

Video essay

Theatre and Its Enchantments

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Disclaimer

Theatre is full of failure and risk. The digital medium, too, is fragile. Caridad Svich is interested in how the digital is dependent on stability and how this echoes the fact that theatre deals with instability on a granular level. The glitches in this video are therefore intentional.

In theatre there is always failure. It is the eternal rope upon which the high-wire act of making is built. At every moment something may break, not connect, fall apart, lose its way. The beauty of theatre is that it is always at risk, on the edge, vulnerable to itself and others, and enthralled by the mechanism of its own co-creation with an audience.

In some theatre dramaturgy acts as a tyrant imposing its structures upon the reality of being in a room with other people. The fixed nature of the event may allow for little to no gaps in the apparatus, and as such, lock the audience and players too from the pleasure of feeling as if they are making up the game on the spot.

In theatre and performance, the expressive impulse guides the work's making and articulation. When societies are flourishing, theatre can sometimes feel settled and content with itself. When societies are in crisis, theatre can be a place where the monsters are reckoned with, and future stories can be born. But sometimes, the expressive impulse wants nothing to do with theatre, tells it to go away, and get lost, and refuses the ceremony that is necessary for its existence. Some call this the death of theatre.

In crisis – personal, social, political – theatre throws itself onto the life raft in the middle of the world's ocean and wonders, when, the oceans are gone, how will theatre go on? During war, which happens all the time in the world although some leaders pretend that sometimes there are times of peace, theatre sends messages of darkness from the dark and messages of light. The precarity or sometimes impossibility of people being able to gather means that theatre seeks other means by which to send its light into the universe, and often that light is as simple as a few words said from one person to another on the telephone or another device, or from one room to another.

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Throughout many histories theatre has died and died again, somehow finding its way back from the ashes. It is a resilient beast, after all, and sometimes a curious creature. People sometimes argue about this word 'creature' because perhaps they think it means 'freak', but it is useful to consider how theatre as creature is theatre as elemental force connected to the natural world. In times of accelerated climate change, decentring the human may be the only way to regain an understanding of the mutual co-dependency theatre and its people have with the plants, animals and insects, earth and skies and oceans again. We have little time. Theatre knows this. This time now is precious, and the events put on in our theatres carry with them more urgency than before, for this may be the last of our theatres.

In theatre, writing occurs through signs visual, spatial, choreographic, corporeal and verbal. There are many languages in the theatre working in concert with one another. Already here there is an act of harmony even when staging dissent. The act of gathering precedes the act of sharing. The company that gathers to make the play/event in space across time is an audience too and a living document of its time.

In the theatre's grooves the record sings and bleats and moans and carries on. It is not decorous. It is a mess, bloody and rough and prone to fits. Time is extended. Time has collapsed. Things get broken and desire's variable directional impulse animates everything with its mercurial passion. Who are we in the theatre when we see and hear it? What is the séance that occurs when the ghosts are summoned, and the dead are awakened?

In theatre, the ghosts sit in the gods and watch the play, but the ghosts sit on the stage/site of play. Everyone that has been here before – every rude joke, snicker, warm laugh, hearty bellow, tears of joy and rage – is acknowledged even as the new non-ghosts enter space, thinking they are not interested in the spiritual. But the medium is at work and the spirits are alive and the theatre dances with them because it is an act of communion.

In theatre, people pretend to be good actors, but really what does this mean? Is acting an act of decorum or an act of selflessness? Is goodness about showing off what one can do or about just being in space and finding a grain of truth? What would happen if you made theatre with the same tools with which you made it the first time? Some cloth, an old children's costume, a battered lightbulb, a paper crown, a plush toy or two, and the tiny race car you kept in the drawer as a remembrance of youth? A theatre made with old inconsequential objects that take on meaning because the audience makes the meaning.

In theatre, a song or two, they say, or sometimes more, can get the heart beating. It is the power of song that can lift the spirit and channel the past and project into the future. The song can be quiet, or it can be loud and take up loads of space. But the song carries across and along the path of the stars because in music there is stardust.

In the theatre, the people gather in one place and the other people come in and gather in another and they look at one another. Sometimes they are happy to be there. Sometimes they are scared. Oftentimes they do not know why they are there. But someone said an event will happen. And actions will take place, and so some of the people that come in pick up some things and then move them around and then

consider what they are making and maybe even ask the other people that showed up what they think is happening and pretty soon an hour or six have gone by where everyone has been trying to figure out how to fight the dark.

In the small space that is theatre an entire world is put. And it is an absurd thing. But people do it anyway. On this stage/site the entirety of human existence in ten minutes or one hour! An entire war and the people that suffered because of it! The small space grows large even though the space itself stays the same. It is all an illusion. And for a while things feel less absurd or more absurd than ever. And we all wonder why so many terrible things happen in the world and why more joyous things cannot and then we remember, we, who are just people, that people are very strange and it's always going to be a battle between warring impulses and peaceful ones, and we are and ever will be learning how to try to be better people.

In the theatre children's games and rituals are played. So are things like cabaret, stand-up, pantomime and things that feel like reality TV or press conferences or lectures or bad television. In theatre, plays sometimes get in the way of theatre.

In theatre there are always several narratives at work. The ones the players come in with, the ones the audience comes in with, and the ones that the players oversee because they have been with the narrative longer than the audience has. Sometimes the audience knows the narrative because it is familiar and sometimes the audience comes in with its multiple narratives in their pockets and brains and it overwhelms the narrative that they came to witness. This happens in the theatre just like it happens at other events. But for some reason it happens in theatre more. Perhaps there needs to be more space for the audience to just be an audience. Theatre needs to let go of its control over things. Except the lights. Because the lights are nice. They shine upon things that need to be seen.

In theatre, what is seen is a mirror. But that mirror does not look like what you look like when you look into the mirror but more like when a painter paints your portrait and says, see, this is you, and you look at the painting and it is of a mountain or a Cornish hen or a square looking at a circle or another person entirely. This is called truth.

In theatre, desire wins, and this means that nothing is ever settled and when you leave the theatre, even if it's just the one in your living room, you are a different person and that thing that was made between you and some people and things is going to be inside you for a long time. And when you are older, and years go by, you will wonder what it is you saw and heard in the theatre, and it will remind you of home.

Supplementary materials. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S030788332200044X>.

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