

The Actor-Audience Relationship in Environmental Theatre: Breaking and Reconstructing of Identity

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Abstract: This study focuses on the issue of identity in the actor-audience relationship within the category of environmental theatre. Environmental theatre shows a situation in which actors and audiences have no clear boundaries of distance. Actors and audience no longer exist only on and off stage in the theatre, the actor-audience relationship created by architectural sites is broken down. I will take an environmental theatre play staged at the Aranya Theatre Festival in China in June 2021 as a case study to illustrate what is broken in the actor-audience relationship and what identities are reconstructed, as well as the continuity and limitations of the play.

1. Introduction

Jerzy Grotowski stated that ‘the most essential element of theatre is the actor, and the Actor-Audience Relationship is an extremely important part of theatre.[1] I interpret this statement to show that without them, theatre would disappear. The actor-audience relationship is a significant part of theatre that involves aesthetics, audience and psychology, etc. In contemporary times, the creative expression of theatre by its makers arouses the desire of the audience, which constantly stimulates the development of the actor-audience relationship in theatre. Specifically, this study focuses on discussing the identity in the actor- audience relationship. I will use *Romeo and Juliet and Sea* as a case study for this research and use the characteristics of Environmental Theatre to specifically explore the identity. The play is based on Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* and it was performed three times at the Aranya Theatre Festival in China in June 2021. The director imaginatively setting the start of the play at 3am, ending the performance with the sunrise, and he sets the site at the junction of the beach and the sea. This setting utilises the entire space, freeing the legs of audience, breaking the boundary between actors and audience, and creating the actor-audience relationship in Environmental Theatre. This combination of theatre and natural environment has led me to think about the identity of the audience and the actors. Therefore, this essay will illustrate this argument in three aspects. In part one, I will elaborate on the part where the actor-audience relationship in this kind of theatre breaks down. In part two of the study, it will further discuss what new identities each of them assumes in the reconstructed actor-audience relationship after the break. In the Environmental Theatre, the viewers and the performers can have multiple identities and even be accompanied by new performers. In the final section of the research, I focus on the sustainability of the actor-audience relationship in this play, which includes the subjectivity of the audience, as well

as the forces of nature that lead to theatrical errors and how to reduce the impact of such errors on the relationship.

2. Breaking in environmental theatre

Environmental Theatre breaks with the actor-audience relationship of orthodox theatre. Breaking means that they are distinct, and I have tried to divide this relationship into two aspects: spatial distance and psychological distance. Firstly, 'In orthodox theatre, the spectators are separated from the performers, their seats are fixed, and the scenery is constructed only in one part of the theatre'.^[2] I take the example of the musical *Romeo and Juliet*, performed in 2001 at the Paris Convention Centre. There is a circular theatre with seats for up to 3,700 people, and the seats fans out around the stage, with no contact between the actors and the audiences in the play, creating a sense of distance. As the French philosopher Denis Diderot claimed, there is an invisible wall between the audiences and the actors, between the stage and the auditorium, which we call the 'fourth wall'. In contrast, Environmental Theatre integrates the actor-audience relationship. This type of theatre breaks the fourth wall, 'characterised by the creation and use of an entire space, that encompasses all the areas in which the audience or performers move'.^[3] In *Romeo and Juliet and the Sea*, there is no specific auditorium or performance area. The connection of the beach and the sea is the performance site. The audience is free to move around the entire site, sometimes standing next to the actors, sometimes watching them from a distance. The distance between the performers and the spectators is not fixed, but selectable. Thus, the focus of audience on the actors from their respective places leads to different patterns. Schechner holds that 'the audience in orthodox theatre is monofocal, whereas multifocal is the hallmark of Environmental Theatre, where the audience's focus is distributed throughout the space due to the simultaneous occurrence of several similar events or mixed media distributed throughout the space'.^[4] Therefore, this change in the structure of place allows for a change in the spatial distance between the audience and the actors. On the other hand, the setting of the theatre site affects the psychological distance between the audience and the performers. In orthodox theatre, the distance created by the fourth wall allows the aesthetic subject, the audience, to add a rational component to the theatrical art, to view the actors and the action from a third perspective and to reflect on the meaning of the play through the defamiliarisation effect. For example, in the musical *Romeo and Juliet*, the audience sits in the auditorium and stands in a third point of view, they outside the action to watch the experience of Romeo and Juliet. For the actors, they communicate with each other. For the audience, they communicate indirectly with the actors. This kind of way creates a sense of separation between the performers and the viewers, which helps the audience to develop a sense of theatre and bring more thought to the play. Therefore, the audience can have both a rational and an emotional experience while this theatrical activity is taking place. Conversely, Environmental Theatre invites the audience to become involved in the play with the actors. Because of the freedom of the theatre site, the audience can move around and communicate directly with the actors during certain episodes. The actors transfer their feelings to the audience, so that the audience's externalised feelings, thoughts and emotions can be directly connected to the actors. In the play *Romeo and Juliet and the Sea*, the actors are divided into two teams on the beach. The audience joins each of them, shouting the lines of the plot along with the actors, taking part in a family struggle between Montagu and Capulet in Romeo and Juliet. In this way, the emotions of the characters can be integrated into the emotional consciousness of the audience, and then the audience become immersed in the action. At the same time, the positive response that the audience gives to the actors will also reflect on the actors themselves, which gives the play a better visualisation. In general, compared to orthodox theatre, the break of the actor-audience relationship in Environmental Theatre means that the spatial and psychological distance between the spectators and the actors are reduced.

3. The reconstruction of identity

Environmental Theatre has created and restructured its own actor-audience relationship. The actors and the audience can take on new identities or other elements in the play. The audience here has a dual identity, both as spectators and as part of the play: as performers. Brook believes that 'we take any space and call it an empty stage. The fact that a person walks through this space under the watchful eye of others is enough to constitute a play'.^[5] I interpret this to mean that 'one person' is the actor, and 'others' are the spectators. So, if we want to constitute a play, the audience needs to perform the act of 'looking', and the actors must walk through the space, which means they need to perform in order to complete their task as 'actors', and then we form the show. In *Romeo and Juliet and the Sea*, the audience 'looks' and 'walks through' the theatrical process in different parts of the plot. They watch the actors on the beach gracefully pacing a grand Italian feast, and they observe the digger slowly bury a kissing couple in the sand. Also, they wait for the actors to put on their wings and take the form of Cupids after Juliet's death. But they are also involved, the actors lead part of the audience in with torches, accompanied by loud singing, they form the Montagu family, confer and decide to join forces to pull a large boat ashore and break into the Capulet family's party. At this point, then the audience becomes the actors, participating in and witnessing this Italian love story. The actors perform the act of 'gazing' at the end of the play, as they walk slowly from the beach to the sea with the wings of angels, in order to wait for the sun to rise and to become an actor that 'walks through' the dramatic space, at which point everyone present becomes the audience. On the other hand, I maintain that performers are not just individuals. 'Theatre can be without make-up, without costumes and scenery, without lighting and sound effects, without a separate performance space (the stage), etc., but it cannot be without a live communicative relationship between the actors and the audience'.^[6] So, this identity of the actors is integral to the play, and the indispensability of natural elements such as sunrise and sunny skies and music means that they are also performed as part of the play. In particular, Minghao Chen, the director of the play, ends the play with a sunrise, that allows the actors to find and express their nature and emotions with the wind, the sand and the sea, moving the story of Romeo and Juliet completely into nature. At the end of the play, the actor of Juliet waits for the sun to appear, along with everyone else present. A small rectangular screen is set up on the beach with the words 'That is the East, Juliet is the Sun', and the entire actors face east where the sun appears, and it is time for the sun to perform. Now, the audience of the play is everyone, they watch the sun slowly rise and celebrate the beauty of the play, also they complete the ritual of a great tragedy of love. At the same time, the play creatively uses music as an actor. When the orchestra performs, the stage belongs to the orchestra. Ten musicians play live, the musicians sense each other, and transform the sunrise into imagery. The music is not a catalyst for the performance but is appreciated as a separate and integral part of itself. The original performers and the others present become the 'watching' part, and all the energy in the space is concentrated in the orchestra and the sunrise, leaving the others enough quiet to imagine and think. In this way, the identities of the actors and the audience change in the piece, individuals take on the identities of both actors and audience, while inanimate objects such as the sun and the music also join the performers.

4. Restrictions caused by reconstructions

However, the compulsivity and uncontrollability of this theatre make me doubt that whether this type of Environmental Theatre can sustain its actor-audience relationship or not. As a postmodern extension of Environmental Theatre, 'It is a performance trend that uses installations and expansive environments to invite spectators' participation and move them around the space'.^[7] 'Inviting' then, means that the audience is free and selective. For example, in Immersive Theatre *Sleep No More*, which became popular in New York and was later performed in China, invited audience members

were free to move around the five floors of the hotel. The audience can follow different actors and reconstructing the fragmented information of the story themselves. This Environmental Theatre does not perform as the same kind of immersive theatre that was developed in later years. It is only partially involved in certain episodes, such as the pushing of the boat ashore, the family quarrel and so on. The audience only gets a more intimate interaction with the actors when they are asked to enter it, which is compulsive for them. Therefore, when the initiative of the audience is missing, the transformation of their identity into actors is not supported by their personal will, and there can be a lack of active theatrical interaction between the new 'actors' and the actors in the performance. But if we want to increase audience freedom and participation, we need to be clear about the extent to which we can mitigate the damage to the integrity of theatre life. For if audience freedom is increased in theatre, then the improvisation will increase as well, it means that the textuality of theatre is diminished. Although Schechner, the theorist of Environmental Theatre, moved from an early contempt for the text to a later re-emphasis on the script, this period shift also contributed to the blurring of the weight of the text in Environmental Theatre. In some plays with a strong freedom of the audience, such as Immersive Theatre, the play is overly weakened and the literary nature and meaning of the play is disregarded, the theatre remains on the surface in the service of commercialisation and its integrity of life is threatened. On the other hand, there is an element of uncontrollability in theatre. I restate that the actor and the audience, and the communicative relationship between the two, are an integral part of theatre. The actor's need to communicate with nature in theatre: the sunrise, means that the sun only appears as an 'actor' in this performance. In the last performance there was an unforeseen situation: the sun did not rise because the sky was very cloudy, and many clouds covered the sun. In fact, this was not the only time that something unexpected happened: halfway through the second act it rained, and both the actors and the audience had unexpected problems: For the actors, the rain was a tricky thing for their freshly painted wings, and the torches in their hands extinguished as well. And for the audience, this bad weather is a vital factor that influence their experience. They may put up umbrellas to see the show and be reluctant to participate as 'actors' because of the weather, and I have even observed some of the audience leave the stage in the middle of the show. If the rain and the lack of sunrise reduce the audience's motivation to participate in the theatre and affect the actors' performance, then the actor-audience relationship is also in danger. In fact, when the freedom of theatre is only partially present, there is not enough space for reversal when issues are made. On the one hand, the play is presented in a grand theatre festival, each play has a fixed schedule, the audience has booked tickets in advance and many people come from other regions to enjoy the plays. Thus, a change in one play not only affects the other plays, but also involves the audience's schedule. On the other hand, if the purpose of the play is to wait for the sun to rise, the integrity of the play will lose when the weather affects the appearance of the sunrise. In the final performance of *Romeo and Juliet and the Sea*, the director and actors bow to the audience at the end of the performance for the unfinished action. Therefore, reducing this theatrical compulsion or finding alternatives to the uncontrollability of the play can be a way of maintaining this actor-audience relationship.

5. Conclusion

This research demonstrates the transformation of the identities of the actors and the audience in this Environmental Theatre, which breaks down the spatial and psychological distance of the actor-audience relationship in orthodox theatre and restructures the plurality of identities. It is evident that the two elements of the actor-audience relationship are creatively developed in the multiple identities of the play. However, it is obviously clear that the play shows two thorny aspects that suggest that it has room for further enhancement. On the one hand, I have mentioned the way that reducing the compulsion of this theatre and giving the audience free space appropriately. Appropriateness means

not letting the audience in completely. If we let the audience into the play without rules, and they can move around and interact with the actors whenever they want, the textuality of the play itself is broken. A proper distance between actors and audience preserves the integrity of the play, which is why art is above life. On the other hand, for this type of theatre, the creator can design alternative scenarios in advance, that are consistent with the purpose and meaning of the theatre, to accommodate unexpected conditions such as cloudy or rainy days, otherwise it brings to the audience a meaningless fragment of action and performance art. If audiences are presented with empty and meaningless theatre shells, will they still be willing to pay for commercial value? And if so, will it be sustainable if it becomes a trend in contemporary theatre? My answer is no. I agree that contemporary theatre can be diverse, but no matter what form we use or how original an idea we create, we must not forget what must exist in the theatre: the actor, the audience and the meaning of the theatre.

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