

**Empathising with the audience: Notes on making and evaluating
decisions when creating theatre.**

Version 1

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While every spectator will have their own unique thoughts/feelings about a performance, it is helpful for artists to recognise some of the questions they might have when watching and trying to understand a show. I think that if you can empathise with what questions an audience might be thinking about, it is easier to communicate effectively with them.

What follows is a brief examination of some basic/fundamental questions that a spectator might consider when watching a performance.

Question One: Where are we?

The theatre integrates imagined and real places. It's important to think about how an audience understands the ways in which space is transformed by the act of performance.

- Is the stage space meant to represent an imagined/fictional world?
- Or is it, more simply, the space in which performance/storytelling takes place?

Some artists blur the boundaries between the two e.g. Bertolt Brecht, Pina Bausch, the Wooster Group, Ontroerend Goed, Punchdrunk.

If the stage space is representative of an imagined place, how is the audience invited to recognise/get to know that place?

- Place can be established within the scenography; for example by using lighting/architectural objects to suggest a forest or a temple (see Appia's designs for Parsifal (<https://www.monsalvat.no/appia.htm>)).
- Or, more simply(?), it can be established through the actor asking the audience to make believe. ('Think when we talk of horses, that you see them.').
- Sometimes in plays, characters describe place/setting within their conversations.
- Place is also established through atmosphere. Movement, rhythm, timing, tension, suspense, sound and lighting play a big part here. (There's a lot to play with in all modes of performance.)
- Most of the time place is established by a combination of these effects.

Each of these approaches to establishing place create different kinds of work for the audience to do in their imaginations.

- The audience has to understand (implicitly or explicitly) the rules of how place/setting is established within a piece.
- Think about how much time they need to do this. How important is it that the audience knows the characters of the play are in a forest? If it's important, give them enough time to imagine/recognise the forest and get their bearings. The tempo and rhythm of transitions (sound/lighting/action) are really important here.

Theatre architecture shapes the ways in which an audience experiences/watches the worlds that are represented and described in the performance.

- A proscenium creates a picture plane, separating the audience from the world of the performance. Most often, the audience are in the dark looking through a window into the world of the performance.
- Thrust or traverse stages draw the spectator's attention to the audience's presence in the theatre space. However, the space at the back of the stage allows for the world on stage to be connected to a larger world imagined beyond the stage.
- In the round performances allow the audiences to surround and enclose the action. In some (rare) instances I have experienced this as being part of the world of the performance. Most of the time, I think performances in the round serve to contain the imagined world of the performance within the boundaries of the playing space/stage. (I think performances in the round are too limiting. But that's just me.)
- I don't have time to get into the ways in which site-specific/promenade performances function – however, I think that by thinking about other kinds of stage architecture, you can work out the benefits/limitations of site-specific contexts. (Note: Once at a conference, someone whose name I can't remember argued that the masks used by Punchdrunk act like proscenium arches. I thought that was a really perceptive point.)

Consider: What is the best architectural context for your work to take place? How does your work need to change as it comes into contact with different spaces? (Jean-Guy Lucat's *The Open Circle* is really worth reading with this in mind. See also Gay McAuley, Iain Mackintosh and Marvin Carlson.)

The audience's understanding of the performance context is important/meaningful when establishing place too.

Form and genre shape our sense of space and place. An audience's expectations of stand-up comedy are different to their expectations of naturalistic drama. Immersive theatre has different 'rules' to pantomime. Different 'rules' invite different kinds of imaginative engagement with stage space. The stand-up is telling a story on stage. Hamlet is talking to the audience but living in historical Denmark. Nora from *A Doll's House* doesn't talk to the audience, she appears to be going about her day in 19th Century Norway. I think we experience/watch/think about/feel these spaces in different ways.

There's a lot going on. Given the audience the time and space to make sense of the world you are making on stage.

Something to play with:

A snap lighting change creates a very different sort of atmosphere to a four-second fade. Playing with transitions is a good way to look at the ways in which place is established by scenography. If you are an actor or a performer you might think about how you work with lighting and sound transitions when you set the scene.

Note: I prefer not to use the decimal system when programming lights, because I think it forces me to think more carefully and look harder at my decisions. Base 12 all the way!

Question Two: Who is that?

The audience should be curious about the people they see on stage.

They will also want to understand their relationship to performers during a show.

Here are some basic questions that might come to a spectator's mind when watching a performer come on stage.

Who is that?

And what's my relationship to them?

- Is that person on stage a character who lives in an imagined world?
- If they are in an imagined world, can they see me down here in the audience?
- If that person talks to me, are their questions rhetorical? Should I just sit here and be quiet. (As in the conventional staging of a Shakespeare soliloquy.)
- If that person says something to me, do they have fixed expectations about how I should respond? (The Dame in pantomime: 'HE'S BEHIND YOU!!!!')
- If that person asks me a question, should I respond and be ready to be made fun of. (Crowd work in stand-up. *Shrinks into a ball and tries to be invisible.*)

With these questions in mind we can ask what kind of work the performer/writer/director needs to do to help the audience understand the intended relationship.

I think asking these questions encourages us to think about the integration of dramaturgy/storytelling/acting/scenography in a way that prioritises and values the imaginative/cognitive work that the spectator is doing when they watch a performer.

Even in a context where the audience doesn't need to know who the performer is, I think they need to feel comfortable not knowing. (I'm thinking about Donald Rumsfeld here.)

There are lots of techniques that artists might use to help spectators answer the question 'Who is that?' I don't have space to introduce many of them here. But I do think it's worth pointing out some novel ways of thinking about the question:

1. Think about how the real and imagined spaces in which the performance takes place shapes the spectator's engagement with the performer.

We can apply lots of analysis about establishing place from Question One (Where are we?) to the question of 'Who is that?'. Context and character/persona are intimately linked.

2. Think about how form/context shapes the spectator's relationship to the performer.

One way of thinking about how form/context shapes the spectator's relationship to the performer is to consider the different kinds of pleasure that an audience takes from the work that different kinds of performers do. I think this is one of the most pragmatic ways in which spectators define/understand their relationships with performers.

(The following are suggestions, not definitive answers.)

Stand-up: The spectator enjoys the stand-up's ability to make me laugh and help me see the world in a new way.

Dance: The spectator enjoys the dancer's ability to manipulate their body in space - the ability to express themselves through movement. There is a lot of joy to be had when watching athleticism/mastery/control. (See also: sport.)

Acting: The spectator enjoys the actor's ability to make me understand another human being. The ability to make me believe in an imagined situation/place/character.

Performance Art: Maybe... The spectator enjoys the performance artist's ability to facilitate a space for reflection rooted in (inter)action as a kind metaphor? It's complicated. This is the best I can do right now.

If the performer understands what the audience might recognise as the core of the performer's work, maybe it gets easier to prioritise certain activities/skills/techniques/modes of engagement.

Note: Nicholas Ridout's *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems* is worth reading here. Michael Kirby's 'On Acting and Not Acting' is also still really worth looking at.

3. Finally, think about how the question of 'Who is that?' is answered in examples and forms of art that you admire.

In certain kinds of drama a character's identity/character is defined very quickly. In *Star Wars*, we immediately know Darth Vader is the baddie. In *Breaking Bad*, it takes a while (spoiler warning) to realise that Walter White is a baddie. Part of the pleasure of a thriller is working out whether characters are who we think they are.

Tone, pace and energy are often suggestive of a stand-up's personality. Bill Hicks is very different to Jerry Seinfeld.

Training helps to establish the performer's identity. Ballet dancers look and move very differently to contemporary dancers. Their training shapes their bodies, movement and, accordingly, the audience's perception of them

A few practical questions for performers and directors to think about:

How do you establish a character/persona? (Is it through movement? Voice? Rhythm? Timing? The things you say? The things you do?)

How long does the audience need to recognise who you are? (Don't introduce a character a place and a situation all at the same time. It overwhelms the audience and they are unlikely to understand what's going on.)

How do you establish relationships between different performers/characters? (Status? Atmosphere? Tension? Eye contact? Dialogue?)

How much time does the audience need to be given to recognise relationships between performers?

How much time do they need to work out their own relationship to the performers?

Sometimes the answer to the question 'Who is that?' is established during training. The skills that performers use to establish their identity on stage take a long time to learn. (You can't become an acrobat over-night.) Think about the ways in which training will inform your relationship to the audience.

Again, there's a lot going on. Given the audience the time and space to make sense of the world you are making.

Question Three: What is happening?

I can't decide whether this is the simplest question or the most complicated one.

Maybe it's a simple question that is very hard to help the audience answer.

It's difficult because it's hard to know if an audience know what's happening until the performance has finished and the reviews are in.

Perhaps the best thing to offer here is a set of questions to reflect on when making work:

Is story the centre of the performance?

If it is: Is the rehearsal/devising/writing process focusing enough on storytelling?

Are you giving the audience enough time and information to follow the plot?

Is there enough time for the audience to reflect on the narrative impact of different moments? (What are the dramatic/emotional/funny moments? Do they have enough time in the sun?)

If story isn't central to the performance, can you make the audience comfortable with the process of not following/understanding/getting what's happening?

Is there enough pleasure/entertainment to occupy the audience in the absence of a story?

Where is that pleasure found? (There are lots of good examples in contemporary circus and dance.)

If your work is non-narrative, what does it mean for your work to make sense?

Does your work follow rules? Are those rules perceptible for a spectator? (In most sports, the scoring system can be worked out relatively quickly without prior knowledge.)

Implicit in 'What's happening?' are the two previous questions: Who is that? Where are we?

If the audience know who they are watching and where they are meant to be, I am pretty confident that they will understand what's happening.

Finally, I have some advice that relates to the question of making work comprehensible:

In my experience it is better to start with character, story, action, atmosphere. Let theme and metaphor emerge organically. I don't think it helps to start with a theme or abstract concept. Leave them for the audience to find. Concentrate on clarity. (This is just an opinion.)

Watch lots of theatre/performance/film. Read lots of books. Reflect on why you liked it with reference to the choices and techniques used by the artist.

Have fun! (Optional.)