

**contents**

---

<i>Series editors' preface</i>	vii
<i>Foreword by Lois Weaver</i>	ix
Difficulties of definition	5
Models and frames	11
The road less travelled	27
Suspicion, frustration, and contempt	38
Potent orthodoxies	55
Playing with the audience	62
<i>Further reading</i>	77
<i>Index</i>	85



## theatre & audience

---

You are the topic. ... You are the centre. You are the occasion. You are the reasons why.

Peter Handke, *Offending the Audience*  
(1966, p. 21)

The presence of an audience is central to the definition of theatre, and the twentieth century saw an explosion of interest in the audience's role among experimental theatre practitioners. In 1968, Peter Brook insisted in *The Empty Space* – a text that is now a well-worn touchstone in theatre studies – that he could 'take any empty space and call it a bare stage', observing: 'A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged' (p. 11). In the same year Jerzy Grotowski defined theatre as 'what takes place between spectator and actor' in *Towards a Poor Theatre* (p. 32). Writing in 1999, Tim Etchells encouraged his readers to contemplate the 'irreducible fact of theatre – actors and

an audience to whom they must speak' (*Certain Fragments*, p. 94). The theatrical experiments carried out by these directors and many other practitioners during the twentieth century have shown us that theatre is not dependent upon its location in a designated building or institution and that it is possible to do away with plot, character, costumes, set, sound, and script. As Handke's characters acknowledge in *Offending the Audience* (Theater am Turm, Frankfurt, 1966), the relationship with the audience provides the theatre event with its rationale. This relationship is indispensable.

This indispensability does not mean that audiences have always been treated with deference or that they have been allowed to watch or listen undisturbed, as the title of Handke's play indicates. The desire to reconfigure the relationship between theatre and its audiences was a recurring theme in experimental theatre practice during the twentieth century and continues to preoccupy many practitioners, and these attempts to reposition the audience have proceeded as much by castigation as they have by celebration. In fact, the polemic which surrounds audiences – and the concerns and anxieties which have been projected onto them from both outside and inside the theatre – seem to be generated by a complex mix of hope, frustration, and disgust.

Some of these attitudes are apparent in the terms that are often used to describe audiences and their behaviour. Take the word 'spectator', for example. Do spectators simply watch? Or are they gazing, or gawking? Are they impartial observers, innocent bystanders, or voyeurs? The terms employed to describe audiences and their relationship

to performance are laden with value judgements. Are they just viewers, or accomplices, witnesses, participants? Are they a crowd, a mass, a mob, or critics and connoisseurs? In this book, I want to interrogate some of the assertions, prejudices, and polemic which continue to shape our attitudes towards audience in order to explore how these produce our sense of what theatre is, has been, and should be.

Examining the discourse relating to theatre audiences can also help us understand the hopes, expectations, and frustrations which surround other cultural forms which position us as part of a collective. Our sense of the proper, or ideal, relationship between theatre and its audiences can illuminate our hopes for other models of social interaction, clarifying our expectations of community, democracy, and citizenship, and our perception of our roles and power (or lack of it) within the broader public sphere. As Susan Bennett puts it in her preface to the updated 1997 edition of her *Theatre Audiences* (a book which has become a central reference point in the field): '[T]he act of theatre-going can be a significant measure of what culture affords to its participants' (p. vii). This quotation signals Bennett's investment in one of the most cherished orthodoxies in theatre studies: the belief in a connection between audience participation and political empowerment. In what follows, I want to ask some uncomfortable questions about this belief. For example: why, when there is so much to suggest that the responses of theatre audiences are rarely unified or stable, do theatre scholars seem to be more comfortable making strong assertions about theatre's unique influence and impact upon audiences

than gathering and assessing the evidence which might support these claims? Why do they appear to prefer discussing their own responses, or relaying the opinions of reviewers, to asking 'ordinary' theatre-goers – with no professional stake in the theatre – what they make of a performance? Could this apparent aversion to engaging with audience response be related to deep-seated suspicion of, and frustration with, audiences? And, if so, what are the grounds for this suspicion? Why are audiences apparently not to be trusted?

A word, before I continue, about the scope and focus of this book. It concentrates on productions which I have experienced personally and on work which is well documented by others and has generated broader critical debate within theatre and performance studies. This means that it focuses upon canonical European and North American theatre and its audiences in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with a particular bias towards contemporary British performance, which has seen an extraordinary increase in the use of audience participation since the turn of the millennium. My responses to the performances I describe below are also strongly informed by the British political scene. Since New Labour's election under Tony Blair in 1997, we have seen ongoing governmental interest in the concept and potentials of participation, reflected in public policies which aim to increase the electorate's engagement with the democratic system and local government, and in education and arts policies directed at widening participation and reaching new audiences. In this context the questions I want to raise about the connections between collective experience,

---

audience participation, political agency, and ‘the people’ have a particular urgency.

### **Difficulties of definition: the communal situation**

Several barriers block a better understanding of the relationship between theatre and its audiences. One is the tendency to confuse individual and group response; another is the persistent circulation of exaggerated and unsubstantiated claims about theatre’s influence and impact. But let’s start with the challenges presented by the term ‘audience’ itself. The word’s origins in the Latin verb *audire* – ‘to hear’ – suggest that audiences have been thought of primarily as listeners, rather than viewers, at certain moments in the past. This seems to be at odds with the emphasis in the roots of the ancient word for theatre, which translates as ‘place of seeing’, and indicates that historical shifts occur in our understanding of which senses audiences are predominantly using at performances. Even more significant problems are generated by the term’s association with an assembled group. The common tendency to refer to an audience as ‘it’ and, by extension, to think of this ‘it’ as a single entity, or a collective, risks obscuring the multiple contingencies of subjective response, context, and environment which condition an individual’s interpretation of a particular performance event. A confident description of a singular audience reaction may do no justice at all to the variety of response among different members of that audience. So it is important to remember that each audience is made up of

individuals who bring their own cultural reference points, political beliefs, sexual preferences, personal histories, and immediate preoccupations to their interpretation of a production. Regular theatre-goers know that post-show discussions reveal how widely responses can vary, even among friends who might be expected to bring similar ideological perspectives and cultural experiences to the event.

What's more, these differences are present within individuals as well as among them. It is possible to find yourself judging and responding to a production in a number of different – and potentially conflicting – ways, as Alice Rayner points out in her essay 'The Audience: Subjectivity, Community and the Ethics of Listening' (1993). Rayner articulates the different subject positions she occupies: 'Sometimes I hear you from my position as a woman, sometimes as a professor, sometimes as a mother, sometimes as bourgeois' (p. 4). Rayner's list is a useful reminder that a single person can experience multiple responses to a show which may well be at odds with one another. Nevertheless, for performers, the need to negotiate the reality of encountering a group of spectators, gathered together with the intent of watching their show, remains a pressing issue, regardless of the fragility, contingency, or transience of that audience's collective identity (or indeed the internal debates which individual audience members may entertain). Tim Etchells, director of Sheffield-based performance ensemble Forced Entertainment – whose performances often draw attention to the relationship between performers and spectators – reflects on the tension between awareness of the

---

differences among spectators and the collective experience of theatre-going in *Programme Notes* (a collection edited by Daniel Brine and Lois Kiedan, 2007):

Watching the best theatre and performance we are together and alone. Together in the sense that we're aware of the temporary and shifting bonds that link us both to the stage and to our fellow watchers, plugged into the group around and in front of us, the communal situation, sensing the laughter, attentiveness, tension or unease that grip us collectively, in waves and ripples, in jolts, jumps and uncertain spirals or in other formations that do not yet have a name. Sat watching we spread-out, osmose, make connections. But at the same time, even as we do so, we feel our separateness, our difference from those around us, from those on-stage. Even as we shift and flow within the group, we're aware that our place in its emerging consensus, its temporary community, is partial and provisional – that in any case the group itself – there in the theatre, as elsewhere, in our cities and streets, in the relations between nations, peoples and states – is always as much a fraught and necessary question, a longing and a problem, as it is any kind of certainty. (p. 26)

Etchells's portrait of the complex paradoxes inherent in being an audience member usefully indicates what is at stake in our understanding of the nature of community and

collective experience. His description of the experience of connection occurring through a process of osmosis reflects long-standing hypotheses about how beliefs and behaviour spread among mass gatherings, groups, and crowds, but his sense of the limitations of communal experience has a specifically twenty-first century inflection. Etchells's awareness that community is temporary and provisional – as much a matter of problematic and frustrated desire as it is a tangible reality – chimes with concerns about who 'we' are in an age of terrorism and swiftly shifting populations and sites of wealth. After all, in many of today's urban centres it is impossible to be sure that the people you live, travel, or work alongside – and those whom you sit next to in the theatre – share your language, your sense of national identity, or indeed any of your beliefs. An assumption that they do so may cause confusion, misunderstanding, or even offence.

Unfortunately, not everyone is as alert as Etchells to the potential problems with an assumption that every member of a crowd or an audience feels the same way. As Elin Diamond points out in her essay 'The Violence of "We": Politicizing Identification' (1991), traditional theatre reviews often blithely ignore the possibility of a range of audience response, as their writers make assertions such as 'we feel Macbeth's fear' or 'we understand Nora's frustration'. The trouble with these statements is the way they project the subjective responses of the critic on to the rest of the audience, discursively producing the audience the critic would like to imagine rather than accurately reflecting the complexity and potential diversity of collective and



# index

---

- Abramović, Marina, 23–4, 62–3  
 Acconci, Vito, 50  
 anti-theatrical prejudice, 38–42, 72  
 applause, 19–21  
 Artaud, Antonin, 17, 27, 77  
 audience:  
   active engagement of, 3, 25, 27,  
     46–9, 55–76  
   antagonism towards, 2, 4, 9, 46,  
     49–52  
   community within, 6–9  
   definitions of, 2–3, 5  
   energy among, 7, 10–11  
   frustration with, 2, 47–9, 54–5  
   individual members of, 5–6,  
     9–10  
   methodological analysis of, 19,  
     22–3, 25, 28–31, 37  
   participation in performance,  
     55–76  
   passivity of, 16–17, 27, 51–3  
   production of, 31–2  
   suspicion of, 4, 8, 9, 15, 37–45  
   trusting of, 72–4, 76
- Barker, Howard, 52–4, 77  
 Bennett, Susan, 3, 12–13, 15, 25,  
   28–30, 78–9  
 Blackadder, Neil, 26–7, 46, 78  
 Blast Theory, 67–72  
*Blue Man Group*, 64–5, 70, 75  
 Boal, Augusto, 56, 58–9, 77  
 Bourriaud, Nicolas, 59–61  
 Brecht, Bertolt, 17, 26, 46–9, 77
- cultural studies, 27–8, 79
- Etchells, Tim, 1–2, 6–8, 52,  
   72–3
- Gardner, Lyn, 57–8, 65, 75  
 Grotowski, Jerzy, 1, 67, 77
- Handke, Peter, 1, 2, 51–2

- Jarry, Alfred, 26, 46
- Kershaw, Baz, 19–21, 25, 63–4, 78
- Living Theatre, the, 51, 63–4
- marketing, 29–32, 73–4
- Mulvey, Laura, 13–14
- performative writing, 23–5
- Phelan, Peggy, 23–5, 62–3, 79
- Piñero, Miguel, 9
- Pinter, Harold, 13
- Punchdrunk, 65–6
- Rancière, Jacques, 15–17, 74–5
- reader response theory, 11–13, 15
- Relational Art, *see* Nicolas Bourriaud
- responses:
  - affective, 22–5, 53
  - interpretive, 6, 12–13, 17–18, 53
  - physiological, 10, 18–20, 23–5, 27, 53
  - reviewing, 4, 8–9, 33–6
  - riots, 25–7, 78
- Shunt, 66
- spectator, *see* audience
- spectatorship, theories of, 13–14, 15–17, 29, 56, 64, 74, 79
- stage fright, 43–4
- Stein, Gertrude, 45
- technology, developments in, 14, 19, 69–70
- television studies, 11, 14, 28–9
- Theatre in Education, 56, 61
- voyeurism, 2, 13–14, 52, 73
- Wooster Group, the, 17–18
- Yeats, W. B., 44