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PAPER

Theatre Heterotopias: Sea on Stage

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In the paper "*Theatre Heterotopias: Sea on Stage*", the sea is discussed as a *heterotopia* per the term by M. Foucault, as a liminal 'other place' on stage, challenging the perception of theatre and reality. *Sea* redefines both the physical and the conceptual space, and as an element or an environment with transformative power that calls for a *response* installing, per Waldenfels, a presence of otherness. It evokes the question of (in)visibility, as examined by Merleau-Ponty, and of below-the-surface, neighbouring with Andrew Sofer's *Dark Matter*. The possibilities of presenting sea as an 'other' space on stage are endless, from symbolic or abstract representation to the playful use of props, and from audiovisual projection to the literal use of water. Real water on stage challenges the boundaries between performance and reality; its special relationship with the body of the actor stimulates liveness in its double meaning (live material and *event*) triggering unusual audience response. In order to explore how the presence -or absence- of sea on stage affects both the concept and reception of the space and the bodies of the performers, examples from international productions such as Ariane Mnoushkine's *'Le dernier caravanserail'*, Bob Wilson's *'Odyssey'*, Eric Stube's *'Lady from the sea'*, Simon McBurney's *'The Encounter'* and Ivo van Hove's *'Persona'* will be analysed, in relation to aesthetics and performance practice.

Theatre Heterotopia

Heterotopia was introduced by Michel Foucault (2009: 28–29) as the 'other place' (ἔτερος τόπος), the place that can host multiple –incompatible by nature- spaces at once, in contrast to utopia, the 'no-place'. Theatre is a heterotopia by default (Foucault 2009: 29): its essential function consists in incorporating various different places and times, constantly 'creating new mental landscapes, new conscience locations' (Pefanis, 2013: 131) within the real space and time.

Theatre remains the place of the *embodiment* of an idea, creating the 'possibility for the body to function as the object, subject, material, and source of symbolic construction, as well as the product of cultural inscriptions' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 89), the space where the invisible reveals itself and the imaginary is performed as an artful action *and* as an event (Auslander, 1999, 2008), balancing between phenomenal and conceptual. This is true for any place and action on stage. However, some places are naturally *liminal*, automatically requiring adaptation and causing transformation in order to *preserve oneself* within passing time, in the sense of the salvage developed by Benjamin (2013), and to become part of history, or even to *survive* in some form of being beyond the continuous loss and eternal mourning, according to Derrida's *survivance* (Derrida, 2001).

The sea has always been an 'other place' with special transformative power – often including in its associations the idea of rain and of river. It is an element and a *locus*. The water element prompts fluidity and transparency, clarity, cleanliness, change, renewal and rebirth; but it can also be conceived as a solid entity, as an autonomous unit, as an opaque space of darkness, the unknown that seduces and frightens. The duet of clarity and darkness invites the duet of visibility and invisibility. The reflection on the surface and the refraction are usually a false image, separating the over and under, the inside from the outside of the sea, reversing appearances. Such extreme, extraordinary, different *topoi* (places) like the sea, redefine human perception of the space and bodily presence, inviting further exploration in their theatrical presentation.

The idea of the sea is accompanied by the Uncanny (*Unheimlich*) as introduced by Freud (2003): a sense of imminent danger connected to something familiar which in a different space and time turns frighteningly unfamiliar; on stage, this sense is to be shared both by the performers/characters and the audience.

Andrew Sofer (2013: 3–15) suggests the term 'dark matter' (borrowed by physics) for a series of theatre elements that are invisible on stage and that cannot be isolated, yet they manifest a powerful presence. These elements are at work in the dark, significantly influencing the actions and the positions of all the other bodies in the

space, -in a word, affecting the response. Whether visible or invisible, material or abstract, the sea dynamically dictates the theatre act, from the design and the appearance of the space to the performers' bodies, their movement and interaction, or the audience reception; in a smoothly operative way, the sea functions as such dark, overpowering, and absolutely dramatic, matter. The sea on stage is not a character – unless specifically stated in the script, or conceived by the director and developed as such-, yet it is considered as an active thing of the world; as a dynamic Being that provokes movement and action, it always calls for a reaction, for a *response*. It is that response that defines the qualities of the interaction between the sea and the bodies of the performers, as well as the audience response: is the sea a landscape, a background or an environment, is it an element or a boundary, or a place for infiltration between different spaces? And how does the performer's body respond to it and to the element of water?

The choice on the theatrical presentation will be discussed in the following examples of productions from the international repertory. It will be shown how meaningful interpretation, especially in relation to invisibility and materiality, informs aesthetics, the theatre act, and theatre practice.

Ariane Mnoushkine and the parachute

The performance '*Le dernier caravansérail'* by Ariane Mnoushkine's Théâtre du Soleil, first presented in 2003 at La Cartoucherie, spirals around the adventure of migrants, refugees and strangers from the unspecified Orient seeking a safe home. The port that one needs to access (ie. see Calais in recent history) is the necessary threshold around which those *Odysseys* (as marked in the subtitle) evolve. In the context of myth, crossing the water is a sine-qua-non condition for the completion of the *adventure* of the hero, (Campbell, 1949, 2008: 64), highlighting parallels in the narrative between ancient cultures and contemporary social structure, as well as marking the *passage* (Van Gennep, 1981) for the individual. The sea and the river are the main avenues where an improvised transport network tries to navigate around illegality and bureaucracy using inappropriate equipment and impulsive

moves. Each Odyssey, watched and persecuted, is not headed towards 'back home', but marks an attempt in search of hope; it is a fugue on the fantasy of this other safe, welcoming and prospering place.

Those Odysseys happen in the margin, in a *state of exemption:* (Agamben 2007: 19) the conventional legal system is temporarily replaced by another power that confronts the disruptive, alien, strange, inconvenient, outside the norm emergency. Regarding international waters especially, no state is entitled to impose their rule ipso facto, and no state bears responsibility: this is the exception of all exceptions. The space carved within those waters by the refugees forms the ultimate exception: an off-grid heterotopia at sea.

Following her signature approach on improvisations and physical creativity, Ariane Mnoushkine suggests a three-dimensional sea as an *environment* with volume, texture and motion. She invests in the power of the ensemble and in theatricality of *ludus* and acting devices even in the most tragic moments. Enter a huge silk parachute cloth which is manipulated by the quasi-off-stage actors standing at the edges of the stage lifting and waving it in order to create the sea. Their movement is co-ordinated or disorderly according to the sea-effect required, yet their bodily presence blends with the stage, they become almost invisible. Meanwhile, the performers-characters have to 'fight' within that cloth, they have to swim or control a boat, or communicate with other actors-characters waiting 'ashore'. This obvious, almost primitive theatre device offers a majestic and compelling substance on stage. The sea, ie. the parachute-cloth and the actors that manoeuver it, overtake the stage, causing drafts and winds, swallowing and unloading bodies, reversing props, revealing and absorbing presence. The motion of the performers-characters as well as of the quasi-off-stage performers is continuous and interdependent. Through the effort of the characters, one can identify the effort of the performers: a purely theatrical attempt for realism that allows so much space for meta-theatrical observations. The edges of the stage are blurred, they disappear in the fluidity of the movement, highlighting the liminality of the sea. The limit becomes a connective between exodus and inclusion, the point of no-return introduces the return, or even

the impossibility, sometimes leading *experience* to an impasse, an *aporia* meaning death, as noted by Derrida (1996: 35).

The sea is visible, as is the mechanism that supports it; the more obvious, the more it becomes embedded in the act, incorporating the sea in what Fisher-Lichte (2008: 99) calls *the radical concept of presence*: it is a continuous and impenetrable material surface, catching (and hatching) the travellers inside the parachute –which in war times used to be saving lives. Inside this controlled experiment, flooding over the stage, yet limited by its dimensions, this on-stage sea is not but finite. Their operations are being watched and persecuted –by officials of other states, by pirates, by the ensemble actors that manoeuvre that parachute and of course by the audience. This finitude reminds the isolation of that sea of migrants and refugees.

Bob Wilson and the transformative power of abstraction

Bob Wilson's *Odyssey* after Homer premiered at the National Theatre of Greece in 2012, and in it he evoked the ocean through his signature style: movement, intense stillness and formalist aesthetics. His post-modern approach unfolds a series of sketches that gradually 'come to life', *tableaux vivants*, within an geometrical, meticulously-timed pattern.

Wilson does not *show* the sea on stage, yet he imposes it as a highlight. The sea is implied, occasionally through lighting, as a reflection splashing across the space; moreover, in certain scenes (e.g. the Sirens) everything appears through complete darkness. The shapes that emerge from the sea are strange, two-dimensional, dreamy silhouettes.

This material and visual absence of the sea per se relieves from any danger of a cliché and discordance while it reveals and certifies its presence. Sofer's (2013) 'dark matter' gains territory here, where the unseen sea does not disappear, but on the contrary, it lurks – and sometimes is given away through the soundscape.

Also, Wilson's deep sea is not a single motionless unity, it differentiates in every scene through a mental imaginary mechanism, it moves and changes – it retires to the background, it obeys the tide, it rises, it advances, it fills the stage or extends

behind the auditorium, it covers the bodies and the 'rocks', controlling the space through the constant mental shift.

The sea remains a given enigma heightening the sense of the *uncanny*, both an element and a place that shapes itself through the bodies of the performers, through the empty space they clear on stage and the audience is thus called to 'locate' the sea and its boundaries according to the formation and the movement of the performers' bodies.

Eric Stube and absence

In Ibsen 'there is always an overlying and imminent space declared, the space of absence, of pure difference, where the mechanism of compression and of metaphor co-operate, creating transcendental scales and points of reference: this is the symbolic space, that acquires various senses and metaphysical dimensions', according to G.P.Pefanis (2012: 531). Apart from a symbol of the unconscious (Jung 1964: 153, 198, 174), in '*The Lady from the sea*' the sea is the place of origin, a title of ownership and a capacity. It is where Elida comes from and where the returning stranger claims to take her to. In Eric Stube's production at the National Theatre of Greece in 2010, the invisible sea extended far beyond the proscenium, through the auditorium, engulfing the audience, widening the whole theatre as part of the landscape.

Kari Gravklev's design did not include anything more than the bare stage, the theatre space exposed and unpolished, from the embellished balconies to the cold back walls and the metal lighting bars backstage. The seven distinct steps between the Italian stage and the auditorium divided or united the internal, visible space of an assumingly tidy home and the untamed sea that magnetizes Elida; the present as perceived by all the characters in the play, the *others*, and Elida's present, which is essentially the haunting past and the imminent future (**Figure 1**).

Eric Stube sometimes leaves Elida alone on stage and with one movement she dismantles the whole assumed home and the land: her body on the floor, laying diagonally, supported on one elbow, with her feet oscillating slightly in a repetitive movement of anticipation or simple acceptance of every moment that passes, her gaze fixed to what floods in front of her: the sea, the auditorium space filled with the

Figure 1: '*The lady from the sea*', National Theatre of Greece, 2010. Photo by Marilena Stafylidou. The invisible sea that magnetizes Elida extends beyond the stage and incorporates the auditorium. Reproduced with the permission of the production company and the photographer.

invisible sea and the visible spectators. There is where she belongs, as if transformed to a mermaid, a cursed mythical creature. And the audience are her only witnesses: only the sea, the longing is visible/possible for Elida in order to overcome her own life, to accept mourning, to *survive*; and yet, it is experienced as an *ellipsis*, as an absence. Here the heroine does not complete her transition through the sea. Her sacrifice is not through death, but through life, carrying on living in this unfamiliar home, literally suffocating outside the water.

Simon McBurney and re-codified rhapsody

In '*The Encounter*', inspired by the book of the same name by Petru Popescu (2016), which premiered in 2015 at Edinburgh Festival and performed at the Barbican in 2018, Simon McBurney and Complicité reinvent narration and re-codify stage rhapsody. In the story where photographer Loren McIntyre immerses himself in the extraordinary world of Jivari, Brazil, and its people, Amazon river is the protagonist.

Simon McBurney explores the possibilities of innovative sound technology, shaping a new surprising experience: within a high tech yet straightforward and simple environment that includes mics, speakers, a recorder, vocal experiments, a table and a large number of plastic bottles filled with water, he builds an innovative narration laboratory on stage (**Figure 2**). His body constantly moves and engages with all the equipment in various ways; it is the body of the narrator/main hero, but also it is a large tool that connects and co-ordinates the technology features; and most importantly, it is an instrument that produces sound in every possible way.

The various bottles of water containing different amounts of still water are planted in different places in the space. In the effort to surpass the representational, according to Fishcer-Lichte (2008: 170), 'all performances are self-referential and constitute reality. When an-actor playing Hamlet walks across the stage it primarily signifies the reality of the actor walking across the stage'. This relates to Tadeusz's Kantor's view on props, 'presenting the objects as autonomous phenomena that

Figure 2: '*The Encounter*', Complicité, photo by Robbie Jack. Simon McBurney created a *rhapsody lab* on stage. Reproduced with the permission of the production company.

were nonetheless ghosted by use, history, and abuse' (David Krasner and David Z. Saltz, 2006, 2009: 193). However, in '*The Encounter'* lies an interesting example where the same object has a dual function: the performer/narrator uses the bottles for theatre effects, and the performer/person uses the water to genuinely rehydrate. The water produces different sounds, depending on how the bottle and its contents are manipulated, rendering e.g. the obvious sound of river flow, rain, and drops, in a rather representative role in the narration; but it is also used in a self-referential way, ie. water that sooths the narrator's thirst.

The presence of water on stage produces an unavoidable association: this is a very familiar live element on stage presented as itself. Limited and measured in a plastic or glass transparent container, it is protected and controlled, but it also reflects the modern urban lifestyle and the results of industrialisation – a reality that is very remote and strange in relation to the Amazon river, this totally other place, this space of magic and beauty and danger, with the tribes that fascinate the hero of the story. This strong juxtaposition sets a high (political and anthropological) significance on the element of water that is not just a prop, but a co-actor for McBurney. This almost transcendental, meta-theatrical glimmer of the water confirms the numerous reformulations of codes and interpretations embedded in a meticulously and boldly prepared beyond-post-modern production that discusses difference and otherness (**Figure 3**).

Here now emerges a topical and temporal space where the Being (l'Être), in this case the water as integrated in the theatre act, perceives and simultaneously manifests itself, it performs its difference, in the sense that Deleuze (1968, 2011: 79) introduced. In regards to the piece of art that tends to materialise the conditions in which that difference develops, Deleuze continues, thus takes place 'true theatre, made of transformations and transitions', abandoning representation for '"experience", for transcendental empiricism or the science of the sensitive' (Deleuze, 1968, 2011: 79). And, as Schechner (1988, 2003: 36) highlights, experience allows for 'all things [to be] part of one wholeness', making 'unlimited exchanges and transformations' among things possible.

Figure 3: '*The Encounter*', Complicité, photo by Sarah Ainslie. The meta-theatrical glimmer of the water confirms the numerous reformulations of codes and interpretations. Reproduced with the permission of the production company.

Ivo Van Hove and absolute experience

And what happens when the referred/implied and the signified appears on stage in its most complete and indisputable form of the signifier? When the sea is (or seems to be) present itself?

In Ivo Van Hove's theatre adaptation of Bergman's *'Persona'* presented at the Barbican in 2018, the impressively large stage was covered –or filled- with real water, the whole performance space was transformed into the sea (**Figure 4**). The space reflects the quality of the water and the crystal quietness imposed by its volume and stretch.

In Bergman's film, the sea indicates a *landscape* that defines distance and isolation; but in Jan Versweyveld's design, it materialises as an *environment*, as the most other place that incorporates the whole theatre act. The actors move inside or through that sea, which immediately affects the speed, the intensity and the quality of each movement, accompanied by the natural sound of a body that moves inside water. The actors are continuously and unavoidably performing every single

Figure 4: *Na de repetitie/Persona*, Internationaal Theater Amsterdam, 2012. The whole performance space was transformed into the sea. Photo by Jan Versweyveld. Reproduced with the permission of the production company.

transformation that the contact with the water causes to a human –still within the context of the play (**Figure 5**).

A visible sea on stage reveals something strangely unfamiliar (*uncanny*). According to Merleau-Ponty (1964), through the void that bears the visible, the viewer –here, a performer or a spectator- reveal themselves too (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 150). This double establishes both as instantly others (*eteron*) to each other and absolutely present. This momentaneous awareness of the otherness – that will soon turn into memory (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 161)- invites for a *response*. According to Waldenfels (2011: 35–43), it is the *response* that verifies the otherness and the (simultaneous) presence in the space and permits existence -in the case of theatre, it allows the sea to be on stage in that specific space and time.

The literal presence of water nullifies the conventional theatrical metaphor going way beyond representation. The presence of the sea becomes very intense. When realism surpasses itself becoming such a perfect illusion, imposing the non-logic of magic and the unimaginable, the element of transcendental -that prevails in circus arts, drag performances and extreme games- dominates, launching a new reality, a reality-beyond. The completely *other*, the totally unfamiliar, the almost impossible,

Figure 5: *Na de repetitie/Persona*, Internationaal Theater Amsterdam, 2012. Photo by Jan Versweyveld. Reproduced with the permission of the production company.

nourish a striking transformation that triumphs as a unique *difference*–reinstating the deleuzian absolute *experience* here and now.

Conclusion

The philosophical and ontological question of sea as a heterotopia shapes into the practical dilemma: how can sea 'appear' on stage. The possibilities of a stage presentation of the sea in post-modern times, in times post-Brecht, post-realism, post-technology, post-metatheatrical, are of course endless. As Stavros Stavridis (2006: 30) highlights referring to the effect of modernism in architecture and design, 'space as multiply articulated, transforming, can include different levels of temporal associations' enhancing the experience. What seems to be attached to the main question of the re-presentation of a heterotopia such as the sea, is the choice between what serves illusion and what liberates from it.

Invisibility and immateriality favour a rather abstract interpretation, leaving the sense of absence to install itself as a reminder of an underlying, hidden presence. The uncanny feeling of an omnipresent *other* allows this other to expand from a symbol to a *topos* that includes the theatrical convention as such: not everything needs to be on stage for the performers and the audience to see them, like Bob Wilson's sea, or even to be engulfed by it, like Eric Stube's suggestion.

Visibility and materiality at first glance evoke a literal view and an effort towards realism. However, through the examples examined above, one can identify two opposite yet complementary tendencies that go beyond realism. One that holds firmly on the element of theatricality and *ludus*, which employs devious creativity and the play-within-stage-limits. The most striking example of that is Mnoushkine's parachute. And another that frees up the artistic demon, which employs anything available, every medium and every art form in order to offer an experience so real that it transcends the reality and the imagination of theatre. The most characteristic example would be the re-creation of a complete and perfect live sea by Ivo Van Hove.

One would be tempted to find in those choices connections with an old question of ideology too, the *struggle on the future illusion* (Blau, 1992: 30). A theatre artist does not necessarily start from a conscious ideological or theoretical point, yet the idea is encapsulated in the production, along with any circumstantial factors.

Moreover, specific choices resonate differently at different times- and some choices might only become available in the future. However, one dares to guess that the more science and technology reveal about the world, the more the quest for offering the absolute experience in theatre will become crucial.

One constant element remains that (re)presentation of heterotopias bears special weight on stage, revealing *difference* and *otherness* in an attractive and daring way as a portal to the transcendental. A performance infused with meaning that can sustain its own suggestions and decisions, will always challenge the concept of actual reality. Within that fragmented space, the basic claim in theatre remains 'the adventure of the human body as it wanders and progresses between place and no-place, selfhood and its transcendence, real and its simulation' (Patsalides, 2004: 181). Sea as heterotopia becomes a three-dimensional experience on stage calling for the human element to react and interact in another here and now; a reminder of the unexpected possible.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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