

Impossible Seductions: The Work of Herbert Blau

Anthony Kubiak

Cast a cold eye
 On life, on death.
 Horseman, pass by!
 —*Under Ben Bulben*
 The epitaph of W. B. Yeats

Among the many seeming paradoxes of mind his work represents, it is perhaps the strange confluence of warmth and cold rigor that best represents the timbre of Herbert Blau's writing: at once exacting and open-ended, precise and playful, playful and stylistically lethal, Blau's work, taken as a whole, represents either the most exhilarating or infuriating (depending upon one's intellectual predispositions) read of perhaps any contemporary theoretical opera. From *The Impossible Theater* to the *Dubious Spectacle*, Blau's remorseless analysis oscillates between elegance and passion, the object always in mind, the subject still vanishing before the eye (and what is perhaps most daunting for me in his work, as should be evident—its propensity for producing stylistic doubling—the threat of being subsumed into the labyrinth of Blau's "writing-effect"). The great challenge in presenting his work, in fact, is engaging the full richness of Blau's precision-disappearing act without falling victim to disappearance oneself. I will try, then, to move in two different, but parallel directions in this piece: I will, as much as possible, attempt to clarify what I believe are the more salient points in Blau's work and its intersection with current trends in performance theory (though I will not give any sort of point by point comparison—the field is simply too large and varied), and also, by way of excursus, allow for the complexities of his technique and counter/argument. I will concentrate more on the earlier works¹ like *Take Up the Bodies*, *Blooded Thought*, and *To All Appearances*² (although I will not cite from all of the works just mentioned, and will make only passing and oblique reference to the more recent books) realizing,

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that for me at least, these early works lay out the seminal ideas, especially as they intersect with other modes of performance theory that come later on. These other modes of theory are not so much at odds with Blau's work, but take it insufficiently into account, and so, in my estimation, suffer a kind of blindness to the larger implications of what theatre is, what theory is, and what they represent.

Central to Blau's work is the matter of mirroring ("[M]irrors all around me," Blau recalls at the point of critical mass during the Lincoln Center debacle, "rimmed with light"),³ which itself mirrors (at least in title) Jacques Lacan's well-known essay on the mirror stage,⁴ a work that puts forth the idea that human beings articulate their bodies, and become themselves articulate through the self-same process—the specular identification of the self in an other in the "mirror-stage," a developmental stage, occurring around one and one half years of age, when the nascent self first recognizes its own autonomy, but an autonomy that, paradoxically, exists only in the other (or in the observation *of* the other). It is during this specular process, if I may gloss Lacan's essay a bit, that we learn to coordinate our bodies—to articulate our limbs, quite literally—through the same process of bodily control that allows us to use language. Speaking, mastering the body, and the condensation of identity through speaking thus occur simultaneously; they are, indeed the same process. By extension, thought and consciousness, which come into being through and as language, also emerge in this same period of development—children often learn to speak and walk at the same developmental point in their lives. But this articulation, as we know, implies not only learned control, but separation: to articulate a sentence is to make the words distinct, to coordinate and differentiate words, and so ideas, from one another, just as using the body demands an ability to see and use the parts in unison but also isolated one from the other ("to throw a curve ball, I must do this with my hand, this with my arm," etc). Likewise, knowledge, the ability to discern the world, requires an ability *in mind* to separate oneself from the world. Consciousness, then, is gained through action and separation, through living and loss. Blau, I think, wants to extend this observation and say that consciousness is, in a word, tragic (and so theatrical)—born in the acting, experienced as bereavement, looking upon the world, and in so doing being forever separated from it (Oedipus raking out his eyes). In fact, it is in this paradoxical coagulation of identity through separation that we ensure our own disappearance to ourselves as we come to recognize that we have gained identity through our specular identification with (or rejection of) others—we thus have our identity only in them, outside our "selves." When we come to recognize this, Lacan says, we see that we only have identity at the cost of disappearance to ourselves. Much performance theory, sensing the gendered, political implications of this specular construct, have used Lacan's ideas to argue for the performative nature of sexuality even when, like Judith Butler, the epistemology of the mirror stage is repudiated. For Blau the mirroring is a far more dynamic and disturbing process requiring *an awareness of the mirroring*—consciousness, in other

words of mirroring, in which the mirroring is also mirrored in mind, and I see in the other's eye the infinite regress of reflecting surfaces reflecting each other. Here the politics of power and identity becomes endlessly refracted and profoundly suspect, especially in those cases in which the theory, performative or otherwise, remains blind to its own entrapment in the mirroring surfaces, and begins to disappear to itself—its true motives, its own suspect ontologies.

And for Blau, in the theatre, the disappearing act is epitome: "In the psychopathology of theatre," he writes, "the missing person is a seminal proposition, and the disguised life a generative principle."⁵ This seminal proposition, moreover, is already haunted by the very presence which precedes it, for presence itself (and I mean this, in part, in the most banal sense, the physicality of one's taking up space) is only made meaningful by the threat of disappearance. This oscillation between presence and absence (what Blau calls "ghosting," and which I will discuss in a bit) suffuses all of Blau's work, and frames his approach to the problem of theatricality (and its weaker sibling, performance).

One ought to understand the issue here in more or less basic terms: I am not, strictly speaking, referring only to the Derridean or even poststructural concern with presence and absence ("deontologized presence") when I note this in Blau's writing, but something that is also more visceral, even tactile. Although reductive, I am tempted to say that this concern with presence and absence is a type of metaphorical substitution for life and death, love and grief. Tempted, because the question in Blau is also always a question of genesis: Is it the thought of death that gives birth to our confrontation with mortality, or conversely, is it the death-that-is-thought (the thought that demands separation and grief) that threatens our very being (and, re-reading the previous sentence, is the difference between them not both enormous and infinitesimal)? Is the agony of bereavement a prefiguring of the agony of death, or is the terror of death instead an understanding of the finality of bereavement—is the terror in the leaving or in being left behind? The playing out of these enormities is at once the living of life and the doing of theatre, "tracing the insubstantiality of the self through the insubstantiality of performance."⁶ This, in turn, is played out through the structures of thought itself, and the tendency of thought to want to de-structure itself—to move beyond representation or the symbolic—in its desire for the real, the unmediated, the purely substantive: an impossibility, of course, in that destructured thought would not be thought at all. But still, there is the desire.⁷

Blau finds a reflection of this primal play of anxiety in the famous Freudian "fort-da," a scenario Freud explains in some detail, in which a child throws a toy where he cannot see it, and then pulls it back by the string to which it is attached, saying "fort" ("there") when he throws it, and "da" ("here") when he retrieves it, finding great delight in this game of disappearance and reappearance. A more familiar example in our culture, perhaps, is the child's game of peek-a-boo. In

this simple, endlessly repeated exercise, we find some of the primitive elements of Blau's thought: the appearance/disappearance matrix, the attempt to control, through play, the terror of separation, and to control, through that same play, the anxiety and fear of the other from which we are separated. There is even in this game, something of the theatrical, the curtain (hands before the face, concealing the Beloved, shielding the eyes, then suddenly, even aggressively, returning the gaze), a script, repetition/rehearsal. This simple game, playing as it does on infantile and primal fear of abandonment, becomes a kind of prototype for the Real fear which comes to haunt life—the fear of death, both the death of self, and the death of self in the other, and, finally, the death of the other herself, the Beloved. Death, then, in the play, is brought forth through presence itself, as life is given its fullness by the fact of death (the death that Wallace Stevens tells us “is the mother of beauty”)—inasmuch as that presence is, in the theatre, always fading, always dying, always disappearing—the body never sitting still, the scene always changing, the voices always heard only in memory, the entire business “always already” memory, echoing all of the fear and grief that both haunts life and gives life its substance. So the question: is the preoccupation with death in our theatre's history simply what it seems, or is this fear merely a metaphorical displacement of the more immediate fear of disappearance—uncertainty, separation, loneliness, exile, madness. In Blau's thought it is all of these and none: the circular rush of death-as-metaphor, the metaphor-as-death, desire somehow caught in the reciprocations.

And yet for all of the “dislocations” in Blau's thinking, it is important for us not to reduce his theory only to its poststructural aspects. Indeed, even though his work grows from a substrate of poststructural discertainties, there are also palpable existential and phenomenological flavors to his writing that often go unremarked. Indeed, it is unfortunate that the kind of vision Blau's writings and theatre production represents will undoubtedly cast his work as “merely” poststructural, or worse “postmodern” in less than discerning minds. This linkage is perhaps inevitable after the work of Derrida, whose project seemed to resonate so strongly with Blau's, especially Derrida's very interesting readings of Artaud. What one misses in making this kind of categorical reduction, however, is Blau's deep concern with the undeniable physicality of it all: death, after all, is death of the body and death in the body—“no abstraction there,” as Blau might say. And acting is, in Blau, not merely “acting” in the usual sense (i.e., mimetic representation), but engaging, doing, existing at the edge. This is Heideggerian *Dasein* with a vengeance, “thrownness” with intent to do bodily harm, theory shifting away from the Derridean “writing effect” and toward the physicality of the mind and its thinking body enmeshed with other minds and bodies catacombed within the encroachments of theatrical space (a space of literal absent presence). I am suggesting here that Blau's work is more powerfully heir apparent to Heidegger's philosophical legacy than Derrida's, and

that Blau's continuous effacement of his own writing is the very inscription of the disappearing physical body in that theatrical space.

For Blau, then, the matter of presence and absence is never simply textual, no simple "writing effect" but conversely, the textual, the signifiatory, is predicated in the living-dying body as primal signifier itself—there before language, but also bringing language into being, bringing body into being with it. So whereas it may be true that in the poststructural scheme of things, "language learns us," it is, Blau says, only in the "grail of the voice" that language lives, "totally material *and* totally abstract"—the "production of meaning and semantic continuity,"⁸ but also "the materiality of the body speaking the mother tongue."⁹ Finally, then, disappearance is the subtle horror that it is because of the very powerful certainties of presence and the undeniable substance of the body. And in understanding the anxieties attendant upon disappearance, we can, perhaps, come to some understanding of the Real. Or so, Blau says, it may seem in the seductiveness of the theatrical, for it is the temptation to see something definitive, something *non-theatrical* in the theatre that has always haunted the stage: "There is something in the nature of theatre which from the very beginning of theatre, theatre has resisted."¹⁰

This is theatre's seduction, because the problem, of course, is that in the search for the disappeared Self—arguably the *idee fixe* of Western theatre, and the Modern theatre in particular—knowing, as we do, the presence of the body in its aging and in its death, we find only the empty grave, loss itself. And in the peeling away of life's disguises, we do not find life's core, but life's very insubstantiality. And in memory, we arrive to find only what we have forgotten. And so, pursuing lost identity in theatre ("tracing the insubstantiality of the self through the insubstantiality of performance," as I quoted earlier), we don't arrive at some material discovery of what self is, or how it might come to be, performativity or not, but only the disease of always arriving too late, just after the fact, left with the spoor, the track, the trace, but no habeas, no corpus. Thus the questionable premises of much American theatre/critique—that there is a truth to be discovered in pain and loss, or that the truth of political materiality is paramount in performance critique—is continuously ghosted by the terror that loss may be the only truth to which we have access, for the theatrical production leads us (or ought to lead us) inexorably through the flickering disappearing acts of mind itself, through what, as I mentioned, Blau calls "ghosting."

The conceptual apparatus of this ghosting came into being through a series of theatrical inquiries which emerged in part from the work Blau's group Kraken did on Kafka's story "The Burrow" ("the creature of the Burrow is, as I've said, a mode of consciousness . . . all mirror and painfully hidden"). The subterranean speleology of this work articulates for the actors the difference between the simple unknowability or "contingency" of materialist critique, and the kind of radical ungroundedness that Blau's theatre represents, "desperate about what's out there,

looking, tempted by it,” yet “driven back in panic, helplessly inner, realizing finally that there may be no way to hide.”¹¹ This difference goes back to the very origins of the theatrical impulse in the conceptual underground of Plato’s cave allegory,¹² a space of shadow and light, a puppet stage of the mind. But even though, in Plato’s allegory, what the cave-dwellers “see” is merely the shadow of what is, there *is* a what is, and the shadow, far from being merely false, is, presumably, a true trace of things not seen. The chained watchers in the cave can look, and discern the secondary lineaments of things as they are, just as contingency theory claims it can, and so, while admitting to the provisional nature of perception, can still claim to see the *material conditions*¹³ of the Real.

But what if we could inhabit, for a moment a different, and far more ancient cave in which shadow plays are also appearing in the dark (that Heideggerian space of mind)? What if, among the shadows of things only partially seen flickering on the walls, there were also strange images shimmering on the rock-face, emerging from the stone itself, appearing and disappearing at each turn, each step exposing “the heliotropic substance of the Promethean myth”?¹⁴ What if the strange images came to life, speaking, perhaps, to our terror—Artaud’s cries and groans, “a kind of unique language halfway between gesture and thought”?¹⁵ What if, in the extremity of that terror, the eidetic images of mind were also thrown upon the cave-walls, a “still-flaming divinity . . . lights going on and off, now this *that* now that *this* through successive masks . . . a murmuring surge, voices, through the rhythm of light-waves”?¹⁶ How then could we know anything of the Real? How could we know anything, indeed, of mind itself, or rather, how could we know anything *but* mind itself? These are the caves of Lascaux and Les Trois Freres, arguably among the most ancient theatres on earth, kinema of mind in which the initiate might seem to inhabit mind itself, the hallucinatory play of dream’s terrors.¹⁷ These second caves are more properly the site of theatre, of mind both possessed and unhinged, of perception radically and powerfully foregrounded and unanchored, the site of an aesthetic that causes the Platonic allegory to pale in its simplicity and assumption of a Truth behind the scenes (the realm of Ideas). Here, the overwhelming reality is the reality of pure illusion. It is in these caves, perhaps, that art was fully born, and with it, thought—not merely the doing of ritual, but the consciousness of playing it out. One might indeed ask how, in such a cave as this, a mind as this, a theatre as this, it is possible to think at all? Or, conversely, and as Blau might have it, how is it possible to do anything but?

Ghosting, then, in the way that Blau uses the term—a kind of residue of repetition that, like the reappearance of Hamlet’s ghost, seems to affirm its reality and deny it altogether—doesn’t refer to mere insubstance, a simple Cartesian shudder at the uncertainty of things, but refers rather to the endless oscillations between intractable substance—the scrofulous flesh, the cleaver on the block and the headless bird—and emptiness itself. In Blau’s work, it is always this collision

of thought, neither this nor that, nor both, nor neither, but the simultaneity of impossible opposites:

You are living in your breathing. Stop. Think.
 You are dying in your breathing. Stop. Think. You are living in
 your breathing. You are dying in your breathing. You are living
 in your dying, dying in your living. (Take time, breathing.) Stop.
Show. The doing without the showing is merely experience. The
 showing is critical, what makes it theater. What makes it show (by
nothing but breathing) is the radiance of inner conviction.¹⁸

The living in death, dying in living—the syncretic tension itself, the “radiance of inner conviction,” the certainty that we are falsely convicted, and doubly guilty—this all emblemizes both the difficulty and richness of Blau’s thinking. Seeing the difference, unable to tell the difference, the necessity to show what one cannot tell, but the telling being all that one has to show for oneself, realizing finally, that the problem of thought is thought itself, the problem of the theatrical, theatre itself. As Marvin Carlson has it in his book *Theories of the Theatre*:

Blau in both theory and practice is concerned not simply with the articulation of this process [of perception reflecting upon itself] but with the illumination of its originating point, that “privileged instant” when performance begins.¹⁹

In Blau’s work, the performance is always beginning, and never begins; life and performance, perception and theatre, theory and practice meet, however tenuously, in a kind of danse macabre.

What Blau’s work does, then, is to lead us, like the shamans of Lascaux, through the restless terrain of thought and thought’s desires, not to lead us to some simplistic conclusion about the mere contingency of thought, but rather to force us to deal with thought’s reality as well; the pain, the grief, the blood, the violence of life and life’s theatres are real. They are not “merely theatre,” nor simply performative. I think the touchstone here is Blau’s theatrical work: in pieces like *Elsinore* and *The Donner Party*, the relentless physical exertion, the precision, the impossibility of it all, call into question any criticism of Blau’s work as “too cerebral,” unmaterial, or ahistorical. For Blau, his thought (unlike much current theory) emerges from and is grounded in the extremes of performance that he and his actors bring to the stage. So even though for Blau the reality of what happens lies in the wet networks of brain, it nonetheless drives our passion or drives us mad, forces us to act, causes us pain, even bleeds us at the very extremes of physical exhaustion, and yet at the selfsame moment that we look, what we see there is merely seems—passion

becomes the memory of a passion rehearsed, death, the mere idea of death.²⁰ And at that moment we are struck by the reality that thought's powerful hold over us is somehow rooted in our knowledge of thought's very insubstance: again the for-*da* of life, of death: between the idea of murder seemingly done, and the bloody deed itself lies the shadowy structure of mind, the shadow theatre of thought ("is this a dagger I see before me?").

The disappearing act, moreover, is multivalent: the hide and seek of theatre—the fact that performance can only appear to us as memory, we "see" it only after it has occurred and is turned over in the critical mind—or the intransigent superfluity of thought (albeit within a certain aesthetic of suspicion), or the evanescence of identity infected by desire, "the evidence," finally, "of what we've never done."²¹ All of these speak of the maddening condition of things in the midst of the palpable, painful and irreducible Real. No idealist conundrum here, but rather, caught in the skein of discertainty, facing certain and agonizing death. The condition of identity, history and "once again at the limit of theatre, time's negation of time."²²

But can't the matter be stated more clearly? Perhaps, but the thrill of Blau's thought lies in the way it constantly derails itself, moving toward the observation, the clarification, the thing seen, only to arrive, through the rigor of his thought, at a refusal to hypostasize that thought into simple conclusion. The net effect of this is the sense, while reading his texts, that Blau wants to say it all in each sentence or observation he writes. While it is important to read *through* his work, the real pleasure, for me, also lies in the turning over, paragraph by paragraph, of ideas and insights into the current state of things performative. I recall complaining once, early on in my reading of his work, that I couldn't easily summarize him, making it very difficult to use his work in my own. "I don't write position papers," he told me, typical of his occasional penchant for understatement. This refusal to hypostasize thought into easy codes and convenient methodologies has led some to suggest that Blau is merely being coy, or worse, obscurantist, even solipsistic. But there is nothing coy about Blau's work. It is only obscure to those who crave easy certainties, and the ghost of solipsism, if it does shimmer at the margins, is, finally, there for everyone to see. For among the many tasks he sets for himself, is Blau's recognition that all thought, all acting, is in the end the crossing over from the solipsistic to the unsteady truce between minds that suggests (rightly or wrongly, we have no way of knowing) we may indeed have understood something of the Other. In this, I think, lies the dynamic of theatre. In this movement also lies the link between theatre and consciousness.

But how does all of this lead to the generative richness of Blau's oeuvre: books on the audience, on fashion, ideology, postmodern hubris, and the deficiencies of some performance theory? Simply put, the theatre, in Blau's writing becomes, ironically, life in a way that theatre has failed to realize. For all of the attempts of the twentieth century stage—from Artaud to the Living Theatre, to the excesses

of body art—to find the real within theatre, attempts which have all been manifest failures, there is still something *in* the theatre, as I said earlier, that defies itself, something that insists on the reality to be found there: the real, life. But that life, of course, the truth of it, is a also a lie. This, Blau tells us, is the truth of illusion, whose flipside is the illusion of truth: How can we speak of materialist theories as unmaskings, if, in fact masking is the condition of things, indeed the condition of theory itself? How can we condemn fashion as the mere pose and pretense of class identity, or even begin to analyze and understand it when fashion is precisely what fashions us unbeknownst to us? How can we claim the subversive high-ground of postmodern analysis without understanding that any subversion has already become unconsciously complicit with the system it seeks to undermine through the agency of the theatrical? How do we understand that the very questions I have just posed are themselves part of the con?

Finally, the exhilarating read notwithstanding, the test of any body of theoretical work is not its tone or timbre, but its ability to open new avenues of study, and not merely, as is true of so much current theoretical straight-jacketing, casting the object of study within new contexts: gender, ethnicity, and the rest. Herbert Blau's work has done precisely that: taken the study of *theatre* and presented it as the nearly limitless possibility of mind (and in the work itself, seeing limitless possibility as Impossibility itself). And before the facile response that Blau is merely taking it all as theatre, simply reiterating Donne's "the whole frame of the world is theater," Blau himself states the matter in a decidedly more elliptical manner, asking the question "If life is a dream, what is the theater?"²³ or again, glossing Donne and Shakespeare, if all the world's a stage, what is theatre? It would be an easier compromise to make if we could simply say it was all just acting, but we know, or at least suspect, like the Donner Party in its crossing, that something terrible awaits us, something that is precisely that which is not and cannot be theatre. If we take the history of our theatre at its lying word, it is this fear of the terrible that in fact defines existence. And even if it were true that theory of the Blauian mold simply takes it all as theatre, how is that different from taking it all as history, gender, culture, or the ilk? And indeed, at some fundamental level, are not gender, history, ethnicity, even "material practice," even as they threaten us with sure obliteration, not the merest products of some unseen, fevered, theatrical mind, "bounded in a nutshell," perhaps counting itself king of infinite space, but trying very hard to ignore the bad dreams.

Notes

¹ Though largely bypassing his first book, *The Impossible Theater*, which really represents a decidedly different period of thought, a kind of didactic certainty, against which his later writing seems to rub.

² *Take of the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1982); *Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982); *To All Appearances: Ideology and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

³ *Take Up the Bodies* 53.

⁴ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function, as Revealed in the Psychoanalytic Experience," *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), chapter one.

⁵ *Take Up the Bodies* 155.

⁶ 156.

⁷ A subtlety pointed out to me by Jon Erickson in an early reading of this article.

⁸ "Deep Throat," *Dubious* 131, 130.

⁹ Roland Barthes quoted by Blau (no citation) in "Deep Throat," *Dubious*.

¹⁰ "Universals of Performance; Or, Amortizing Play," *The Eye of Prey: Subversions of the Postmodern* (Bloomington: U Indiana P, 1987) 165.

¹¹ *Take Up the Bodies* 269.

¹² "Picture," says Socrates,

men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width. Conceive them as having their legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remain in the same spot, able to look forward only, and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads. Picture further the light from a fire burning higher up and at a distance behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them a road along which a low wall has been built, as the exhibitors of puppet shows have partitions before the men themselves, above which they show the puppets. . . . men carrying past the wall implements of all kinds that rise above the wall, and human images and shapes of animals as well, wrought in stone and wood and every material, some of these bearers presumably speaking and others silent.

¹³ Here we can, I think, discern the manner in which material critique (Marxism, historicism, pragmatism) is in essence Platonic in its presumption of a material substance "behind" the appearances of ideology.

¹⁴ *Dubious* 249.

¹⁵ Antonin Artaud, *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976) 245, 242.

¹⁶ *Dubious* 249; *Take Up the Bodies* 164.

¹⁷ At Lascaux, like the many cave-art sites spread across Europe, we have only recently come to appreciate the dynamic, organic quality of the art, an art combining moving images (creating through the flickering of tallow-lamps) that shrink and elongate as one moves through the labyrinth, terrifying

sound (the acoustical properties of the cave mimicking the animals portrayed—booming echoes among the buffalo caverns, soft whispers among the cats), the possibility that instruments were played, that the shaman himself may have sung and chanted among the shadowy terrors—what was likely an all-consuming, sublime, and terrifying experience. See, for example, David Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave* (Thames & Hudson, 2002), and Steven J. Waller, *Rock Art Acoustics*, <http://www.geocities.com/CapeCanaveral/9461>.

¹⁸ *Take Up the Bodies* 86.

¹⁹ Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986) 514-15.

²⁰ And there is here, more than a bit of the Stanislavskian double bind: how one extrudes, on stage, something like the real from mere acting, displacing acting with “the truth” of art.

²¹ *Blooded Thought* 109.

²² 110.

²³ *Take Up the Bodies* 1.

PRAXIS

