TELEPRESENCE IN TEXT BASED THEATRE

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents and analyses the stage resource of Telepresence in text-based theatre and establishes the different categories and possible ways for its use in the production of a show. It also establishes the discursive precursors and principles that should be considered in order to develop and push forward this particular genre. Through various practical examples based on contemporary theatrical experimentations, it defines the necessary characteristics a show must have to be classified within the genre. *This paper also establishes the need of appropriate analysis and critical models to study this genre that besides the academic value they will have in themselves will surely help theatre makers develop their practice[1].*

KEYWORDS: Theatre. Telepresence. Staging resources. Online Theatre. Digital Theatre. Geographically Displaced Theatre.

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[1] Almost ten years and a pandemic later here is one example of what I was asking for:
https://www.americantheatre.org/2021/11/05/a-manifesto-for-the-future-stage-performance-is-a-human-right/

In 1997, at the Albéniz theatre in Madrid, a version of Hamlet called "Elsinor" was presented, it was directed by the Canadian theatre director Robert Lepage. This show, in which a single actor depicts all the characters, is a staging manual. The resources, both technical and technological, are so dramaturgically justified that it is possible to admire their use without stopping to think about them.

The relationship between the text, the scenographic structures and their movement and the projections, flows without any dissonance. One of the scales that establish that a resource is effective in a staging is precisely its "dramatic overlap", that is its inner coherence throughout all the elements.

The "dramatic overlap" in the staging of "Elsinor" allows the critical viewer to analyse the show while enjoying it at the same time. As Umberto Eco would put it: It allows us to remain vigilant and at the same time to let ourselves be carried away by the pleasure it provokes.

My research on "Telepresence in text-based theatre", without me knowing it, started here. In that aesthetic satisfaction that arises from contemplating the powerful articulation of the good with the beautiful. Being more specific, it all started in the subsequent analysis of the use of video cameras and projectors in the scene between Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern.

The solution that, in this case, Lepage gives to the problem of having three characters on stage and a single actor is the following: Hamlet is on the threshold of a door in the centre of the stage, turning his back to the audience. When he looks to the right, where we understand Guildenstern is, a camera picks up Hamlet's face and projects it live onto a panel on the right of the scene. The panel covers a quarter of the stage's length and its entire height. Hamlet's face is massive. In the same way, when he looks to his left, same thing happens with Rosencrantz, what the viewer sees is Hamlet's face live on the panel looking at the other character, and never projected simultaneously. We are looking through Rosencrantz and Guildenstern eyes.

Is in this way, through Hamlet, his "friends" are "on stage". We understand what they say and feel, without the need for them to be present, or for us to hear their voice or even see them. Seeing Hamlet's reactions makes clear what happens in the "reverse shot", because we are looking through the eyes of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. We empathize with the perception of the absent character and thus that character materializes on stage without being present in any other way whatsoever.

This can be understood as a small precursor experience of what telepresence will become, but conceptually it cannot be taken any further, and we are in 1997.

The result of this resource that Lepage is applying here refers us to the concept of **remediation** and more specifically to that of **immediacy** (**transparent immediacy**), a notion introduced in "Writing Space" (Bolter, 2001[2]), and explained in "Theatre and new technologies: basic concepts" (Abuín González, 2008[3]). Abuín says the following:

*The **immediacy** of the spectator is intended to forget the presence of the medium and accept the convention according to which he is truly in front of the represented objects. From the epistemological point of view, immediacy is equivalent to the **absence of mediation** (or the appearance of absence): a medium can erase itself and disappearing for the viewer, who can contemplate the objects directly.*

Lepage's idea is a twist on this approach.

On the other hand, a good example of the other side of the remediation coin can be found eleven years later, in 2008; German theatre director Thomas Ostermeier presents another "Hamlet" at the Teatre Lliure in Barcelona. This proposal also uses a live camera on stage and a screen on which

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[2] Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print. By Jay David Bolter
https://www.routledge.com/Writing-Space-Computers-Hypertext-and-the-Remediation-of-Print/Bolter/p/book/9780805829198#

[3] http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/teatro-y-nuevas-tecnologas-conceptos-bsicos-0/

what the camera captures is projected. However, unlike in Lepage's "Hamlet", the use of this technology does not solve a scenic problem but rather enhances the director's proposal.

In this case, instead of immediacy, we speak of **hypermediacy**, the scenic resource that aims to **remind the user of the explicit use of the medium**. Here the camera is manipulated by the actors live on stage. We see it. They project their points of view to us. The camera is part of the world of the piece. We follow their movement. We follow the characters that Hamlet focuses on, one by one. We get the feeling that these characters grow under the lens / magnifying glass of the camera, as if their emotions were resized in our perception at the same time their faces and bodies are on screen.

If the use of projections as backdrops or decorations sometimes makes the actors look smaller on stage, when the actors themselves are projected the opposite effect takes place.

When the staging is coherent and the actors can work within it, the power of the live performance, at the size that the projection allows, moves the viewer in a visceral way. The **double stage presence** mixes and plays with the codes with which the viewer deciphers perception, a viewer who, in most cases, is still used to the fact that what he is seeing is, generally, two independent languages, filmic and scenic.

In Ostermeier's "Hamlet"[4], a dramatic universe that basks in mud, both literally and metaphorically, the dirt on the detail of the very first, unedited plants takes on a new meaning. It brings us closer to the characters, we perceive other dimensions in them that is also sometimes dissociated into acting for the stage versus acting for the camera, because in the world that this staging creates, it is plausible that Hamlet has a camera during the wedding of her mother and his uncle, and it is likely that the characters would interact with it.

This resource, as Ostermeier uses it, has been and continues to be used extensively.

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[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvW4sXDBEwI

Perhaps the company that makes the best use, not only of the technology of live projection but of **stage hypermediation** is "The Builders Association"[5], founded in 1994 by Marianne Weems, "The Builders Association" is a New York based performing arts company, creating original productions. The company uses any tool that can push the boundaries of "conventional theatre". Devising their theatre, "The Builders Association" productions[6] mix staging, text, video, sound, and architecture to tell stories about the human experience in the 21st century.

But why when the subject is dramatic telepresence in text-based theatre, I start by talking about shows or companies that don't use them?

In the genealogical tree that links technology with theatre, the mother of shows that use telepresence in text theatre should be a theatre like the one in the examples, an idea of theatre that connects directly with Greek tragedy and not with a performance made by technicians who want to share and showcase their new hardware or software.

In "Theatre and new technologies: basic concepts", Abuín Gonzalez attributes the origin of digital theatre to the "spirit of Black Mountain College"[7], in happening and in performance, ways that in the 60s began to openly involve the public and direct their cooperative role during the creative process […] ". There is something to think about there, but theatre creators who decide to digitize and hypermediate our productions should keep our eyes on texts. The perspective of Abuín González reflects a certain practice that leads us to the "mass amateurization[8]" of the contemporary hypermediated scene, making it a technological expo of variable duration instead of an interesting theatrical offer that generates community, memory, and box office.

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[5] https://new.thebuildersassociation.org/

[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sy5zhAYzeXA

[7] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Mountain_College

[8] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass_amateurization

The virtues of Lepage's, Ostermeier's and The Builders Association's shows are hardly found in shows in which telepresence appears on stage, but they are the standard to follow. We can extrapolate the technical and artistical components they share as follows:

From a technical point of view:

- The use of a video camera.
- The use of projectors.
- A lighting design that allows such projection.
- Hardware and software that allows live editing.

From an artistic point of view:

- Live stage performance that is interwoven with live performance on camera. It is necessary to consider the great difficulty that this process entails for an actor not trained in going from one way to another, without having the support on the means and the artistic team each one requires.

The actor used to perform for the camera, who plays his role with small gestural nuances and minimal variations, is also used to having his voice picked up by a microphone held by someone who follows his movements. Except in large productions such as those of the National Theatre, the theatre actor who plays his role simultaneously for the camera (or who tele-enacts his role) and for the scene, must understand the restrictions that the technology available in the show is going to impose. For example, sometimes an actor must continue projecting his voice and directing himself towards a fixed microphone but while interpreting with the gestures and movements that he would use in the cinema and still be credible. That interpretative dissociation is difficult. It takes solid prior training or lots of practice to meet this challenge successfully.

- Another common feature of the experiences described with telepresence in text theatre is the projection of live footage.

• The third common element is that they are all based on a dramatic text, structured, and rehearsed beforehand. And here is the reason why I started talking about those shows. This interpreting of a dramatic text, structuring and rehearsing is also the main difference in the use of this resource in text theatre with the use that is given to it in performances and other artistic stage manifestations that do not consider a textual basis necessary.

To defend the perspective that telepresence in theatre connects with the Greeks, we could say, relying on "Scenic Mutations. Mediamorphosis, transmediality and post-production in contemporary Chilean theatre", (Espinosa and Miranda, 2009), which has been mediamorphosed from the use of live video projections on stage.

The telepresence in the theatre that is sustained on a textual basis, can be used in different contexts, dramatic speeches or staging depending on the message that you want to emit. As a playwright and theatre director I have experimented with these dramatic speeches on fifteen shows and the results could not have been more diverse.

How to study these results without precise analysis models for this new discipline?

We could approach the study of these results sociocritically. Among the rest of the social factors within which a work is produced, starting by considering the hierarchy of the team that stages the show and reflecting on this hierarchical organization would help to understand the social context that generates and produces the work and therefore one of the speeches in which the show, being circumscribed in it, emits. And it is a very powerful speech, because deliberately or not, the first message that is emitted when using telepresence on stage, is a declaration of intentions that will present the team that performs this show as experimental, with all the added burden that this carries. The scenic freedom of the creator is curtailed in relation to the public that is known to attract this type of proposal.

In the staging process, there are two clearly differentiated cases, so pragmatically we should consider those shows in which the playwright has written the text, considering telepresence as an integral part of a scene or even of the play and this is specified in the text and those in which the

use of telepresence is an option of the director or the company or a product of a work produced through a "devised theatre".

To delve into these dramatic speeches or stagings themselves, I will break down their formal possibilities. They are as follows:

1. When the audience is in the same space and the characters who intervene through telepresence are on a stage / space without an audience:

1.1.- The entire work must be broadcast live to a geo-delocalized audience with respect to the actor or actors that make up the entire cast. From my point of view, this option can continue to be included within what is called "theatre" only if there is a two-way channel open between the audience and the actors, that is, if the energy of said audience affects the performance.

1.2.- Traditional theatre in which the characters interact with each other (i.e. the collectors).

1.3.- Immersive theatre in which the characters interact with the viewer (i.e. Long Distance Affair).

1.4.- A part of the cast is geo-delocalized with respect to other actors and the audience and that cast is present throughout the entire performance (i.e. New Yorkers in The Plane).

1.5.- The resource is used only in parts of the play while other scenes take place in the physical space that the rest of the cast shares with the public (i.e The Aristocrats in Ronensbourgh).

2. When the text is written so that the public is in several spaces and the characters who intervene in telepresence simultaneously have a live audience.

2.1.- All scenarios have equal status and all actors are telepresented in another scenario and thanks to telepresence the two are in a common space in which drama is possible. That is, Juan is physically in a theatre in Madrid and is telepresented in a London theatre while Mary is physically in a theatre in London and is telepresented in a theatre in Madrid. An example of this case is the

play called "Virtual Dinner Party" that took place in (between) New York and Berlin in which both the New York and Berlin stages had a table and diners seated at it, both Tables ended in a screen that gave the illusion of extending that table as the same scenery had been used. Both New York and Berlin audiences attended the same performance but as if each were on one side of the mirror. Co-present in a space that is neither that of one nor that of the other but a perceptual common space.

2.2.- There are scenarios subordinate to others (i.e. the Madrid scenario with respect to the London scenario in The Plane).

Nadja Linnine Masura, quite rightly, within her doctorate in digital theatre carried out in 2007, lists four characteristics necessary to be able to classify a show within the digital genre:

Masura identifies "four necessary conditions" for digital theatre to be both digital and theatre (6–8):

1. A limited interactivity of message. That is, audience members interact with the performers but not to the extent that their distinct roles dissolve; although the audience may participate to the creation of the event, "the messages flow primarily *from* performers *to* the audience.

2. The presence of verbal communication. Digital theatre works contain "either spoken language or text constituting a narrative or story.

3. A co-present audience and actor. Meaning that "liveness" is not sacrificed or, in other words, performers and audience(s) share public space [not necessarily physical of course] at the site of the primary artistic event.

4. The existence of digital technology in the central creation of the performance (not as an archival tool)," which is self-explanatory.

Following his scheme, the categorization proposed here for the case of telepresence in the text theatre would look like this:

1. Use of telepresence in the staging.

2. Presence of an actor or actors performing live.

3. Open communication channels between the public and the actors

4. Pre-established structure.

5. Dramatic text, visual and sound elements.

The rest of the manifestations that, even making use of telepresence on stage, do not meet the rest of the conditions may be artistically excellent but they will not advance this new stage genre, especially if they lack a dramatic textual basis to support them.

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