

On the Proscenium and Shared Lighting

One of the primary issues I take with the modern realist theatre and the proscenium is that does not foster a sense of community. That within the liminal playing it creates an intentional separation, which goes against the storytelling. I am interested in eliminating that barrier in favor of a communal atmosphere. One in which the performer and spectator work together towards the same goal of creating narrative such that they might better understand the human condition. If theatre is about the encounter (as Grotowski has theorized) then surely it must be an encounter between two equal parties, not the voyeuristic zoo which now plagues our stages.

Indeed, the theatre for much of history has never had this absurd fourth wall convention; it is a relatively recent construction, and in lighting it only goes as far back as Wagner. I believe wholeheartedly that drama is meant to be performed in shared lighting environments (where both the spectator and performer receive light). When the actor can see the spectator a dialogue is possible, and without it the drama is left stale and tepid.

If the spectator does not want to engage in the encounter. If they are allowed to simply slump back in their seat and observe passively then what is the point of going to the theater? At that point just stay at home and watch television or go to the cinema. For what does theatre have that film does not? The moment. The aliveness. The possibility for interaction between the performer and the spectator. To ignore this is to create a theatre that undercuts its greatest strength.

We need not always light the audience in equal brightness to the performer, however artistic attention must always be paid the light within the house. Nothing is more distasteful than to enter a theatre, eager to experience something extraordinary, and then be forced to sit in a plain white wash of houselights for thirty minutes before the playing starts. Not to mention leaving the theater in the same wretched lighting.

There is a charged energy to live performance that is born of the community (the same as in a baseball stadium). Why then are we meant to ignore one another in absolute once the drama commences? It is madness. I want to see how my fellow theatregoers are reacting. Of course, the focus must be on the performer, no one would deny that, but just as we focus on the players of a baseball game, we also are aware of our fellow onlookers and their attitude to the action, it informs the individual's interpretation of the event. It is the stadium of spectators, not the players, which imbue a baseball game with a collective wildness and sense of liveliness, were we meant to watch the same event in isolation it would not have nearly the same effect. The same is true of any live performance.

And interactivity between the spectator and performer is something we are beginning to see remerge in digital performance. On social media the relationship has evolved from parasocial to something far more complex. The spectator now influences the content created by the digital performer (or influencer) and is granted more access to the creator's personal life. With the rise of amateur small-scale performers on social media we are seeing networks of mutuals on equal footing rather than the parasocial paradigm of early digital performances (such as mid-2000s YouTube). All this is to say that the people are ready as an audience to engage in the performance and that the theatre must keep up.

In a shared space there is no unequal power dynamic between a voyeuristic spectator and the isolated performer (who then becomes an object for the spectator's entertainment). No. What I am interested in is a space that either subverts the fourth wall convention, or which eliminates it from the start. I am interested in a scenography which disrupts any spatial hierarchy and a dramaturgy which leverages this "even playing field" to have a more profound dramatic effect.

And to be clear this is not necessarily a *verfremdungseffekt*, which is often what people think of when you say "let's light the audience." On the contrary it can be an immersive environment within which the audience gets lost and becomes enraptured, which is the complete opposite of Brecht's intentions. The key is that the isolation is removed, and that a sense of community is created, not necessarily that the spectator becomes aware of the artifice. Of course, this may happen unintentionally, but that is due to the prevalence of the 4th wall convention, not its elimination. After all, a theatre-goer to an Elizabethan playhouse would not find it jarring to see their fellow audience members — it is only jarring to a modern audience precisely because the creation of 4th wall in the first place, and due to its current ubiquity.

But why do this? Why not just leave realism alone? Well because it makes comedy funnier if you can take things out to the audience and develop a banter. That is simple enough to understand, it is why we enjoy stand-up comedy, improvisation, and joking metatheatrical gags. However, less easy to grasp is how shared lighting can function in to heighten a tragedy.

How can this be if it means the audience will be made more aware of the artifice? It because by establishing a shared lighting environment the space between the performer and spectator is removed. Hence there is a far stronger sense of intimacy. Let us take Juliet's death in a large proscenium theatre, she's far away, we know it's fake. One might even console a worried child by saying, "you know it's just a play, you know it isn't real." Well if you are in a small intimate venue and the lighting is even (such that Juliette can look back at you) it is much more difficult to do this. Even if you also see the other audience members. And a good actress will command your attention. The intimacy is also more uncomfortable, because you are now being seen by the character in a way that you were not before. Juliet is not talking to "the audience" she is talking directly to you, and yes also your neighboring patrons, but does that really matter when she looks into your eyes and talks of killing herself? No, of course not! And the performance is more profound because of it. It is intimate and immediate, two things which can never be achieved as effectively when imposed upon by the fourth wall.

Or let us take a scene of violence. If the audience is allowed to excuse it, safe on their side of the theatre, in the dark, it is less impactful. If the space between is eliminated and the victim cries out for help they are talking directly to you. You feel a much stronger urge to actually get up and stop the performance. If the performer pleads with you to help them and you sit there and do nothing then you are implicated by your inaction. And you are complicit in a way that is far less excusable than if you were placed within a fourth wall arrangement. The playing is then more striking and will have a stronger empathetic effect.

We can also be creative in the way we define this relationship with light. In a show I lit some years ago I used a cold white "scientific laboratory" light on the audience and a more formalist artistic light within the playing space. The separation was removed without eliminating the use

of theatrical lighting entirely. This created a permeable barrier wherein the fourth wall was eliminated while some distinction between the role of the spectator (as scientist/observer) and actor (as the subject of study) was retained. This turned the stage into a court-like setting, what I would describe as an “experiment box” rather part of the same world as the audience. By distinguishing the two spaces with different kinds of light, the fiction world within the playing space became separated from the world of the audience and this makes one more aware of the performance onstage as artifice. In my opinion this was more effective than simple turning on the house lights because it implied a particular relationship that we wanted the spectator to have to the playing.

It can also be about confrontation. I adore the alley staging for this very reason. The audience is faced with the audience. There is a confrontation. There is an encounter and not just between the player and spectator but between the audience on both sides of the theatre. It also creates a layer of reality and of fiction. We see the other spectator’s heads in front of us, then the playing space, then the audience on the other side. These layers all commentate on the story (how I interpret the piece may be different depending on how the person sitting directly across from me responds).