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Pablo Berzal Cruz, Athena Stourna, Tyrone Grima, Alba Balmaseda Domínguez



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Moving Spectators in Performing Spaces: The Auditorium Dislocated into the Stage, or Vice Versa

Rafael Magrou

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42

Moving Spectators in Performing Spaces: the Auditorium Dislocated into the Stage, or Vice Versa

Rafaël Magrou

École nationale supérieure d'architecture Paris-Malaquais - Université PSL
Laboratoire ACS

Abstract

In theatres, in most of cases, the audience is assigned to its seat, in a separate area from the stage; but many experiments in spectatorship suggest that it can be mobile, with the possible aim to make it active. Sometimes it follows a relevant composition, sometimes less convincing, questioning the space and the conventional separation between the auditorium and the stage. It often creates configurations that break with the constructions imposed by the theatres. Directors and stage designers are rearchitecting the venue or importing their own architecture that incorporates the audience into the scenography, following Artaud's vision in *Le Théâtre et son double* (1938). Theatre architecture rarely offers such a morphological freedom between spectators and performers excepting 1960s and 1970s experiments. Depending on the context, *what are the limits (or excesses) of the audience's appropriation of the stage? How do they integrate the performance, and how is this anticipated? What resonance do actual experiments have with theatrical architecture? May they lead to a renewal of the current stage space?* Beginning with major examples of theatrical situations outside conventional venues, I explore, through some recent examples, how scenography meets architecture and how designers develop scenic devices that modify the audience's situation by inviting them to become part of the set. Finally, by means of comparative analysis and perspective, I will attempt to identify the ins and outs of these experiments to glimpse the extent to which today's theatres allow the development of these relational forms between spectators and performers.

Keywords: theatre architecture, set design, "scenographic architectures", stage-hall relationship, theatrical morphologies.

Moving Spectators in Performing Spaces

In 1938, in *Le Théâtre et son double*, Artaud expressed his revolutionary ideas, calling for the total transformation of the partitioning of spectators and actors on both sides.

We are removing the stage and the auditorium, replacing them by a kind of unique place, without partitions, no barriers of any kind, and which will become the very theatre of the action. Direct communication will be re-established between the spectator and the performance, between the actor and the spectator, because the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is enveloped by the action. (...) This envelopment comes from the very configuration of the auditorium. (1938, p.148).

In the history of performing arts, we generally consider architecture as the structure of the organisation of the space, in which the auditorium and the stage are two separated parts. *But is this architectural heritage enough to testify to the diversity of relationship between the auditorium and the stage?* As we know through experiments, all creations do not expect the spectators to stay seated and to have one only single point of view on the performance. Through drama history, there have been – and are still – many experiments in spectatorship suggesting or imposing that it can be mobile.active, Although some compositions are relevant, nevertheless some of them are less convincing. Some examples re-organize theatre architectures, breaking with the constructions imposed by theatre architecture – generally auditorium and stage face to face. Directors and stage designers are *rearchitecturing* the venue or importing their own disposal to incorporate the audience into the scenography.

Questioning Theatrical Relationship between Hall and Stage

In France, in the 1970s, Le Théâtre du Soleil occupation and *re-architecturation* of the old gunpowder factory nearby Paris, led to the creation diverse amenities and even landscapes, such as *1789*, *1793* or *L'Âge d'Or*. To the question why bring the audience into your shows, Mnouchkine (Théâtre du Soleil co-founder) answered: "The desire for togetherness, communion, dreams, and collective projects that corresponded to an era. Today I've come to realise that the public's inner journeys can take place even when they are seated..." (Mnouchkine, 2024). In the same period (1970s), Brook transformed the abandoned Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord (built 1862), creating an Elizabethan semi-circle seats parterre, keeping the Italian balconies, changing radically this relationship between audience and players. In *Avec Grotowski* (2009), the British director commented: "According to Artaud, the actor is on a stake from which he desperately emits signs through the flames. For [Jerzy] Grotowski, the actor is also a martyr, and the spectator can only be a respectful witness to his sacrifice

and the courage he shows by exposing himself". Indeed, the polish director with his partner stage designer Gurawski experimented in the 1960s with several space organizations for their plays including the audience breaking the face-to-face illusion box.

As theatre architecture rarely offers such a morphological freedom between spectators and performers, excepting some experiments illustrated before, these blurring out the frontiers between spectators and actors. Nowadays, depending on the context, there are sometimes no limits of the audience's appropriation of the stage. Some directors are integrating them into the performance, with the possible aim to create interactions, even if this is sometimes questionable. *Can/should this be a free or guided occupation? Is imagination activated the same way when the spectator stays seated at a distance from the performers, or when standing among them in the same space? What resonance do these experiments have with or on theatrical architecture?*

A Classification of Situations Considering Recent Shows

Through some recent examples I have been personally experienced, I propose to share how scenography meets architecture, to analyse how designers develop scenic devices modifying the audience's situation by inviting spectators to become part of the set. These are several situations which can be classified as following:

- shows in which the spectators' journey is strongly induced or supervised,
- others in which they are relatively guided,
- and still others where spectators move randomly.

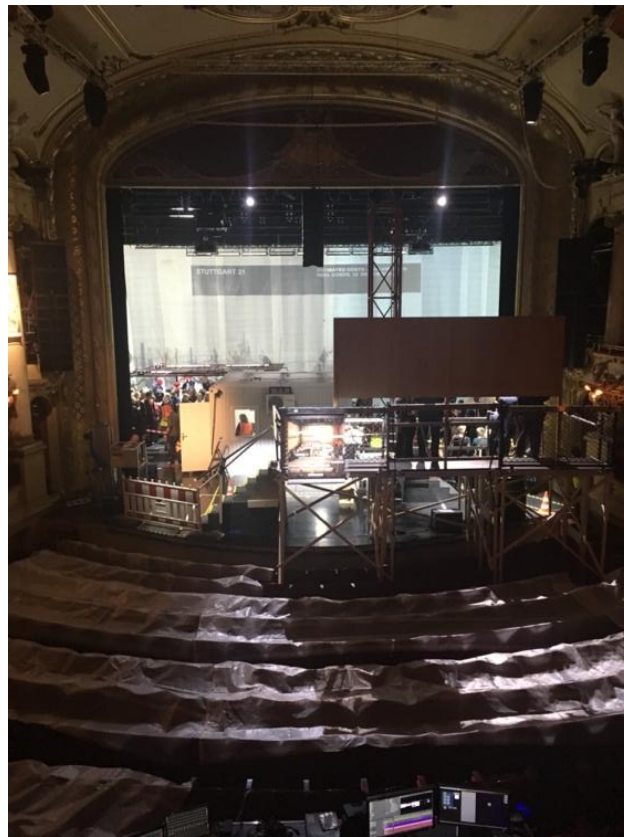
Spectators Journey is Strongly Induced or Supervised

Rimini Protokoll' *Society under construction* (2014) is an installation dedicated to the different aspects of architectural commissioning consisting in several characters: the architect, the lawyer, the estate agent, the worker, etc. Participative spectators are dispatched in groups relating to scenarios placing them in this different participation of the construction process. A stopwatch indicates each change, leading spectators to execute actions, with pauses to help them develop a critical approach of the system established.

In a different way, in *Roman Tragedies* (2008), Ivo van Hove invited spectators to join the actors on stage and to sit on sofas next to them. Excepting some forbidden areas and periods of the show, they could move from hall to stage and even drink and eat on stage. Filmed and projected on large screens, they were part of the "image," creating an unsettling situation as spectators' behaviours were disturbing, as they are not extras.

Figure 1

Rimini Protokoll, Society under construction, from hall, Oslo National Theatre 26 September 2019 © R. Magrou.

**Figure 2**

Rimini Protokoll, Society under construction, from the flying tower, Oslo National Theatre 26 September 2019, © R. Magrou

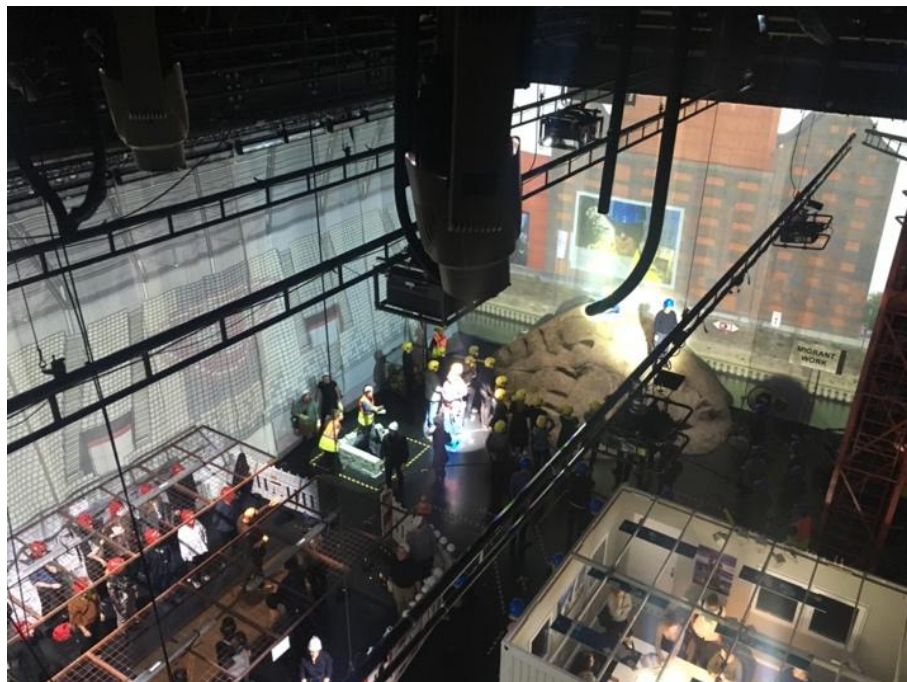


Figure 3

Ivo van Hove, Roman Tragedies, from the hall, Paris Théâtre de Chaillot, 29 June 2018, © R. Magrou.

**Figure 4**

Ivo van Hove, Roman Tragedies, from the stage, Paris Théâtre de Chaillot, 29 June 2018, © R. Magrou.



An Audience Guided or Relatively Free

Created in 2017, the opera *Sun and Sea (Marina)* of Lapelité and Grainyté set by Barzdzikaité was composed of a central stage set with sand. The singers in summer clothes were equipped with microphones while the music was played through loudspeakers. This “beach” was surrounded by the public standing on overhanging passageways. There was no physical contact between the two groups, as they were on different levels. The spectators were free to move around to catch different angles and to approach some situations, but surprisingly, each of them kept to their positions.

Figure 5

Lapelité & Grainyté, Sun and sea, Paris La Villette, 16 September 2023, © R. Magrou.



Another experience is illustrated in the Saire’s *Black out* (2011), with a tighter stage. There was a distance between spectators and actors, no physical contact and a balustrade to create the limits between stage and “hall.” The director controlled the lights. The results was once again that the spectators remained glued to their position but, here, the stage diaphragm was for everything to be seen.

Figure 6

Lapellité & Grainyité, Sun and sea, Paris La Villette, 16 September 2023, © R. Magrou.



Performances Where the Spectators can move randomly

In *re-Paradise now* (2018), French director Morin recreated the Living Theatre former *Paradise now* show audience dynamics as strongly inspired by Artaud's ideas. Actors were soliciting spectators to be part of the play, without the powerful provocation it had in the 1968 Avignon Theatre Festival. Some spectators joined the group and participated in this choreography, as some did in the Brazilian experimental Celson show at the Bo Bardi Teatro Oficina, at São Paulo.

More recently, Kennedy and Selg created *Einstein on the beach* (2023) following the musical score of Glass. In this performance, a mix of temple and rocks were fabricated on a stage spinner, while the musicians were in the orchestra pit. The spectators were totally free to move around or to sit on stage, and to get in and out of the auditorium. The laxism made the show a bit chaotic and interfered with the images the artists created.

Directors of these productions are breaking the rules of the sacred area that is the stage, blurring the limits between stage and hall, creating other relationships with the audience,

with the conscious or unconscious risk of disturbing the reception of the play. There are other experiments that illustrate this trend or will to requestion the theatrical organization, with varied levels of success.

Figure 7

Kennedy & Selg, Einstein on the beach, on stage, Paris La Villette, 28 September 2023, © R. Magrou.



Figure 8

Kennedy & Selg, Einstein on the beach, from hall, Paris La Villette, 28 September 2023, © R. Magrou.



Towards a History of Scenographic Architectures Morphological Variations

Body and space relationship could of course be a vector of proposing other models to add to the diagrams or schemes of theatrical architecture. The main idea of this observation is to take account of these space organizations in theatre architecture representation, such as Jouvett in the Sabbattini reprint introduction of the *Pratique pour fabriquer scènes et machines de théâtre* (1637-1942)¹, Izenour' (1977) *Theater design*. In fact, the stage sets ephemeral disposals are never taken account in this panel of morphologies and hall-stage relationship. This leads to the following question: instead of separating theatre architecture and stage organization and experimentation, wouldn't it be more holistic to approach design from a crossed framework of models? The aim would be to compose a *history of "scenographic architectures"² morphologic variations*, to better link space and time, content and container.

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¹ Sabbattini Nicola (1637), *Pratique pour fabriquer scènes et machines de théâtre*, reprint (1942) introduction by Louis Jouvett, Neufchâtel, Ides et Calendes.

² Assembled words formulation inspired by Gaulme (1985)