On November 19, 2025, my longtime friend and colleague Giorgio Baruchello launched a new book, *Uncanny Soulscapes in Uncustomary Dreamscope: Collected Philosophical Fragments*. The book departs radically from conventional scholarly forms but not from the subject of his recent scholarly investigations, the "frequently interlaced human phenomena [of] *humour* and *cruelty*" (xiv, Baruchello's emphasis). *Uncanny Soulscapes* is, in brief, a work of philosophy that uses fiction and theatre rather than the essay as its vehicle. The book "contains a total of *sixty* short stories, brief sketches, and two-person mini-dialogues which, supposedly, should be delivered by two or three actors on a stage" (Baruchello xiii; his emphasis). To make the launch suit the book, Giorgio invited various friends to perform select dialogues. I was one of these invitees. He suggested I read the sketch "Alien Day." My scene partner, whom I hadn't met before, was to be Nikola Tutek, a specialist in Croatian and Canadian Literature who teaches at the University of Rijeka in Croatia. I teach at Memorial University in St. John's, a city in the easternmost province of Canada. We wouldn't be flying to Akureyri, Iceland, where Giorgio teaches. Our performance would be streamed, the platform Zoom.

I presume this was the first time ever that an actor in Rijeka and another in St. John's performed for an audience in Akureyri. A world historical event! But our Zoom performance was self-evidently not conventional theatre and, although we appeared on a screen before our Icelandic audience, it wasn't conventional film, either. Nor did the questions raised by the platform have only to do with these kinds of definition. And since this still-relatively-new form of mediation made the launch in its specific form possible, I'm loath to pass it over in utter silence. But this isn't the forum in which to explore the matter in detail, and I'll confine myself to making the point that my involvement and that of all those who joined the launch remotely raised a number of aesthetic, political, philosophical, economic, and ecological issues, and that it may be a dereliction of intellectual responsibility to discuss our contribution without fully thinking these larger issues through. But I'll risk that dereliction by focusing for now on the text, on our rehearsal process, and on our performance.

The piece Nikola and I read, "Alien Day,"* is a *Star Trek* parody (in a note, Giorgio confesses to being "an inveterate Trekkie" [182n231]). This choice of text might be considered risky, insofar as *Star Trek* has already spawned a measureless mass of parodies, the prospect of originality correspondingly dim. And while the welter of *Star Trek* parodies might indicate how rich a vein the franchise is to mine, full of larger-than-life hence easily parodied types

and, what's more, invitingly strange, even ludicrous, in its internal contradictions, a half-naïve, half-sentimental franchise about anti-imperial imperialists, it might instead just indicate how unavoidable the damn thing has become.[1] These days, the culture industry supplies us with our touchstones, no matter how derelict a given IP may be – and the Enterprise should long since have been towed like a space-Temeraire to some cosmo-Rotherhithe. But over-exploitation offers artistic possibilities, too. To acknowledge the strong likelihood that the parodies, and the franchise itself, have exhausted the vein is to bring the franchise into the realm of depletion and ruin, which is to say, into a certain kind of Modernist landscape. This desert country is, I think, where "Alien Day" lands its shuttle: this Trek rubbish Giorgio has shored against his ruins. (Here I'll confess that I've written a brief *Star Trek* parody of my own, inspired by Beckett's *Play* and titled *Warp*; I append it below.)

"Alien Day" achieves its comic effects in large part through what one might call its deranged or pseudo-oneiric recursiveness. The two central characters, Otto N. and the Ensign, played respectively by Nikola and me, continually return to the subject of James Tiberius Kirk, specifically in his role as the "ship's steering cock" (183, 185, 186, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193). The circularity might be read as an echo of Lucky's demented monologue in *Waiting for Godot*, or, in a more benign vein, of Henry Carr's mental slips in Stoppard's *Travesties*. But it might be more helpful to think of it in relation to the comically iterative algorithm in George Perec's Oulipian instruction manual, *The Art of Asking Your Boss for a Raise*, since that precursor would suggest that the psychological decay of a Lucky or a Carr is a rationale offered within the diegesis for structural play. Meanwhile, the recursive trap is a device that the *Star Trek* franchise has itself explored, in the Next Generation episode "Cause and Effect," wherein the Enterprise is ensnared in a time loop and keeps gratifyingly blowing up on the cusp of each commercial break only to return, disappointingly intact, when the commercials end.[2] I read Otto's palindromic name as an onomastic figure for the circularity of the scene itself.

The script's gleeful reiteration of "ship's steering cock," which plays on James T. Kirk's reputation as an astrolothario, is the more obtrusive source of comedy in the scene. Giorgio derives the same satisfaction that the poet Robyn Schiff derives from meticulously describing the American cockroach in her marvelous *Information Desk: An Epic*. This conscientious feat of description gives her mischievous pleasure insofar as it justifies her,

she writes, in

say[ing] cock as often

as I have had the

occasion to here; "American cock," in

particular. (3)

There's no need to ponder the source of the comedy in such instances, which mostly has to do with the transgressive thrill of saying "cock" in nominally polite company. In the case of "Alien Day," it might also be useful to underscore the comic mismatch between the grandiose idea of the phallus and the pathetic reality of the wee little human penis. (All this fuss about something that can fit in a sardine can, as a feminist comic once quipped.) This same mismatch might underlie the difference between Kirk as brash *miles gloriosus* (not just the cock but the cock that steers the ship) and Otto himself, barely equal to the occasion and typified by what Sianne Ngai called "minor and generally unprestigious feelings" (6) (Giorgio's stage directions note variously that Otto is "puzzled throughout" [182], "embarrassed" [182], and "flabbergasted and frustrated" [190]).

As one would expect, alongside the carnivalesque gags are erudite jokes directed at Giorgio's community of professional philosophers. Nikola's character is identified in the script as "Otto N., a smoking logician" (182), a reference, Baruchello confirmed, to the twentieth-century Viennese philosopher Otto Neurath. The stage directions declare that my character, the Ensign, bears a certain physical resemblance to the eighteenth-century philosopher Gershom Carmichael – a claim that's amusingly hard to gauge since no portraits of Carmichael survive (I considered wearing a periwig). The scene ends when Otto offers a hymn to duty and responsibility and credits his insights on this score to "Hans" – a reference presumably to his celebrated brother-in-law, the mathematician and philosopher Hans Hahn. Since I'm not a professional philosopher, these jokes were lost on me and were equally unintelligible, or so I would guess, to most of Giorgio's Akureyri audience. But even if non-philosophers can't immediately fathom the wit itself, these details still convey the impression of wit, achieving what one might call, with a nod to Roland Barthes, a wit-effect.

In anticipation of our performance, Nikola and I held two rehearsals on Zoom. Giorgio offered to attend, but we demurred, maybe from a fear of mangling the script in front of its author. In retrospect I think we made a mistake in depriving ourselves of the third party. As mutually unfamiliar actors working on a script without the guidance of a director, we experienced some embarrassment, in that neither of us presumed to give the other notes. Even so, the rehearsals gave us a sense of the scene's rhythms and its most challenging passages. In my case, the most challenging by far was the Ensign's lawyerly revision of the series' famous mission statement:

To boldly go where no intelligent-but-without-prejudice-towards-diversely-able-beings, be they carbon-, silicon- or other chemical-based, civilisationally-advanced-yet-without-imputing-any-inferiority-to-other-civilisations-at-different-levels-of-civilisational-development, and technologically-capable sentient creature has gone before, provided that no time-travel-trickery is unduly involved, that is, sir! (188)

Finding places to take breaths in these 57 words was my first task; finding the best way to deliver the elaborate joke was my next. On the latter front, a clue lay in Giorgio's decision not to embroider "to boldly go" (as, for instance, by emphasizing that the boldness in question was exclusively positive in connotation and didn't imply its more negative connotations of effrontery, impudence, and immodesty). An additional clue lay in the final supplement, the subordinate clause that followed "gone before" and that momentarily threatened endless new caveats (such as, for instance, "*and meaning no disrespect to the intelligent-but-without-prejudice-towards-diversely-able-beings, be they carbon-, silicon- or other chemical-based, civilisationally-advanced-yet-without-imputing-any-inferiority-to-other-civilisations-at-different-levels-of-civilisational-development, and technologically-capable sentient creatures whom we will routinely encounter already contentedly or discontentedly living in said spaces*"). I opted for hypermotility on the unaltered Kirkisms followed by an abrupt slowing of the peristalsis on the Star Fleet legalese.

Prior to the second rehearsal, Giorgio sent us a message clarifying how our piece fit into the overall schema of *Uncanny Soulscapes*, which was modeled, he revealed, on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Our vignette was one of twenty in what I'll call the Purgatorio suite. More particularly he revealed that each scene was crafted with the medieval theory of interpretive levels or phases in mind. That is, in addition to the literal, he conceived three

further levels of meaning: the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical. The scene we were reading was thus declared interpretable in four different ways; in addition to having a literal meaning (presumed to be straightforward and readily intelligible), the scene should be understood, per Giorgio's neo-medieval schema, as an allegory of modernity whose moral meaning concerned duty and perseverance and whose anagogical significance related to charity.[3]

This information was fascinating in principle but irrelevant for our purposes and we ignored it. As I recall we didn't even mention it in rehearsal. In my view, the burden of this vein of interpretation was not on us but on our interpreters, which is to say on our audience. Our responsibility was threefold: first, to make the scenario at a minimum intelligible and if possible diverting; secondly, to calibrate our acting styles so that they were compatible with those of the original *Star Trek* cast but also equal to the absurdity of the scenario; and finally, to tether the audience to the familiar in the midst of the extravagance, so that they would not find the scene hopelessly alien, and would be engaged from start to finish. In this final respect, the emotional dynamics of the piece – Otto's confusion and frustration, the ensign's belatedly revealed lust for James T. Kirk – were our most valuable resources. We judged that, like nineteenth-century melodrama, or like any of the space operas of the contemporary culture industry, the scene would succeed in all its absurdity if played with great earnestness.

The book launch confirmed for me that performing via Zoom is not like performing in a theatre. I found it more like sitting on a conference panel. We weren't in the wings waiting for our cue; from the moment the launch began we were visible to the audience and to the other presenters in the band of windows that spans the top of the Zoom screen. We were correspondingly obliged, as a matter of etiquette and solidarity, to listen when Giorgio's other invitees spoke – in itself no burden, but detrimental to someone like me who focuses before a performance by obsessively perusing the text just one last time. What's more, while we were still in the audience, we weren't yet in character, making the transition from actor to character and back again perfectly visible to the audience (if they happened to be looking). This produced a *Verfremdungseffekt* that the script didn't orchestrate and that we hadn't anticipated, hence hadn't turned to account.

Nor, as I discovered, was the performance altogether like our rehearsals, when the dynamic

was solely between Nikola and me, when I could see him clearly throughout and gauge his reactions. The presence of an audience always alters this dynamic, of course, but in the Zoom performance this alteration was more dramatic (in a word): I felt, for reasons I don't fully understand, that my performance was suddenly alienated from his. But I could, at least, see him and hear him, which was not true of the audience. They were invisible to us both throughout, though sporadically audible when they made noises (hisses; boos?) that the mics transmitted. I was aware of their remote presence but largely ignorant of their response from one moment to the next. This situation was not unprecedented (I'd lectured to many a silent, invisible auditor during the pandemic) but I still found it mildly unnerving. Our observers felt like an inaudible, invisible tribunal more than an audience. And while I don't know what the audience itself experienced, I know they'll have seen us delivering our lines in adjoining windows on the screen, facing them and not one another, a circumstance that would accentuate the artifice of even the most naturalistic performance.

The day after the launch, I asked Giorgio if the scene was a success. "Zoom didn't help," he said, "but there were times when I laughed like a hyena." This was a troubling revelation. Hyenas laugh without mirth and, although they're predators, they aren't cruel as humans are. Since "Alien Day" is meant to contribute to Giorgio's long meditation on human cruelty and human humour, his response tells me just how abjectly we failed to realize his vision. The "two-person mini-dialogues [in *Uncanny Soulscapes*], supposedly," he wrote, "should be delivered by two or three actors on a stage" (Baruchello xiii). Supposedly. I'm afraid that, like incompetent obstetricians, the two actors on a platform botched the delivery in question!

Works Cited

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Warp

A Fragment Therefrom

Three urns, two of them teal each flanking the third ochre. Otherwise identical, all about one yard high. From each a head protrudes, the neck held fast in the urn's mouth. The heads are those, from left to right as seen from auditorium, of McC, K, S. They face undeviatingly front throughout the play. Faces so lost to age and aspect as to seem almost part of urns. But no masks. McC speaks in faint Georgian twang. S has pointed eyebrows and ears.

Faces impassive throughout.

McC: I said to him, Give him up, you pointy-eared, cold-blooded cousin of Romulans. I swore by all I held most sacred.

S: One stardate as I was sitting by the porthole he burst in and flew at me. Give him up, he screamed, he's mine. My memories of him, and his holograms, were kind to him. Seeing him now for the first time in some time I understood why the captain preferred me.

K: We were not long together when he smelled the rat. Give up that alien scum, he said, or I'll inject myself – [*hiccup*] – excuse me – with cordrazine, so help me God. I knew he could have no proof. So I said I did not know what he was talking about.

S: What are you talking about? I said, strumming my lyrette. Someone yours? Give up whom? I smell you off him, he screamed, he stinks of half-breed. Fascinating, Doctor, I said, and most illogical.

***Appendix — "Alien Day"**

One Act:

Otto N., a smoking logician

An ensign of Star Trek*'s USS* Enterprise *(who looks like Gershom Carmichael)*[a]

Otto wakes up. He's aboard the Enterprise*. He doesn't know it. A young ensign approaches him.*

Ensign:

(*politely*) You are up, sir! Excellent.

Otto:

(*puzzled throughout the conversation*) Pardon?

E:

You are up, sir. Awake. That is good.

O:

Why's it good?

E:

Because you are no longer asleep, sir.

O:

Was I asleep?

E:

Evidently, sir. You snored, at times.

O:

(*embarrassed*) Sorry about that.

E:

Nothing to be sorry about, sir.

O:

Why’s that?

E:

That what, sir?

O:

Nothing… nothing to be sorry about. Snoring.

E:

Snoring is a perfectly natural process of the human body, sir.

O:

Have I got a body?

E:

I believe you do, sir. Though I have not probed the issue, sir. May I, sir?

O:

What?

E:

Probe, sir, the issue.

O:

Probes?

E:

Not that I know of, sir.

O:

Not what?

E:

No probe was launched, sir. Though I can check, sir.

O:

Where?

E:

With the ship’s steering cock, sir.

O:

What?

E:

The captain, sir.

O:

Who?

E:

James Tiberius Kirk, sir.

O:

Tiberius?

E:

Yes, sir. Though I don’t think he likes it very much. Never uses it, sir.

O:

Who?

E:

Tiberius, sir.

O:

What?

E:

The captain, sir.

O:

Oh… The captain?

E:

Yes, sir. The captain.

O:

(*completely lost*) … Does he snore?

E:

I can’t say, sir. Though I have heard him breathe heavily, sir.

O:

Have you?

E:

Yes, sir.

O:

Why?

E:

I was listening, sir.

O:

What?

E:

The breathing, sir.

O:

Breathing?

E:

As we speak, sir. Are you not?

O:

What?

E:

Breathing, sir.

O:

Am I?

E:

I would gather so, sir. It would seem logical. *And* biological. Shall I probe the issue, sir?

O:

What?

E:

Probe, sir, the issue.

O:

Probes?

E:

Not that I know of, sir.

O:

Not what?

E:

No probe was launched, sir. Though I can check, sir.

O:

Where?

E:

With the ship’s steering cock, sir.

O:

What?

E:

The captain, sir.

O:

Who?

E:

James Tiberius Kirk, sir.

O:

(*pensively, as to himself*) Tiberius?

E:

Who, sir?

O:

Tiberius.

E:

The captain, sir.

O:

Tiberius… Eh?

E:

The ship’s steering cock, sir.

O:

What?

E:

The ship’s steering cock, sir.

O:

What?

E:

The captain, sir.

O:

Tiberius?

E:

Yes, sir.

O:

The ship’s steering cock?

E:

Yes, sir.

O:

Steering?

E:

Yes, sir.

O:

Cock?

E:

Yes, sir.

O:

Of the ship?

E:

Yes, sir.

O:

On the sea?

E:

No, not exactly, sir.

O:

Not the sea?

E:

Yes, precisely, sir, not the sea, sir.

O:

(*even more puzzled*) Not the sea…

E:

Space, sir.

O:

Where?

E:

Here, around us, sir.

O:

Isn’t that normal?

E:

I suppose it is, sir.

O:

I mean, look around you!

E:

Yes, sir. It is definitely a spacious ship, sir.

O:

Which ship?

E:

The USS Enterprise, sir.

O:

Enterprise?

E:

Yes, sir.

O:

Whose enterprise?

E:

Ours, sir. Our mission, sir.

O:

Mission?

E:

Yes, sir. Mission, sir. To boldly go where no intelligent-but-without-prejudice-towards-diversly-able beings, be they carbon-, silicon- or other-chemical-based, civilisationally-advanced-yet-without-implying-any-inferiority-towards-other-civilisations-at-different-levels-of-civilisational-development, and technologically-capable sentient creature has gone before, provided that no time-travel-trickery is unduly involved, that is, sir!

O:

(*flabbergasted*) … Who's in charge around here?

E:

The captain, sir.

O:

(*proud of himself*) Ah! Tiberius!

E:

Yes, sir. But, please, do not call him *that*, sir.

O:

That what?

E:

That, sir. The T-word, sir.

O:

T-word?

E:

T-word, sir.

O:

What word?

E:

The T-word, sir.

O:

That's *that*?

E:

That, sir, exactly.

O:

"That?"

E:

Yes, *that*, sir.

O:

Not "Tiberius," then?

E:

Yes, *that*, sir, the T-word, sir.

O:

That… Ah, you mean "Tiberius," then!

E:

Yes, sir. That, sir. Shh!

O:

… The steering cock.

E:

Steering, yes.

O:

Cock.

E:

Cock, sir. Yes, sir.

O:

Of the ship, right?

E:

And left, sir. But we prefer port and starboard, sir.

O:

Which port?

E:

Any port of call, sir.

O:

Call?

E:

Yes, sir.

O:

Who calls?

E:

The captain, sir.

O:

(*with enthusiasm*) The ship’s steering cock!

E:

Yes, sir. The captain calls, sir.

O:

What? Where?

E:

Anything, sir. Anywhere, sir. Unless in violation of Federation Law.

O:

Federation?

E:

Yes, sir.

O:

(*flabbergasted and frustrated*) Oh God… Can I talk to anyone else?

E:

Who, sir?

O:

The ship’s steering cock, for one.

E:

The captain, sir?

O:

Yes, of course! (*losing patience*) Gordon Bennett! Are *you* sleeping?

E:

I would gather not, sir. Highly unlikely. Shall I probe the issue, sir?

O:

What?

E:

Probe, sir, the issue.

O:

Probes?

E:

Not that I know of, sir.

O:

Not what?

E:

No probe was launched, sir. Though I can check, sir.

O:

Where?

E:

With the captain, sir.

O:

(*mixing anger with hope*) Yes, the captain! That’s what I said!

E:

Yes, sir. (*with pride*) We are not sleeping around here, sir!

O:

(*particularly surprised*) Oh! Doesn’t he sleep?

E:

Who, sir?

O:

The captain.

E:

The ship’s steering cock, sir?

O:

Yes, cock.

E:

(*in a dreamy tone*) That’s the dream, sir.

O:

What?

E:

The cock, sir.

O:

The cock?

E:

Yes, sir. The captain’s, sir.

O:

What?

E:

In *my* reveries, sir.

O:

Where?

E:

It’s a matter of taste and personal preference, sir. Mostly in bed, sir. But we are not prejudiced.

O:

What?

E:

In bed, sir.

O:

Bed?

E:

Yes, sir. Bed, sir. Where one usually goes to sleep, sir.

O:

The captain?

E:

In bed, sir.

O:

Peculiar… Does *he* snore?

E:

Who, sir?

O:

The ship’s steering cock.

E:

What, sir?

O:

The captain.

E:

Where, sir?

O:

In bed.

E:

Which bed, sir?

O:

On the ship.

E:

Which ship, sir?

O:

Ours… Yours!

E:

The Enterprise, sir?

O:

Yes, yes! The Enterprise!

E:

Yes, our ship, sir.

O:

With beds.

E:

To sleep, sir. Primarily, sir. But… We're not prejudiced. I'd rather do it in bed, for instance.

O:

In bed? Where *I* was asleep? (*bashfully*)… and snoring?

E:

Yes, sir. In bed, sir. Not yours, though. Unless inevitable. But… who snores, sir?

O:

What?

"Red alert! Red alert!," a peremptory voice is heard: "This is the captain speaking! Battle stations, all hands to battle stations. This is not a drill! I repeat, this is not a drill! … Red alert! Red alert! This is the ship's steering cock speaking!" Otto and the ensign rush out.

E:

(*surprised to find Otto hurrying beside him*) Where are you going, sir?

O:

(*still puzzled*) Battle stations!

E:

Why, sir?

O:

Duty.

E:

(*uncertain*) What, sir?

O:

Duty. Be responsible. If it rains, be the umbrella. Do the right thing. Hans himself told me.

E:

Tiberius, sir?

O:

No, Hans.

E:

Who, sir?

O:

Hans.

E:

Tiberius Hans, sir?

O:

No, Hans.

E:

Hans Tiberius, sir?

O:

No, just Hans.

E:

(*smiling*) Ah. I see. Hans!

Curtain.

[a] Yes, I confess it, I’m an inveterate Trekkie. (**Punch**: Isn’t that clear enough? **Judy**: Eternity beacons.)

Endnotes

[1] Just think what a blessing it would be never to have heard the names of Spock, McCoy, and Kirk.

[2] Just as “Cause and Effect” eventually finds an escape from this loop, so too does “Alien Day,” when Kirk himself appears by intercom and calls the crew to battle stations. Otto follows the ensign to his station, actuated by a sense of duty and responsibility: “If it rains,” he says, “be the umbrella” (193). He thereby brings the scene to an end. Mindless obedience to a call to battle may not be the beau ideal of duty and responsibility, but to sound that note of hesitation may be to ignore the oneiric situation in which Otto acts, akin to criticizing Alice for drinking a potion labeled “Drink Me.”

[3] This brief characterization of the different meanings of “Alien Day” is incompatible with the more extensive account Giorgio provides elsewhere, which may be a sign either that we shouldn’t take these schemas too seriously or else that these texts are rich enough to be interpreted in more than just the four ways stipulated by medieval theory.