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Performing Space and Performativity: Two Case Studies from the Epidaurus Festival

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Performing Space and Performativity: Two Case Studies from the Epidaurus Festival

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of “performing space,” emphasising its dynamic nature and its role as an active participant in the artistic process, rather than a passive backdrop. The term “performing” is unpacked through its connection to action and performativity, drawing on Austin’s theories of performative utterances, Peirce’s notion of the living sign, and Schechner’s environmental theatre. The discussion introduces a formalist definition of performance and its derivatives (performativity, perform, performing), refining the semantic field concerning the process of “producing a form.” Two case studies illustrate the transformative power of performing spaces: Marmarinos’ *Trackers* and Papaphilippou’s *Sacred Tales*, both presented at the 2021 Athens and Epidaurus Festival. Marmarinos’ production at the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus is framed as a performative space that integrates music, movement, and dramaturgical elements to create an immersive environment that encourages audience interaction. The dynamic choreography, sound design, and spatial engagement dissolve the boundaries between performance and spectator, highlighting the interplay between narrative, space, and temporality. In contrast, Papaphilippou’s *Sacred Tales* uses an installation of interconnected strings in the Little Theatre of Ancient Epidaurus to symbolise unity and interconnectivity between the audience and nature, framed within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This performance, grounded in environmental theatre principles, transcends the physical space of the theatre, fostering a sense of temporal and cosmic awareness. By engaging with the strings, spectators actively participate in the performance, experiencing a collective connection. Both examples underscore the notion that performing spaces are living entities, shaped by the interaction of performers, spectators, and the surrounding environment, offering new perspectives on the relationship between performance and space.

Keywords: Performing space, performativity, environmental theatre, living space, spatial dynamics, transformative performance, immersive theatre, interactive performance, embodied Experience, sensory engagement.

Performing Space: Unpacking Semantic Layers Beyond the Backdrop

Given the multiple meanings of the notion of “performing space,” I will define its specific interpretation as discussed in this paper before examining two study cases. I will start with a brief exploration of the term “performing,” which indicates that performing space embodies action, creating a dynamic environment influencing both those within it (performers) and those observing from a distance (spectators), instead of merely serving as a backdrop for action.

Additionally, the term “performing” connects to concepts such as performance art and the broader category of performing arts. For both, action is a fundamental aspect tied to the notion of doing something, shaping the actions and relationships among performers, viewers, and objects. The concept of performativity, as articulated by Austin (1962), supports this. His notion of “doing things with words” helps us understand the spatial dynamics under discussion. For example, “declaring war” or saying “I do” are performative utterances that do more than convey meaning; they enact the idea of declaring war or forming a marital bond. Performing space functions according to a similar pattern.

To clarify the terminology and its angle of approach, I will present my definition of performance, providing a formalist perspective on the process involved: “Performance (*per- + -formance*) can be understood as the process of ‘producing a form’ or as an action leading to a form. It is, therefore, about shaping specific qualities” (Dospinescu, 2013, p.XX, translation my own). The suffix *per-* indicates a vector of intentionality, directed towards the constitution of a form. The suffix *-ance* helps in “forming nouns of quality, state, or action.” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.)

Notably, performativity should not be equated with semiotic or aesthetic phenomena, as it focuses on giving form, which is distinct from concepts of beauty or style. It pertains more to a transitional state, reminiscent of a “living sign” (Peirce, 1994, p. 222), which I define here as one that has not yet fully established its meaning.¹ Thus, a performing space embodies the dynamics of action rather than serving merely as a canvas for projecting meaning. Often perceived as inert, performing space can be profoundly dynamic, impacting both the objects within its reach and the subjects (performers) or spectators observing it. This reflects upon the notion of environmental theatre, in which “[t]he audience does not sit in regularly arranged rows; there is one whole space rather than two opposing spaces. The environmental use of space is fundamentally *collaborative*. [...] Environmental theatre design is a reflection of the communal nature of this kind of theatre. The design encourages participation; it is also a reflection of the wish for participation” (Schechner 1973, p. 39).

¹ In this respect, “[t]he living sign is a sign in a performative state, in the process of acquiring a form, which aspires to a culturally recognizable form, in the domain of the symbol and theatricality.” (Dospinescu, 2007, p. 416, translation my own).

Marmarinos' *Trackers*: Weaving Narrative, Music, and Acting in a Transformative Space

Marmarinos' *Trackers* (*Ιχνευτές*), a highlight of the 2021 Athens and Epidaurus Festival, transformed the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus into a dynamic, living space. The production exemplified environmental theatre, engaging deeply with performativity through a narrative on "how Music first reached the ears of humans" (Konstantinos, 2021, XX). Various theatrical techniques created an immersive sensory experience,² enhancing the dramaturgy and aligning with the idea of a successful performative space as a "microcosm, with flow, contact, and interaction" (Schechner, 1973, p. 30). The artistic team succeeded in intertwining the story, space, and the relationship between the stage and audience, bringing Sophocles' unfinished text to life. In a metatheatrical moment, the chorus, humorously transformed into playful goats, acknowledged their limitations alongside the audience, thus breaking traditional boundaries. This interaction engaged spectators in a lively interaction filled with laughter and surprise, exemplifying dramaturgical choices that fostered audience participation.

As the premise revolves around Apollo's command to the Satyrs to retrieve his lost cattle, guided by the newly invented lyre, this narrative serves as a framework for the performance, woven into a magical *soundscape*³. Bultheel's music, interpreted by a skilled ensemble, became a fundamental component of the staging, reinforcing its immersive qualities. Brass instruments strategically placed around the theatre enveloped the audience in an enigmatic auditory experience. Katona's ethereal countertenor voice enriched this soundscape, bridging the fragmented text and live performance. The music transcended its role as a mere element of the *mise-en-scène*, becoming a quality of the performing space itself, contributing to its organic cohesion.

The interplay between music and movement further activated the performing space, with Karachalios' choreography mirroring the dramatic action. The stylised movements of the Satyrs captured the essence of their search, while the playful "goat step" and the sound of bells reinforced this physical connection, extending it to both space and the audience.

Marmarinos' vision expanded beyond the immediate performance, exploring spatiality as it relates to ancient Greek culture. The theatre's architecture informed the dramaturgy, merging space, time, and sound into a unified whole. As an immersive aspect, spectators

² A photo gallery on the Athens and Epidaurus Festival's website can give a glimpse of these techniques. [https://aefestival.gr/festival_events/trackers/?lang=en#iLightbox\[gallery_image_1\]/-1](https://aefestival.gr/festival_events/trackers/?lang=en#iLightbox[gallery_image_1]/-1)

³ A video presentation can offer a glimpse of the visual quality of the performance and the musical excerpt accompanying it offers an example of the aural quality of the performance's soundscape. https://aefestival.gr/festival_events/trackers/?lang=en

transcended the present moment, connecting with ancient Greece's spectral past. The sound enveloped the arena, generating a sense of organicity, that transformed it into a living entity.

The integration of environmental elements—such as bells, footsteps, and even the *wind-swirling leaves across the stage*⁴—enhanced the performance's grounding in its physical space. These effects blurred the boundary between performance and environment, making the audience active participants in a shared experience resonating with echoes of the past and bridging ancient myths with contemporary sensibilities.

Trackers exemplifies performativity as a dynamic, evolving process. The engagement between performers and spectators became vital to the theatrical experience, reshaping the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus into an active performing space rather than a monumental relic. By blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, *Trackers* transformed the theatre into an integral part of storytelling. This interaction between space and performance offered a deeper understanding of the ancient context while contemporising its themes.

Ultimately, *Trackers* celebrates the power of performativity and the transformative potential of performing space. Through the artistic team's creative contributions, Marmarinos' direction turns the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus into a vibrant canvas for exploration. The result honours the legacy of Greek theatre while inviting new interpretations, affirming the relevance of a theatrical vision that is organically integrated into the performance space. By innovatively engaging with sound, movement, and space, *Trackers* challenges conventional theatre, reinforcing the idea that performance and its space merge into a living, breathing entity born from the interactions of various elements.

Papaphilippou's *Sacred Tales*: Weaving Time and Space, a Collective Experience

Papaphilippou's *Sacred Tales* also presented at the Athens and Epidaurus Festival in 2021, exemplifies the concept of performing space in the unique artistic context of the COVID pandemic: "The global experience of the pandemic as an oxymoron perceived in the coexistence of separation and connectivity. A piece with references to the paradoxical text *Sacred Tales (Hieroi Logoi)* by Aelius Aristides (117-181 AD), regarding healing by the god Asclepius and the attempt to express oneself." (Terezaki, 2021). The visual artist proposed an installation, envisioning a nexus of strings connecting individuals in the theatre, linking them to one another and nature. She emphasised the interconnectedness of *art* and *nature*, stressing the circular unity of the *whole* (Figure 1).

⁴ It happened happily and by accident during the performance I attended.

Figure 1

The koilon of the theatre. Sacred Tales by Aemilia Papaphilippou. Athens and Epidaurus Festival 2021. Image by A. Papaphilippou.



The koilon of the theater," she explains, "structures community, coherence, and dialectical relationships. Similarly, at an architectural/sculptural level, the solution, catharsis, is formed, which involves the acceptance of circularity and periodicity of phenomena. After all, the theater, as a mechanism, was part of Asklepieion's therapy (Papaphilippou, 2021, pp. 7-8).

Initially designed and proposed as a static installation⁵ (Figures 2-3), the project evolved into a one-time performance during its final days. Papaphilippou invited an audience, deepening the theme of interconnectivity by offering them to let themselves be tied up together within the web of strings (Figure 3). As she recited fragments of her *Sacred Tales* text,⁶ this transformation animated the inanimate nexus, creating a vibrant network that fostered a sense of collective presence. Participants engaged with the strings, feeling connected to each other and the surrounding space.

Reflecting on Schechner's environmental theatre, the movements of the spectators influenced each other in a shared experience. As an attendee, I can confirm the profound sense of unity among the audience, fostering a connection to both the physical space and the larger world. This experience transcended the moment, creating an awareness of *time* and a feeling of belonging to it. While anchored in the present, spectators were drawn into

⁵ From August 13th until September 5th, 2021.

⁶ Called *The Rant*, this text is written by Papaphilippou after Aristides' *Sacred Tales*; it includes fragments of but should not be confused with Aelios Aristides' text.

a sense of primordial time, reminiscent of Mircea Eliade's "Great Time" (1967, p. 23) associated with creation myths.

Figure 2

"Daughter, mother, nature," as the artist Papaphilippou calls this picture. Sacred Tales could be viewed at the Little Theatre of Ancient Epidaurus, first as a fixed installation. Image by A. Papaphilippou, 2021.



Figure 3

The material web of strings merging with the lines of light on the stone steps, achieving a connectivity both with the theatre and with Nature. Image by A. Papaphilipou, 2021



The performance transformed the theatre into a dynamic performing space, prompting spectators to interact with the environment through the strings (*Figure 4*). This interplay facilitated a psychophysical connection, where the strings became a metonymy for the

universe. Enveloped in this web, attendees experienced an expanded awareness of their connection to the *κόσμος*.

The web of strings extending beyond the theatre (*Figure 5*) represents this connection, suggesting the amphitheatre, as a site of Culture, projects, through the *koilon*'s opening, participants into the larger *κόσμος* of Nature. Papaphilippou's *Sacred Tales* embodied the essence of performing space, resonating with themes of connection, unity, and the shared human experience while infusing the audience with a purifying sense of catharsis.

Figure 4

Visitors are gradually integrated into the web of strings. A. Papaphilipou, 2021.



Figure 5

Strings stretch all the way outside the theatre, connecting the spectators to the larger κόσμος... Photo: A. Papaphilipou, 2021.



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