“Like Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, Sack’s *Imagined Theatres* are mirages for the mind’s eye, creations by leading artists and scholars that speak of stages that never were but may yet be—an editorial and critical tour de force.”

— Joseph Roach, Sterling Professor of English, African American Studies, American Studies, and Theater at Yale University.

*Imagined Theatres* invites us to envision theatre as a utopic ‘no place’ of infinite possibility, in which theory and practice conjoin in a liminal space of creative imagining. Sack brings together contemporary theatre and performance’s brightest artist/thinkers in a constellation of words and images, ideas and propositions that give me hope, not just for the theatre, but for how human beings might interact, relate, and connect in ways that performance helps us conjure. An inspired collection for precarious times.”

— Jill Dolan, Dean of College and Annan Professor of English and Professor of Theater at Princeton University.

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During November and December 2014 I staged a production of Samuel Beckett’s *Not I* as a 3D holographic projection. Nobody realized that it wasn’t real—that there wasn’t anyone there on the stage. It was the kind of hologram that doesn’t require the audience to wear goggles.\(^1\)

Despite her age and frail condition, Billie Whitelaw, who had originated many of Beckett’s greatest roles, agreed to be captured for the project as long as it could be done at her nursing home. The performance was excellent, in large part due to Billie’s extraordinary talent and experience, but also due to the care that went into the editing. My guess is that Beckett would have preferred to edit his shows and actors than direct them.

When he came to audit the performance, the guy from the Beckett Estate wept, and told me it couldn’t be closer to the playwright’s vision. He asked if he could speak to Billie, to congratulate her. I told him she was too tired.

Press reactions were also very positive. There was great interest in Billie’s return to the stage, so demand for tickets quickly soared. The theatre seated only 70 people, so we started running the show every half hour, every day of the week from midday to midnight. We were soon averaging audiences of 1,500 a day. Questions began circulating about how a woman of Billie’s age could endure the performance schedule.

On December 21st, Billie Whitelaw passed away. For 3 days, all shows were cancelled, but on the 23rd I issued a press release announcing Billie would resume performances.

The Beckett Estate guy called up and demanded a ticket. During the Christmas Day performance he sat still, apparently frozen, until just after the first of the Auditor’s four small movements. At that moment he disrupted the performance by yelling and running onto the stage, but became tangled in the Musion NotEyeliner™ and had to be assisted. The following day I received an email saying the Estate would be suing me for the production, which they deemed a counterfeit. Only live performances of *Not I* are tolerated.

It eventually went to court. The judge wanted to see the show for herself. She wept during the performance, and declared that the experience was certainly “live.” She ruled in my favor, saying there was nothing to distinguish this production from another performed in real time and space by a human, beyond the knowledge, only now, that Billie Whitelaw was no longer with us.

This year (2015) has seen a number of other holographic performances of Beckett’s work—notably *Catastrophe*, *Footfalls*, *Act without Words I* and *II*—leading us to wonder whether his plays lend themselves more favorably to performances by the edited dead, than the irregular living.

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1 According to the website for Musion, the world’s leading provider of holographic projection, “Eyeliner is the core of our technology, with its imagery often referred to as a hologram. A 21st century twist on a Victorian theatre trick, the Eyeliner utilizes a technique called Pepper’s Ghost … Famously used to bring back on stage the late rapper Tupac Shakur at Coachella festival, millions worldwide were wowed by the Tupac illusion. Our specialist foil, invisible to the naked eye, is suspended across the stage, creating a life-like 3D image … Extremely flexible, scalable and quick to install, Eyeliner will bring your event alive in any environment.” For the production, a slightly adapted version was created, called Musion NotEyeliner™. It was developed in May of 2014, while Musion was busy with the delivery of a travelling hologram of Indian politician Narendra Modi which, according to the *New Statesman*, “ended up addressing a total of 1,400 rallies, many of them in ‘dark villages’ where no resident even owned a television.” The gambit was a success; in May of that year Modi was elected prime minister.
Hologram
Rendering Samuel Beckett’s *Not I* a hologram, Ant Hampton exposes the play’s uncanny poise between the there and the not there. Where is Mouth speaking? In a courtroom? In a nursing home? In a home for the mentally ill? On a stage? In Beckett’s mind? Mouth’s dilemma is that she cannot quite locate herself, caught as she is by her incapacity to inhabit or utter the “I” that grounds self-presence. Feminist scholars have often pointed out that Mouth’s struggle to say “I” mirrors the struggle women often face within phallocentrism. Spoken, rather than speakers, women sometimes are cast as holographs in patriarchy’s relentless (all too real) drama.

Billie Whitelaw
What is the strange transubstantiation between the writer’s voice and the physical embodiment of that voice? In theatre and performance, that gap is what ties the performer to the writer. Beckett said he wrote *Not I* “for” Whitelaw, and her legendary performance at the Royal Court in 1973 has become the standard, nay, the hologram that flickers behind all other subsequent performances. A feat of endurance, speed, and tone, Whitelaw’s performance emerged from her conviction that Beckett had written an “inner scream” she immediately heard and understood. She also said that rehearsing the play with him was like working with a conductor; it was the rhythm and pace that mattered most. Her performances, intimate concertos of spittle and stutter, trembling chin and vibrant tongue, are inseparable from the “meaning” of Beckett’s words.

The Edited Dead
Beckett died on 22 December 1989; Whitelaw on 21 December 2014. In the fifteen-year interval after his death and before her own, Whitelaw did not appear in any of Beckett’s work. That is, until Ant Hampton placed her hologram in *NOT I (not)*. Whitelaw’s decision not to perform Beckett’s work after his death allowed her to avoid any potential denial of rights from the artist’s estate. Under the direction of Beckett’s nephew, Edward, Beckett’s estate has retained such strict control over productions that his work risks being transformed from live art to a complex algorithm. Ant Hampton’s *NOT I (not)* warns against the risk of “protecting” Beckett’s work by suffocating it entirely. The Whitelaw hologram avoids fatigue and pain and can play repeatedly. Just as the play insists on a gap between she who speaks and Mouth, the hologram reveals the chasm between the copy and the live event. The hologram *Not I* gives us *NOT I (not)*.

Other Catastrophes
Celine Dion began performing “a residency show” in Las Vegas in 2003. She performed the show until 2007, took a break, and returned with a new show in 2011. Although she has taken breaks to care for her family, the sheer repetition of this kind of live performance schedule also gives pause to those committed to the liveness of the live performance. After some 700 performances of the first show it was “impossible” to take seriously the title of Dion’s performance, *A New Day*. Thus, while most holographic performances seek to resurrect the dead (Tupac Shakur) or absent (Narendra Modi) performer, sometimes living performers become holographic before their time.