

STAGING THE WORLD: PERFORMANCE SPACE AS AN UNIFIED FIELD OF DRAMA AND SOCIETY

Jorge Palinhos¹

¹*Centro de Estudos Arnaldo Araújo, ESAP (PORTUGAL)*
jorgepalinhos@gmail.com

Abstract

«All the world is a stage», wrote Petronius, and the same was repeated by William Shakespeare plagiarizing the Roman writer. They were both wrong, because in both their lives, the world – or at least the theatrical world – was not all of it a stage. In fact, according to Jean Duvignaud, theatre was defined by two polarizing spaces: the stage and the audience. The first where the drama took place, the second where the drama was supported and socialized by its watchers.

However, contemporary stage somehow breathed life to the dream – or nightmare - of Petronius and Shakespeare. That was what Walter Benjamin already felt in epic theatre, noting that in his time the “dead people” on stage and the living people in the audience were mingling more and more, and the frontier that divided them was becoming more and more blurry, so that the Magic Circle of Johan Huizinga or the Magical Conclave of Jean Duvignaud became more and more all-encompassing, turning all the world into a stage, but also the stage into a world.

Drawing from the classical and contemporary theories and ideas of Aristotle, Georg Simmel, Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Walter Benjamin, Erving Goffman, Jean Duvignaud, Raymond Williams, Richard Schechner, Miwon Kwon, Cathy Turner, Markus Montola and Ian Bogost about drama, performance, game, and adventure, and also on concepts of social theory and the theories of action, I will try to understand the meaning, impact and limitations of fictional interventions in real space, focusing on a anecdote told by the renowned theatre director and thinker, Anne Bogart, to try to understand the particular relationship between performance and space and the impact that it can have on their creators, participants, spectators and on the surrounding environment.

Keywords: Site-specific Theatre, Space, Anne Bogart.

1 INTRODUCTION

Site-specific art is a common artform since the 1960s that attempts to create works around specific places, trying to raise awareness about the place or change the aforementioned place.

Originally, site-specific art, according to Mion Kwon [1], attempted to draw attention to the specific conditions of production and presentation of works of art, but later it was used to draw attention to broader cultural and social issues connected with each place. That is, space was turned into a metaphor for something considered more important, like a political or social issue.

However, even before Site-specific art, space was recognized as an important feature of the performative act, in more than one way defining the nature of the performative act, and even its fictional nature. A brief glance through some of the thinkers of the XXth century makes it

obvious that many of them regarded space as a defining trait of fictional performance, whether they saw it as the mark of the “adventure”, like Georg Simmel [2], or they considered the space of playing a “magical circle, like Johan Huizinga [3], or a Magical Conclave, like Jean Duvignaud [4], or first of all a meeting of people, like Hans-Thies Lehmann [5]. Looking to how these different concepts of the theatrical space evolved, one can clearly notice a change of perspective, from the theatrical space being a place clearly framed outside daily life, to becoming an event more and more contiguous to daily life. The best perception of this change possibly comes from Walter Benjamin [6], that talks about how the separation between the world of the dead, on stage, and the world of the living, in the audience, is becoming more and more blurred in the theatre of mid XXth century, namely Brechtian theatre. This, I would argue, is paving the way for the future site-specific performances – or even the concept of performance as a real event, and can be seen as starting in the Renaissance. If until this time theatre was an event that happened not only at certain times – holy days, celebrations – to mark specific social, religious and political events, from the XVIth century onwards we increasingly find a theatre that becomes part of the daily routine, i.e., part of the time of reality, where merchants and traders could leave their shops to attend performances by Shakespeare’s or Molière’s companies. Erika Fichte-Liche [7] even comments how public executions could compete with theatre for the attention of the audience, and such competition is significant, as it marks the entrance of theatre into the daily routine, to become an entertainment like any other. Likewise, when theatre leaves the stage to address the complex nature of real spaces – in their political, social and architectonic nuances and idiosyncrasies – it starts competing with other forms and ways of addressing real spaces and real issues.

Obviously, this brings other problems, and nuances to the work of setting up a performance in a real space, competing for the attention of the audience in comparison with real events. And it is these problems that I would like to address here, based on a short but, in my view, rather meaningful anecdote.

This anecdote is told by Anne Bogart in her book *And Then You Act*, and I believe it raises all kinds of important and revealing questions about the understanding of space in performance and site-specific theatre.

I am perfectly aware that solid, scientific conclusions require more than a simple anecdote, but I believe this anecdote can help us think space in a different and meaningful ways, which can open new ways of thinking.

2 THE CHOICE OF LOOKING TO THE WORLD

The quote that I would like to discuss in this paper is this one:

«During the 1980s I saw a play in an abandoned factory building in Berlin. The production began out-of-doors with a scene staged on a rooftop. The audiences stood in the courtyard below, watching the actors perform elaborate abstract moves above them. (...) I stood in the courtyard, attempting to watch the actors on the rooftop, but my focus kept shifting to a man in the courtyard simply fixing his bicycle. Because the play had been running for weeks, the denizens of the area were accustomed to audiences and went about their normal lives. This man turned his bicycle upside down and intently went about fixing the gears. I could not take

my eyes off him. He was far more fascinating than any of the actors in their colorful costumes moving along the rooftop.» [8]

This quote has intrigued me for many years, but the episode must surely have intrigued Bogart for even more time, as it took place in the 1980s, and was just written down by Bogart in a book published in 2007.

I believe the story has a lot to discuss, but the one issue I would like to debate is the question of why a man fixing a bike in the courtyard is more interesting than a professional company performing on a rooftop?

This may seem like a whimsical and naïve question to debate. Surely, the performance was so bad that anything else – even a bicycle-repair man – was more interesting, and that is all. After all, how many dull shows has one seen that made us wish we were doing something else? And how can we know what is happening inside one spectator's head?

However, I argue that these are actually naïve and pointless answers. When you are planning, producing and directing a performance and when you are creating a dramaturgy, you are obviously trying to direct the gaze of the spectator, predicting his or her emotions and using all the tricks and techniques to keep him or her entertained and interested, and even going to the length of setting the performance in such a spectacularly dramatic space as a rooftop.

This is also what Bogart tries to answer in her book: what is needed to keep the audience interested. Her answer is the idea of attitude. According to the American director, what this man repairing the bicycle had that the performers did not have was a precise attitude or exactitude: «This was a lesson in attitude. The man's attitude was precise and riveted and therefore riveting. The performers' attitudes were, in comparison, general.» [9]

Bogart is quite vague in her definition of “Exactitude”, and from the text we can only deduce it to be some combination between a behavior denoting self-confidence and purpose and a mastery of technique.

I believe this answer, while thought-provoking is incomplete and inexact. On one hand it seems to imply that anyone doing something with an exact attitude will be more interesting than any other person in any other situation. Yet, it is hard to ignore the fact that any situation which is more dramatic, mysterious or visually more impressive can catch the eye of an onlooker more easily than the exact action, so that Exactitude cannot explain everything. On the other hand, it is obvious that Bogart blames the problem on a performing technique, based on the conviction of the performer. But this idea of conviction cannot explain everything and is quite doubtful in the current scenario. Shall we assume Bogart means to say that the man in the backyard seriously wants his bicycle to work, while the performers don't really want the play to succeed in front of the audience, and to receive recognition for it?

A strong attitude can evidently be captivating and even charismatic, but it can hardly be the sole and definite answer to the power of theatre and performance.

Bogart also suggests another possibility: the concept of “pressure” which she discusses in the same book, although not directly related to this anecdote: «The composer John Cage suggested that if you want to see theater, sit on a park bench and put a frame around what you see. Your intention makes it art. Art is intentional pressure. The intention of making art creates a pressure. Pressure creates intentional art.» [10]

This statement places art in the realm of intention and deliberation, and outside of form, technique or aesthetic judgement. To make art becomes a choice, but a choice with consequences, that ends up defining art itself. It also defines art as framing, that is, as

establishing a boundary between the area of reality modified by the intention to create art, and the area of reality free from such intention. Therefore art exists inside a limit of intention.

We can accept this definition for the situation described by Bogart for the performance on the rooftop. We can even accept that it can encompass most site-specific performances, which are based on the intention of transforming a certain space through action and gesture. We can conjecture that the idea of pressure is connected to the idea of exactitude, as the pressure of the intention of creating art can only be answered by a precision of gesture and delivery by the performer. Without the pressure of the framing of art, there is no purpose for the performer to be exact. Yet, this ends up working against the scene of the bicycle-repairing man: he has no intention of creating art, is not conscious of creating art, or even of being watched. Where does the power of his performance comes from?

The framing of art concept also leads us to the distinction between theatre and non-theatre. The framing of the performance on the rooftop as theatre, in opposition to the framing of the man repairing a bicycle as non-theatre could possibly render the “realness” of the scene with the bicycle more interesting than the performance. After all, “real” and “authenticity” and “experience” are concepts that became quite popular from the mid-20th century onwards, mainly through the ideas of Antonin Artaud, Giles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard. And one doesn’t need to go far to find the popular acclaim and success of documentary theatre and reality television, to learn that contemporary audiences are deeply interested in being witnesses to the real or to an illusion of realness.

However, the attraction of a certain representation of “realness” also depends on the framing of event as an artistic event. The framing itself, that is, the intention, the audience and even the dramaturgy of the event is what renders it interesting. What I am saying is that it is not possible to believe that any real episode would automatically trump any fictional performance, and that any man repairing a bicycle in the comfort of his home would be automatically more interesting than any performers acting on a roof, risking their lives and bodies to convey some sort of aesthetic statement and draw an emotional response from the audience. It is obvious that the performers are striving for a specific aesthetic statement. However, Bogarts finds a more meaningful emotional response in the unintentional performance of the man. We cannot help but wonder: is it possible that if there was an artistic intention in the performance of this man, Bogart wouldn’t find it as interesting? Clearly a “yes” answer would mean that any artistic performance is much less interesting than a non-artistic performance. Taken at face value, this could certainly be true: an artistic performance with no real, meaningful, material consequences for the real world should always be less interesting than a real performance that can affect our lives. However, we can also believe that the deep impact that artistic expression has had in the last millennia means that it has some hard-to-define impact in our lives, or at least that artists have found some ways of making it more meaningful.

Some of these techniques can be found in Bogart’s book. At least when she tells us that: «The stage designer John Conklin helped me relate attitude to spatial placement or distance. According to Conklin, our perceptions are sabotaged by a standard, prescribed middle distance. (...) One evening in class, while looking at the scenic designers’ work, Conklin began to chastise the students for standing at a standard distance from the models. “Get up close or move further away. This is the only way you will be able to see anything,” he intimated. “You can see nothing from the middle distance!”» [11]

This concept of distance and its impact on the artistic vision can draw us closer to the search of the meaning of space in this anecdote – something that had been missing from the interpretations of Bogart, which only takes in consideration reasons connected to performers

and technique. It is well known that the sense of intimacy or strangeness, of being drawn close to the center of the action, or being put at a distance, peeking through the keylock hole, they all have been staples of the scenic work, as theatre creators try to evoke different emotional reactions from the audience, and help reminding us that theatre is not just a matter of text, performance or acting, but it is also a question of geometry, of spatial definition, delimitation and involvement in an action taking place in space.

But this spatial involvement needs to be developed. Something isn't interesting just because it is close or distant enough. There is the need of an initial emotional response that causes a change in the initial distance. We need to be interested, moved, alarmed or scared of something to be able to move forward or backwards from it. Therefore, the quote by Conklin that is brought up by Bogart needs to be read metaphorically – even if not just metaphorically. The gaze of the audience has to be directed, focusing it emotionally. But how to build this emotional focus? I would suggest an idea from Benjamin: «An extremely confusing neighbourhood, a mess of streets that for years I have avoided, suddenly became understood when, at a certain point, a dear person moved there. It was like if there was a projector at her window that would untangle the place with beams of light.» [12].

This quote, I would argue, allows us to think that the orientation, and the focus in space is also an emotional focus. The distance between the audience and the performers is covered by the gaze of the spectator, and this gaze has to be directed, usually by guiding the emotions of the audience through certain techniques and devices that I will not try to describe in such short space. Space, like action, need a guiding light, a focus, that help the audience know where to look and how to look.

But suffice is to note that the gaze of Bogart in this anecdote has been allowed to wander away from the performance taking place, and the question is why in this particular situation, has her gaze wandered? After all, Bogart was watching a performance taking place on a rooftop, a specific event that was carefully created and rehearsed to raise awareness about certain places and specific gestures. There was an artistic process of selection, disposition, transformation, and repetition, a carefully planned creation of a rhythm of the event and subtle manipulation of the senses and emotions. And yet this somehow failed to be more interesting than some common man spontaneously repairing a bicycle.

As much as I think the previous quote of Benjamin is worth of further study, I don't think it works in this specific situation, as clearly the emotional focus of Bogart, as a director and theatre-maker, should have been on the performance, not only as an aesthetic experience but also has a learning opportunity – in the same book, for instance, Bogart [13] admits that she also directed some performances on rooftops, so she had a deep interest in the setting of that performance.

There is, of course, the theory of affects, drawing from Jean-François Lyotard [14], Nicholas Ridout [15] and others, who focus on the way that bodies can interact and influence each other in subtle ways, mainly through performance and gesture. This is a recent and promising field, however, which even displays a similar approach to the ideas of Anne Bogart, being mostly focused on the performance and the performers, and leaving the space of performance mostly outside of its scope. And I am convinced that space is one of the key elements here to explain Bogart's anecdote.

After all, rooftops, because of their relative height and inaccessibility in daily life, are intensely interesting places, half obscured to our everyday vision, mostly empty of human activity and inherently dramatic for the danger they could represent for those who are there, and for their high visibility they give to human bodies present.

But, in a way, could it be that they are too interesting for certain performances? What I am suggesting is: could it be possible that if the performances switched places - if the man was repairing a bicycle on the rooftop and the performers where in the courtyard – Bogart’s reaction would be different?

This is a thought experiment that it is almost impossible to solve, but I believe thinking about it can give us some interesting insights.

My argument is not possible to prove or disprove just based on this one anecdote, but I would like to express it here and give it some thought for the possibilities it raises for the use of space in site-specific performances.

What I propose is that space has certain qualities that can enhance but also derail a performance. And I believe that this is what happened in the anecdote of Anne Bogart. The intense dramatism of the rooftop space, with the complex performance taking place there, give an information and stimuli intensity to the spectator – or at least to one spectator – which made Bogart look around for something less information-intensive.

I raise this idea based on the detail that if Bogart was on a populated area – and her reference to the “denizens of the area” makes it seem so – there should be a lot more people around the performance, probably going on their everyday lives, probably some of them at the windows of their houses, peeking or busy with their daily chores. Yet, Bogart, unconsciously, chose to look at just one man doing an ordinary activity at human eye level. It seems to me that she was looking for some distraction from the intensive data-delivery performance. Looking for a place to rest her eyes and mind. That can make us deduce that perhaps the complexity of the performance and the interest of the spot was too taxing, and some mental rest was needed.

This can fit with the typical personal story of theatre-goers that, at some moments of a performance, need to watch the lights or some other dull spot, just to remove their minds from the performance taking place at the moment.

This could be a natural human reaction, of needing to create some distance – to resist the aesthetic manipulation of the performance – by looking at some dull space or movement.

We should even consider that this could be a rejection of the use of space. Throughout history, theatre used the stage – an inherently dull and simple space – mostly as a way of focusing emotionally the audience’s attention to the performance taking place. And moving to an information-rich and interesting place can be a way of creating too much noise and too much disturbance in the attention of the audience, who may feel the need to look away, to remove themselves, temporarily, from such an overloaded event.

3 CONCLUSIONS

What I present here is a general and preliminary discussion and comments on the importance of space for a site-specific performance. For that I use a quote from Anne Bogart to debate the audience’s perception of a site-specific performance, possible ways of reading the success and failure of such performance to captivate the audience. And I propose two concepts, dull space and information overload, to explain the importance of a certain scarcity of spatial information for specific performances and the audience’s need to gain some distance and alienation from certain performances or moments in a performance to refocus its attention.

I am aware that my ideas in this paper are highly hypothetical, but I am convinced that they open possibilities for the thinking about the importance of space in performance and of evaluating the role and function of space in certain performances.

These ideas could be further developed in the studies of affects and of site-specific performance, namely in the intricate connection between real elements and artistic or theatrical performance. It can also be a way of directing the analysis of site-specific performances more to the use of spaces and the connection of the audience with spaces through the performance itself.

Either way, it seems clear to me that the issue of space, audience attention and performance are way more intricate than what common sense usually tells us.

REFERENCES

- [1] Kwon, Mion. 2002. *One place after another*. Boston: MIT Press. Pp. 2-5
- [2] Simmel, Georg. 2004. *Fidelidade e Gratidão e outros textos*. Lisboa: Relógio d'Água. Pp. 179-198
- [3] Huizinga, Johann. 2003. *Homo Ludens*. Lisboa: Edições 70
- [4] Duvignaud, Jean. 1999. *Sociologie du théâtre*. Paris: PUF.
- [5] Lehmann, Hans-Thies. 2009. *Escritura Política no Texto Teatral. Ensaios sobre Sófocles, Shakespeare, Kleist, Büchner, Jahn, Bataille, Brecht, Benjamin, Müller, Schleef*. São Paulo: Perspectiva
- [6] Benjamin, Walter. 1969. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken Books
- [7] Fischer-Lichte, Erika. 2002. *History of European Drama and Theatre*. London: Routledge. P. 100
- [8] Bogart, Anne. 2007. *And Then You Act – Making Art in an Unpredictable World*. New York: Routledge. Pp. 103-104
- [9] Bogart, Anne. 2007. *And Then You Act – Making Art in an Unpredictable World*. New York: Routledge. P. 104.
- [10] Bogart, Anne. 2007. *And Then You Act – Making Art in an Unpredictable World*. New York: Routledge. P. 38
- [11] Bogart, Anne. 2007. *And Then You Act – Making Art in an Unpredictable World*. New York: Routledge. P. 100
- [12] Benjamin, Walter. 1992. *Rua de Sentido Único e Infância em Berlim por volta de 1900*. Lisboa: Relógio D'Água. P. 66 (My translation)
- [13] Bogart, Anne. 2007. *And Then You Act – Making Art in an Unpredictable World*. New York: Routledge. P. 138
- [14] Lyotard, Jean-François. 1973. *Les Dispositifs Pulsionnels*. Paris: Union Général d'Éditions
- [15] Ridout, Nicholas. 2006. *Stage Fright, Animals and other Theatrical Problems*. Cambridge: CUP

¹ Jorge Palinhos is a playwright and researcher. Has a degree on Modern Languages and Literatures by the Faculty of Letters of Porto and a Master in Terminology and Translation at the same university.

He has written and worked for theatre since 2003, and several of his plays have been presented and distinguished in Portugal and abroad..

He studied dramaturgy with Guillermo Heras, Hans-Thiers Lehmann, Jean-Pierre Sarrazac, Mick Gordon, Michael Bradford, Andrea Thome, Jose Sanchis Sinisterra, Neil LaBute, Raimondo Cortese, Thomas Bakk, Linda Seger, Goran Radovanovic, Ahmed Boulane, Paulo Filipe Monteiro and Vergílio de Almeida.

He co-edits the journal Drama, published by the Portuguese Association of Screenwriters and Scriptwriters and he is a member of the scientific commission of the journal Persona. He has also published with Sinais de Cena, P3, Grande Porto e Porto24.

He has published articles in several journals and presented papers in several conferences. Currently he has received funding from FCT to develop research on Contemporary Drama. This paper is supported by ESAP transversal research project Dramatic Architectures in the institutional framework of Escola Superior Artística do Porto - Departments of Architecture and of Theatre and Cinema - and of CEEA |Centro de Estudos Arnaldo Araújo, FCT R&DI 4041