

## "Theatre and Spectatorship"

24th Annual Conference of the German Society for Contemporary Theatre and  
Drama in English (CDE)

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Research into spectatorship and the role of audience has stressed that the spectator is a corporeal presence and indispensable to a performance but that as a concept spectatorship is slippery and difficult to define. Seminal publications like Susan Bennett's *Theatre Audiences* (1990) or Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009) have highlighted both the interest of theatre practitioners in the role of the spectator and its comparative scholarly neglect up to the 1980s. In this context, scholarly work has increasingly focused on the productive, collaborative role of audiences and spectators, contributing to a decisive paradigm shift in the field which, with its emphasis on 'seeing' and 'hearing' respectively, has long linked spectatorship with passivity. Since then, there has been a gradual yet sustained increase in interventions in the field. The 24<sup>th</sup> CDE conference at the University of Barcelona, hosted at the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Residència Salesiana Martí-Codolar, reflected on such theoretical, methodological as well as artistic work on spectatorship in the context of contemporary theatre and drama in English.

After the official conference welcome, the programme opened with a conversation between playwright **David Greig** and **Clare Wallace**, CDE's vice-president. Focusing on his ideas on spectatorship and how it has evolved, Greig talked about telling stories to children as well as working with teenagers as two extremely collaborative audiences, about his specific experiences with audiences in Scotland and about the role of the spectator in plays like *Damascus* (2007) or *The Events* (2013). Greig described how both plays changed their atmosphere and effect depending on the audiences and locations they were performed at, e.g. when *Damascus* moved to Syria or when working with different local choirs for each performance of *The Events*. Finally, Greig discussed the influence of media like Twitter, which he used for his *Yes/No Plays*, an ongoing series of short plays which grew out of the Scottish Referendum and started in 2013, and how such media can create alternative and new forms of audience.

The first panel of the conference on "Spectatorship in Immersive Theatre" started with **Josephine Machon** (Middlesex University) and her paper on "Attendance and Immersive Theatre". Focusing on productions by Punchdrunk and Il Pixel Rosso, she discussed spectatorship as evolving through involvement and degrees of interactivity and improvisation that foster the audience's active observation and

participation. **Gareth White's** paper on "The Affective Aesthetics of Immersive Theatre" (Royal Central School of Speech and Drama) expanded on this idea of immersion by defining the spectator as interactive intersubjectivity. Plays like Coney's 2014 production *Early Days (of a better nation)* stress that subjectivity is created through the contact with the bodies and minds of others and point out how the spectator and the playwright thus share power over the material and the play. In the panel's final paper, **Adam Alston** (University of Surrey) talked about "Making Mistakes in Immersive Theatre" and the wayward spectator in productions like Coney's *Adventure 1* (2015). Alston made a case for the errantly immersed spectator as the ideal spectator whose mistakes and sometimes wrong investment are part of a play's creative process which is involved and emancipated.

In the first keynote of the conference, **Erika Fischer-Lichte** (Freie Universität Berlin) took the route of history to talk about "The Art of Spectatorship and Transformative Aesthetics". She claimed that no form of spectatorship is ever entirely passive and is always part of its specific cultural and historical context. Starting with Jesuit plays over Lessing to contemporary theatre, Fischer-Lichte traced the development of ideals and forms of spectatorship and the values and ideas about the human being inherent in these changing notions of the spectator.

Following Fischer-Lichte's keynote, the second panel of the conference on "Forms of Spectatorship" started with **Anne Etienne** (University College Cork) and her paper on "Spectatorship(s) in Site-specific Theatre". Using two Irish productions, Corcadora's *How These Desperate Men Talk* (2014) and ANU Productions' *Vardo* (2014), she discussed the role of specific sites where performers and audience share a space and an experience, blurring the boundary between reality and performance. The paper on "The Erotic Voyeur" by **Holly Maples** (Brunel University) concentrated on Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man* (2013) and *Sleep No More* (2011) and how the company uses strategies of seduction and eroticism in their relation to their audience, including the sensorial experience of touching and being touched but also withholding the spectator's desire for immediacy. In the final paper of the panel, **Karen Quigley** (University of York) spoke about Blast Theory's *Rider Spoke*, developed in 2007, in which the spectator is also an actor who follows in other participants' footsteps, creating the potential to compare yourself to other spectator-actors but also rejecting their versions of the performance.

In the afternoon, the third panel tackled empirical research on audiences and started with **Dawn Farough** (Thompson Rivers University) and "Audience Engagement in the *Home/Less/Mess* Project and Play". The Kamloops project brought together homeless people, audiences and an interdisciplinary group of researchers and included a survey on audience reactions which revealed the production's strong impact on attitudes towards homelessness. **Caroline Heim** (Queensland University of Technology) equally presented an empirical project in which she focused on "Audience as Co-creator". Using her interviews with audience

members, specifically of musicals, she discussed the development of communal practices and reciprocity between audience and actors who together 'write' the plays and are dependent upon each other. **Chris Megson** (Royal Holloway, University of London) and **Janelle Reinelt** (University of Warwick) then presented results from a study conducted for the British Theatre Consortium between 2013 and 2014 in which audience's social contexts, values and social networks were linked to their experience of being at a performance. They showed how spectators drew a strong connection between their own lives and the experience of the plays, but how these assessments also strongly changed over time and differed from people's initial responses.

The next morning started with the fourth panel on "Dramaturgical and Theatrical Encodings of the Spectator" and with **Siân Adiseshiah's** paper on "Utopianism and Spectatorship in Forced Entertainment's *Tomorrow's Parties*" (University of Lincoln). The performance's mode of spectatorship was analysed as influenced by its modes of communication which seemed relaxed and commonplace, creating an audience which shifts between doubt and fascination for the sincerity of the piece and its message that a sincere encounter between human beings is a utopian possibility. **Laurens De Vos** (University of Amsterdam) then focused on David Greig, specifically on his *Outlying Islands* (2002). Using Sartre's theory of the gaze, he analysed the play as a study of how people watch each other and how they deal with the fear of becoming an object, a fear and fascination that also influences the spectator's role in the play's performance. **Emma Willis** (University of Auckland) then used Jackie Sibblies Drury's 2012 production *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation* on the Herero genocide to deal with the role of character in emancipated spectatorship. She argued that character functions as a third term in-between spectator and actor, complicating the relation between the two and thematising how guilt and responsibility, e.g. for a genocide or violence, is shared by everyone. In her final paper, **Olivia Turnbull** (Bath Spa University) considered the relevance of social networking for 21<sup>st</sup>-century audiences in productions like Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man* or the interactive performance *You Me Bum Bum Train* devised by Kate Bond and Morgan Lloyd (2004). While immersive theatre can alleviate the feeling of loneliness in the digital age, it is equally influenced by new modes of sharing personal information or opinions and reactions to a play or performance.

In the second keynote of the conference, **Nicholas Ridout** (Queen Mary, University of London) focused on the English language and its capacity of creating a global marketplace of creativity and collaboration among theatre practitioners, e.g. on international festivals. However, he also analysed how theatrical practice unveils the potentially problematic power of English in performances like William Pope.L's 2003 unintelligible speech with sign language or Kinkaleri Teatro's multi-lingual projects which turn English into mere sounds. The audience is thus included in a

process of resisting and criticising processes of translation and communication in a globalised world.

The fifth panel on "Spectatorship and Trauma, Affect, Immanence" continued this critical stance with a focus on the ethics of spectatorship. **David Pattie** (University of Chester) discussed David Greig's *The Events* and the role of the local choir in the performance. Using Deleuze's notion of immanence he showed that the choir serves as a powerful reminder of the human body and its encounter with the affects of other bodies. The spectator thus turns into a participant and a witness of the traumatic events depicted on stage. **Maggie Inchley** (Queen Mary, University of London) expanded this discussion of trauma in her paper on Yaël Farber's *Nirbhaya* (2013), a play about the rape and death of Jyoti Singh Pandey. The play turns the audience into witnesses, but it equally uses its content for its marketing strategy. Audiences thus oscillate between an ethical response and the feeling of having seen an acclaimed hit show. **Jill Planche** (Brock University) completed the panel's discussion with her analysis of *Ubu and the Truth Commission* by William Kentridge, Jane Taylor and the Handspring Puppet Company (1997). Working with Deleuze's idea of 'becoming minor', she demonstrated that the use of puppets and video screens in the play draw attention to artifice and fragmentation, but that they also create an intense engagement with events otherwise too traumatic or problematic.

In the afternoon, **Cristina Delgado-García** conducted a conversation with **Richard Gregory** and **Renny O'Shea**, the founders of Quarantine. Gregory and O'Shea talked about their work with trained actors and untrained people and how their audiences often connect with the people who perform in the pieces on stage. In their often biographical narratives, the founders of Quarantine stressed that they have increasingly made production processes visible to their audiences, e.g. in productions like *Seesaw* (2000), *Eat Eat* (2003) or their more recent show *Summer* (2014).

The second day concluded with Andy Smith's solo performance of *commonwealth* which invited participants to consider theatrical deixis and the role of narrative in performance. Viewers were challenged to consider and take part in a performance "in a room very much like this" with "people very much like us", thus illustrating the fact that indeed theatre creates a commonwealth of agency (or non-agency).

The final day of the conference opened with a workshop facilitated by **Richard Gregory** and **Renny O'Shea** of Quarantine which first engaged the participants in a few group-building activities before sending them out to take a silent, performative walk outside. The fascinating aspect of this endeavour was the idea that participants were to go out as single walkers, making sure, however, that no group member got lost or left behind. This activity resulted in an eerie but also very peaceful experience of a heightened awareness of self and connectedness to others.

The sixth and final panel on “Participatory Theatre Practices” started with **Barry Freeman** (University of Toronto Scarborough) and his paper on “Intimacy and Indifference in Participatory Performance”. Applying Bauman’s ethics of encounters with strangers he analysed *The Stranger*, a participatory performance staged at Toronto’s Summerworks Theatre Festival in 2014. Freeman argued that the performance created an ethical challenge for the spectator and his/her meeting with strangers, but it was equally self-absorbed and endangering the performance’s ethical gist. In her presentation on the borders of participation, **Kelly Jordan** (De Montfort University) then investigated how experiments with audience participation have invited a reconsideration of the physical and symbolic borders between performer and spectator. She challenged the idea that a participatory spectator is a more emancipated spectator, using the work of Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s performance group La Pocha Nostra. In the conference’s final paper, **Elizabeth Swift** (University of Gloucestershire) asked “What do Audiences do? And How can Computers Help us Understand Spectatorship as ‘Doing’?” Applying concepts from digital theory, she demonstrated how digital modes of engagement have changed the role and responsibility of audiences in recent years, e.g. through practices of interactivity, and how such changes can be double-edged in their effects, both granting and taking away an audience’s independence.

In sum, the 24<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English illustrated the liveliness of the debate surrounding notions of spectatorship and the role of audiences and the multi-faceted forms that such engagements may take on contemporary stages.

(Selected papers of the conference will be published in *JCDE: Journal of Contemporary Drama* in English, vol. 4.1, 2016.)