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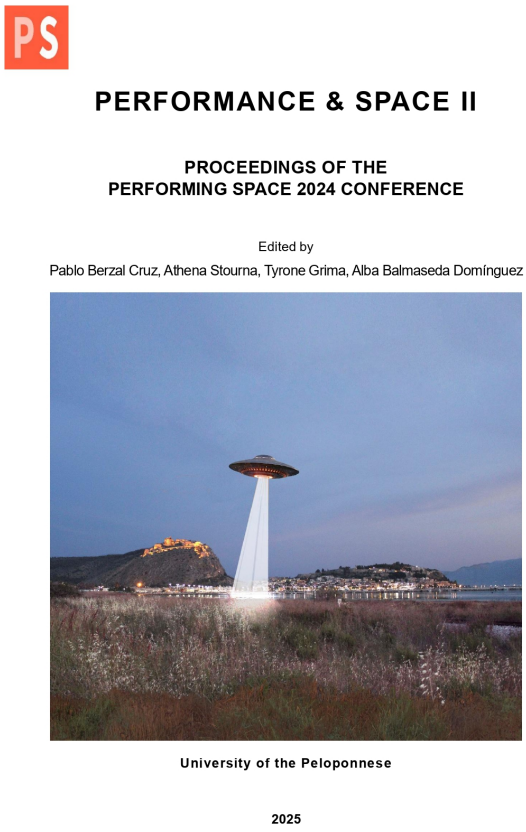

Theatre of Dionysus. A Performative and Reflexive Space

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Theatre of Dionysus
A Performative and Reflexive Space

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to look at the first theatre of the world, the Theatre of Dionysus, and how it was used both as a performance and as a reflexive space, and how some dramatic spaces appeared to the public, thanks to the existing theatre space. It should be remembered that the tetralogies performed the Theatre of Dionysus were only one stop of the whole route of the rituals of the Great Dionysia that started in the Asclepieion on the Acropolis hill, where they instigated the activities of different forms of sacrifice. Interestingly, the theatrical space as it was conceived at the time, included different parallel rituals that extended the boundaries of the theatre as a performance space. Turning to scholars such as Fischer-Lichte (2013), and Puchner (1985), masters of the semiotics of theatre, we examine how, in the above-mentioned theatre, the reflexive space appears as a folding of the existing performing space, setting an example for directors who have left their mark on our modern stage. For this research, we have selected Aeschylus as our guide to better understand the osmosis of the separate elements between the reflexive and the performance space, which absorbs the senses of the viewer, putting into practice his spiritual criteria for seeing the world. By sharing examples taken from his tragedies, we might benefit by reflecting on lesser examined issues as the goals of directing in this theatre, beyond what the dramatic space suggests. Looking back at Aeschylus' potential directorial choices, we might comprehend more of how the Theatre of Dionysus was used both as a performance space, like any theatre in the world, but also as a reflexive space, capable of offering an introspective experience and a deeper understanding of social dynamics.

Keywords: performance space, reflexive space, theatre of Dionysus, spatial signs.

Theatre of Dionysus

Ancient drama was performed during festivities attended by the majority of the society, with one competing tetralogy following another, as a part of a larger cultural and religious ceremony. Therefore, as Puchner (1985) suggests in *The Semiotics of Theatre*, the place used for the performance is part of the hypercode, and it develops the thematic subtext. In fact, there were many thematic parallels to the rituals on the circle of life and death, enhancing the tragic element of the tetralogies. In addition, the Aeschylean satirical plays often took us to a period before the fate changed for the heroes involved in the trilogy, which reminds us of Kastoriadis' (1999) theory about the anthropogenic worldview of Aeschylus, the basis of which is that we belong to chaos and we will return to it (Puchner, 1985).

The audience's guide for diving into these dark mysteries is the horus, as narrator and commentator of the action, helping the audience to see behind the blurred lines that separate the real world from the world of the play. In *Seven Against Thebes,* for instance, the statues in the background area of the Theatre of Dionysus were possibly used to represent the ones that guarded the seven gates of Thebes. Thus the Chorus probably was lamenting at that point. The structuring experience, in this case, covers the dimensions of the given space but also of our inner world. Think of the Oceanids hovering on the stage for over 100 verses, the "terrible" presence of the Furies, or the 50 Egyptians in *The Suppliants*, all of which ignite the spectator and make him confront the fears of his own fragile autonomy.

There is also a distinction that we should be aware of, and that is between the dramatic space and dramatic place in the imagination of the spectator. Think of the shocking moment in *The Persians* when the ghost of Darius faces the Parthenon in ruins, and how the glorious Sousa is presented in such a wounded space by a Chorus in the armour of the deceased. With Fischer-Lichte's theory (2013) of spatial signs in mind, we are aware of the geometrical possibilities of the stage area and the very use of spatial signals beyond the stage building. However, the stage area is ultimately shaped by human vision, as far as the eyes of the spectator can see. For example, *The Eumenides* is set in the nearby Areopagus.

As of now, we have also borrowed parts of Schechner's theory (2003) to examine space in a broader sense, including even the moment when the spectator leaves home to go to the theatre and what that person will encounter in the meantime such as the Asclepieion.

Thus, the reflexive space's goal is to use a theatrical material in the performance space that is a continuum of human actions, either taken from rituals or forms of entertainment, for the spectator to be healed. This could have been the case in *Prometheus Bound* with the Titan tied up to a rock, similar to the rock seats in the first row, with the hope that another hero would rise up in times of tyranny, and leave the effigy behind.

In a sense, as Wiles (2003) argues, the reflexivity of theatre is used by the audience to sharpen their own reflexive thinking and internal conversation about the issues that govern their lives. Wiles, of course, was heavily influenced by pragmatists such as Pierce (1996), and through their approach to semiotics of theatrical “hiding spaces”. What can one observe about the changing of stage spaces in *Achilleis* trilogy? We clearly find a change of location in the *Oresteia*, but it is also possible that the altar of Agamemnon becomes/hides the sanctuary of Delphi, or in the *Achilleis* synopsis, we have a clear shift from Achilles' tent to Priam's palace.

In conclusion, Aeschylus achieves, even through these symbolic alterations and/or expansions of space, the rupture of illusion through reflection by transporting the spectators into his fictional spaces. These spaces are, ultimately, used as parallels to restore mnemonic spaces, that are either real or creations of the imagination of the spectators that their contemporary culture has instilled in them.

Looking at works by Terzopoulos (such us *Persians*, 2003, in Hagia Irene Church in Istanbul or *Prometheiade*, 2010, in three historical locations) and Ariane Mnouchkine at Cartoucherie and site-specific events while on tour with Le Théâtre du Soleil, or at memorable site-specific productions such as Brook’s *Orghast* (1971), Pearson’s *Persians* (2010), or Scaife’s *Happy Days* (2021), we further comprehend that the theatrical space, when it includes parallel rituals, expands the boundaries of the theatre as a performance space, and may bring us closer to the understanding of the goals of this art form as it once was.

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