

THE DIGITAL CONTAMINATION OF DRAMATIC THEATRE: SUBJECT TECHNOLOGY IN EXCEPTION

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Drawing on Derrida's analysis of the metaphysics of presence, this paper examines the centrality of presence in theatre commentary, arguing that such a privileging demonizes projected media as a form of contamination. Through a close look at a hybrid work that integrates live performers with avatars from Second Life, I seek a way to move forward between conditions of possibility and impossibility.

Dramatic theatre claims that it is a unique site of literal co-presence while asking audiences to forget their own presence and give precedence to a closed fictional world 'made present' by the auratic actor. In contemporary performance, two practices have emerged that shift these traditions: digital performance, where technology challenges the position of the actor as central; and live art or participatory performance that places the audience at the centre of the performance encounter. Although contemporary practitioners often rally against the prejudices of dramatic theatre, an understanding of its core assumptions can benefit emergent forms and prevent them from replicating those aspects deemed problematic in traditional practice. An awareness of literal, fictional and auratic presence as mediation can enable a richer theatrical encounter. I draw on Derrida's analysis of the metaphysics of presence to establish the centrality of presence in a significant amount of commentary on theatre, arguing that such a privileging of presence demonizes projected media as a form of contamination that impedes dramatic theatre's ability to represent 'truth.' While much has been theorized about presence in theatre, my position is that of a practitioner grappling with the problems that a privileging of presence brings to my work, of which I will examine a specific example.

From Greek antiquity onwards, discourses on the essential nature of the theatrical invoke some variation of what Peter Brook labels "a mystery called the present moment." [1] For example, playwright, actor and author David Cole claims, "theatre closes a great rift in our lives by enabling us to experience imaginative truth as physical presence." [2] Actor and Director Jean Louis Barrault believed that, "the final aim of mime is not the visual, but presence itself." [3] Practitioners like Eugenio Barba are concerned to define 'theatre's essence' which he claims, "consists... in radiating through the rigor of scenic technique an individual and collective *form of being*." [4]

'Being' can apparently be experienced through the actor's presence as expressed by actor and theorist Jean Pierre Ryngaert, "It is not always to be found in the individual's physical features, but in a radiant energy whose effects are felt even before the actor has acted or spoken, in the vigor of his being-there." [5] American director and teacher, Joseph Chaikin made similar claims, "It's that quality that makes you feel as though you're standing right next to the actor, no matter where you're sitting in the theatre... It's a kind of deep libidinal surrender which the performer reserves for his anonymous audience." [6]

Theatre is the place where co-presence of actor and audience apparently enables connection with the present moment. American designer Robert Edmond Jones believes that: "This is drama; this is theatre –

to be aware of the Now.” [7] Descriptions of theatre often refer to it as a unique site of presence, like Norwegian poet, writer and playwright Jon Fosse describes:

[...] these intense, clear moments, although they are hardly explainable, are moments of understanding, moments when the people who are present, the actors, the audience, together experience something which makes them understand something they never before have understood, at least not as they now understand it. [8]

I have quoted extensively here to demonstrate the privileging of presence in much twentieth century theatrical discourse.

Through these quotes, we see what Eugenio Barba describes as a search to “transcend the performance as a physical and ephemeral manifestation, and attain a metaphysical dimension...” [9] Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski both attempted to transcend performance by eradicating the text while Constantin Stanislavski and Bertold Brecht outlined ways for the actor to speak so that all traces of the text were not felt to be present. Stanislavski’s mission was designed to bring presence to the absence of the written word. It requires immense skill to achieve a sense of this, and we praise actors that give us the illusion of doing so. In his essay, *Just Be Yourself*, Philip Auslander critiques Stanislavski, Grotowski and Brecht, stating “all assume that the actor’s self precedes and grounds her performance and that it is the presence of this self in performance that provides the audience with access to human truths.” [10] It is this auratic actor that has been central to dramatic theatre, an idea which remained unchallenged until Derrida’s deconstruction of Western philosophy’s privileging of presence.

Derrida’s analysis of ‘the metaphysics of presence’ has become an important feature of recent performance studies and helps us to understand why projected media in performance has threatened dramatic theatre. The desire to attain ‘pure presence’ through theatre, to eliminate all representation and ‘access human truths,’ if one follows Derrida’s logic, is not possible or desirable since pure presence is outside time and therefore equals death. Derrida argues that every known thing is relational and the result of ‘differance,’ defined by what it is not rather than by an essential nature. The present moment itself cannot be grasped, there is never a now that can be restrained and held. The present always contains a mark of the past, at the same time as it allows itself to be invalidated by the mark of its relationship to the future. Difference is indeterminable and therefore meaning arises from something that is not present. The present moment can similarly not be apprehended. Derrida terms this non-presence ‘differance.’ He argues that full presence cannot be reached because no instant can exist outside of time; the present has disappeared before it has made an appearance. Signs are present in the absence of the things they signify. The sign represents the present in its absence.

The concept of ‘differance’ is important here as it helps us understand why traditional theatre has excluded the use of projected media. Many of the practitioners I have mentioned demonstrate a strong desire for various forms of theatrical presence. This desire is not limited to proponents of dramatic theatre and can be found in contemporary and postmodern theatrical discourse. Live art, for example, is a form of contemporary performance that, it could be argued, craves presence. I am interested to examine the assumption that any theatre or performance can ‘make present the present moment.’ More often than not, the desire for presence dismisses the use of technology because it imagines that technology contaminates the live actor: the conduit through which it is assumed full presence can be reached. Technology’s use in theatre can bring into question claims of presence. It can disturb the assumption that presence is attainable, by making evident the fictional illusion; in juxtaposition with the actor it undermines the notion that theatre is a site of literal presence; and it can intrude on the actor’s

charisma or aura. Most threatening about technology in theatre, is that it questions theatre's claims to 'a mystery called the present moment.'

A number of prominent commentators, such as Philip Auslander and Elinor Fuchs, have put forward that deconstructing theatre's illusion of presence is essential in order to demystify theatrical representation. I would argue that beyond deconstruction and demystification, theatre practitioners aware of the historical reach for presence can enable a more conscious play of both the audiences' and the actors' notions of presence. Auslander and Fuchs have been important in using Derrida's analysis to understand prejudices and assumptions in traditional theatre, but to a large extent we have gone beyond the need to make evident theatre's privileging of presence through the work. Cormac Power provides a comprehensive critique of theatrical presence. He defines theatrical presence in three distinct modes; the "fictional mode" of making present the fictional world of the play; the "auratic mode" of actors having presence as charisma; and the "literal mode" of actors being-present literally with an audience (co-presence). These modes are very useful to help us understand theatrical presence with a number of different aspects, and perhaps when we understand how these compete with one another then we will have the capacity "to explore and 'play' with notions of presence." [11] Power's main thesis is critical to this study: if theatre highlights that it is "part of a mediatic system" rather than claiming to be a privileged site of "unmediated 'nowness,'" (through literal, auratic or fictional presence), then theatre can realise its potential to show how the "(im)mediate" is itself "mediated." [12]

With emerging digital technologies, the notion of literal co-presence has had to be redefined. Until recently, most definitions of liveness referred to Auslander's binary opposition of 'live' and 'mediatized,' live only being understood since mediatization became a possibility. With the emergence of digital technologies, Auslander has had to redefine this notion of live. Speaking at the recent Transmediale 11 conference in Berlin, Auslander describes his new definition:

Liveness is no longer defined as presence of physical persons in front of each other or physical and temporal relationships. The audience's experience is now the locus of liveness. Digital liveness emerges as a specific relation between self and other. Our conscious act at grasping virtual acts as live in response to the claims they make upon us. [13]

The positioning of the audience as the test for liveness has created some controversy. In 2002, Auslander published a provocative paper about chatterbots, which prompted a number of responses. The crux of Auslander's argument was that, "The chatterbot forces the discussion of liveness to be reframed as a discussion of the ontology of the performer rather than of the performance." [14] He made this claim because the internet chatterbot performs live according to one of the Oxford English Dictionary's definitions of live, "Of a performance, heard or watched at the time of its occurrence, as distinguished from one recorded on film, tape, etc." [15] The Internet chatterbots are performers themselves, Auslander says, because they create their performance at the same time as we witness them. This proposition suggests that a live performance is no longer determined by the performer as live person, and therefore removes performance as a specifically human activity. Liveness, Auslander claims, is now determined by the audience 'being there,' rather than the performer. This notion that liveness is not dependant on the performer, but on the audience/viewer is important when we investigate further the relationship between projected media and its uses in theatre. Would we consider a work to be live if all the actors were avatars operated in real time, but not literally present, for example?

In a theatre that privileges the actors' literal and auratic presence, where the spoken words of a text are used to make present a fictional world, projected media has often been viewed as contamination. Having posed that presence is threatened by technology in theatre, I now want to look at a specific example of my own work that further problematizes this privileging.

Exception is a performance that uses the multi-user online virtual world, Second Life, as both metaphor and tool for performance. As a metaphor, Second Life functions as literal 'second life' for asylum seekers lucky enough to be offered a permanent home there; as a site for performance, one actor on stage interacts with avatars projected and operated (mostly) live from Second Life. The show is currently in its third stage of development in Melbourne, Australia. During the first stage, we proposed three possible interactions between actor and avatars; (1) Avatars (including an avatar of the actor), operated live by on-stage actors who manipulate the avatar movements visibly at workstations, voicing them from on-stage; (2) Actor interacting with pre recorded avatars including pre-recorded voice; (3) The capacity for live and remote audiences to interact as avatars in Second Life, projected into the theatrical space.

The desire to bring Second Life into theatrical space is a desire to 'make present' what is not present: a virtual world. Avatars are 'given life' by their scale of projection, method of voicing and dimensionality. Theatre however, has arguably always attempted to 'make present' that which has not been before it. Making Second Life avatars present in a three dimensional space is therefore not structurally different to any of theatre's other endeavors. My bias for theatre over virtual worlds demonstrates a privileging of presence on my part.

The actor onstage in *Exception* is immersed in an entirely animated projection world. All settings and characters are created from the crude two-dimensional animation that is the Second Life aesthetic. The argument that projections overwhelm live bodies is challenged when the actor is immersed inside the projections in this way. It is a common perception that projections overwhelm the live actor because of the dominance of the screened image. While this view may be true in specific performances, it is not a given that projections overwhelm live bodies. In the case of *Exception*, the immersion of one actor amidst an entirely animated world framed his liveness. It was impossible not to see him first. Rather than overwhelm the body, projection integrated with the actor and blurred the distinction between organic and mediated. In this way, the juxtaposition of actor and animation can make liveness more prevalent. The animations in *Exception* made no claim to being real. One actor immersed in an animation world enhanced the actor's auratic presence while at the same time challenging its power.

Another trope of dramatic theatre: an emphasis on empathy and identification, is challenged when most of the characters on stage are digital. Empathy has been well critiqued by Brecht in the last century who defined his epic theatre as the elimination of empathy and imitation. Brecht felt that film lends itself to "a type of drama not depending on empathy," and for the audience, he claimed that the use of projections in theatre "prevent[s] his complete empathy, interrupt[s] his being automatically carried away." [16] Brecht was significant in identifying traditional theatre's reliance on empathy and imitation and attempting to dislocate this but, as Auslander noted, Brecht's conception of the role of the actor was also based in the metaphysics of presence. Andre Bazin, amongst others, have refuted Brecht's claim that audiences do not empathize with the screen, however Brecht's claim that juxtaposition of projection on stage can prevent complete empathy, is relevant to this paper. Patrice Pavis defines identification as a "process of *illusion* whereby the spectator imagines himself to be the character represented and the actor gets right 'into the skin' of the character." [17] In *Exception*, through the juxtaposition of actor with projection, a level of estrangement occurred. The audience was brought closer to the actor's aliveness because the actor was surrounded by non-living entities: the animated avatars. Their otherness signaled

the actor's aliveness. The capacity for empathy was not affected, success of a closed fictional world to engage the audience's care factor remained the same whether projections were used or not. Dependent on the success of the closed fictional world, dramatic theatre's desire to create empathy in an audience can still be achieved. However, Brecht's objective to estrange the audience can also be enabled by using the projections to interrupt our identification with the living actor/character and reflect upon the fictional illusion made present. The argument that audience cannot empathize with projected characters ignores the capacity of projection to enhance empathy with the actor/character by framing the actor's liveness. 'Cyborg theatres' like *Exception* have the capacity to enhance empathy and identification, while at the same time enabling a kind of 'verfremdungs effekt.'

From its inception, *Exception* was conceived as a project that would enable interactivity from live or remote audience members via their avatars in the Second Life world. The idea being that the auratic present actor would engage in a three-way interaction with the two-dimensional avatar objects that could be operated by either audience or on-stage operator. This would enable real time interventions into the apparently closed fictional world that the piece otherwise constructs. Prior to showing the work-in-progress to an invited audience, we staged an in-world interactive exercise, which would feed this capacity for live intervention. One of our sets was a detention centre, created in Second Life. We placed our main character's avatar, Asim, in the virtual facility and publicized the fiction that Second Life had detained him. We had anarchists and communists from all over the world attempting to break Asim out (which they achieved quite easily). After sometime, with varied reactions, we enlisted a few of our more engaged rescuers to 'perform' in a live showing. During the section where our onstage actor and his avatar were locked in Second Life detention, the anarchists were to rescue our avatar, but of course our on-stage actor remained behind bars.

The participatory capabilities of *Exception* have not been explored to their full potential, but in an effort to engage the audience's awareness of their presence, we are moving the work to function as a game, giving the audience agency in the creation of the work. Already *Exception* plays with the actor's auratic presence by immersing him in an animation world and introducing avatars as 'live' animated characters. Now we propose to interrupt the fictional world by enabling further audience interaction.

In *Exception*, 2D animations are 'made present' through live interaction, operated and voiced in real time. This unsettles the notion of theatre as the privileged site of literal presence. The actor's auratic presence is challenged by juxtaposition with life sized animated characters; and by enabling audience's participation, the fictional world made-present is challenged. At the end of the day, *Exception* is no different from any piece of theatre that attempts to make present that which did not exist before it. However, *Exception* does this in such a way that the different modes of theatrical presence – literal, auratic and fictional – are identified as mediated and their competition with one another enables an enhanced awareness of liveness.

I have not resolved the problem of the privileging of presence in digital and participatory performance but through the development of *Exception*, my thinking has changed. By making this work, I have discovered that the ancient tradition of theatre can offer a rethinking of fundamental notions of presence to contemporary forms that engage with electronic arts. Far from attacking the metaphysics of presence, I seek a way to move forward between conditions of possibility and impossibility.

References and Notes:

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12. *Ibid.*, 156.
13. Philip Auslander, "Realtime, Desire and Sociability" (interface keynote address, *Transmediale* 2011, Berlin, February, 2011).
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