does not oblige us to dwell on the boundaries between the film’s lifeworld and its theatrical venues. The latter are real spaces temporarily claimed and made over for theatrical use. In another Hitchcock film, *North by Northwest* (1959), Phillip Vandamm (James Mason) famously observes to Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant): “With such expert play-acting, you make this very room a theatre.” Roger, at this point, does not regard himself as an actor at all, and offers his thin and unpersuasive real life credentials to his disbelieving captors. The metaphysical twist in the scene is that the room in which Thornhill is struggling to make credible claims to another identity is in fact a stage set, and his interrogators are themselves performing assumed roles as they endeavor to make Thornhill divulge his undercover activity as George Kaplan. Once again, the spectator takes the room in which the action is set at face value: it is part of the home of the adversary who is mistakenly grilling Thornhill for information that he doesn’t possess. The stagecraft is concealed from the viewer until later on, and when Thornhill returns to the space in police custody and is confronted with its alien properties as he attempts to locate items that were previously there, it paradoxically acquires the attributes of a stage set in the process of revealing its true domestic character. Theatre space in cinema is frequently veiled in this way because too forceful an insistence on it throws the film world’s own reality status into doubt. We should be conscious of film as representation, imitation, and illusion, but at the same time the film world should preserve its independent “thereness.”

Theatre can be productively understood as a permanent adjoining room or neighboring property to film reality. It affords different kinds of escape routes from film reality’s somewhat weightier, more consequential events. Theatre space, in effect, offers an escape within the escape of movie

storytelling. In *The Eddy Duchin Story* scenes I will later analyze, theatre initially promises and secures a temporary bulwark against insupportable grief. Yet the theatre framework can at any point disavow its kinship with make-believe, freedom, and safe performance. Death as well as other brutal facts can suddenly tear the curtain of stage illusion and mingle with the performance in progress. Theatre space can supply a mirror to any sort of situation film narrative shows us, a mirror that can expose pretense, deflate exorbitant claims, yet just as easily supply transcendent alternatives to characters who feel themselves constricted and earthbound. It is the double-sided ministry of theatre frames to provide routes leading away from difficulty or further into it. Theatre space can extend the ground of privacy in film or rob this seeming privacy of meaningfulness. It can be a force to be fought against—as characters resist absorption into “playacting” or a too thin, artificial engagement with others—or a force to aspire to, a means of self-enlargement and a vision of life creatively heightened and intensified. It is both linked to reductive machinery and to the defeat of mechanical determinism. The energy of theatre can prove a curse to film characters as well as be an antidote to what ails them. In short, in Heideggerian terms, the separation from the film world that theatre offers is an indispensable key to our knowledge of that world.

Theatre space has been abundantly employed for political purposes throughout the history of drama. My investigations of theatre environments in film seldom take up political questions directly. The reading of Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) in the final chapter and my brief commentary on the skeleton and ghost dance macabre performance in Jean Renoir's *La Règle du Jeu* (1939) are the notable exceptions. My general avoidance of scenes that make political intentions overt is not due to a fear that ideology might muddy the waters of my predominantly aesthetic approach. Quite the reverse: I worried that ideological affirmations and the commitment to decisive unmaskings and exposure of the lies at work in every narrative edifice would introduce too many presumptions of clarity, and a faith in the disentangling power of a perspective *outside* the work itself, that I do not share. Too often political readings of films regard the mesmerizing force of particulars as a blinding lure that obscures a larger, more general and solid truth, say, concerning Guy Debord's “society of the spectacle.” Why focus on the interplay of character actions, images, cuts, and camera movements, to an inordinate degree, if a film's attitudes and values are typically in league with the delusions of a corrupt system? If there were a theatrical space in Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954) that could disclose, in Brechtian

fashion, the film's collusion with the defenders of informing to the House Un-American Activities Committee in the McCarthy era, then could we not disregard the distracting conflicts and depictions of ambiguous human striving in the rest of the narrative? If we know that the pods in Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) are strongly related to Cold War fears about Communism's power to "brainwash" and rob us of our individuality, then why examine aspects of the story or presentation that do not align with this allegory? The political idea, which reveals what the puzzle means, cannot only rise above the workings of imagery and the mysteries of audience involvement and discovery, but also renders inconsequential the moment-to-moment experience of the film. An ideological critique, in its frequently pervasive skepticism, offers a critical vantage point seemingly uncontaminated by the narrative's own reductions and simplifications. Art's details camouflage and confound the clarity to which the politically alert spectator has access.

The space of political inquiry, like theatrical space, aspires to stand separate from a film world's reality, but unlike the theatrical space that I am concerned with, it doesn't wish to be vulnerably and disorientingly in dialogue with it. It generally aspires to have the upper hand and a well-insulated perspective. Political critique does not feel obliged to take fictional beings with full seriousness. They can be treated as simple constructs. Theatre, in contrast, is deeply implicated in the imperatives to believe, to get inside character feeling and predicaments, to imagine with intense specificity. Dominic Lash, in his recent study, *The Cinema of Disorientation: Inviting Confusion*, movingly reminds us that "ultimately, fictional beings exist by means of our *solicitude*, the care or attention we give them" (34). The translation of narrative meaning that political readings offer, though it seems related to figurative language, is in its effects quite stubbornly explicit. Paradoxically, the political critique feels licensed to extract a binding literalism from the slippery free play of image and sound storytelling. By literal I mean here political "face value," a practice that opts for standing still and establishing a firm line, rather than continued imaginative motion. Because it begins with skepticism about what narrative is (wittingly or unwittingly) constructed to disguise or conceal, the act of finding the key to the mechanism, one that frequently upholds the logic of an oppressive social system, tends to freeze the work's power of supplementary meaningful revelation. The critique is in danger of becoming a wall to stare at, rather than a generator of questions that will lead us back into the film for a fresh seeking, an amplification of the viewing experience.

The kinds of political theatre scenes that most attract me in film work in very similar ways to those that have no pronounced ideological objectives. A space is established in which clarity appears to be emerging, with considerable force, and then elements are reversed within the staged situation to unsettle the clarity, and finally eradicate it. The undoing of clarity might happen in the following ways. The film world adjacent to the stage sometimes provides a deceptive, intoxicating, and dangerous impression that the assembled theatre audience is not only absorbed but “remade” (permanently transformed) by the scene they are privileged to witness. But then old patterns swiftly assert themselves, and the apparent gains leak away. On other occasions, performers become so hypnotized by their newfound sense of command, as they dictate the terms of political reality from their onstage “elevation,” that they break connection and faith with the show itself. They surrender, impetuously and single-mindedly, to a higher goal, trying to communicate something large and true, and in the process producing the opposite result. Without understanding what has happened, they end up with something small and false.

An outstanding example of this second phenomenon is depicted in Jean Renoir’s *La Grande Illusion* (1937). A group of French and English soldiers held captive at Hallbach, a World War I German prisoner of war camp, have been rehearsing a musical revue, approved by the camp authorities, as a morale builder. Most of the scenes set in this camp subtly develop a theme of brotherhood. Class distinctions and nationalist prejudices, over time, are significantly reduced. Neither captors nor prisoners experience favorable conditions, and food and other creature comforts are in short supply. On the day the revue is scheduled to be performed, the French prisoners receive discouraging news about a defeat in the war world beyond the camp. Douaumont, a strategically important fort in a French village, has fallen. The prisoners do not cancel the show. Its audience includes not only French, English, and Russian soldiers, but German guards and officers as well. We see two acts of comic and musical entertainment, a delightful mingling of prepared numbers and improvisation. The French actor, Cartier (Julien Carette), at one point makes an affectionate flip of his coattails to one of the English show-girls (a chorus in drag singing “A Long Way to Tipperary”) and then warmly acknowledges by name Arthur, a German guard sitting close to the stage. The theatre presentation allows for a charming regression to the effortless, giddy make-believe and dress-up of childhood (Boeldieu, an aristocratic career officer who declines to join the revels, describes the show preparations as “soldiers playing at being children”). The staged

numbers are not especially well organized, and seem rough edged, open to accident and a convivial rush of improvisational energy. In spite of themselves, the soldiers lose touch with their anxiety about the capture of Douaumont. When the actor invites the mixed audience to join him in a chorus of “Marguerite” while he capers about exuberantly in his oversized evening coat with a huge fake carnation in his lapel, the barriers separating the various groups comprising the audience are conjured away. No one declines the invitation to join in.

The stage is a place that encourages a mixture of discipline and happy accident. At times we can't be sure whether a bit of business is planned or a delightful mistake (say, the sudden collapse to the floor of a large cardboard limousine as Cartier, the actor who has driven it on stage and honked its painted horn, struggles to step out of it). The atmosphere onstage welcomes interruptions of every sort and abrupt changes of plans. What it cannot so readily accommodate is the explosive announcement of war news. Marechal (Jean Gabin), a French



Figure 1.2. Everyone briefly brought together in service of play in *La Grande Illusion*.

officer who is waiting offstage to perform stagehand duties, discovers while glancing through a German newspaper that Douaumont has been recaptured. Unable to contain his excitement, he shouts “Stop the show! Stop the show!” as Cartier the actor is comically balanced in the arms of a prima donna in drag, who waves her plumed fan. Just before the actor has time to complete a pratfall, Marechal appears amid the bewildered group of performers, who come to a sudden halt in their intensely illuminated, gaudy stage space, their sequined dresses sparkling amid a messy assortment of makeshift theatrical props. Marechal replaces the show with his news about the French victory. The audience of prisoners rises en masse as one of the English soldiers, heavily made up and in a loosening gown, removes his wig and instructs the stage orchestra to shift its musical number to “La Marseillaise.” The camera tracks away from this singer and seeks, in characteristic Renoir fashion, to adjust to the new performance circumstances, as though it had no foreknowledge of this interruption and must play “catch up” uncertainly as the soldiers attempt to shed their theatrical roles in favor of the military parts that preceded them. The camera attends to Marechal in particular as he crosses the stage recklessly to sing a portion of “La Marseillaise” with angry defiance to the ground level box occupied by German officers. His performed attack achieves its goal, briefly intimidating the officers into vacating the theatre. The camera continues its tentative scanning of the audience, showing us a rigid front row of soldiers standing at attention while singing in unison. The camera then circles back to the wigless English singer standing among the musicians. He has begun to smile at the achievement of solidarity. Almost immediately, as if in response to the cue of his smile, the camera reverses direction once more to arrive at a stationary view of standing rows of soldiers, solemnly completing *their* number as we observe the decorations hanging from the ceiling above them that were originally connected to the musical revue. As Alexander Sesonske has argued, the “Marseillaise” roughly replaces the comic stage pieces and singing that had “excluded no one.” The French anthem brings the prisoners into impassioned, if mechanized, accord, but it also “marks the deepest penetration of war into [this] place, dividing the room into two hostile groups” (293).

Unlike a similar spontaneous eruption of “La Marseillaise” in *Casablanca*, the scene in *La Grande Illusion* does not surrender to the triumphal sentiment that Marechal pushes into being. The scene lies caught, as it were, between competing forms of theatre, and does not settle the question of which manifestation of togetherness has more substance and

value. The immediate consequence of Marechal's "invasion" and conquest of the stage is that he is arrested, separated from his fellow prisoners, and punished with an agonizing stretch of solitary confinement. We soon learn that Douaumont's victory was nearly as short-lived as the singing of the anthem. The fortress is soon recaptured by the Germans, and as one of the French prisoners ruefully observes: "There can't be much left of it." Renoir does not make us choose between the impulse that leads Marechal and the soldiers to sabotage the carefree atmosphere of the revue and the impulse to briefly forget the pain of confinement and loss that the show itself promotes. The rehearsed entertainment has modest but valid claims to set against war loyalties; it fosters easy comradeship, a belief in the transforming power of imagination, and supplies vivid comic reminders of a world in which different kinds of human connection and order are available.

In the scene immediately preceding the musical revue, a group of six French soldiers—three in partial costume for the play—are standing by a window watching young German recruits below marching to drum and fife music. One of the observers is Boeldieu (Pierre Fresnay), a French officer who declares his dislike of performing in theatricals (though he will later be fatally wounded while staging one of his own). When another soldier says "you have to admit" that the theatrical ritual of the march is "stirring," Boeldieu replies after listening for a while in silence that he loathes the sound of fifes. The first soldier speaks a second time of his attraction to it: "Still, it gets to you." Marechal enters the conversation at this point, quietly contending that it is not the music that gets to you but the accompanying rhythm made by feet marching in unison. He is describing in advance the effect that will be produced by his shifting of the entertainment from musical comedy to "La Marseillaise." The way the soldiers stand at attention while proudly, combatively singing it produces a hypnotic effect akin to the offscreen sound of marching in this episode. The impresario of the revue, Cartier, is so entranced by the theatre of "men marching to music" in the window scene that he forgets that he has left a hot iron resting on a costume he has been preparing. A sudden billow of smoke arises, drawing his and the other men's attention back to the materials for their show. This interruption reverses the direction of the mood shift of Marechal's demand to "Stop the show" after discovering that Douaumont has been recaptured. In this scene the marching is at fault for breaking the group's concentration on theatre matters. But Cartier swiftly transforms his distress about the burnt costume by launching into a jubilant, comic song. As the scene ends

the lighter mode of theatre prevails over the temptations of war-related kinds of exhibition.

A second example of a political theatre scene whose clarity is no sooner powerfully established than it is displaced by several stronger instances of confusion and ironic deception occurs in the early stages of Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* (2007). In 1938, during the Japanese invasion and occupation of China, Wang Chia-Chih (Tang Wei) is persuaded to join a student theatre group in Hong Kong University (still a free city). The theatre group is committed to doing patriotic plays that will encourage audiences to resist their Japanese enemy, and not collaborate with them. The director of the company, K'uang Yu-min (Wang Leehom), tells Wang that the citizens of Hong Kong must be awakened from their "lives of leisure" with "drums and gongs." Wang has already suffered substantial personal losses. After her mother's death, her father moved to England, taking her brother with him. She has waited two years to be given a chance to join them in London, but for obscure reasons it has never happened. She receives a letter from him announcing that he has remarried, without making any commitment during the ever-intensifying war to rescue her. Wang accepts the invitation to act, though she has no previous sense of an aptitude for theatre. We are given indications of her strong desire to find fantasy escape routes from her present circumstances, and from an identity whose contours feel dim and stifled. She has a taste for sentimental American films. We see her weeping uncontrollably in a darkened movie house as she watches Ingrid Bergman and Leslie Howard conduct their adulterous affair in *Intermezzo* (1939). The darkness of the movie theatre melds with the darkness of the stage in an earlier scene. Wang is again an enraptured spectator as her director arranges a lighting cue. He becomes larger than life in the silent space he occupies, positioned halfway between reality and a saving artifice.

On the night that the play is presented to an overflowing house, Wang sits onstage in peasant clothes awaiting her first cue to action. She seems initially uncertain of her ability to take hold of the character she is playing and make her suffering real to the intimidating crowd, and perhaps to herself. She scans the space in front of her, bordered by footlights and filled with invisible audience members, as she tries to become involved with her stage prop knitting. The setting she inhabits has a primitive, amateur look. She hears a knock behind her, which releases her from her fear and orients her to the scripted crisis. The scene has to do with mistaken identity. A wounded officer, played by director K'uang, is brought into the peasant dwelling by the Village

Chief. Mother Chao, the mother of Wang's character, has been driven mad by grief, and confuses the wounded officer with her son, who has been killed in combat. It is Wang's task not to be lost in war delirium and despair and to tend to the wounded officer until he recovers. In the following scene further identity confusion is introduced. K'uang has organized this play and become active in student politics in part because his own brother died fighting the Japanese after graduation. His parents forbade him to follow his brother's lead and enlist in the army. Wang's onstage character, Little Hong, has a speech to deliver about her own dead brother, and how every time K'uang's officer kills an enemy, he will be avenging her fallen sibling. She movingly discusses the pledge she made to her brother to look after her mother rather than join the fight herself. During this oration, we are shown a crew member off-stage providing music accompaniment from an LP on a turntable; the sound is amplified through the hall by a microphone held close to the turntable. (Director Ang Lee wants us to see all the elements of the theatre apparatus before demonstrating his power to elicit our belief in the stage illusion.) Wang gives K'uang the scarf she had knitted for her dead brother. As she speaks of her deep attachment to this fallen hero, with increasingly powerful conviction, while unbidden tears run down her cheeks, she suddenly shifts focus and informs K'uang's character of how much he reminds her of her brother. At this point K'uang briefly loses his place in the fiction, overpowered by the sense that Wang is seeing his own lost brother in him, and summoning him back to life. This brother, she passionately concludes, "was our only hope." Wang then links the brother's fate to China's ongoing struggle, and need to prevail. "China will not fail," she cries out, with a burning transcendent faith, as she bows down before K'uang. K'uang is dressed in his officer's uniform, and Wang's upper garment is a sparkling red, which enhances the effect of fire in her address. As they kneel side by side, we have time to observe how much their present stage set resembles a prison. Wang looks out to the audience and makes her appeal to the generations to come. An elderly audience member is so intensely affected that he rises to his feet, raises his arm, and shouts in solidarity with Wang: "China will not fail." Other audience members are immediately galvanized to take up the cry and soon the entire audience is on its feet, with upraised fists, joined in the determination to take China back from its Japanese invaders. The noise of the crowd gives way to the sound of a whooshing blaze as we cut to an outdoor celebration where the celebrating cast are cooking noodles over high flames. After joyfully confirming each other's

sense of the political importance of this theatrical production, they walk together through the rainy streets of Hong Kong, singing a patriotic hymn: “And take into our hands the fate of our land! Huge waves, huge waves, forever surging!”

Shortly afterward, we are returned to the stage in daylight, whose set now consists of a grouping of leafless trees backed by a painted stone wall and a white mountainous landscape overseen by three static clouds. Wang enters and wanders, bewildered, through the realm of illusion, as though the new props were part of a play she did not recognize. She is searching for her fellow actors, but pauses midstage and begins to hear the sound of cicadas and a light wind in the constructed landscape. Her friends have gathered for a private conference on the balcony at the rear of the theatre. It is crucial to note that they have not severed their connection with theatrical space. They are placed well above the stage and at a distance from it but the “elevation” they occupy is still intimately related to the theatre setting. The balcony’s sole architectural function is to provide a clear view of what transpires below within the proscenium frame. Wang hears her name, and turns to face the group of her stage collaborators who are all watching her from behind the balcony divider. She is summoned to “come up” where they are and listen to them make plans to assassinate Mr. Yee (Tony Leung), a high-ranking Chinese collaborator with the Japanese invaders who is affiliated with a fake peace movement, and is currently hiding out in Hong Kong. In his effort to persuade the group to become part of the armed resistance, K’uang distinguishes between “shouting slogans” and “wrenching tears from an audience” and eliminating a “flesh-and-blood traitor.” The group’s new agenda will involve “real acting—you will [need to] change your identities and become part of Yee’s group.” The members of the company quickly agree to go “all in” with the dangerous scheme of deceiving the enemy about who they are, and join hands to indicate there will be no reversing course once this larger scale drama gets under way. Wang is the final person to place her hand into the circle. Before doing so, she exchanges a look with K’uang. He is still closely associated in her mind with the character he has played onstage. It is the Chinese officer that she has half fallen in love with, and Wang for him is the young woman in the drama who tearfully regarded him as the heroic fighter carrying on in the cause to which her brother was sacrificed. When her hand touches his as she pledges her readiness to join, her hand displays the shyness that comes from making first physical contact with a prospective lover.

From this point forward in *Lust, Caution*, there is no easy means of separating committed political action from theatrical performance. Every advance toward the group's goal depends on a deeper level of belief in the roles they take on, and (especially in Wang's case) a performance in which there is not a single word, look, or gesture that can break the illusion and awaken skepticism. A surrender to the part's intricate, consuming demands is literally a matter of life or death. Wang's barely formed, hopelessly confined, despair-laden "real self" is gradually displaced and swallowed up by the role of "Mai Tai-Tai," the mistress of Mr. Yee. Her final lostness in this role and the unthinkability of relinquishing it eventually leads her to betray (on an ungovernable "character" impulse) all of those she stands with in common cause on the theatre balcony. In a quarry outside Shanghai in 1942, after all of them have been arrested and brought to the edge of a pit for execution, they are lined up close to the edge. K'uang and Wang are once more kneeling, as they did in the climactic scene of their patriotic play. They exchange a final look. The headlights from trucks provide an equivalent of footlight illumination for the final dramatic encounter. As they and the others face the blackness of the quarry, the camera briefly leans forward, peering into its obscure depth vertiginously. The pit that will momentarily become their grave acquires the look and feel of the darkened, waiting audience on opening night.

In *Lust, Caution*, as in *La Grande Illusion*, the manifestations of political thought and action are so tightly intertwined with theatre issues as to render them almost indistinguishable. The political does not sit higher on the ladder of value or bring us nearer to reality. Neither does it provide a secure release from the serpentine spell-weaving of theatrical largesse. The space of theatre in film can accommodate any form of truth-telling without losing its grounding in imagination and dream.

Returning to our first example of spaces claimed for theatrical transformation in *The Eddy Duchin Story*, I am repeatedly struck by the way in which director George Sidney links theatre awareness to Eddy's increasing consciousness of rapidly approaching death. Eddy is still part of his world, but in the concluding scenes he has a persistent sense of it receding from his grasp. The elements around him have acquired the poignant deceptiveness of simulacra, stand-ins for a material environment that can no longer impose its solidity persuasively. He must stage the declaration of his "involuntary goodbye" to his son, Peter, in a manner that will not prove empty of consolation, but both the playground setting of his initial revelation and the sumptuously artificial domestic setting

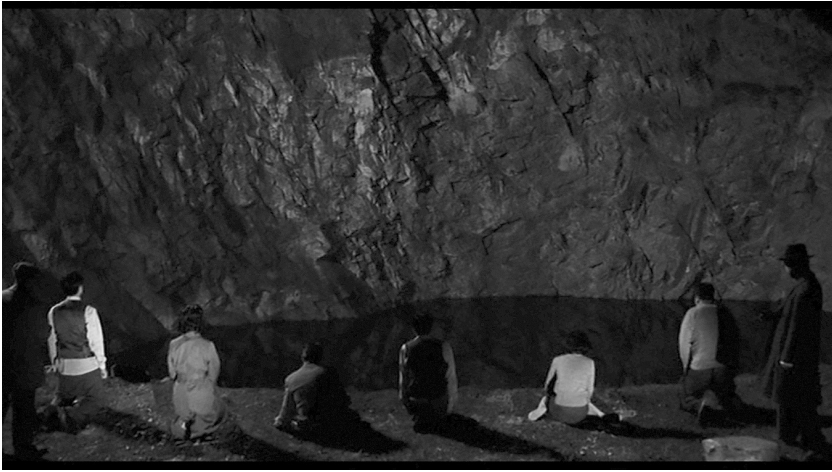


Figure 1.3. Kuang (Wang Leehom), Wong (Tang Wei), and others in *Lust, Caution* face the abyss at the end of role-playing.

in which Peter's new knowledge is consolidated seem imbued with the father's accelerating sense of ghostliness. The two stages Eddy inhabits for his farewell appearances in life seem, by some feat of death magic, to have crossed to the other side, in advance of his own departure, as though already beyond living reach. Theater becomes the container of forms that are being taken away from him while Eddy still, as in a dream, lays claim to them.

Let us return to the scene in which Eddy and Peter are walking through a Central Park playground in New York. The father is seeking an appropriate setting in which to make a speech to his twelve-year-old son about the fact that he will soon die from leukemia. How can he best present this information in such a way that he might spare Peter some portion of a life-altering shock, followed by immeasurable pain? Without any overt break with the tenets of realism observed in this film's sometimes stylized world, the playground elements began to assert, very quietly, certain theatre prerogatives. The various familiar forms—monkey bars, slide, and swings—beheld through a mild, autumnal chill, soon become wedded to Eddy's solemn performance duty. Peter's initial pleasure in the remembered activities of the playground gives way to an angry repudiation of their innocent associations, once he begins to hear and misunderstand Eddy's prepared but awkwardly delivered "script." The

playground forms have collaborated with Eddy in setting Peter up for betrayal. He had instinctively surrendered to the setting's reminders and assurance of safety. It is a milieu designated for imaginative escape, which revives Peter's sense of freedom and gives him an expansive sense of the person he is becoming. The child, in the ensuing reversal, must abruptly turn against the playground "deception." His manner of doing so leads him to adopt a theatrical role himself. Only dimly comprehending the import of Eddy's words, he strives to defend himself from the fear that his father, yet again, intends to abandon him. The theatre connection in this scene is further established by Peter's exclamation as they arrive at this location that this was the onetime site of Central Park Casino, where Eddy became a star performer in the 1930s. Peter alludes to the now vanished building and its implied stage. Eddy's own undisclosed illness links his imminent end to the disappearance of the building in which he first found his audience. Peter, before receiving inklings of his father's dark news, turns the playground into a make-believe casino by using the slide as an entrance to his own little stage. The base of the slide becomes a piano bench as he briefly mimes one of Eddy's performances from the old days. The bounds of the playground mark out an area for the father's mentally rehearsed revelation scene, one that, in its solid affirmation of childhood liberty and self-direction, will work to contain the dread of what Eddy must impart. The setting has its own separate voice, if you like, countering thoughts of collapse with an insistence on resilience and manageability. The film does not insist that we concentrate on the theatrical aspects of the playground space. It is possible, even likely, that the emergence of theatre space within this happened-upon segment of Central Park reality—reality under the sign of cinema—will be overlooked by the film spectator.

Let us consider the more realistic elements of the scene more closely. The afternoon is overcast, with hints of a gathering storm, but the weather does not seem linked to Eddy's predicament, as in so many melodramas, but neutral and aloof. As Eddy and Peter move from monkey bars to slide to a row of swings in the play area, we sense an autumnal chill in the air. The damp walkways suggest a recent rain that may soon start up again. The scene will end before there is a decisive shift or release of storm elements. In the middle distance is a fountain in which several light, rising plumes of water are visible. The display seems forlornly excessive, given the absence of onlookers. When Peter speaks about the vanished Central Park casino, the fountain in the background combines with the talk to evoke, uninsistently, the transience of all human endeavor. The water and mist have usurped the space once occupied by the obliterated

casino, and, of course, carry no memory of it. The playground area, as I noted earlier, is not depicted in theatrical terms, but the association with the creative imagination and the performance of children's games is unavoidably intimated.

Peter feels a trifle old for the slide, swings, and bars and seems to be wondering, briefly and with a measure of surprise, if he has outgrown them. We see this in his attitude toward play. He says nothing about his distance from once immediate, unselfconscious pleasures but there is a hint of effort in his "entering in." He seizes the bars instinctively when he comes near them, and conjures up a fantasy as he climbs the slide. But the fantasy is part of his now real life as an aspiring musician. When he mimes playing the piano after using the slide, he is imagining how his father felt playing on the casino stage when it still existed. Since we understand what Eddy's son will learn at any moment, we feel that his cheerful miming of piano playing as he sits at the base of the slide marks his last carefree experience of "transition" in the landscape of childhood before being banished from it. Eddy has been separated from Peter, intentionally, for nearly all of the boy's life. (For years he blamed him for Peter's beloved mother's death, which happened shortly after he was born. Band tours and extended military service in the Second World War have kept father and son steadily apart. Until very recently they have been strangers, and the fragility of their recently established bond persists.) As the two commence discussion of another impending paternal absence while they sit on adjoining benches, it strikes Peter that Eddy is planning to abandon him once more. When he concludes that his father is about to embark on another very long trip, of Eddy's own choosing, he rises and walks away from him, getting as far as the row of park swings. Clumsily, and with barely restrained anguish, Peter attempts to play the part of one who doesn't care about his father's decisions, seeking to revive the protective guise of his former genuine estrangement from him. As Eddy begs his son to listen to him, Peter—his back turned to his parent—moves along the line of swings, thrusting them all in motion as he exclaims "No! No! No!" With this gesture, Peter breaks the cover of his insulation, and sets the whole world of childhood into a protesting jangle. The swings that measure the literal distance between Eddy and Peter also remind us here of the swinging child's dream of total freedom, loosening the ties of earth and gravity, and lifting one up toward a beckoning sky.

An audible wind has arisen as Peter moves past the gauntlet of swings, and the trees in the distance sway in submission to the wind's gathering force. Instead of swing freedom, the gusty air communicates desolation

and defeat. Everything of value in Peter's small domain, all hopes of stability and deliverance, seem, from the boy's pared down perspective, about to be swept away. His father calls out that he is leaving Peter this time against his will. Peter looks back at his father through the turbulent stir of empty, moving swings and shouts that what he is saying is not true: "There's no one who can tell you what to do." Eddy's response is to approach his son through the ever-more ghostly succession of swings, which seem intent on striking him as he closes the gap, as though in protest against his right to assert his love. Eddy takes possession of the final, motionless swing, seating himself there and at last referring directly to his terminal illness as the reason he can't be with Peter much longer. Eddy asks Peter, whose back is again turned to him as he audibly begins to weep, whether he understands now. The question is immeasurable, since it encompasses not only the fact of impending death, and the irreversible resumption of separation, but the unfathomable reasons why this looming tragedy must be so. "Why," he might as well be asking, "is this ghastly, ironic turn of events ours to share?" Peter faces his father and says, with wholly warranted hesitation, "Yes, I think I understand." Then Peter returns to his father, who remains on the swing, and the two embrace, as Peter helplessly repeats the word "Daddy," that he has so recently come to terms with and accepted. Peter surrenders whatever is left of a protected childhood in this scorching recognition. The play structures and their benevolent assurance of imaginative escape become tied, through a negating transformation of theatre elements, to the implacable fixity of death.

It is worth noting that as the playground theatre episode draws to a close, the viewer is able to observe, behind the embracing father and son, several swings near the one Eddy is seated on that are still in motion. The scene that follows, and will conclude the film, attempts, by means of overt and hidden theatrical devices, to build upon this "swing potential" for the resuscitation of life energy, in a setting "gripped" by the awareness of inescapable death. In certain respects, the narrative solution of how to reduce the impression of senseless horror in Eddy's passing is a simple one. Peter, like Eddy, is a musician—an unusually gifted pianist who has absorbed his father's musical standards and his style of playing. If the scene depicts father and son performing a duet together, the viewer can quite easily be led to feel that the father's spirit will be kept alive by the legacy of "shared music," which Peter already carries within him and will be able to demonstrate visually onscreen. However, the scene that we are given, while containing these anticipated