Remembering the past to create the future: the audience as document

Introduction

In this paper I will discuss a series of events I have facilitated over the past year entitled Audience as Document, as an extension of Zecora Ura and Persis-Jade Maravala’s research into the ‘dramaturgy of participation’ (Ramos 2011), exemplified in their piece Hotel Medea. There have been a total of five Audience as Document events held over the last year in London, Edinburgh and Rio de Janeiro.

Essentially, Audience as Document is an opportunity for audience members to share their experiences of the show with those who haven’t seen it, to reflect on the complex series of interactions between actors and spectators over a six hour, overnight performance.

This paper concerns what implications and research possibilities are yielded when placing the seemingly fallible, fragmentary and unreliable audience’s memory as the primary source of knowledge transfer when attempting to research, or even discuss, a past performance. By considering the notion of a living document, as opposed to materials that can be consigned to a physical or digital archive, this paper aims to demonstrate the usefulness in embracing the transformative conditions of memory to reflect the experience of attending a live performance rather
than recording the outward demonstrative happenings. In this way the internal, interpretive processes that exist within the mind, body and imagination are recognised as a key element in the construction of the performance event.

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![Hotel Medea](image)

During an interview with me artistic director Jorge Ramos discussed the ‘dramaturgy of participation’ as a form of live performance where the audience are implicit in the construction of the dramaturgy, immersing
them in participatory performance structures that give them a sense of agency over how events play out in the unfolding of the narrative. To highlight the complexity of audiences achieving the status of agent, that is to say one who determines their interactions with the world, Ramos uses the term ‘players’ to describe the audience member because ‘it implies an active engagement, which moves us away from the conventional role of an audience sitting in an auditorium’ (Ramos 2011).

Although there is not enough scope in this paper to discuss the function of space in the creation of the contract between actors and audience, it is important to consider how spatial dynamics inform the ways one remembers and interprets a piece.

When I have been working with audience members to prepare their accounts for AAD events, I have found there to be a degree of consistency in the moments that they have chosen to present. One scene during the second act, entitled Drylands, was a recurring moment that audiences chose to recount. I will briefly describe it here to give an example of Hotel Medea’s participatory framework.

The audience are separated into three groups, two of whom are taken into Medea’s bedchamber. One group sit on stalls in front of her bed and answer one Maid’s questions concerning love and past relationships, whilst the others are put into bunk beds and encouraged to go to sleep. One Maid attends four players by reading them a story, serving hot
chocolate and singing a lullaby. In this instance the Players assume the role of Medea’s children, and are discouraged from observing the tense scene that is playing in the centre of the room. Although the ‘child’ role is never explicitly assigned by the actors, the way that the Maids address the Players allows them to gradually but effectively assume this role by gently integrating them into the scene, thus transforming their function from spectator to participant.

The audience’s general reactions were surprise and delight because, simply put, they had never been put to bed whilst at the theatre. After closer analysis it became clear that the intimate encounter with the audience and the actors was of particular significance. Having such an explicit acknowledgement of their presence within the performance, as opposed to their presence within an auditorium, gave the audience permission to exhibit behaviours that are not ‘traditionally’ assigned to audiences, i.e. sitting and observing. Through repeated runs of Hotel Medea in London, Edinburgh and Rio de Janeiro, it became clear that expectations of audience’s behaviour are greatly determined by their spatial relationship to the dramaturgy.

Critic Lyn Gardner made a similar observation in an article written for the Guardian Blog, suggesting that the effectiveness of immersive theatrical structures demonstrate that the theatre behaviour of ‘sitting politely in rows and not speaking’ is learned and can be ‘quickly unlearned’ (Gardner
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2010). Using an immersive structure that demands the audience adapt to unprescribed behaviours allowed myself and the company to consider how the collaborative relationship between audience and actors can be extended beyond the recognisable performance Hotel Medea to capture the traces of this ephemeral event and express them within a live, interactive framework. This was to demonstrate how the experience of the individual player cannot be generalised within a particular schema that is determined by readings post event, but is in a constant state of metamorphosis.

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Live Performance, Documentation and the Archive

Without a fixed stage as a main point of focus, the company had struggled to effectively document Hotel Medea through conventional mediums. Despite various attempts to film scenes, it was an inescapable truth that whoever held the camera was in a privileged position because they would have foreknowledge of what was to occur and choose the most ‘important’ parts to film. More importantly, the resulting document
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would unavoidably reflect an *individual’s* point of view. This does not lack validity, but capturing actions in this way gives the resulting document a level of authority that can surpass the living memory, what I term ‘archival memory’.

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‘The archive achieves its authority and quality of veracity, its evidentiary function, in short its reality, through a series of designs that unit structure and function’ (Enwezor:16)

Here Okwui Enwezor describes how the status of the archive as source and instigator of knowledge storage and transfer is achieved through complex, standardised processes that place objects in relation to their contexts of creation and provenance.

The implication here is that the identification of these processes within the academic and artistic communities has created a hierarchy of structures that, intentionally or not, gives hard material a validity over forms that are not consignable to an archive. In her book *The Archive and the
Repertoire (2003) Diana Taylor describes these transient forms as the ‘repertoire’, knowledge whose meaning is dependent on its transmission through embodied, live acts to be recognised as meaningful. This could include a dance routine or folk song, where the act of doing is as important as the knowledge the form contains. Written or audio visual mediums struggle to articulate the experiential qualities of these practices beyond the descriptive level. In Theatre Ecology (2007) Baz Kershaw explicitly states that ‘only the living human can retrieve and reconstitute a past live event’ because the human, as a growing and alterable entity, shares the same ontological qualities as the event itself (Kershaw 2007:79).

Matthew Reason describes the perception of the archive as ‘proper’ memory, one that endures beyond our lifetime for future generations. In contrast, the audience’s memory is ‘devalued as subjective, inaccessible, and disappearing’ (Reason 2003:86). Memory’s qualities of fading, withering and eventually disappearing can also be said of live performance, with Peggy Phelan stating that performance ‘becomes itself of disappearance’ (Phelan 1993:146). This definition places theatre’s temporality as its defining characteristic, that Phelan states ‘cannot be saved, recorded, documented or participate in the circulation of representations [because the performance then] becomes something other’ (ibid 1993:146). The vagueness of the ‘something other’ is
indicative of the possible uses of a document once it has been produced and circulated, that greatly determines its function.

Potentially limitless reproductions of the object give the now mediated memory a sense of stability that provides a consistent point of return for the researcher. When the document is viewed and interpreted, it functions as a form of conveyance to the past that cannot be physically visited or recreated, yet it can be studied.

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Derrida links this process to the structure of the archive that he describes as ‘spectral’.

‘It is spectral a priori; neither present nor absent “in the flesh”, neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met’ (Derrida 1996:84)
With *Audience as Document* I hoped to, quite literally, have the researcher meet the eyes of those who had lived in the past that was under investigation. It is important to recognise, however, that the eyes are not those of the audience who witnessed *Hotel Medea*, as those selves (the ‘players’) have now disappeared with the performance. Instead the ‘players’ function as conveyances to their past selves, in their role as key components in the formulation of the dramaturgy. Those selves were borne directly out of the process they relate to, giving them the authority of the document without resorting to the production of an object *pointing towards* a subject. Rather, the Audience as Documenter is treated as the subject and the document simultaneously.

Responding to past performance through the study of reproducible objects is problematic when we consider what is lost in the process. In his seminal essay ‘The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1936), Walter Benjamin describes this singular, yet crucial, element as ‘it’s presence in space and time, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be’ (2). Although he is referring to an art object as opposed to a theatrical event, the observation is still valid here. The key difference between, say, a painting or sculpture and a live performance is the latter’s ability to transform and alter over time with revisions, alterations, additions and subtractions while still retaining a distinct identity. In the ‘Allure of the Archive’ (2003) Helen Freshwater cites this as a key factor in any redefinition of the performing arts archive,
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where embodied actions in the ‘here and now’ are gaining a greater significance over script where performance’s ‘singularity’ should, indeed must, be reflected in the materials that allow us to study it.

This corporeality can be extended beyond the identifiable performance event into the domain of the audience, whose experience is transformed into memories that continue to live within them long after they leave the theatre.

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If we look at Richard Schechner’s model of interrelated terminologies in *Performance Theory* (2003) he places performance on the outside disc, stating that it is ‘the broadest, most ill-defined disc’ that ‘takes place in [and] among both the performers and audience from the time the first spectator enters the field of the performance...to the time the last spectator leaves’ (Schechner [1977] 2003:71).

Schechner’s definition is dependent on the audience’s presence within the performance space to be recognised as part of the event. I would extend this definition to include the inner working processes of imaginative associations, intellectual engagement, and physical traces realised in sweat, tears, paint, and smells; in short, the effect the performance continues to have on the audience throughout their life.

Naturally there will be degrees of intensity depending on individual engagement, but if as Eugenio Barba says that memory is ‘a way of seeing’ and is not ‘museum but metamorphosis’ (Barba 1992) then that experience will continue, in some form, to play out beyond the confines of designated theatrical space. The performance’s legacy is not just realised in academic study or artistic innovation, but within the audience themselves.
When we describe something, we change it. When that redescription is realised in a theatrical form, it is placed within the hands of unseen and future interpreters, where a perception of the ‘original’ becomes highly problematic, and can become obscured beyond recognition. I do not see it as a problem; quite the contrary. For with every new addition, new perspectives are offered, and theatre practices are greatly enriched as a result. The challenge lies in recognising the validity of metamorphic memory and subjective interpretation to connect with the past, as its traces stay etched on our consciousness to be accessed and brought into the light, enabling others to listen, observe and feel. The permanence of the written word and recorded image do not prevent them from acquiring narratives, for with each separate handling and treatment the object acquires new functions that alter our perception of it.

We have only to look at the theatre-making process to see how cerebral, organic remembering is central to its existence. An idea is formed that is manifested in the present space with physical bodies until a repeatable
score of actions, utterance, light and set is created within a set framework.

Tim Etchell’s describes performance as a ‘body that bares traces of its past’ (Etchells 1999:72), for those who create it continue to glance back through the piece’s history to give meaning and significance to their actions in the present moment. Knowledge is transmitted out to the audience to create the next layer of the performance’s life, a life that manifests itself within people’s psyche.

The question for us as practitioners and scholars is how one can trace this manifestation without a fixed point of return, without the undeniable existence of reproducible objects as the primary source of knowledge.

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References


Ramos, J. (2011) Interviewed by Joseph Dunne, 10th September
