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Interactive Theatre: Participation of Audiences and Their Role in Enhancing a Performance

Mariyam Ilyas Siddiqui
Research Scholar
Department of English
Aligarh Muslim University

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Abstract:

Interactive Theatre highlights the role of audience in altering the plot of the play or passing judgements on any given situation at the end of the performance. However, Interactive Theatre by 'Breaking the Fourth Wall' can also be used to initiate change in the society and in creating awareness over important issues and it needs to be addressed in a public forum. Breaking the Fourth Wall provides an opportunity to remove the imaginary wall between the performers and the audiences and hence a platform to address the global issues in public interest. The fourth wall was frequently broken in the Elizabethan and Restoration dramas. The actors from Shakespeare's days would come and sit in the audience, make jokes to them personally and sometimes hand over the important props, while the contemporary drama usually shies away with the breaking of the Fourth wall. Moreover, Interactive Theatre has helped many of us in putting ourselves out there in the real world, breaking through the stereotypes and stating our views. Thus, with the Breaking of the Fourth Wall in the field of Interactive Theatre creating awareness about the social, political and other global issues has been very fruitful.

The purpose of this study is to highlight the feasibility of using Interactive Theatre in order to activate the needed change in the society. Over the course of the study, different examples and types of Interactive Theatre will be thoroughly analysed and studied to meet the ends. My analysis will focus on works like *Blind Hamlet*, *Sleep No More*, *66 Minutes in Damascus*, *Hair* and some Flash Mobs.

Keywords: Breaking the Fourth Wall, Interactive Theatre, Moving bodies, Change and Awareness.

Interactive Theatre is a newly exploded popular theatrical form which is characterised by an active and physical relationship between audience and the production. It aims to inspire and engage the audiences. It highlights the role of audience in altering the plot of the play or passing judgements on any given situation. Sometimes they are given a choice to follow the actor of their own choice and, hence, they carry forward the plot line leading to an all new ending to the story of the show and sometimes theatre audiences are found resolving the issues. In addition to that, sometimes audiences are given a task to supply with some useful suggestions to highlight the performance. This way the perspective of every individual present is highlighted. Here, the audience is on the same performing space as that of actors.

This kind of theatre is rehearsal of life because sometimes they are bold; sometimes they are jarring as they immerse the audience in the landscape of the show. So, next time if one visit to see any such performance, one must not be bewildered, it's a new presentational art of work. One thing which must be kept in mind while preparing for such performance is that if the audience isn't expecting or isn't comfortable with such kind of performance than one must be well prepared for it because this could be off-putting and defeats the very purpose of the interactive theatre.

Interactive Theatre with these characterising elements is becoming very popular and common these days as it gives an opportunity to express, to speak up and to present the individual belief. In a way, it becomes audience's lives, dreams, hopes and even aspirations. And more than that the special thing about this theatrical form is that you don't even need to be talented to speak for yourself as in it doesn't matter if you are a good actor as an audience because what matters is how you present yourself and what is your personal opinion on any particular given situation. Ranji David, a theatre actor, says,

“Aristotle may have stressed on the importance of generating a Cathartic effect while watching a tragedy but this style of drama gives audience a sense of release after stamping their views in front of an audience.”

We all have seen many stage performances which are very different from each other and are performed by the best of actors and we usually ends up praising the acting, the concept, the stage setting and the way it is presented but with Interactive Theatre this thing turns to be a little bit different because you become the part of it. You are not just a spectator anymore who is just sticking to its chair and is enjoying the scene presented before him, now whatever is going to happen you will be responsible for it because now you can move the plot line and it widens your understanding of life because you can take your decisions without worrying about it. Moreover, you don't perform to be praised, in fact, you aren't even performing you are just speaking your heart out. It eventually gives you a platform to perform and make a point.

Another important aspect associated with Interactive Theatre is that no play will ever be performed the same way twice which means it is once in a life time opportunity to express yourself. Today, if you're given a chance to speak up about something which is apparently so important that it might direct to a new change needed to be surfaced, tomorrow you might not get the same opportunity. Tomorrow might come with some alterations and new ideas to deal with. It is something magical about the performance because you are in it and you are interacting and carrying forward the performance. For an Interactive Theatre to be successful we must keep in mind the five rules from an audience perspective as told by Miriam Gillinson:

“**Think outside your venue:** Site-specific venues range from reclaimed spaces to venues constructed entirely from scratch or the great outdoors. Sometimes these choices feels lazy, designed to deliver an initial shock, replicate the story's location or simply allow the audience space in which

to roam. This is not enough. The most successful interactive shows ensure their space connects, vitally, to the emotions contained within a piece.

Justify your audience / actor ratio: I've lost count of the number of interactive shows I've seen in which the audience outnumbers the actors. On rare occasions – such as in Punchdrunk shows, when the audience is in masks and effectively contributes to the atmosphere – this can work. But in most instances an audience that dwarfs the show is a bad idea. They are forced to work harder than the actors so that the show's success depends not on performer energy but spectator passion. Uninvited Guests' BAC show, *Make Better Please*, relied heavily on the presence of an outraged audience. One long section required the audience to hurl indignant questions at masked authority figures – an apathetic crowd made for a lacklustre show. A nervous or bored audience is the enemy of interactive theatre, but an emboldened and curious one is gold dust.

Enclose audiences, don't expose them: Much interactive theatre depends on getting the audience out of its comfort zone, without them realising it. Some shows ask spectators to stand alone in the spotlight and unload their secrets, as in Non Zero One's *The Time Out Zone*. Better ones enclose the audience so completely in their chosen environment that spectators no longer feel themselves. Wrapped up in a new sensory experience, we instinctively adapt.

Keep things simple(r): Shows increasingly take place in huge, multi-storey buildings, but vast spaces can lure directors into creating massively over-complicated shows. Half Cut's recent *Shelf Life* recreated an entire life trajectory from birth to death. Despite some transporting moments (such as crawling through a massive vulva), the show felt shaky and rushed overall and it was difficult to sink into such a frantic piece. Similarly, World Stage's *Babel*, which involved hundreds of actors and almost as many concepts, descended into a lukewarm fairground event. Epic shows can become too big to control.”

The purpose of Interactive Theatre is to bring audiences out of their comfort zones without them realising it. But, many a times it faces failure when audience is asked to stand alone in the spotlight and unload their secrets as in “*The Time Out Zone*”. To avoid such failures, the setting has to be realistic and so comforting that audience don't feel reluctant and they are ready to take the risks. Another important thing which is to be kept in mind regarding such kind of performances is the consistency because this is what makes it or breaks it. It doesn't matter what world you create unless you make it a consistent one. Then it will not fall into pitfall and spectators will follow the performance more likely. They'll trust you and will eventually catch the loose strings attached to the basic structure of the performance.

Interactive Theatre can also be used as a vehicle for promoting social and institutional change; the audience become activated “spect-actors” and engages in collaboration dialogue, reflection and problem-solving to transform their realities. Presently, we are surrounded by so many social, political and ethical issues which need to be addressed at first hand in the most influential manner and the kind of treatment required is expected of Interactive Theatre. The belief that ‘Art can bring change’ is what is to be understood for this. If it can be shaped, targeted and delivered in a particular way it can excite change. It is developed as a genre where practitioners aim at minimising the gap between stage and auditorium and emphasis is on the direct relationship between actors and the audience and eventually between audience members and themselves.

The different types of Interactive Theatre include:

- **Forum Theatre:** It was created by a practitioner named Augusto Boal. The aim of its establishment was to teach people to bring change in the world. It was started as a part of the already established genre called as Theatre of Oppressed. In this, actors were given a liberty to stop the performance or any scene of the play where any of the characters were oppressed in any way. Sometimes, audience will come on stage and perform their interventions.
- **Community Theatre:** It was made with relation to a particular community. The sole aim of the establishment of such kind of theatre is to highlight ant community because the theatre is made by the community and is performed for the community. No outside help is taken in this regard. It targets the social upliftment, artistic abilities and community spirit.
- **Invisible Theatre:** This type of theatre is performed where people will least expect it to be. For instance, on a moving road or a shopping complex. It aims at disguising itself from being a performance and, hence, can be understood by the spectators to be real and unstaged and, hence, the name Invisible Theatre.
- **Theatre for Early Years:** It is a blanket term used for the theatrical performances designed especially for a younger audience. The performance is for the children under five or six years of age. The performance aims at the themes of bonding and attachment and kids watch it while sitting in their strollers or on the laps of their parents.
- **Playback Theatre:** This form of interactive theatre takes its origin from Improvisational Theatre where audiences narrate their real life stories and saw its enactment on the spot. This type of theatre is usually seen its performance in schools, prisons, centre for elderly people etc. It aims at encouraging people from all spheres of life to share their stories and make them heard.
- **Immersive Theatre:** This form of theatre witnesses the presence of audience either in the form of a witness or a role of an actor. They are not merely bystanders.

There are many interactive performances which can be our focus in order to understand the aforementioned theatrical form well and how can this form be considered as a medium to initiate awareness. First and foremost production that will be taken into account is “66

minutes in Damascus". This is written by a Lebanese playwright and director, Lucien Bourjeily. The writer took inspiration from the true events which were recounted by the local activists and journalists from outside who have been detained and are being released later from Syrian Secret Detention Centres. They were locked down very randomly and without any trials. Within the play, the audiences will be doubling as tourists which will be eventually arrested by Syrian Secret Service. This gives an insight to what is actually happening in Syria. It deals with the difficulty to understand the lives of those who come out of detention and basically what happens when you are in detention centre. You are tortured and beaten brutally to death. Through this play, audiences were given the first hand experience of interacting with detainees. They can talk, interact, listen and understand the life in detention centre and ,thus, realising what is actually happening around us. Detainees part of the crew were detained for days, for weeks and some of them were there for months, So, listening to their stories and interacting with them and creating an opinion of your own on these sensitive problems is what this art form is capable of.

In "*Sleep No More*", a 2011 play by British Theatre Company named Punch Drunk, is inspired by Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Even though, there aren't any dialogues in the performance, only music is played and audiences are asked to wear masks and are instructed not to say anything, the Fourth Wall is broken in an unusual way when the audience is free to explore individually or they can follow any particular actor depending upon their choice of character. The audience can investigate by opening drawers and examine the letter written from Macbeth to Lady Macbeth which is kept as a property. Now you don't talk, you don't get a chance to express yourself than how do you expect to get something from such a performance? But here's the surprise, you've already read Shakespeare. In order to understand the play better, you get a chance to explore a lot without explaining it to anyone. Above all, the experience you share after you come back makes you realise that your thinking ability has widen up because now you can discuss things even when you haven't heard or said anything about them. And eventually it encourages you to explore more and more. In fact, it gives you an opportunity to question yourself, Who We are?

Another interesting performance that we can talk about is that of a play named, "*Hair*" which is a time capsule that reaches the present with universal issues that in variant forms applies to today's youth. It talks of a time when dislocations, fear of change are so important. Here, the performers are walking down the aisles or over the seats with the elements of sexuality. "*Hair*" is the story of group of Americans searching for love and peace during the Vietnam War. It is a timeless portrayal of a movement that changed the world. It talks of war, sex, drugs etc. which are relevant even today. The audience, here, is invited to be a part of the tribe and become its member. So it's something which aims at young generation and the problems associated with them.

In another play named "*Blind Hamlet*", Iranian writer, Nassim Soleimanpour, has dealt with the slow loss of his eyesight and the very fact that he has never read Hamlet. In this particular art work, writer is dealing with the darkest of times in one's life. Imagine a person who is moving towards darkness and he knows he will eventually get blind but then he decides not to stop. Moreover, he chooses a different and a more progressive path to live on. He records

his own voice and that voice recorder is kept amongst the audience. Audiences eventually, after listening to the recorded voice, get a chance to listen to themselves, question themselves and even answer themselves.

In Ayn Rand's theatrical play named "*Night of January 16th*", the audience is given the role of jury. The play is inspired by the death of an entrepreneur named Ivar Kreuger. The play focuses on the character named Karen Andre who is a former secretary and lover of the businessman named Bjorn Faulkner. Karen was accused of Faulkner's murder. The play does not directly portray the events that are leading to the death but the spectators have to rely on the testimony of Karen Andre to pass on their judgements. The ending of the play depends upon the verdict given. It specifically highlights the choice taken by the spectators to give preference to individualism or to conformity.

Another one in the list is a play named "*Then She Fell*" which took its inspiration from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. It is a production of Third Rail Projects. In this, only 15 members from the audience per performance can enter into a world which is lushly designed. Here, audience explores a dreamscape by themselves in order to find the hidden secrets, illuminate the shrouded history and go on their own journey of adventure. It gives an Alice like feeling to its spectators. The members feel totally immersed in the story line. Sarah Lyall from The New York Times says:

"I had given myself over completely to the story, to the poignant predicament of a flawed man condemned to a moment for eternity, trapped with his memories and his yearnings, sitting alone in a pool of tears. The image has haunted me ever since, more so because of the sense that I was complicit in it, if only for a moment. You cannot feel more immersed than that."

Apart from these plays, we have these Flash Mobs where a large number of people gather to do some random act and then they disperse. These Flash Mobs aims at creating awareness regarding something or sometimes they pay tributes to someone important or they plan to put forward some kind of messages for the general public. The first flash mob was a failed attempt which took place in Manhattan in 2003 by Bill Wasik. The meaning of the modern day flash mobs is very much different from what it was in the past. Earlier in 19th century, it was used by the women prisoners for the jargon that they used. Later, flash mobs also started to be known as a form of performance art. Hence, Flash Mobs are another interactive performance through which it's easy to excite and initiate any kind of change. In a city named Brunswick in Germany^{9090v v}, Flash Mobs has been stopped by enforcing a law which states that a permit is required to use the public space for any event.

Interactive theatre also comprises of a genre of musicals which includes an adaptation of an unfinished novel of Charles Dickens namely, '*The Mystery of Edwin Drood*'. It was the first Broadway musical with multiple endings. Written by Rupert Holmes, the musical had 7 different endings based on audience's vote. Apart from Dickens's final novel, it also took inspiration from the British Pantomime and Victorian style Music Hall traditions. To make it

interactive, during the break, audience was asked to vote and tell who killed drood, only if he was meant to kill. And since every person present as an audience differs in its temperament, the ending might be happy or sad depending upon the majority of votes. In such cases, the writer had to work a little more as he has to write different possible endings depending upon the votes casted.

These magical experiences of these different types of performances use different techniques for 'Breaking the Fourth Wall' in such a beautiful way that it leaves an impact on the mind of the audiences. It allows guests to explore those aspects of their personalities they might otherwise neglect, or that usually remain latent or hidden. It also allows participants to play with changing status again experiencing a marked difference from 'ordinary life'. In a nut shell, it broadens the range of scenarios where participants experience a rare opportunity to have their realities affirmed. The intention is to achieve change by creating the circumstances in which people experience optimum conditions in which shifts of personal knowledge, values and attitude can occur. There is always a hope to achieve the best possible levels of social efficacy and artistic merit.

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