

The importance of live experience in theatre

Live experience is considered as an implicit value of theatre. It is based on the fact that theatre is a disappearing art form. Live experience refers to such issues as the presence and materiality of living bodies, and the contingency of living performance, which opens up the possibility of something unexpected happening. The concept also refers to the living interaction between performers and spectators. Live experience has been theorized as an opposite to mediated forms of performance, but it also can be explored as an opposite of stage action where nothing unplanned happens.

The possibility for something unexpected to occur is found especially in the field of live art and performance art. Most performances of these artistic disciplines are explicitly built up through the idea of contingency. The performances might stress the tolerance of the audience by setting living, perhaps naked, sweating, breathing, wounded bodies very close with spectators. By doing so performance is able to create special intimacy with public but it also provokes reactions.

Both the contingency and spectator's ability to react in an unexpected way are essential parts of the structure of such performances. But I would argue that such contingency is seldom realized in theatre. Especially in text-based drama theatre, the direction of action is often so predestined that there is little room for contingency. Yes, there is room for mistakes that often are the most living part of performances, but mistakes are not considered valuable. On the contrary. Live experience as a value is taken as a granted in theatre and when it happens it might be perceived more like a mistake. This makes the consideration of the importance of live experience in theatre very complicated.

It is said that the whole concept – live experience - exists above all as a distinction from mediated forms such as films and videos. Nowadays the relation between live and mediated performances is the subject of extensive theorizing. According to Philip Auslander technological advances have not influenced and shaped performance practice as dramatically as is believed. He argues that the distinction between mediated and live has grown increasingly suspect. They are not in oppositional relation with each other. Many of contemporary performances are hybrids anyway. The Finnish performance artist Teemu Mäki agrees with Auslander saying that in many cases the idea of performance is the most essential and it works just as well when recorded - the quality of spectator's experience doesn't change. Interaction between performance and audience works whether it is mediated or not. But what kind of differences there are between live and mediated experience?

Recordings of performance are directed at only some of the receiver's senses, namely sight and hearing. In live performance both spectators and performers share the same space; performance has the possibility of provoking the other senses – smell and taste and touch. And this is important nowadays when contemporary (performance) art is getting more and more interested in body of spectator. Conventional forms of performance have emphasized the importance of the performer's bodily presence, but a shift toward dialogue between artists and spectators is taking place. This means, for example, that the fields of aesthetic and social are not tightly separated anymore. On the contrary, they are mixed. The artistic event might borrow the form of disco or party, or gambling den, and spectators are invited there as participants. What kind of consequences will these kind of events have for the concept of live experience? Does the concept matter anymore?

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