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SUMMARY

THEATRE AND CRITICISM IN AN EXPERIENCE CULTURE

The emergence of Experience Theatre as part of a larger cultural movement

What started out as a small-scale phenomenon with the artistic avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s became a more common theatre practice by the turn of the century: having the audience act as co-creators of the theatre event. In various forms of contemporary theatre, be they participatory, interactive, or immersive, modern-day visitors are placed in the middle of the event, and the theatre space is transformed into a stage or set in which the audience becomes spectator and performer at the same time.

The phenomenon of the performing spectator, or the spect-actor as theatre-maker Augusto Boal dubbed it, is not an isolated one. On the contrary, it ties in with a much broader trend in which the distinction between the roles of the spectator and performer is becoming more fluid. This happens in other art forms as well, for instance, in the visual arts or classical music performances, where participation in various forms is encouraged. It has also become popular with the art institutions, which are increasingly active in involving the public in programming and evaluating their events, or which, as in the case of popular festivals, use works of art to create an environment in which the visitors move about. The same happens during sports events, on social media, or in games, where watching and being watched, perceiving and performing often overlap.

This book examines the relatively new phenomenon of the participating theatregoer as part of that broader movement. From a tradition of performances as Presentations, in which the work of art (a theatre performance, concert, film, or painting) was conceived of as a given that the visitor observed silently and motionless from a distance, surrendering to a world brought about through the mediation of others, we have moved on to the practice of performances as Experiences, in which the work of art and the visitor become caught up in each other, like a movement in which the dancer and the dance have become indistinguishable.

Presentations and *Experiences* can be conceived of as two modes of experience based on essentially different forms of attitude and perception.

In Presentations, the concepts of 'distance' and 'mediation' play prominent roles. A physical and social distance exists between performer and spectator, which leaves the latter in a position that allows them an overview of the scene and the option to concentrate on what is happening in front of them. They are not part of what happens on stage. The performer is standing in a stage setting. Even if they are not playing a

fictional character, just 'themselves', there is a distance between them and the natural world. The performer is the entity who uses their craft and imagination to bridge the physical and social distance and who possibly draw in the character they play, making it their own or believable to the audience. The spectator is actively involved as the person making sense of the scene, as someone who is moved or who is critical, who attempts to make the 'great unknown' in front of them their own and draw it closer to their own world and known reality.

An Experience is much more about 'closeness' and 'immediacy'. In Experience Theatre, the visitor moves within the work of art and is surrounded by stimuli, and their role is not fundamentally different from that of other performers. While a Presentation may appear to be an untouchable other world, Experience Theatre may put forward a situation as raw material that the visitor can manipulate to their own liking. And while a Presentation invites the spectator to relate to the world of the performers, the Experience addresses them directly and will often expect an immediate response, during the Experience itself.

When, in the artistic practice, a certain attitude and perception becomes dominant and is increasingly considered the 'proper' way of looking at art, one may assume that a significant value shift is underway. For conceptions of what constitutes the proper attitude towards, and perception of art are not neutral. They are supported by specific concepts and ideals of what constitutes good art and the right audience, what role art should play in society, and which responsibilities intermediary institutions have in realising that role.

A critical distinction

Institutions in the theatre world, such as venues, critics, or educational institutions, are dealing with ever-changing playing fields. All attempts to respond to contemporary developments are essential and always problematic aspects of the practice of cultural institutions. Indeed, those institutions do not automatically go along with every new development; within almost any institution, there are forces that encourage one development and fight another, ignore this trend and overestimate that one. Faced with innovation, institutions will want to distinguish between what is relevant and what is not, what is valuable and what is not. Thus, in each case, they require a theory about the meaning of cultural change.

Usually, cultural changes are minor and do not substantially alter the foundations of the established theatre practice. But then there are times when the new developments seem more rigorous. And the present turn towards Experience Theatre seems indicative of such a moment.

This book seeks to interpret the turn toward the Experience, the broad cultural movement in which theatre and visitors seem to merge, its influence, and the way the theatre world will deal with it. The focus is on the impact this will have on the critical dimension of theatre. For the past two and a half centuries, the concept was that theatre was allowed to question dominant beliefs, perceptual schemes, or habits. In turn, each theatrical performance was to be questioned and discussed by the audience. In this way, theatre became part of both an aesthetic and socially critical discourse. However, does this idea still hold sway when the ways we interact and perceive are changing dramatically? Has the concept of theatre's critical dimension had its day? And if not, can it continue unchanged?

A Presentation Culture and an Experience Culture

In this study, each of the two different attitudes towards, and perceptions of theatre is understood as exemplifying a specific culture. Thus, in this study, two different modes of experience are juxtaposed, as are two different cultures, as ideal-type constructions.

The first one will be referred to as the *Presentation Culture*. It is a culture in which 'distance' and 'mediation' recur at various levels. For instance, at the level of the institutions that keep the theatrical performance at a distance from everyday life, from commerce or political propaganda, and that mediate (thanks to theatrical architecture or professional theatre criticism, among others) the 'proper' attitude towards, and perception of the performance.

The second culture, the *Experience Culture*, provides the conditions under which 'experience' becomes the dominant factor. Here we could argue that the Experience Culture is permeated with the notions of proximity and immediacy. For instance, in the proximity between the dramatic arts and society, or the more immediate role visitors are assigned in scheduling and experiencing the performance.

This study juxtaposes the two cultures in order to interpret how profoundly the new movement is changing the 'old' culture. Does the Experience Culture challenge the Presentation Culture to adjust within the existing system of institutions and values, or does it also question the foundations on which the Presentation Culture is built? To answer that question, an inventory is made of a number of *core values* of the known Presentation Culture, which are then examined for their vitality and legitimacy in the Experience Culture.

The core values of the two cultures

Core values of the Presentation Culture

In the Presentation Culture that emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century, theatre is part of a system with publicness, *autonomy*, and *criticism* for its core values.

For the past two centuries, the dominant practice conceived of art in general, and theatre in particular, as a world of its own. The spectator was actively interpreting the theatrical signs, placing them, relating to them, and linking them to off-stage reality. But in relating to these signs, the spectator was relating to an existing situation, structure, and event. They tried to find their way through the Presentation, as it were, without changing the Presentation itself. The underlying idea was that by concentrating on that other world and being guided by it, the spectator had an experience that was qualitatively different from everyday reality, allowing the Presentation to function as a proposed alternative interpretation of reality.

The Presentation witnessed by this spectator was public. The guiding ideal in the Presentation Culture was to keep theatre freely accessible and geared towards the common good. Moreover, it had to encourage forms of public debate in which the performance could be both the source and the object of criticism.

The dominant ideal also entailed that the theatre practice had to remain autonomous when it came to economic and political interests, just as it claimed its own space in relation to social activities and was not a backdrop for events such as celebrations or commemorations, nor a tool for things such as community building or educational programmes. Institutions such as theatres and theatre criticism reproduced this ideal by holding on to the clear distinction between venue and stage, between spectator and performance, and between theatre and social, political, and economic reality. While they brought theatre and audience together, they also created a distance – between the audience and the performer and between the performance and the world outside the theatre space.

These institutions had good reasons for doing so. The underlying idea was that these forms of autonomy served the critical publicness of theatre. By presenting their Presentations in this way, the theatre remained an ‘other world’, a world the spectator had to focus on in order to connect it to realities outside the theatre. And so, the Presentation proposed an alternative interpretation of reality, which in turn was the critical function of theatre.

Core values of the Experience Culture

As notions of ‘distance and mediation’ give way to those of ‘closeness and immediacy’ in the Experience Culture, the core values shift as well. This is not to say that the ideals of publicness, autonomy, and criticism all disappear, but rather that they undergo changes that may be profound.

Thus, as far as the ideal of publicness is concerned, the ideal of free accessibility loses its exceptional character. Works of art, and cultural expressions in general, are largely ubiquitous. From theatres to living rooms, from museums to computer screens,

‘creative material’ that can serve as raw material for our own aesthetic existence is popping up all around us, as something with which we are more or less naturally surrounded and which we can largely shape ourselves. These quantities of creative material are emerging simultaneously with a greater diversity of audience groups. Without too much institutional interference, individuals can put together their own cultural menu that fits in with their own preferences. The idea that theatrical performances serve the common good in some form or other has lost its relevance.

As far as the ideals of autonomy are concerned, we see that the concept of the Presentation as a fixed entity has given way to an event in which the participants experience something new, and the distinction between autonomous and instrumental theatricality becomes more diffuse. The Experience Culture is fuelled in part by an experience and attention economy in which theatricality is an important means by which products, politicians, or private individuals can distinguish themselves from others and attract the eyes of those others. The maxim of ‘all the world’s a stage’ does not only refer to a world where everyone is always part of an audience, but also to one in which anyone wants to play their own roles and seeks their own more or less unique experiences.

How does this impact the critical effect of theatre?

Can the theatre experience still be distinguished from the highly personal experience that characterises every other experience? Can artistic theatre still promote the critical discourse when the old institutions of the Presentation Culture, such as theatres and professional critics, have lost their mediating authority? Can artistic theatre still make a critical difference in a culture full of other theatrical experiences and activities?

Three case studies

Three case studies have been carried out in order to refine the examination of the possibilities of the critical dimension of artistic theatre in an Experience Culture and to identify the moments in which these possibilities present themselves. It is important to note that the known core values and concepts of the Presentation Culture are no longer self-evident benchmarks for determining this critical dimension.

The dramaturgical analysis of concrete examples reveals how Theatre Experiences that are perceived as highly personal and yielding highly unique visitor experiences can still be part of critical intersubjectivity.

The dramaturgical analysis of a number of theatre festivals attended explores ways in which a stage on which artistic activities are organised in close proximity to other activities and in which the institution plays a minor mediating role to encourage or monitor the ‘proper perception and attitude’ can still be a place for critical theatre encounters.

An analysis of *Bitte liebt Österreich!* by Christoph Schlingensiefel is used to re-examine the concepts of autonomy, publicness, and criticism, and to describe several ways in which theatre can play a distinct role in the critical public debate within the framework of the Experience Culture.

The study concludes with a description of a new type of criticism in which 'proximity and immediacy' play an important role. Finally, several proposals are presented for a theoretical and practical elaboration on the challenges that Experience Culture poses to the theatre.