

Literary Theatre and Embodied Theatre: A Practice-Based Research in Exploring the Authorship of a Performance

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Abstract : Theatre, as Ann Ubersfeld calls it, is a paradox. At once, it is both a literary work and a physical representation. Theatre as a text is eternal, reproducible, and identical while as a performance, theatre is momentary and never identical to the previous performances. In this dual existence of theatre, who is the author? Is the author the playwright who writes the dramatic text, or the director who orchestrates the performance, or the actor who embodies the text? From the poststructuralist lens of Barthes, the author is dead. Barthes' argument of discrete temporality, i.e. the author is the before, and the text is the after, does not hold true for theatre. A published literary work is written, edited, printed, distributed and then gets consumed by the reader. On the other hand, theatrical production is immediate; an actor performs and the audience witnesses it instantaneously. Time, so to speak, does not separate the author, the text, and the reader anymore. The question of authorship gets further complicated in Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" movement where the audience is a direct participant like the actors in the performance. In this research, through an experimental performance, the duality of theatre is explored with the authorship discourse. And the conventional definition of authorship is subjected to additional complexity by erasing the distinction between an actor and the audience. The design/methodology of the experimental performance is as follows: The audience will be asked to produce a text under an anonymous virtual alias. The text, as it is being produced, will be read and performed by the actor. The audience who are also collectively "authoring" the text, will watch this performance and write further until everyone has contributed with one input each. The cycle of writing, reading, performing, witnessing, and writing will continue until the end. The intention is to create a dynamic system of writing/reading with the embodiment of the text through the actor. The actor is giving up the power to the audience to write the spoken word, stage instruction and direction while still keeping the agency of interpreting that input and performing in the chosen manner. This rapid conversation between the actor and the audience also creates a conversion of authorship. The main conclusion of this study is a perspective on the nature of dynamic authorship of theatre containing a critical enquiry of the collaboratively produced text, an individually performed act, and a collectively witnessed event. Using practice as a methodology, this paper contests the poststructuralist notion of the author as merely a 'scriptor' and breaks it further by involving the audience in the authorship as well.

Keywords : practice based research, performance studies, post-humanism, Avant-garde art, theatre

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