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Spatial Dynamics in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Huis Clos*: Otherness as Spatial Oppression

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Abstract

This paper will be examining a practice as research project which focuses on the staging of Jean-Paul Sartre's modern classic *Huis Clos*, translated for the first time in Maltese as *Bil-bieb mitbuq*. Sartre's play presents the narrative of three unrelated persons, captured for eternity in hell. Through my participation in the process as director, I will analyse the spatial dynamics of this performance in relation with the theme of otherness. In this particular production, the notion of the space is presented in a reverse manner. In the first half of the play, where the three characters are attempting to comprehend why they have been placed together in hell, the actors are enclosed in a 3 by 3 metres enclosure made of gauze. The spectators observe the characters through these gauze walls in the same way how a clinical psychologist might observe the behaviour of a patient from a one-way mirror. In the second half, where the characters seek for an escape route, the gauze walls are suddenly lifted, and the characters use all the theatrical space, including the areas close to the audience. All of a sudden, unexpectedly, the audience become part of the action, and finds itself in hell as well. Hence, when Garcin shouts out his infamous line, the audience by this point has no other choice than to admit that even for them "hell is the other." The objectives of this artistic project are also juxtaposed against the reactions provided by nine audience members who were interviewed after the performance, as well as against the published reviews of the production.

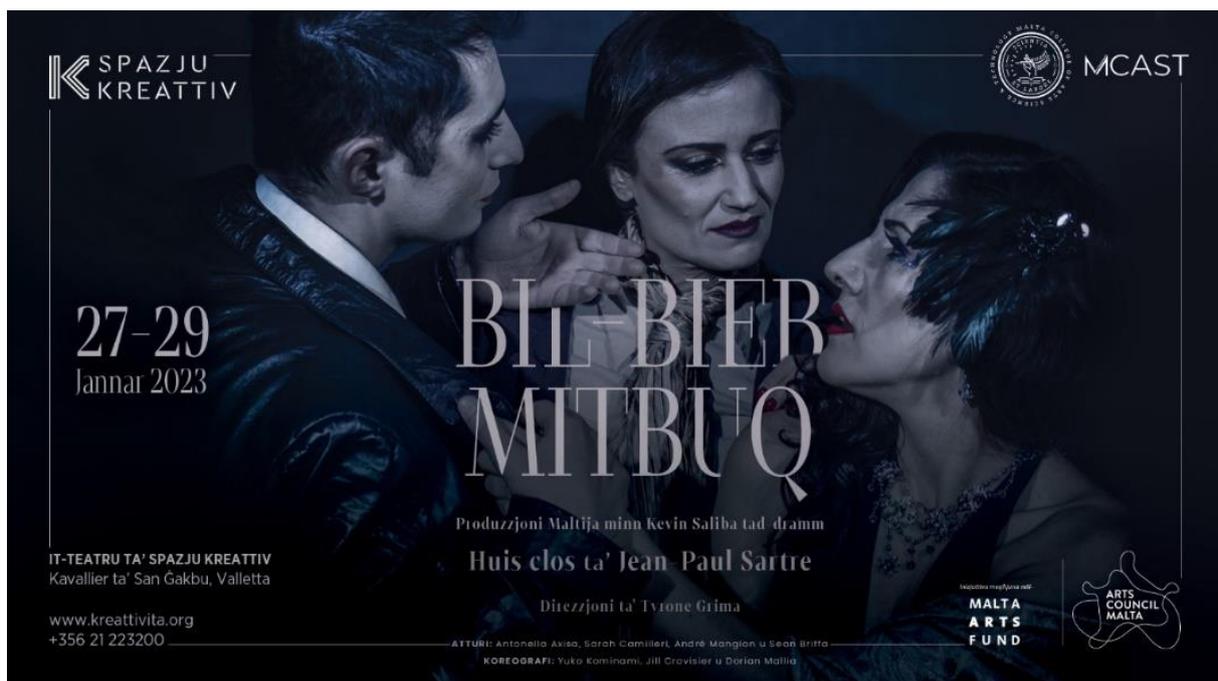
Keywords: Otherness, performance, spatial dynamics, existentialism.

Spatial Dynamics in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Huis Clos*: Otherness as Spatial Oppression

Adrian Van Den Hoven describes Jean-Paul Sartre's *Huis Clos* "as a perfect example of the unreality that is, according to Sartre, at the heart of all theater" (2012, p.66). This statement is reflected by the numerous times this play has been staged worldwide ever since it was presented for the first time in occupied Paris in May 1944. The entrapment in Hell of the main characters of the drama has intrigued theatre creatives, as much as audiences, for the last eighty years. This study will examine in depth a staging of the play in Malta. By focusing closely on the spatial dynamics of this performance, this paper will investigate to what extent the salient aspects of Sartrean philosophy can be embodied and whether this theatrical production managed to capture the oppressiveness experienced through otherness that *Huis Clos* depicts.

Figure 1

Poster of *Bil-Bieb Mitbuq* (Photo credit: Deacon Xuereb, 2019; Poster design: Luca Azzopardi, 2022; Design Executive: Spazju Kreattiv, 2022)



Huis Clos presents us with three characters escorted by an enigmatic valet in a room composed of three sofas and a mantelpiece with a bronze statue on it. They know they are in Hell but they cannot understand what connects them together. They are also hesitant to admit why they are damned but as the play unfolds the audience discovers that they are all guilty of heinous crimes. Garcin betrayed his wife, but is condemned for being a coward. Inèz is a lesbian who led her cousin and his wife (who becomes her lover) to suicide whereas the

flamboyant high-society woman Estelle kills her lover's baby. They are all attracted to the wrong person. Inèz attempts to seduce Estelle who in turn is attracted to Garcin. The gaze of the latter is addressed towards Inèz, who he hopes will confirm that he is not a coward. When none of them attains their object of desire, they realise that "L'Enfer, c'est les autres" (hell is Other People).

This play has been performed in Malta a few times in English since there was no translation available in the Maltese language. In 1973 it was staged at the National Theatre under the direction of the late Mario Azzopardi whereas in 2011, the play was directed by Albert Marshall, a Maltese veteran theatre practitioner, in one of the fringe theatres in the Maltese capital city. Kevin Saliba translated Sartre's *opus magnum* in Maltese for the first time in 2018, and produced it five years later, under the title *Bil-bieb mitbuq*, literally *The Closed Door*.

This paper will present an analytical case-study of this staging of the play in Maltese which was held over three nights from the 27th till the 29th January 2023 at the theatre of Spazju Kreattiv in Valletta. This intimate theatre-in-the-round, housed in the National Centre for Creativity, seats a total of 144 persons per performance. The limited number of persons watching the performance reflects the unfortunate and limited number of regular theatre goers in Malta. Even though the statistics in 2016 show that 32% of the population goes to the theatre once a year (Leone Ganado, 2017), this percentage incorporates the large number of people who watch the traditional annual Christmas pantomime. On average, performances are only staged twice in Malta (Cremona, 2019) and the capacity of the leading theatre houses ranges from 100 to 1000 seats. The Maltese population is of around 500,000 inhabitants, clearly revealing that theatre is still a niche market.

Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical framework that informed influenced the artistic choices in this project is the framework of existentialist literature. Apart from the corpus of philosophical works written by Jean-Paul Sartre, this literature review delves into the writings of other important contemporary existentialist and phenomenological philosophers of Sartre. However, to provide a more comprehensive outlook on the subject of alterity, it also incorporates in its analysis other prominent philosophers who explored the theme of otherness.

At the core of the philosophical thought of Sartre on alterity is the tension between the "I" and the "you." Otherness is what defines us as human beings, and yet as Eco succinctly argues, this fundamental notion within human reality causes much fear and anxiety (1997). Richard Kearney develops the concept of alterity by denoting the other as the *stranger*. Kearney does not perceive this concept negatively. The stranger is a moment "of sacred

enfleshment when the future erupts through the continuum of time” (Kearney, 2011, p.7). This does not imply that it is not daunting or that it does not place the encounter within a framework of vulnerability. The Nietzschean analogy of the tightrope walker captures the perils of the terrain: indeed, the acrobat falls off the rope and dies (2005).

The fear of otherness is embedded in the power dynamics that ensue in the conflict between the “I” and the “you.” The former, that is the subject, wants to assimilate the latter, the object, into its reality, resulting in the conflict that arises when the object does not identify with the subject and possibly hinders this process of assimilation from occurring (Sartre, 2003).

Sartre also denotes that in this dialectical tension, there is never a state of equality. The subject is either looking down at the object, that is the relationality is expressed through *trans-descendance*, or else looking up in awe and admiration, *trans-ascendance* (2003). We are never ourselves in our relational dynamics but in the role that these dynamics impose on us. Engrossed in these illusionary roles, we become victims of what Sartre calls *bad faith* (2003). In Sartre’s (2003) own words, “I do not choose to be for the Other what I am, but I can try to be for myself what I am for the Other, by choosing myself as I appear to the Other” (p.550). Relationality, hence, could lead to an unhealthy state of dependency or possessiveness (Buber, 2004). Simone Weil (1997) compares this relational dyad to the Hegelian tension between domination and servitude. She warns that the dependency on another person can generate a sense of imbalance which subsequently transforms itself into hatred (Weil, 1966). Weil, unlike Sartre, believes that the only way forward is the loss of self, that is, ultimate detachment. Through this form of anonymity, the person prevents his or her identity from destroying the relationship (Weil,1966). Reconfirmed by Levinas (2009), the impersonal and the anonymous allows the person to concentrate on the other in the present moment whereas the personal carries all the experiential baggage of the past and all the anxiety of the unknown future, creating barriers between the I and the other.

Sartre considers these illusionary power dynamics inevitable. The use of language within human relationships makes the illusionary even more unavoidable and complex. Paradoxically, words are the source of communication within relationships, and yet are often a stumbling block in the development of these dynamics. Each subject uses signifiers (words) that are construed differently by the object, leading to situations where, despite the use of the same language (Lacan, 1989), problematic situations arise: what a person means is not necessarily, and very often might not be, what the other perceives. The expression of ideas, manifested through language, becomes the imposition of the self onto the other.

These illusions intensify in sexual relationships where the sexual act could often become a filling in of the void. The consequence is mutually destructive for the couple when the gratification of the self is the motivating factor for the sexual in the relationship. The female eats the phallus by allowing it to penetrate her body, and thus creating a form of castration,

while the male asserts his superiority through the act of penetration (Sartre, 2003). Yet satiation is never attained. As we gaze at our object of desire, we contemplate how we can engage further in these illusionary roles and power games with the aim of capturing our prey totally, but frequently, if not always, falling short of doing so, and experiencing deeper frustration and angst. The illusion is amplified by what Sartre (2003) refers to as the being-for-itself, the illusionary desire to reach completion by acquiring beauty, only to discover that this is unattainable. The more a person feels loved, or believes that he is feeling loved, the more his being is lost and being eaten by the other. Hence the other has the power to jeopardise the universe of the self, and of course, the self has the same power to do the same thing. Even if there were no power dynamic, which we have already established cannot be within the philosophical understanding of Sartre, the mere presence of the other hijacks the reality and the perception of my experience. The illusionary aspect that characterises relational dynamics highlights their absurdity: it poses the question whether they are so necessary and relevant in life.

Yet the solution of these relational dynamics does not lie in absence or annihilation. Relationships cannot be avoided. We may try to isolate ourselves and hide from others, but this only intensifies this existentialist crisis even further. Absence discloses being, and, indeed, not to be nevertheless entails the potentiality of being there (Sartre, 2003). The other exists, and we have a responsibility to this other. Indeed, “the individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals, he exists only by transcending himself” (De Beauvoir, 1976, p.156). Of course, this responsibility is frequently also his condemnation. It is these perennial questions, this constant dialectical tension, that informed the artistic choices in the production of *Bil-bieb mitbuq* that will be presented in the next section.

Methodology

The research approach that was used in this project and that will serve as the backbone to answer the research question is a practice-research approach. Hence, I will attempt to demonstrate how as a theatre practitioner commissioned to direct this piece, I ‘translated’ the key features of Sartrean philosophy present in this play into a spatial concept and into physicalised action. The outcome of the experimentation which resulted in the staged production will be examined by juxtaposing it against the two published professional reviews on this production, as well as the perspectives that emerged in the nine interviews that were conducted after the performances. The selected interviewees were mostly composed of theatre practitioners who watched the performance, with a balance between persons who identify as males, and interviewees who identify as female. There was also a balance in terms

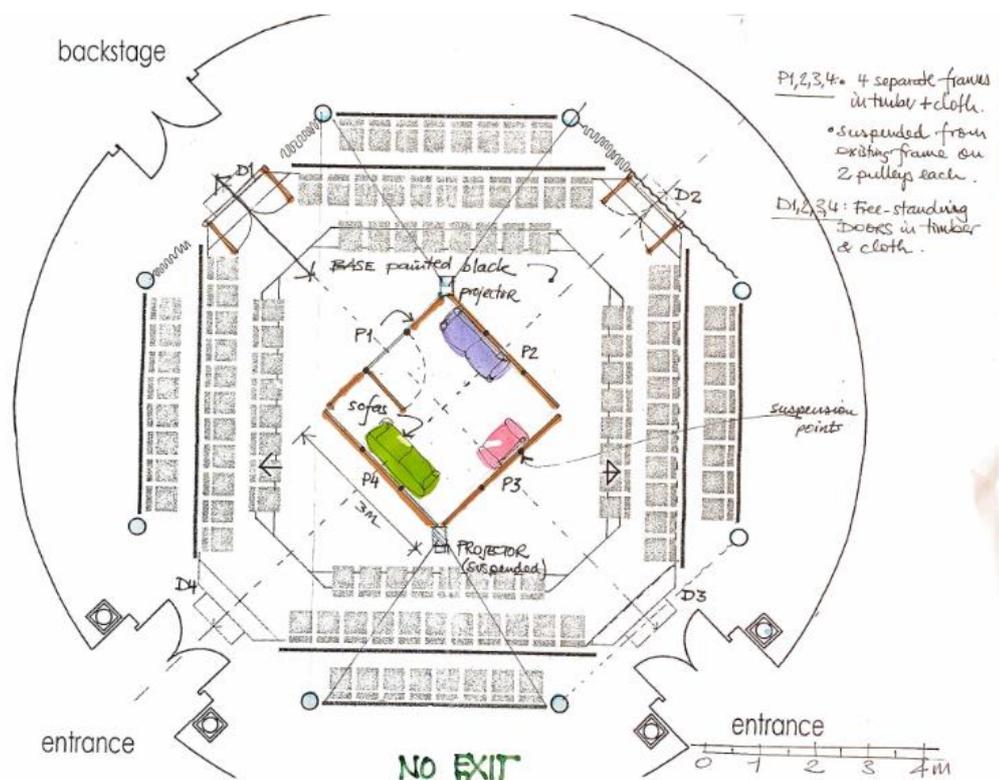
of age range to ensure that the participants encompassed both young practitioners, who are still new to the industry, alongside veterans.

Case-Study

The main objective of the spatial design of the production *Bil-bieb mitbuq*, the main objective was to lead the audience on an immersive journey. Notwithstanding the size of the theatre at *Spazju Kreattiv* (9 metres by 9 metres, including audience seating, and 5 metres by 5 metres for the acting space) the space was diminished even further to create a sense of claustrophobia. Hence the first half of the play was designed to happen in a 3 metres by 3 metres cube in the middle of the acting space.

Figure 2

Set Design by Perit Adrian Mamo



The audience walks into a dimly lit theatre. As the house lights fade out, and the interior of the cube is illuminated, the audience notices that there are two sofas, a chair, and a column with a bronze statue on it within the cube. Shortly afterwards the characters are escorted into the cube. The interior of the cube can be seen through walls made of shark tooth gauze, which reduce very slightly the visibility, creating an eerie feeling. According to the reviewer Ramon Depares (2023):

...this cage gets more and more claustrophobic by the minute, an entirely believable portrayal of hell that messes with the minds of the three leads as they spiral into a vortex of self-hatred, condemned to play and replay the deeds that brought them to this point.

Figure 3

The Entrance to the Cube. (Photo credit: Chakib Zidi)

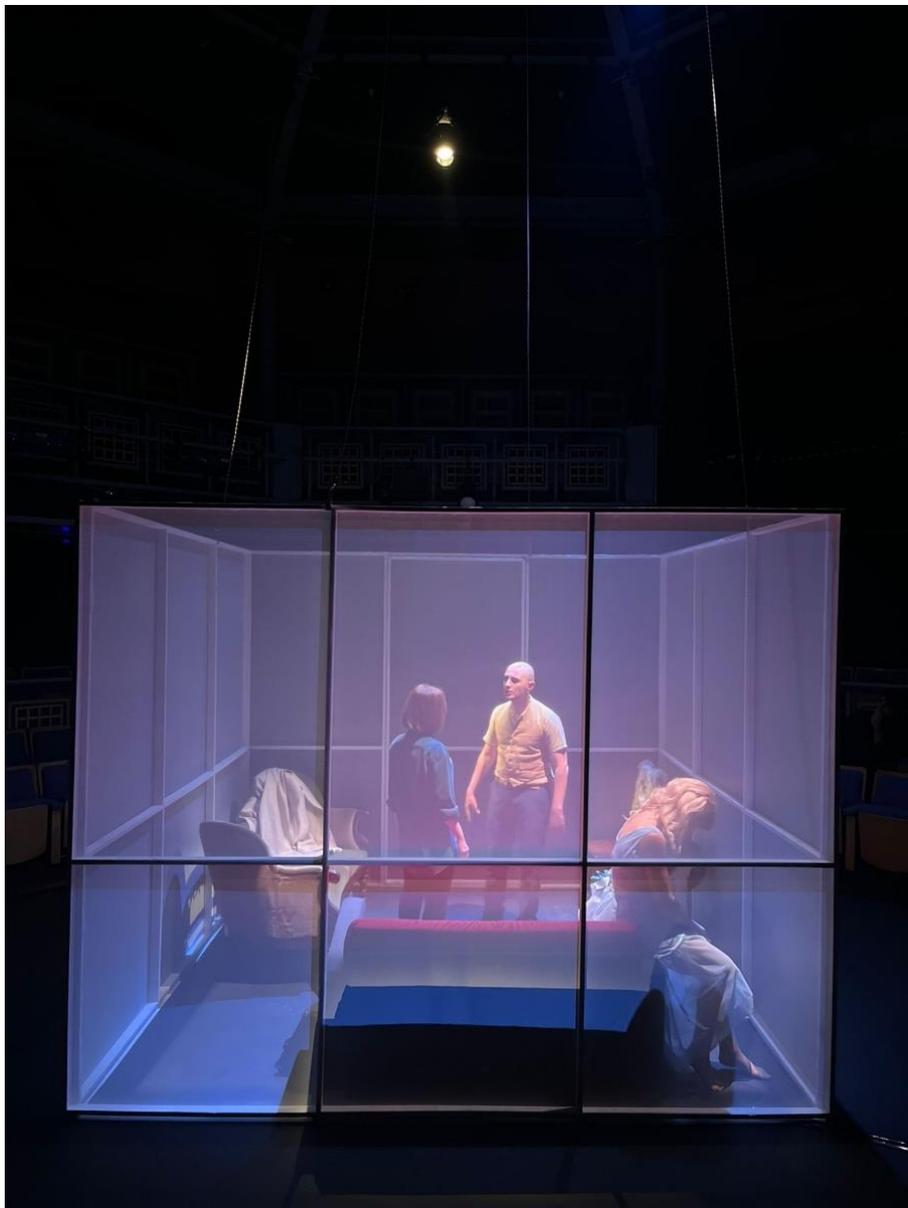


Despite the uncomfortableness that the cube causes, the audience is still in a privileged position. They observe the plight of these three characters, analysing and interpreting their words and movements, in much the same way how a clinical psychologist might observe patients in a hospital through a two-way mirror, or visitors in a zoo watching, and ultimately enjoying, animals in captivity. The audience is “safe.” They are not in hell and the atrocious

crimes committed by these characters are unrelatable. The sense of uncomfortableness was reiterated by the interviewees, who used words such as blurry, faded and detached to describe the experience of the first half of the play. They observed the spatial and mental restrictions of the characters as they struggled in the box, as well as the hindrances that the actors experienced as they interacted with one another in a limited space. According to the interviewees, the first half of the performance felt as though they were watching a film on a screen, or actions through a curtain. One interviewee stated that even though the concept of the box was effective, the performance would have benefitted if the box was removed earlier.

Figure 4

The Actors in the Cube: Inez (Sarah Camilleri); Garcin (Andre Mangion); and Estelle (Antonella Axisa). (Photo credit: Chakib Zidi)



The theatrical space also embodies life on earth, whether in relation to the past of these three characters, or to the current events happening on earth as they are in eternal damnation. As the characters disclose aspects of their past or make reference and comment on what their significant others are doing, filmed clips of Tanztheater choreographies are projected onto the black panels of cloth that are situated at the back of each of the four sides of the audience area.

Yet these projections are the first semiotic aspect that instills doubt in the perception of the audience, and which accentuates even further the illusionary aspect of the relational. The three dancers on screen are not the three actors on stage, even though at times they are playing the same dramatic characters. Furthermore, at times, the same dancers play interchangeably the significant others referred to by Garcin, Estelle and Inèz. This deliberately baffles the audience. Moreover, there are moments where there seems to be lack of correspondence between what the character in the cage is saying in opposition to the visual being seen on the panel. Some of these moments are subtle and hardly noticeable, such as Garcin referring to his wife dressed entirely in black, whereas the dancer is wearing a white shirt. Other moments are more bluntly confusing. Inèz relates how her lover Florence left the gas on at night, leading to their deaths, whereas on screen, two female dancers, presumably representing Inèz and Florence, suffocate a man with a pillow, and fall onto the floor shortly afterwards. The audience is never sure whether these characters are stating the truth and this uncertainty is reinforced by these images that do not always correspond with the spoken word.

Figure 5

Projection of Choreographies. Dancer (Yuko Kominami). (Photo credit: Miguela Xuereb)



The reaction of the interviewees on the use of the projections was divisive. Three of them felt that the projections were distracting, and although this was one of the artistic objectives why they were included in the production, the interviewees did not use the word in a positive manner. Four more stated that the projections were unnecessary and did not contribute to the dynamics of the performance. On the other hand, two of the interviewees claimed that the projections allowed them to be more engaged with the drama happening on stage. A possible explanation for such a wide variety of reactions could be that the perception of the projections depended on where the person was seated. Being in the round, some angles allowed for a better engagement with the projections than others, resulting in a more positive reaction to their use.

The analytical attitude of the audience is shattered after forty-five minutes of the performance. As Garcin attempts to drive sense into the mind of Inèz by explaining that their condemnation lies in the fact that they are each other's executioner, the cube is suddenly lifted up, an artistic choice which does not feature in the written text. The acting space abruptly increases to include the audience space too, and the audience is flooded in light. The reviewer Lara Zammit (2023) remarks that:

...*Huis Clos* (*Bil-Bieb Mitbuq*) is not an easy play to inhabit, whether as a character or audience member. The difficult viewing is crystallised near the end of the act when the box composing the set – the room in hell – is lifted out of sight, spilling hell across the whole theatre, gushing around our seats, forcing us to wade in it.

The audience is now part of hell. The characters approach the spectators, even delivering specific lines in their faces and establishing momentary eye-contact, thus breaking the fourth wall (pun intended). The audience members for the first time see the other spectators, and the actors who spent half the play isolated in the cage can now see the audience clearly. This sudden interaction has a profound implication: the spectators are no longer observers or passive agents. They are now culpable of the same sin as the characters that they have been speculating about for the past three-quarters of an hour – indeed, they were already so unknowingly since the onset of the performance. The sin they share in common is that they are all human and consequently are condemned to relate with each other.

The objective of this dynamic is to reverse the perception of hell. The first part of the play was designed to feel more claustrophobic, leading the audience to believe that the torture of hell consists in the closed space and the dark ambience that ensues. This is totally challenged when the cube is lifted. The audience – as well as the characters – shockingly realise that the torture of hell is not related at all to physical space. Relationality transcends proximity. No matter how far away the characters attempt to place themselves from each other, the intensity of damnation is nevertheless experienced. Indeed, the most excruciating scenes and the

spiraling down of each character are played in an extended space and in full brightness. Light and space do not offer any safety or escape route. This allows the three characters to seemingly invade the audience space, with certain uncomfortable scenes, such as the sex scene between Garcin and Estelle being acted out in one of the four corners in between the sections of the audience seats. The extension of the space increases the disquietude of the spectators, and the increase of light intensifies the anxiety caused by the mere presence of the other.

Another spatial dynamic that occurs once the cube is lifted is that the openings in the space are revealed. Estelle frantically rushes and bangs against these openings, crossing chaotically from one corner of the theatre to the other. One of the openings is the door through which the audience entered the theatre; the second door is the emergency exit; and the third opening is a curtain leading to the backstage area. Each corner was covered by a black curtain which Estelle draws open. Hence, the doors in the space have multiplied but this does not make the situation any more relieving. It magnifies the exasperation of having numerous possibilities that do not lead anywhere.

All the interviewees expressed the view that they were more engaged in the second part of the play. The raising of the box provided a sense of relief, but this change of mood did not affect the overall attitude of the audience members. They now became aware of each other's presence and realized that they were all in the same reality. Although the space increased, and the actors felt smaller, since they were not concentrated in a limited space, the feeling of closedness was not only retained but paradoxically became more intensive.

The artistic decision to increase the space and to demonstrate that the condemnation of otherness surpasses distance is clearly embedded in Sartre's text. Towards the end of the play Garcin bangs vehemently on the door of the room, and this opens suddenly. Speechless, the characters pause and gape at the open door. Yet they cannot leave: they are doomed to be with each other. The only difference that was introduced in the use of the door in this particular *mise-en-scène* is the choice of door. The door that opens unexpectedly at Garcin's command is the same entrance through which the audience came into the theatre. This makes the audience realise that an hour before they were inadvertently entering hell through that same door, and consequently now wonder whether like the characters they are trapped in it forever.

The interviewees also commented on the effect of the opening of the theatre door towards the end of the play. The door combined reality with fiction. It was the real theatre door but now it was transformed into the fictitious door of hell. Although one interviewee expressed that it provided a sense of respite because there was the possibility of leaving the space, most interviewees felt that paradoxically the opening of the door entrapped them even further, highlighting the sensation that they were in hell. The entrapment was no longer only physical

but became a trap in the mind too, which potentially is more dangerous and daunting than physical imprisonment.

Figure 6

The Lifting up of the Box (Photo credit: Chakib Zidi)



This frustration is reiterated at the end of this production. In the final scene, after the three main characters fall on the floor in fits of hysterical laughter, Garcin stands up and states that they should proceed. Conventionally the blackout after this last line leads to the curtain call, which is accompanied by the house lights as soon as the actors exit, having taken their final

bow. As the audience stands up to leave the theatre, another blackout is inserted (not in Sartre's didascalies) and when the theatre lights are turned on again, Garcin and the valet enter repeating the first four lines of the beginning of the play, giving the impression that the performance is going to recommence. This is followed by another blackout and houselights, as an indication that the audience can now leave the theatre. This added scene played on the concept of the looped narrative. Like Sisyphus, we are fated to keep on rolling the boulder to the top of the hill forever. We are condemned to replay continuously the same dynamics that imprison us in our relationships, and no form of awareness seems to liberate us from this imprisonment.

Figure 7

The Opening of the Door. Garcin (Andre Mangion). (Photo credit: Miguela Xuereb)



Conclusion

Depares affirms that this production is “an important piece of theatre that deserves to be made accessible to a wider audience” and that “given the limited space, the production is surprisingly physical...By the time the iconic line is delivered – hell, then, is other people – the entire audience was visibly in a state of nervous tension that would have undoubtedly pleased Sartre” (2023). The fulcrum of the production was the use of space to depict the existentialist hell that is caused by alterity. By identifying the salient aspects that emerge in Sartre's philosophical and literary writings on the subject, in dialogue with other notable philosophers, physical expressions were discovered that facilitated the translation of these insights into embodied

action in such a way that they were relevant to a contemporary theatre audience in Malta. As Dr Alex Vella Gregory commented after having watched one of the performances: “Every word is important. Each action is filled to the brim with meaning” (Facebook, 2023). This production of *Bil-Bieb Mitbuq* demonstrates the power and the poignancy of the dynamic interrelationship between the word and the body, between the text and the action. Both semiotic elements indeed clearly point to the same direction: “Hell is other people”.

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