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FROM ELIZABETHAN PLAYHOUSES TO SITE-SPECIFIC THEATRE: TRACING THE GENEALOGY OF IMMERSIVE THEATRE AND THE REIMAGINED SPECTATOR

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the historical evolution of immersive theatre by examining its genealogical roots in Elizabethan playhouses and progressing through various theatrical movements that prioritized spatial dynamics and audience engagement. Situating immersive theatre not as a rupture but as an evolution, the study examines how the shifting boundaries between performer and spectator mirror broader socio-cultural transformations in class, power, embodiment, and subjectivity. Drawing upon performance theory, scenographic history, and neoliberal critiques, the paper argues that immersive theatre functions as a site of embodied spectatorship and affective agency—where the spectator is no longer merely a viewer, but a co-creator of meaning. By foregrounding participation, risk, and spatial intimacy, immersive practices enact a rupture in theatrical convention while simultaneously offering new modes of social interaction and self-awareness. This genealogical approach reveals immersive theatre as a dynamic form deeply embedded in historical practices of ritual, rebellion, and relationality. By contextualizing immersive theatre within a broader historical continuum, the paper reveals how spatial dramaturgy and the reconfiguration of audience roles have consistently re-emerged to challenge traditional theatrical norms, culminating in the multi-sensory, participatory experiences that define immersive theatre today.

Keywords: Immersive Theatre, Spectatorship, Participation, Spatial Dramaturgy, Sociocultural Performance

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. EVOLUTION OF THEATRE PARADIGMS AND THE GENESIS OF IMMERSIVE THEATRE

1) 1567-1662: From Shakespear to Moliere

Let us begin with a brief history of theatre movements that developed in striking theatrical styles that dominated theatre at different points in time. According to Sillitoe(2013), Elizabethan playhouses dominated the period of Renaissance; around the 16th century, specifically 1567 marks the earliest use of space for staging plays in return for an audience member's entrance fee. This form of theatre set in motion the amphitheater style of staging in the times that were to follow. These playhouses were polygonal buildings made out of timber with a capacity to house thousands of audiences in its yard, along with three tiers of gallery space. This was also the place where Shakespear staged his plays. The Elizabethen playhouses exhibited a greater sense of unity as it was accessible for low paid citizens and apprentices as well as rich aristocrats and courtiers. Anyone who could afford to pay a penny was welcomed for a standing view of the play and those who paid more money, enjoyed the comfort of sitting in the galleries with a roof and an elevated view

of the stage.These playhouses eventually evolved from open-air theatre with galleries (Burbages Theatre, Shakespear's Globe playhouses) to using indoor hall playhouses (Blackfriars, Cockpit and Salisbury court). This shift began in the early 17th century, specifically around 1603, when king James became the king of England and the Inns of the Court began to be used as a site of theatrical performances. These Courtly halls were not open to the public and only selected audiences could watch these plays. In the 1640s monarchy fell apart in England until restoration in 1660 when Charles II assumed the throne. Eventually, when monarchy was restored in a briefly republic England, indoor playhouses gained popularity and the "Shakespearean model of an audience surrounding the actors on all sides" (Sillitoe, 2013) was abandoned. During the restoration phase, the outdoor theatre were either gone or relegated to the lower classes of the society and were thereby called "citizen playhouses'' whereas; the indoor playhouses became a site of private performances meant for a courtly audience.(Sillitoe, 2013)

From the 16th to 17th century values had changed and so did theatre. A new kind of audience came about which consisted of "fashionable young cynics and dilettantes, self-indulgent rakes and wits who prized glittering conversations …" (Rea, 2019) This new audience marked the advent of comedy of manners, a genre of dramatic comedy that portray and satirize the manners and affectations of a contemporary society. The plot of such plays consist of a scandalous matter like an illicit love affair but which is inferior to the delicate atmosphere of the play, its comic dialogue and its powerful commentary on the frailty of humans. One of the popular proponents of comedy of manners was Moliere, who satirized the hypocritical and pretentious nature of 17th century French society through his plays like, 'L'Ecole des femmes' (The school for wives, 1662). The late 17th century revealed the weakness of Restoration theatre which is, the concentration on its aristocratic audience and the exclusion of the populace which therefore results in a form of theatre which is not representative of the various levels of English society. The dominant themes of the new form of theatre were, comedy of manners,"romance, games and the leisure time of wealthy class" (Embry, 2017) as opposed to the dominant themes in the Elizabethan era which was, tragedy and comedy. However, these genres were never fixed or certain and most times easily mixed together.

2) 1791-1898: From Sentimentalism to Naturalism; How acting became life-like

In the 18th century theatre flourished across Europe as a popular pastime, consequently resulting in building new playhouses and enlarging the already existing theatres. At the beginning of the century Paris had only three theatres, however by the end of it, specifically around 1791 Paris alone had over 51 theatres. A new populous of theatre goers emerged, as the industrial revolution had left many aristocrats and noble families impoverished while middle class merchants and financers thrived. Intermarriages between the nobleman and middle class became a common affair. The middle class saw this as an opportunity to climb up the social ladder and increase their social status. They now had new privileges of experiencing theatre like the aristocrats but however, failed to cultivate the same taste as nobility. The new audience demanded something different from the late 17th century. They demanded something which is rather realistic and less artificial. This middle class did not wish to labour over the aesthetic subtleties; rather, it wanted sensation.(Rea, 2019) Thus came the wave of sentimentalism under which the genre of sentimental comedy gained popularity across Europe. Such comedy aimed at producing tears rather than laughter. This genre denoted plays with a middle class protagonist who overcomes a series of moral trials. Such comedy reflects a philosophy asserting that humans are intrinsically good but are capable of being led astray through the means of bad examples. (Britannica, 2018) According to Rea (2019), the tearful comedies of Colly Cibber and Sir Richard Steele in England were a response to sentimental drama. One of the greatest actors of the century in Britain was David Garrick who changed the ways of conventional acting and adopted a more easy and natural manner of speech which is a subtle and less mannered style of acting. (V&A, n.d.)

The end of the 18th century is marked with the reassertion of freedom and national consciousness, a consequence of which were the American revolution of 1765 and the French revolution of 1789. Theatre transformed to a means of arousing patriotic fervor. The lower class audiences grew in number and imposed their own tastes. This phase also marks a departure from Neoclassicism. (Rea, 2019) Neoclassicm was a movement in painting and visual arts that became widespread in the mid 18th century; in the art it is an aesthetic attitude which is inspired by classical antiquity. Neoclassicism in paintings depicted classical themes and subject matter that invoked feelings of harmony, clarity, universality, restraint and idealism. (Irwin, 2018) Neoclassicism gave way to Romanticism in theatre marking the beginning of the 19th century. Romanticism in theatre resulted in casting away the formalized rules in order to make room for a more individualistic and passionate expression. Romanticism can be defined as the intellectual orientation that characterized music, literature, architecture, criticism and historiography in western civilization from the late 18th

to mid 19th century. It rejected the codes of order typified by Classicism in general and Neoclassicism in the late 18th century, in particular. Romanticism emphasized on the individual, the subjective, the imaginative, the personal, the irrational, the spontaneous, the visionary, the emotional and the transcendental while rejecting the neoclassical order of harmony, balance, calm, rationality and idealization. (Britannica, 2021)

According to Rea (2019), the popularization of Romanticism gave rise to melodrama as a popular dramatic form of the 19th century. Melodrama in western theatre is sentimental drama depicting a plot wherein the virtuous suffer at the hands of the villainous but which has a happy ending with virtue triumphant. Such plots feature stock characters like the noble hero, the long suffering heroine and the cold blooded villain. Melodrama does not focus on the character build up rather on sensational incidents and spectacular staging. Technological advancements in the 19th century led to technical developments in theatre making realism more possible. During this time music and singing were gradually eliminated from theatre and more emphasis was given to the spectacle; for example, snow storms, battles, earthquakes, shipwrecks, trainwrecks (Britannica, 2019) and even live animals. (Rea, 2019) The first melodrama which England saw was 'The Tale of Mystery' in 1802, an english translation of a French play 'Coclina; ou, L'enfant du mystère' (1800) (Rea, 2019). Apart from this, among the most popular and best known plays which are also representative of melodramas popular in England and the United States are 'The Octoroon' (1859) and 'The Colleen Bawn' (1860) both by Dio Boucicault, an Irish-American playwright. Sophisticated technology and machinery allowed flamboyant production which when coupled with bravura performances of star actors, became a means to conceal the deficiency of the sensational dramas. (Rea, 2019) For these dramas special effects became the principal attraction. (V&A, n.d.) The 19th century marks a rapid growth in urban development which led to a sharp increase in the number of theatre buildings across Europe. The prospect of a wider theatre going public resulted in theatre becoming more specialized in the following ways; firstly, for the middle class audience, changes in the auditorium of European public theatre brought about greater comfort and luxury. In the 1820s galleries with their open boxes were replaced with closed boxes near the proscenium arch allowing more privacy than the rest. On the other hand, for the poorer sections of the English populace there existed smaller theatres called penny theatre, a theatre with short roughly mounted productions wherein patrons paid a penny to watch it. Another dramatic genre that dominated stages of Europe in the first half of the 19th century was the well-made plays. Eugene Scribe, a French playwright developed well-made plays in 1825 which called for a complex and highly artificial plotting. These plays would consist of a build up of suspense followed by a climactic scene wherein all problems are resolved and a happy ending. For these plays conventional romantic conflicts were a predominant subject. (Britannica, 2008) Around the mid-late 19th century, the main trend in Europe was toward the development of 'theatre of ideas' (Rea, 2019). This paved the way for an aesthetic movement called realism; in playwrights it invoked an interest in historical plays and a preoccupation with authentic settings as well as costumes. This movement was a reaction against the well-made plays which steered the theatrical vocabulary and performances towards greater resemblance to real life. The realist dramatist Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg in Scandinavia along with Anton Chekhov and Maxim Gorky in Russia dictated that theatre should treat themes and conflicts belonging to real, contemporary society. These dramatists attempted to portray the mental attitude, physical settings and material conditions of the lives of the middle and lower classes, of the ordinary and the unexceptional. (Britannica, 2020) Apart from this, the introduction of electricity in theatres allowed better lighting on stage which is another reason why actors eliminated exaggerated acting. In England the Savoy theatre was the first to use electric stage lighting in 1881.The final decades of the 19th century can be characterized by the full impact of realist drama which came from North Europe, specifically from the plays of Henrik Ibsen, a Norwegian dramatist and Anton Chekhov, a Russian playwright. The French novelist Emile Zola acknowledged and rejected all "artifice" (Rea, 2019) in theatrical styles, demanding a more honest record of human behaviour, as early as 1867. Zola's dramatization of his own novel, 'Therese Raquin' (1873) represents the first naturalistic drama. The naturalistic playwrights deal with themes centering around real societal issues which were depicted in such a stylized manner that the action and dialogue were suggestive of everyday behaviour and speech. This marks the movement towards naturalism which was sweeping parts of Europe and reached its highest artistic peak in 1898 in Russia. Konstantin Stanislavski, an amateur actor along with Vladamir Nemirovich-Danchenko, a playwright formed the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898 and revived Anton Chekhov's 'Chayka' (1896), 'The Seagull'. Stanislavski devised a theatrical style which entailed an infinitely detailed production and long methodical rehearsals to achieve an almost life-like acting, "a perfect surface naturalism with great emotional complexity beneath." (Rea, 2019) This play depicted the day to day life of landed gentry and was an immediate hit because of its intimate and truthful acting.

3) 1900-1997: Experiments in theater and changing actor-spectator relationships

In England, newly constructed music halls proliferated all over London and other main cities in the 1880s. The auditoriums changed from an old style intimate model of halls with their drinking facilities and tables to a larger theatre like building. This change in the layout of the auditoriums owed to the change in the constituency of the theatre going audience which widened from predominantly male working-class spectators to middle-class men and women. However music halls declined in the 1920s, as the last decades of the 19th century into the early 20th century saw the rise of several forms of popular entertainment like, musical comedy, film, radio and later television. Around this time, visual arts exploded into a chaos of experiments and revolt, giving birth to new styles and "isms". (Rea, 2019) The most influential innovation in the 20th century came from a strong reaction against realism. Asian theatre, Symbolism, Nihilism, the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and the shock of a world war set forth widespread disillusionment and alienation. This eclecticism widened the theatrical vocabulary and set the tone for theatrical innovations that were about to follow and these transformations were often characterized as anarchic and exhilarating. In Russia, Stanislavsky recognized the need to find new artistic paths different from the conventional styles of acting and so he began to train his actors in an approach which was based on the 'emotion memory'. This approach emphasised the self expression of the actor. Stanislavsky believed that an actor should not be subordinated to the director's will, rather in collaboration with the director should aim to achieve a unified interpretation of the play. Stanislavsky's aim was to maintain a high standard of acting even if it meant refusing the revolutionary government to allow his theatre as a platform for spreading state propaganda. The Lenin government entrusted the avant-garde to guide theatre in Russia into the new revolutionary era. Vsevolod Emilyevich Meyerhold a Russian and Soviet theatre director developed the Formalist style wherein the individual characters are replaced with representative types amidst a constructed setting consisting of giant scaffolding supporting a bare platform of which every strut and bolt is exposed to the audience view. Meyehold declared that propagandist theatre confirmed marxist principles as it attempted to throw light on the "unidividuality" of men (Rea, 2019). Many scholars argued that this kind of setting was aggressively functional with only a propaganda value. In 1932 Russian theatre was imposed with Socialist Realism and the experimentation of the 1920's came to an abrupt halt under this Stalinist rule. Socialist realism decreed that theatre should be adjusted to the level of the worker as an audience and aim to educate the public in the ideals of a communist revolution. This resulted in a wave of propaganda plays which heavily compromised on the theatrical artistry; sacrificing theatrical art to party dogma and producing plays that were simplistic and old fashioned. Once again scenery became laboriously realistic and anything impressionistic was condemned as "abstract art" (Rea, 2019).

Similarly, the Italian theatre at the beginning of the 20th century was shaped by the revolt against verismo (realism). The most important movement in Italy was Futurism initiated by Fillipo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909. Futurism can be seen as a prelude to most of the non-realistic approaches to theater that were to follow, most importantly, Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism and The Theatre of the Absurd.The futurists sought for inspiration in the new technology and devised performances that celebrated the ecstasy of speed, explored states of madness and depicted men as machine. Through Futurism Marinetti aimed to discard the art of the past, instead celebrate change, new technology and innovation. Through his plays, he attempted to praise the beauty of speed and movement (White, 2019).

In Germany, the beginning of the 20th century was characterized by the violent reaction against Naturalism and Impressionism of the late 19th century. This paved the way for Expressionism to emerge as a new theatrical style that represented protest against the existing social order, very often overthrowing the rules of grammar. The language of Expressionist drama was mostly striking and exclamatory. The first phase of Expressionism began in Germany in 1910 which was also known as the "subjective" (Rea, 2019) phase as it concerned itself with spirit rather than matter with the and aimed to capture the essence of the subject rather than objectively recording visual reality like Impressionism did. However, the movement ended by 1925 as Expressionism was although exciting but not artistically successful. This gave way to the development of epic theatre by Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. Almost a decade later, with the Nazi accession to power in 1933, further experiments in theatre were cut short in Germany. Bertolt Brecht, a German playwright wrote his first plays in 1920 but he was not widely known until much later. Brecht was heavily influenced by German Expressionism but it was his preoccupation with Marxism that led him to develop epic theatre. He was convinced that man and society can be intellectually analyzed and the role of theatre was not to appeal to the spectator's feelings but to their reason. His work provided a major alternative to Stanislavsky's realism that dominated acting and the structure of well-made play that dominated playwriting. Brecht believed that while providing entertainment theatre should also be able to provoke social change by doing away with the illusionary techniques used by realistic theatre. These techniques allow the spectator to emotionally identify with the character on stage and be moved by it rather than being stirred to think about their own lives. Therefore, Brecht developed his own practice called "Verfremdungs-Effekt" or "Alienation

effect" (Rea, 2019) which uses anti-illusive techniques to remind the spectators that they are in a theatre watching an enactment of reality and not reality itself. The aim of this technique is to encourage the audience to adopt a critical distance to what is happening on stage. The measures include flooding the stage with white light regardless of where the action is taking place, deliberately interrupting the action at key junctures with songs, leaving stage lamps in full view of the audience and making use of minimal props. Brecht demanded from his actors an objective style of acting in which the actor acts as a detached observer of the character, enabling him/her to comment on the actions of the play. Some of Brecht's most important plays written from 1937 to 1945 when he was in exile from Nazi regime were, 'Leben des Galilei' ('The Life of Galileo') and 'Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder' ('Mother Courage and Her Children'). Through such plays Brecht earned the reputation of being one of the pivotal figures of the 20th century theatre.

The anti-realistic movement that characterized experimental theatre all over Europe had little influence on mainstream British theatre. George Bernard Shaw, a Irish-born playwright dominated the Royal Court with plays such as, 'Man and Superman' (1903); he chose the medium of laughter to discuss social and philosophical issues. After World War l theatre rents and production cost escalated resulting in many West End theatres to close down. These theatres were taken over by commercial minded managers and financers who favoured melodrama, musical comedy and farce over serious plays. In the same way, American theatre in the beginning of the 20th century was heavily dominated by commercial plays. From the 1920 to 1927-28 Broadway productions grew in number and these were either plotless revues (theatrical series of small sketches) or "chorus-line extravaganzas" (Rea, 2019). However, the stock market crash of 1929 and the consequent economic depression preceded the end of the prosperous years of theatre. Under the increasing competition from radio, television and motion pictures, travelling theatre companies disappeared and Broadway productions shrank from 280 to 60 shows in 1949-50.

World War II had a long lasting effect in England leaving the British theatre in a precarious state; almost a 5th of the theatres in London's West End were destroyed or damaged by bombings. The government and the theatre management imposed new taxes like the entertainment tax which multiplied the cost of production by 10%. These theatre managements were controlled by a monopoly known as 'The Group', who tended to choose thrillers, light comedies, revues and Broadway Musicals over other demanding plays. The devastation left behind by World War II and rethinking the role of theatre in modern society, consequently resulted in a second wave of experiments in theatre which was more radical in nature than the first wave of experiments post World War I. These experiments in theatre were inspired by popular forms of theatre that embraced the whole community like Elizabethan theatre did; it sought to challenge more than ever the barriers between a performer and a spectator. These experiments manifested as different dramatic theories and practices shaping wider theatre movements, like the Theatre of the Absurd, Theatre of Fact and Poor theatre in 1950s and 1960s. As such the post war mood of disillusionment and skepticism was expressed by dramatists of Europe and America who did not consider themselves as belonging to a formal movement but shared a common belief with the French Existentialist novelist and philosopher Albert Camus; who believed that the human condition is essentially absurd, devoid of any meaning or purpose. Feelings of widespread hopelessness, bewilderment and anxiety gave rise to a theatrical style known as Theatre of the Absurd, wherein logical construction and rationalism were abandoned in order to create a world of uncertainty on stage where chairs could multiply for no reason and humans could inexplicably turn into rhinoceroses. Absurd dramatists were the first to promote the idea of acceptance on the face of absurdity. Absurdist writers include Samuel Beckett ('Waiting for Godot', 1952), Harold Pinter of Great Britain and Edward Albee of the United States. However by the 1960s the movement burned itself out. Around the same time in Germany emerged Theatre of Fact also known as Documentary Theatre and later spread to other parts of Europe. These plays were mostly concerned with the presentation of factual information rather than their aesthetic considerations and very often took the form of a political play. Such plays examine recent historical events through official documents and court records like transcripts of trials. (Britannica, 2000) In the 1930s a unit of the WPA Federal Theatre Project in the United States adopted a 'Living Newspaper Technique' wherein the real events are reconstructed and interpreted through fictional revisions and authentic documentary materials. Joseph Stallin's death in 1953 removed the heavy restrictions on Soviet theatre which led to a slow, cautious and intermittent return to experimentation. The large Soviet theatre going public encouraged amature theatre companies as the professional theatre companies failed to satisfy the demand for dramatic entertainment; the amature companies with outstanding merit were given the title 'People's Theatre'. In the 1960s the Soviet theatre placed more emphasis on entertainment value by gradually freeing itself from ideology. As such new plays emerged where grotesque, fantastical, absurd elements reappeared and where socialist heroes gave way to ordinary citizens on stage. Following the publication of 'Towards a Poor Theatre' (1968) by Jerzy Grotowski, by the late 1960s and 70s, the poor theatre became a worldwide phenomenon. Polish director Jerzy Grotowski along with Bertolt Brecht

and Konstanstin Stansinlavsky became the key figures of the 20th century. Grotowski's idea behind poor theatre was to do away with the nonessential elements of a theatrical performance like, the props, costumes, make up, lighting, sound effects, detailed sceneries, illustrations and the overall paraphernalia of the theatre of the rich; and instead focus on the essential element of theatre that is the actor-spectator relationship. According to Grotowski, theatre should not attempt to match the extravaganza of films and television; rather it should go beyond entertainment. Theatre should be an intense confrontation with the audience, a means for direct actor-spectator communion. However, according to Rea (2019) the spirit of poor theatre was conveyed more theatrically by Peter Brook, an English theatre and film director. In England, the director Joan Littlewood was one of the first to use Brecht's techniques by the mid 1950s. The 1950s marks the transition of actors in theatre wherein a new breed of fresh comers were replacing the elegant actors of late 1940s who exudes upper class sophistication. Post World War II around the mid 1950s higher education grants were widely distributed across drama schools and a new breed of actors across different classes came to perform new plays. Samuel Becketts 'Waiting for Godot' in 1956 marked a turning point as it introduced the Theatre of Absurd in British theatre for the very first time. Around 1961, plays like 'King Lear' (1962) and 'A MidSummer Night's Dream' (1970) established Peter Brook as one of the finest English directors of the century. After leaving England, Brook established the Centre for Theatre in Paris in 1968 and produced a series of vivid productions like 'Le Mahabharata' (1985), a nine hour version of the Hindu epic Mahabharata. By 1997 a reconstructed Elizabethan style outdoor theatre, called Shakespeare's Globe Theatre opened which featured the repertoire of Renaissance London Theatre reinterpreted for a modern audience and contemporary plays. During the late 20th century, director Eugenio Barba and the playwright Mario Ricci extended Grotowski's idea in Italian theatre by presenting the plays in a way which emphasizes the visual world over the verbal. These productions often featured mythical and literary characters for example, 'Gulliver' and integrated the devices of theatre like, light, sound, colour and movement in ways that impact the audience in a visceral manner. This form of theatre came to be called the 'Theatre of Images' as was a dominant form of theatre in Italy at the turn of the 21st century. The last decades of the 20th century marked the emergence of Asian American theatre groups along with Hispanic and Women's theatre companies. Asian American and Hispanic theatre companies often mixed folklore and traditional ceremonies with popular European theatre techniques and Brecht's experimental techniques. During the 1970s Women's theatre companies blossomed as it was composed of experienced avant-garde artists as well as new recruits inspired by the feminist politics. Further, these companies gained momentum from the Women's Liberation Movement which resulted in activities of protest and resistance no longer limited or isolated to a specific field but working across mainstream venues and styles. (Rea, 2019)

Another experimental form of theatre, called Environmental theatre emerged as a branch of the New Theatre Movement of the 1960s. According to Eckersley (2014), Richard Schechner, an American director who founded the Performance Group in 1968, invented the environmental form of theatre which aimed to heighten audience awareness by eliminating the distance between audience and the actor's space. Schechner shaped the performance space to conform to each play by constructing different frameworks for each theatre production. The sets were usually multi level as they were based on platforms, balconies, ramps and scaffolds. Such design allowed greater flexibility of interaction between the audience and the performers; as such the audience of environmental theatre were not only invited to participate but also expected to do so. The multi level sets in environmental theatre enhanced the immediacy of experience as one could focus on the actors from multiple perspectives instead of a single focus like traditional theatres. Richard Schechners theatrical experiments were inherited from the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski's idea of shaping theatre space. (Britannica, 2009)

4) 1981-2012: Environmental Stage-design to the Aesthetics of Immersive Theatre

According to Aronson (2018), 1981 marks the expansion of environmental protection and the transformation of environmental theatre from the realm of experimental theatre into the domain of popular and commercial production. However the term itself struggled to gain traction as it was associated with too much focus on natural ecology. Eventually two other terms emerged later, 1, "Site-Specific" (Aronson, 2018, p. 2) and two, "Immersive" (Aronson, 2018, p.2). Some scholars and practitioners argued that the later phenomena which is immersive theatre as somehow different and distinct from the past practices. According to Aronson (2018,p.2) "... they fit within the larger historical project to challenge the hegemony of theatre building and fixed stage and to explore the position-both literally and aesthetically of the spectator within the theatrical event." The later part of the 19th century continuing into the 1930s brought to light many reactions against the proscenium stage both in theory and practice. As theatre practitioners called for freedom, imagination and experimentation it paved the way for later environmental forms of theatre. The experiments were

diverse and distinct as sometimes they would be staged in forests or gardens, actors would move through the aisles and elaborate architectural schemes for altering space were used to create "greater intimacy, greater theatricality, greater realism" (Aronson, 2018, p.35). These experiments had in common the conscious and deliberate attempt to alter the spectators relationship to the performance. Aronson (2018,p.42) suggests, traditional theatrical performances demand continuous attention on the part of the spectator but incase of a simultaneous performance the spectator is able to create their own performance by selecting specific moments from a spectrum of sequences. The idea of simultaneous performance has its origin in the Dadaist who began their activities in Zurich's cabaret voltaire in 1916. The Dadaist adopted many Futurist concepts among which was Tactailsm. Marinetti had presented Tactilism at the Theatre de l'Oeuvre in Paris 1921 along with the idea of simultaneous presentation of events and activities. Dadaists would often turn found spaces into performance environments; for example, a 1921 Dada exhibit was held in a courtyard which could be reached by going through a public urinal in Lologne. Similarly a Futurist exhibit would turn into a performance through the actions of the participants eventually transforming the entire exhibit into a performance space. Therefore the Futurist and Dadaist through their usage of found environments, their transformation of ordinary spaces into performance environments and their presentation of simultaneous performance were the four runners of environmental theatre. The term "immersive" emerged as the term of choice for the 21st century replacing the "site-specific" term popular in the 1980s. A growing body of scholarship locate immersive theatre as a new genre different and distinct in important ways from its predecessors. Aronson in his work notes how Josephin Machon, a leading scholar in the field, admits at one point that "immersive theatre is impossible to define as a genre" (Aronson 2018, p.199). The advent of 'Sleep No More' wordless choreographed adaptation of Macbeth performed in an elaborately designed, multiroom installation complete with sound score, in the U.S marked the appearance of "immersive" in relation to theatre. Sleep No More, which was virtually synonymous with immersive theatre, was created by Felix Baratt and Maxine Doyle of the British company Punchdrunk in London 2003. After a brief run in London it was re-conceived in New York city in 2011. New York City production was installed in three abandoned warehouses on West 27th Street. These warehouses consisted of six floors which had hundred uniquely and elaborately designed rooms filled with furniture decoration and artifacts that were in some way related to Macbeth and its characters. Further each room was complete in the sense that no one could see backstage nor any other typical element of the traditional stage. Aronson (2018, p.200) quotes Barett admitting that they are "always trying to keep the lid closed so that no light from the real world enters in; figuratively and literally". (Aronson 2018, p.200). In this immersive performance the audience enters through a dark passage and they are all given identical masks after which they are taken through a functioning bar and ultimately up in an elevator. From this point the audience members are free to wander and explore over the next three hours opening doors, browsing shells and reading letters left on the desk and throughout which they will encounter performers enacting different scenes. The audience members are free to follow these characters running through corridors and even interact with them privately as well as intimately. (Aronson 2018, p.200). Gareth White in Aronson (2018, p.202) suggests that immersive theatre is "Site-sympathetic" which means that although they are created in a particular site they do not take into account that site's history or content.

The Immersive Worlds : Definitions and Characteristics of Immersive Theatre

Alston (2013) defines immersive theatre as,

"It is a participatory theatre style broadly premised on the production of experience. These experiences tend to depend on a range of sensory stimulations and a number of viewing positions often partly determined by the audience's movements within a space or set of spaces. … Experiences may well be hedonistic, or even narcissistic in character, bolstered by receiving the fruits of one's own participatory efforts as well as efforts of others. … One consequence of this would seem to be promotion of individualism, even though this promotion may well take place within groups of audience members. Finally, audiences are likely to find themselves functioning as something more than an audience, either as a character cast within a given world or as some kind of hyper-self." (Alston, 2013, p. 6-7)

One of the key elements which distinguishes immersive theatre from other forms of theatre is the inherent demand on the audience members to engage in sensory acts like, "touching and being touched", tasting, smelling and moving within an aesthetic environment which surrounds the audience where they are free to move around and participate (Alston, 2013, p. 1). According to Alston (2013) movement is an inherent quality of spectatorship. Audience members do not remain static, they move, breath, yawn, applaud, shift forward or backward in any theatrical event but within immersive theatre this sensory engagement is amplified (Alston, 2013, p. 3).

Immersive practice involves an explicit or implicit demand upon the audience "to do something" which according to Alston, results in extortion of participation. Alston (2013) uses the term "extortion" to highlight the fact that these individuals are placed in a situation "which is not fully at their command" (Alston, 2013, p. 4) Immersive theatre practices encourage hedonistic and narcissistic desire, as participants are encouraged to seek pleasure through their experiences and perceive it as an end in itself; and narcissistic because it is the participant who is at the centre of this pleasurable experience. For each, the immersive experience is all about them (Alston, 2013, p. 5).

"Immersive theatre shares particular values with neoliberalism such as entrepreneurialism, as well as valorization of risk, agency and responsibility."(Alston, 2013, p. 1)

Participation in immersive theatre is of a particular kind, termed as "entrepreneurial participation", revealing the immersive practice of "self made opportunity". This refers to the possibilities of a participant to create their own immersive journey, an individual, unique immersive experience. To create one's own creative journey, the participant must take "risk" of relying on strangers and explore uncertainties (Alston, 2013, p. 1). This risk taking underscores a sense of vulnerability among the participants and performers and also a sense of responsibility for their own actions. Finally, the nature of immersive theatre is such that there is an uneven distribution of opportunities to participate and it is this quality that contributes to the "meaningful or exciting" character of immersive experience (Alston, 2013, p. 9).

According to Machon (2016), immersive Theatre is an "experiential" form of theatre which acts upon its audience "in a visceral manner" by establishing "'in-its-own-world'ness" through the aesthetics of space, sound, scenography and duration which act as "palpable" forces comprising the imagined world. Immersion in this world involves an explicit or implicit "contract for participation" in order to enable the audience members to exercise agency, participation and engage in an environment different from the "known" through their senses and a "manipulation" of it. (Machon, 2016, p. 35-36)

"Bodies are prioritized in these worlds, possibly performing and always perceiving bodies- the latter belonging to spectators, whose direct insertion in and interaction with the world shapes and transforms potential outcomes of the event" (Machon, 2016, p. 36).

Immersive theatre radically shifts the role of spectators from being an onlooker to being an active participant; from an "attendee" at a traditional theatre performance into an active participating member of the event who engages in "live" and "immediate interaction". Traditional plays within a proscenium stage limit the spectator within the auditorium seating wherein they follow normative rules of spectating, maintain silence during the performance, applauding at the end of it and simply spectating a play. (Machon, 2016, p. 36).

Whereas in immersive theatre, due to the "multiway transfer" of information between a performer and spectator, a spectator transforms into an "interactor" (Machon, 2016, p. 39).

"a reciprocally active and influential improviser who transfer physical, emotional and intellectual energy within the immersive event and has opportunity to take part-ownership of the creative state. Consequently, immersive performance has evolved the idea and the practice of the spectator into an alert, watching, decision making collaborator, an attendant-improvisor who shapes form, influences function and transform possible outcomes in the work, in the process sharing responsibility and respect for the experience with the artist."(Machon, 2016, p. 47).

According to Machon (2016), a pivotal nature of immersive theatre is the fusion of a range of techniques and elements aimed at hightenening the sense of awareness and action to establish a world of its own. This heightened feeling actively "defamiliarizes" the everyday world from that of a world which "hover in-between the felt sensation of the reality and unreality of the experience". The heightened feeling of awareness and action correlates to the feeling of "aliveness" or being alive at the moment. Immersive theatre through its techniques celebrates this feeling of "aliveness" which is one of the reasons for its popularity (Machon, 2016, p. 46).

2. ASPECTS AND CHARACTERISTICS

After taking into account the genesis, definitions and the aforesaid literature on immersive theatre, we can draw the following tenets that distinguish this form of theatre from others:

Contract of participation- Machon (2016) argues that immersive performance demands a "contract for participation" which may be explicit in nature, in the sense that it may appear in the form of guidelines written or spoken.

Or it may be implicit in nature wherein the audience members become aware of it as they navigate through the performance space (Machon, 2016, p. 35-36).

Community and Conviviality- The involvement of a spectator within an immersive performance is an important characteristic of immersive theatre and it garners feelings of community and conviviality. Machon (2016) suggests how an immersive performance caters to individuals belonging to "underground scenes, cabaret circuits and festivals" looking for opportunities of verbal and physical interaction in order to satiate their "hunger for emotional and physical human connection." According to Machon, "full immersion" within an aesthetic space correlates to the "degree of interactivity" and improvisation on the part of the performers and spectators (Machon, 2016, p. 37).

Liveness and Live(d)ness- "the sensual worlds created for and through immersive practice exploit the unique power and theatricality of live performance as an artistic medium."(Machon, 2016, p. 39) Through this assertion Mchon (2016) points out the "exchange of energy" that occurs between individuals (performers and spectators) within this live, present and ongoing performance. This "exchange of energy" harnesses a sense of "being alive" and being "aware" of the moment "lived" as these live performances are "fleeting and only of the moment". Therefore there is a high sense of awareness of each passing moment. (Machon, 2016, p. 39)

Multiway Transfer of Information & Transformation of the Spectator - Immersive performance encourages "multiway transfer of information" which takes place in the form of interaction, verbal or non-verbal between performers and spectators. This interaction when infused with improvisations like, opening of drawer, searching for clues to the story, sniffing the scent from old perfume bottles transform the spectator into a decision making participant of the play, into an "immersive interactor". Machon (2016) notes that alternative terms have arisen to replace 'spectator' and 'audience' as these terms do not adequately define the nature of the spectatorship in immersive performance. Alternative names such as, "Adrian Howell's 'audience-participants', Coney's 'playing-audience' and Rotozaza's 'guest-performers'", essentially forge a new understanding of spectatorship in immersive theatre. Rejection of the already existing terms also means a rejection of the connotations it brings with it. The hierarchical attitude which is associated with 'spectators', 'audience' and 'actors' is replaced with a "relationship of connection through shared responsibility" which an immersive theatre space provides. (Machon, 2016, p. 38-39)

Embodied Watching and Inhabiting- " … the watcher remains active, attending to the moment, to what it looks like but more significantly, what it feels like, both internally and externally."(Machon, 2016, p. 40) Immersive theatre practices encourage embodied watching which involves watching with our eyes and body. Within the immersive theatre, a spectator observes external occurrences, "giving attention moment by moment" to finer details of the aesthetic space as well as noticing internal feelings- "emotional" and "sensational". Immersive theatre encourages the spectator to engage in the moment through his senses resulting in "heightened awareness" which is central to his immediate experience and analytical interpretation. (Machon, 2016, p. 40)

"In most immersive practice the space is integral to the experience. The audience is not separated from it but in it, of it. Interactors are surrounded by it, dwelling in it, travelling through it which ensures some sense of 'rootedness' in the world of the event is actively felt."(Machon, 2016, p. 44) As opposed to traditional plays on stage, immersive practices physically place the spectator into the imagined world of play instead of inviting spectators to spectate and comprehend the world of play from a distance. In this sense, the aesthetic space, the imagined world, is integral to the immersive experience as the spectators not only engage in embodied watching but in the process of doing so also inhabit it.(Machon, 2016, p. 44)

Haptic Attention and Touch- "Touching grounds the aesthetic experienced in the body- in muscle and bone, gut and heart. Touching is body asking question and finding answers [...], not a bloodless, intellectual exercise but a somatic, sensory knowing by the body-mind [...]. The participation of the body in exploring art expands the possible sources of meaning" (Driscoll, 2011, p.111; Machon, 2016, p. 41) Immersive practices either through the use of devices like video goggles or through shifts in lights or blindfolding, usage of masks or blackouts manipulates sight/vision which results in activation of haptic involvement. Haptic perception enables a spectator to mindfully engage with the word created. This haptic involvement encourages the spectator to touch and consequently be touched by the immersive event. (Machon, 2016, p. 41)

Fusion of the Semantic and Somatic- " … semantic sense (cerebral meaning-making) cannot be dissociated from somatic sense (embodied feeling and analysis). The interactor may literally feel the ideas and experiences of the performance holistically, in the moment. The effect of such a response can ensure that this individual holds onto the moment and remembers this feeling corporeally in any subsequent interpretation of the work."(Machon, 2016, p. 45-46)

The fusion of the cerebral and corporeal resulting from the merging of the senses like sight and touch influences the nature of perception and the embodied memory, also determines the tones and types of interpretation. Accordingly, the process of interpretation within the realm of immersive practices is firstly triggered by smell, taste or touch followed by the process of apprehension through haptic vision. The consequent interpretation of the moment has the quality of being "affective" and "experiential". Immersive practices encourage the "unification of the felt and the understood" which organizes the "body-brain intellect" in relation to the concept, themes and form of the immersive play.

Entrepreneurial Participation- Alston (2013) describes the nature of participation within immersive theatre as "entrepreneurial" as it is characterized by risk taking behaviour to manifest opportunities of exploring the aesthetic space and reward themselves with their own, unique immersive experience. This alters the perception of risk within the immersive world from something threatening to something desirable as one must "dare" to act upon this entrepreneurial instinct, exploit the immersive environment and reward oneself with their own thrilling immersive experience. (Alston, 2013, p. 10-11) As such, Alston (2013) asserts, " … daring to touch, to taste, to dance, on countless different occasions … Daring ranges from the confrontational to the trivial, but in all instances there is a sense of putting oneself on the line, often in the presence of others."(Alston, 2013, p. 11-12)

Risk Taking- In order to exploit opportunities of participation, one must take risk of asserting their agency and improve their chances of being rewarded with the experience of "stumbling across a scene", "action" or a "wandering character" of the immersive play (Alston, 2013, p. 9). Participation entails a potential risk of feeling a sense of "embarrassment, awkwardness, guilt and shame" while acting upon entrepreneurial instincts. Machon (2013) suggests, "risk is central to many participatory and immersive experiences: There is first of all the risk of not understanding the protocols of a given theatrical practice; there is also the risk of participatory rules being unclear." (Alston, 2013, p. 12)

Mutual vulnerability and Shared Accountability: Both performers and audience must "face up" to the consequences of their actions in a "live participatory encounter". Audience participation arouses a sense of exposure among performers and audiences which makes them vulnerable and this vulnerability is mutual.The risk of participation arising from an awareness of agency manifests as shared vulnerability and the recognition of the fact that the participants are accountable for their action resulting in shared accountability.(Alston, 2013, p. 14-15)

3. CONCLUSION

Machon (2016) describes the process of spectatorial engagement in the imaginary world of immersive theatre by referring to a sense of "heightened awareness" which is central to immediate experience and analytical interpretation of the immersive experience. Within the immersive theatre, a spectator observes external occurrences, "giving attention moment by moment" to finer details of the aesthetic space as well as noticing internal feelings- "emotional" and "sensational" (Machon, 2016, p. 40). This heightened sensory engagement facilitates a state of awareness wherein an individual observes oneself from inside oneself which influences the way one comprehends and interprets the immersive piece.(Machon, 2016, p. 43) Further, Alston (2013) in an attempt to describe the nature of audience in immersive theatre refer to the term "hyper-self", which he deems as "a pastiche of oneself"(Alston, 2013, p. 7) Similarly, Merrill (2004) describes the phenomenon of altered state of consciousness through masking rituals as a state of heightened awareness which arouses individual persona and identity in relation to the collective psyche resulting from the transformation of the normative conscious state (Merrill, 2004, p.23). This transformation is essential in restablishing the fragile relationship between individual persona and its essential self which is achieved through the process of ritual masking (Merrill, 2004, p.21).

Turner (1982) characterizes the process of liminality as an "inversion of normal reality" to highlight aspects such as, temporal non-status of the religious subjects, their separation from the wider society, the bearing of ritual symbols, their connection to the non-social powers, their absence from the social structure and the suspension of social obligation. (Turner, 1982, p.26-27). This idea of inversion of normal reality is similar to the immersive practice of "defamiliarizing everyday action" in immersive theatre. According to Machon (2016), a pivotal nature of immersive theatre is the fusion of a range of techniques and elements to establish a world of its own. This imagined world actively "defamiliarizes" the everyday world from that of a world which "hover in-between the felt sensation of the reality and unreality of the experience"(Machon, 2016, p. 46). We can construe that ritual practices is a site where individuals seek to establish a connection with the spirit world, the "non-social or asocial powers"(Turner, 1982, p. 27), "roles otherwise not available" to oneself (Bourguignon, 1973, p.23); to seek a connection with the unknown, "foreign or the dangerous" (Bourguignon,

1973, p.23) and in the process of doing so reveal one's "essential self" (Merrill, 2004, p.21) to one self. Similarly, immersive theatre is also a site where individuals seek opportunities to feel a sense of belongingness to a community, to feel a sense of "conviviality" (Machon, 2016, p. 37), to forge a "connection" with others through "shared responsibility" (Machon, 2016, p. 38). This individual interest to engage in interaction, seek connection and form association is a result of the "sociablity drive" (Wolf,1969, p.45). "Sociable man" engage in social interactions and take part in social gatherings like ritual practices and theatre performances (Wolf,1969, p.48). Immersive theatre is also the site of "social drama" which involves a performance by the sociable man arising from the dialectic of ideal norm and real human behaviour (Turner, 1987). Further within immersive theatre, spectators as momentary performers engage in the creative process of acting out the role demanded of them and consequently engage in role experiencing or "the creation of life of the human spirit in role …" (Stanislavski, 2008, p.19). We will explore these concepts and its theoretical framework in the following chapter.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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