

In the Wings: On the Possibility of Theatrical Space

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Abstract

This text inquires in a poetic way the possibility of theatrical space by exploring the question "what space makes theatre possible?". The central argument is that theatre creates an intensive yet fragile space of possibility and the possible through creating affects. The text, written in between a prelude and an epilogue, approaches this space of desire and intensity indirectly by exploring the perspective of audience, actors and "angels" as they are seized by desire and awaiting the play in the wings. We argue through interweaving these three angles that every play presupposes a twilight zone, a connecting boundary which forms a transition into the magical where dream and desire can take over, where the virtual and the everyday can become connected and where new lines of flight might emerge. The aesthetic experience of theatre is characterised by participating in a clearing of openness where truth happens and where its practical implications might be heard. There is no change possible without engaging with the open-endedness when entering the wings of theatre.

Prelude

Enter: The caterpillar -
Creeping up their sleeve -
Looking for a space.

Wrapped in expectation -
Cocooning, soft and safe -
Away, yet in it all.

Exit: the butterfly -
Feeling of being possible -
Wings unfolding.

Theatrical Lines of Flight

„The rest is silence“ is how Hamlet ends his part in the play and how Robert Wilson starts his monologic version of Hamlet to indicate that it is as much here that the play starts, that play becomes possible. The possibility of theatre is the silence, a line of flight that affects us.

There is quite some magic in the silence before a play starts and theatre becomes possible. It is the moment when one hears the echo of the theatre bell, when the lights

are dimming and last coughs are dying out. It is a silence of intensity and tension that asks the Lyotardian question: "Arrive-t-il?" - does it happen? It is when you keep your breath while you should be breathing out.

There is also quite some danger in that silence, alerting us to the fragile space of theatre. Any moment that space can implode, any fraction of time might escape us, a resonance might start: an anticipation of transformation.

Theatre is a space of possibilities, a space of the possible. This is our question: What space makes theatre possible? What does it mean to consider the performance space as the site of possibility? What is this hierophantic space (Gk. hieros, holy; phainein, to show) which is the site of ritual, the place of theatre. In theatre, everything is possible; nothing is fixed. Time collapses and slips, characters change, transform themselves, gender is fluid, nothing is disallowed, everything and anything can enter the site. Nothing is what it seems. These familiar attributes of theatre come to represent a place where anything is

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possible. So it provides an opportunity for the most "dramatic" and revealing transformations to take place.

For our answer, we will not enter the stage directly, nor try to conceive the theatrical space unswervingly since no representation of this "empty space" is possible. The only possible way is by entering the wings, the sides of the scene, the off-scene. The wings surround the scene and form the scene. From the wings, audiences, actors and angels - each with their own angle - go out and meet on the in-between stage. The interplay of their multiple outlooks - this multiple authorship - creates the intensity and the surprise that is called theatre.

Now the bell rings! Follow the audiences gathering in the foyer. Look at the actors waiting in the wings. Take on the wings of angels and troubadours that make magic and carry them like the Gods that brought us theatre. Silence emerges. Imagine to be *in* Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and to hear Benjamin Britten's operatic music where three parties form our three angles we think co-construct the possibility of the theatrical space: the lovers as *audience* who watch the play by the craftsmen; the craftsmen who as *amateur actors* rehearse their upcoming play and the *fairies* who like *angels* intervene in matters of life and love. Shakespeare let these story lines run alongside, creating for each other surprises and lines of flight. In this interspace where one doubts whether this is dream or real, magic or counterfeit, what matters emerges: otherness, desire, love. Every play presupposes a midsummer night, a twilight zone, where such strange conjunction appears and where dream and desire take over. Silence again! The lights dim as if the sun went under. As if the night falls, there is some diffuse light left, a twilight. And then that magic meeting might happen as all sneak into that empty space: audience, actors and ... angels.

Audience

Playing with Persians and Turks, I realized that for the past 40 years I've been rushing. Forget notes and how you articulate them - think about space.

Cellist Yo-yo Ma, Time Magazine (NZ edition), April 4, 2005

The first wing in producing a site of possibility involves a wing of the theatre, the foyer. This lobby area inside the theatre but not yet in view of the stage is the space where the audience begins preparation. As the audience enters this outer space, they begin to distinguish and separate themselves from the outside world. Not yet in sight of the stage, they are at a threshold of sorts. They join the collective identity of the audience and leave behind their everyday props. While the actors are taking on a role, audience members leave certain roles behind. While the actors' role is a consigned, theirs is unconsigned. Their role is one of openness to presentation, to prepare to receive and project. To place themselves into whatever comes next, to take the role of the yet-to-be-known Other. There is magic here as well, and hard work to be done in this wing if we are to create a site of possibility. In order to make them ready to enter a space, magic is pushed into the wings.

Quite literally, the magic might creep up their legs and enter their chest, massaging them. As they enter the wing, their space slowly darkens and packs them in. More and more spectators are let into the foyer, but the theatre stage is kept closed. They are forced into the wings, and wings are forced upon them. The foyer lights are slowly turned down until their wing is an intimate one, while space is closing down around them. The magic of music imposes upon them some emotion. As lights are turned down, the music is turned up and is creeping, sneaking upon the audience, that, only half aware, begins to shout. The wings

- more and more crowded - push the audience members closer and closer upon each other. Perhaps they are as close now as they will be in their seats. This magic in the wings requires them to engage more closely, speaking and laughing louder and louder while still moving closer and closer to each other in their shrinking, darkening space. Personal boundaries collapse and a sort of sublime madness creeps upon them in the darkness and urges them to shout: a crowded intimacy and a packed roar. How far is this from the image of howling tribal ritual trance under a midnight sky? A rave has crept upon them in this threshold. Outside is well out but they are still not yet in.

They are at rupture at the prospect of pouring into the site of possibility. They are prepared for transformation. They have half-embraced a yet-to-be known purpose. The inner doors are opened and they pour into the site. They all face the stage in a pregnant moment. The energy is unchanged but silence comes and attention is directed towards the stage. It is the space and time of a site of possibility. Their rave is still present; a silence screams echoes off the walls and keeps all else out of the liminal. It is an intense yet fragile moment. The roaring silence protects the space and invites more magic.

Actors

Astrolog:
 Beginne gleich das Drama seinen Lauf!
 Der Herr befiehlt's, ihr Wande, tut euch auf!
 Nichts hindert mehr, hier ist Magie zur Hand:
 Die Tepp'che schwinden, wie gerollt vom Brand;
 Die Mauer spaltet sich, sie kehrt sich um,
 Ein tief Theater scheint sich aufzustellen,
 Geheimnisvoll ein Schein uns zu erhellen,
 Und ich besteige das Proszenium.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust, Der Tragödie zweite Teil*

But what do actors think of the wings, the borders of the stage they will enter, the marginal, the liminal, the points of entry? These areas deserve their particular attention because they are the places, which mark the boundary of the transition into the magical, where the dramatic persona is assumed or, less easily, discarded before and after the performance.

In modern theatre, the auditorium is darkened before a performance in order to focus on the frame of action, on the site of performance. Darkness is in contrast to light. By revealing the action in the light and, at the same time, by eclipsing the audience, traditional theatre is theological in character. It divides the world into sacred and profane areas. Its boundaries are marked by the proscenium arch, the shadowy world of the rear of the stage, and by the front stage, the space between actors and audience. It is a site of ritual performance and transformations take place within its framing. Consequently, to enter the site of performance is to cross a threshold into a place where anything is possible. Illusion, fantasy, time-slips, reversals and doubling - all are the vehicles for the creation of theatre. Like the entrance in the wall through which the *Steppenwolf* passes into *the Magic Theatre*, there is always a threshold to be crossed by both the actors and the audience. For the actor, the transformation takes place in the wings or, more precisely as the actor leaves the wings and enters the performance space. The wings are the liminal space between the realm of the backstage area where preparations are made, costumes sewn, props mended, where production staff rush around creating the set, where mugs of tea are left abandoned, the green room conversations left behind. The wings are the narrow passage way between the curtains or the

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flats where the actor sets aside present concerns in the service of the role, touches some favourite talisman or prays to some favoured god, *assumes* the role and mounts the stage.

To mount to the place defined by the proscenium arch, both literally and metaphorically, is to enter a performance space which is circumscribed by context, text and intention. The site of performance is the spatial context of the dramatic act. It is here, away from the rehearsal room that the performance takes on a life of its own. It is also here that it is regulated, ordered and sustained. Consequently, to enter the space is to enter into the trajectory of the performance. This is true of all kinds of performances and sites. This is as true of the theatre as, say, a wedding ceremony or even to the task of having to begin to work again after a period holiday. There is an effort involved in preparation. The actor must *assume* the role to enter the performance. This is why the idea of the "wings" is so crucial to the performance site. In the wings, what immediately precedes the actor's entrance is set aside in favour of the dramatic performance. The play is in progress and to enter the performance is to accept that this is King Lear and not Cleopatra. The stage is set, the drama in progress, the trajectory of the action defined. Always there is the anticipation, the anxiety, the excitement which precedes entry.

The apparent coherence and consensus regarding the accomplishment of the performance depends primarily on the successful assumption of the role and on masking. The dramatic mask conceals ambivalence about the role, about performance and about the production but it is not infallible nor, indeed, irreversible. When the mask fails the performance is thrown into question: becomes ludicrous. For the actor, the extent of his/her degradation is revealed. The actor has not successfully *carried it off*, the preparation has been incomplete, the role fails.

However, when the mask is made grotesque, when the actor forces the role to and beyond its dramatic possibilities the mask fails and, in turn, the performance. There is a nicety in the interpretation of a role which the actor finds not only in the performance of the other players but in the mutuality which develops with the audience. In the wings, this is all in prospect. The actor prepares. The audience settles back in the darkness of the auditorium. A hush descends on all present. The magic of theatre is about to take place.

Angels and Troubadours

Silence

Questions:

Does or should anything survive the space?

Intensify the moment of possibility and leave it there.

Icarus

And the rest is silence.

Beyond the safe ground of origin in the theatre and its representations in language, a world of imagination challenges us to create, to take off. There is an unbearable lightness, captured in the figures of troubadours and angels that the order of discourse has sought to tame and control. This is the preoccupation of management (*manos*, the hand that touches and controls; *contra-* + *rotulus*, against what is rolling); to control, to secure a conduct against the openness of angels and troubadours. Here we seek not to add to the enormous history of control but to affirm life 'in the wings'. We do so following the playful tactics of angels and troubadours. Next to audience and actors, as a third "group", they form what Michel Serres calls "the third", a third space.

How could the practices of troubadours and angels work as tactics of resistance against the vulnerability of the virtual to the directedness of the actual? How could we describe their ways of lightness and ease? They seem to emerge in the in-betweens: being present and perishing; earth and

heaven; the virtual and the actual; sensing and sense-making. We learn from these travellers of knowledge, heralds of messages, that the point is not to find that language (of science) according to which we can determine the origin or the truer truth. We do not seek the unified language according to which we can judge the accuracy and order of the partial and secondary. Our focus - as Michel Serres has stressed in his studies of angels and troubadours - is on the constant work of translation: the interconnections between the virtual and the actual, between the shining language of angels, poets and troubadours and the everyday practices of people. These interconnect, transform and create openings, tendencies to become in unforeseeable directions. We could learn from them how to travel and travel lightly.

These angels, they keep secrets, bring promises, make us move, protect our lives as well as that they bring our stories to new regions, those masters of wings. From the ripeness of imaginations resting in the regions of angels, the troubadours return with the force of higher sanction: the surplus of the real, the lives of angels. And those troubadours are 'pling plunging' their instruments, gesturing towards the possibility and leaving you in a state of singing. They are travellers in music, poetics of sound, looking for the moment, luring in the wings, creating the event, transforming our corporeality in making us dance.

For a life in the wings, or, for knowing how to deal with ending up in the wings, we suggest that we study the lives of angels and troubadours. These have developed tactics of response to the affects of art, to the magic in life. They take flight - with imagination and music - and seek the possibilities of the event, the moment that escapes language but prepares another space where our passions are received and transform what we took ourselves to be.

Resumé

"...[W]inged with desire"

William Shakespeare, Henri VI

Theatre, as many of us can testify and bear witness of, can create affects which produce an immediate response. It is not the meaning of the experience but this response which is important to us. This response to one's tendency to become, to take flight, to move is what we describe as the response to finding oneself 'in the wings'.

Why do we say that the meaning of this experience of theatre is not what's important, but the response as such? The long-standing tendency to seek 'the meaning of...' is the result of having invested heavily in a representationalist epistemology. In contrast, we stress a world of simulacra, of imaging, of desire. Instead of an order of levels of being, we emphasize a series of actual-virtual relationships. We see actuality and virtuality as coexisting, and ask you to think of the virtual not as "...secondary or caused by some already given, self-present and undifferentiated actual being." (Colebrook, 2002: 162). 'In the wings' we respond to this interconnection between the actual and the virtual as they interconnect and transform each other and open up new possibilities for new becomings - new lines of flight. The affects as responses pull us back from composite meanings, from the tendency to interpret and to find the deeper meaning.

Art is productive. It has an excess one might call magic, but that we have tentatively called 'the wings' in the present essay. These wings are the possibility that carries you in the opening or interruption of art. From the connections that art produces - the connection between story and actors; actors and audience; between people in the audience; play and audience; etc. - there will always be a possibility for further becomings. The connections are never fully determined as to what outcome they will produce. There is always a drift, a surplus,

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an unforeseen - a line of flight. Theatre, in being precisely productive in this sense, is 'dangerous' as it never promises to keep the discourses within the laws of order. You take off in the wings, and in that moment you cannot say where you will touch ground again.

Magic is here something different from the bourgeois concept of theatre that takes the theatrical space for its entertainment and escape. Instead we follow Heidegger who said in his famous essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1971) that the aesthetic experience is characterised by participating in a clearing of openness where truth happens. People that become part of such an experience are 'standing within' this truth as it happens in the work (of art). We find this emphasised also in Vattimo's (1992) and in Benjamin's (1999) discussions of the aesthetic experience where a blow or shock marks the discontinuity, which leaves us in a state of disorientation. Theatre is also in this sense dangerous, as it creates intensities, organises our desire, our investments in affects - it intensifies the political. It brings us to the possible without delivering what it is the possibility of. It is *the* possible (the virtual), and as such it is immensely vulnerable and should perhaps - for this reason - also remain personal.

There is maybe a necessary impossibility here: the 'what to do with'-question that our habit of sense-making imposes on us in the moment of possibility. We do not *know* what to do with our wings. Yet, this is when we are faced with our response to art, and where we are pulled back from our concepts and located in the openness where it all can start - where flying, imagining, magic is possible. In the wings the actual and the virtual interconnect and transform each other.

Epilogue

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended:

That you have but slumbered here,
While these visions did appear;
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend.
If you pardon, we will mend.

William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream

After the play, as the doors of the parterre and the stalls open, as actors undress and take of mascara, as silence is broken up and thresholds overstepped, all what we hear is a murmuring, the strange and intense echo of transformation. The vacant theatre is no longer silent.

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