



REVIEW

Analysis of the Concept and the Drama Psychology of Immersive Theatre

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: 30 August 2019

Accepted: 3 September 1 2019

Published Online: 30 October 2019

Keywords:

Immersive theatre

Sleep no more

The concept of theatre

Psychology of audience

ABSTRACT

Immersive theatre means put audience into the space where the story take place. Actors and actresses perform in the authentic environment and audience also in this environment, watching the proceeding of the story closely. With the success of *Sleep No More*, more and more people pay attention to immersive theatre. Some Chinese theatre directors also launch out into doing similar things. It is no doubt that immersive theatre is popular now at home and abroad. However, as a new form of theatre, immersive theatre theoretical study is really inadequate. This text aims explain the connotation and concepts of immersive theatre or what is immersive theatre, the feature of immersive theatre in addition to its present situation in China, though *Sleep No More*, one of the most famous immersive theatres. I hope to offer reference for Chinese theatre people, make contributions for their study and creations, then again filling in gaps in immersive theatre theory. Only in this way, can immersive theatre develop healthily and can its ecology be constructed well.

P.C. 210046

1. Theatre of Cruelty and Environmental Theatre: Theoretical Source of Immersive Theatre

The ideas advocated by immersive theatre and theatre of cruelty have obvious similarities.

Just as Artaud mentioned in the article, “*The Cruel Theatre (First Declaration)*” that theatre should be restored to its original form, that is, to become a true illusion means, it must provide the audience with a real deposit of theatre. We canceled the stage and theater hall and replaced it with a unique place, no partitions, no fences, and it was the place where the plot happened^[1]. A direct communication will be established between the watching

and the performance, the actors and the audience, as the audience is at the center of the performance and is surrounded and permeated by the performance. This kind of encirclement comes from the shape of the theater itself. The environmental theatre advocated by the theatre master Schechner also emphasizes the communication between the actors and the audience. The main feature of environmental theatre is the participation of the audience. Schechner believes that the participation of the audience expands the scope of the performance, and broken the performance and make it become social activities. Sometimes audience participation is spontaneous; sometimes even completely unexpected; sometimes it is the effect of director^[2].

The immersive theatre puts the audience directly into

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the environment where the story takes place, blurring the line between the performance environment and the real environment, and is in line with the theatre of cruel advocated by Artaud. At the same time, the immersive theatre also pays attention to the audience participation. The distance between the actors and the audience is reduced, the audience can observe the actors in a short distance, and even participate in the performance with the actors, which has something in common with the environmental theatre.

2. Concept Miscellaneous: Immersive Theatre Urgent Needed to be Clearly Defined

In “*Immersive Theatres*”, Josephine Machon describes immersive theatre as “practice which actually allows you to be in ‘the playing area’ with the performers, physically interacting with them. The direct participation of the audience member in the work ensures she or he inhabits the immersive world created^[3].” In this statement, the author emphasizes the space breakthrough between the performances, through which the immersion is achieved.

In “*On Immersive Theatre*”, Gartheth White said “It has theatrical elements, dialogue with in-role facilitators organizing the event and the gesture of surrendering oneself to a clinical/experimental/sacrificial process, but it also use of a physical interior, engages the whole body of the spectator participant, and creates an ambiguous situation whereby it is unclear whether the work is happening around, to, or within the spectator participant^[4]”. This definition is more abstract, but essentially emphasizes the communication between the audience and the actors.

In China, scholars defined immersive theatre more simple: “immersive means make audience surrounded with the environment where the story taken place^[5].”

As a new trend, there are many ambiguities in the concept of immersive theatre whether it is abroad or domestic. “The challenge with this debate, as with all of its kind, is how you define your terms. Are we all going to be speaking about the same thing? Terms such as immersive, intimate, epic, can all be slippery in the context of trying to find common ground or some kind of shared truth^[6].”

In my opinion, immersive theatre need to meet the following conditions.

First, the audience used to be a passive viewer of the performance. But now they have initiative, no longer what the actor plays, what the audience must to see, but the right of choosing what they prefer to watch. The freedom of choice means equality. This choice puts the audience and actors in an equal position and is the psychological basis for the audience to “immersive”.

On such a psychological basis, the immersive theatre

also needs to break “the fourth wall” and let the audience participate in the theatrical performance. Audience participation is a major feature of immersive theatre which makes it different from traditional drama. In traditional drama, there is also a two-way communication between the audience and the actors, but because of the fourth wall, the audience can only receive aesthetic experience. Even it is a tragedy performed on the stage, the audience will not suffer, they often get “katharsis” because of the lofty spirit of tragedy. Aesthetics requires distance, traditional drama gives enough distance to weaken the emotions of the drama itself, and allows the audience to think rationally. But on immersive drama, “the fourth wall” was broken and the distance between the performance and watching was greatly reduced, so the immersive theatre can give the audience more emotional stimulation. How much influence can a play have? Sometimes it depends on the audience’s participation. In some real scene such as “*Impression Lijiang Show*”(a show directed by Zhang Yimou and performed in Lijiang Scenic Area), audience can watching show in the place where story happen, but they don’t play any role in the show. Some immersive theatres let the audience play the characters in the play directly. Compare the two forms, it is obvious that audience can get different feelings.

Based on this, I think that the immersive theatre should have the meaning of both broad and narrow sense. Broadly speaking, as what we discussed above, all the dramas that give audience initiative to break “the fourth wall” and drop audience into the environment where story taken place can be called immersive theatre. In a narrow sense, immersive theatre should guarantee the participation of the audience. The audience can participate in the plot, and the ability to obtain a personalized experience is called immersive theatre.

3. The Predominant Status of the Audience: the Research of Audience’s Psychology

In theatre discourse ‘immersive’ is now attached to diverse events that assimilate a variety of art forms and seek to exploit all that is experiential in performance, placing the audience at the heart of the work^[7]. In traditional theatrical performances, the audience sit in the auditorium and watched the performances on the stage. The actors hoped to make the audience enter the plot through their own performances. However, the fixed seats and stationary scene made the audience only “watch the show”. In an immersive theatre, the audience can watch a play in their own way. The audience is actually “felt”, and everything the actor does is helping the audience perceive the scene.

Take *Sleep No More* as an example. When you first enter the theater, there will be several staff member in black who tells you: "Walking along the wall, turning when needed." The entire aisle has no light with strange music, and perception begins at this time.

There were many one-on-one performances throughout the performance. Here I'd like to take the one-on-one plot in the fifth floor psychiatric hospital of the McKinsey Hotel as an example. The woman who drunk the red wine was caught in the ward by the nurses. The nurse invited two audience to enter the ward and closed the door. The doctor in white coat walked over and put a white sick suit on the audience and direct the audience to the bed. This time the audiences played the role of the crazy woman's roommates. When the doctor took the pulse for the patient, the mad woman broke away from the doctor and nurse, and hid under the bed with the audiences, seeing the doctor and nurse walking around. In the end, the mad woman was pulled out of the bed by the doctor. The audience continued stay under the bed and watch the dance of the mad woman. The lights in the ward were twinkled and the action of the mad woman was freezed. In this performance, although the audience is still passively accepted, the subjective status of the audience is established: the closed door, the actors around the audience, all this tell the audience that all we have done is for you.

4. Scopophilia: the Tendency of Cultural Activities

Catering to the desire of audience is the essential purpose of entertainment. We are passionate about watching movies, not only because these entertainment activities bring us joy, but also because they satisfy our desire to "see other's life".

The word "scopophilia" used to be applied in theory, but now can be used to explain the pleasure of immersive theatre that audience acquired during the performance. When watching a movie, through the changing scene, the audience can easily be brought into the story and become a legitimate voyeur. The drama is also satisfying the audience's viewing, but always at a far distance. The viewer's sight is stationary, and the audience always sees the entire stage.

In the immersive theatre, the audience's scopophilia is greatly satisfied. The audience and the actors are in the same space-time. Audience can sit next to actors, carefully observe the actors' expression in a short distance, or enter the actors' bedroom and read the actors' letters. *Sleep No More* immerses its audiences in a paradoxical practice: we write our individualized plotlines in our own movements,

but are constructed within the spectacle as realist voyeurs, watchers, and readers, not agents^[8].

While satisfying the voyeur of the audience, the immersive theatre also satisfies the pleasure of the audience being seen. In the traditional theater stage, the actor is the performer and the audience is the viewer. In the immersive theatre, the audience is not only watching the performance, but also being seen by the actors, and by the other audiences. In "Double" (an immersive theatre directed by Tong Tong and play in Shanghai Theatre Academy in 2016), the audience also acts as a character in the play, becoming one of the actors. The double satisfaction of seeing and being seen makes the audience get psychological pleasure throughout the process.

Meeting the audience's scopophilia is also a direction for the development of contemporary cultural industry. Such as the escape of the secret room, the theme park, and the prevalence of various experience museums are also designed to meet the audience's satisfaction. Catering the audience's scopophilia is a gradual process. With the development of social economy, people's emotional threshold is getting higher and higher, and become more difficult to be satisfied. Before the advent of modern electronic devices, people usually relied on books and traditional dramas (through stories in books, or by watching others perform a glimpse of other people's lives) to achieve emotional satisfaction; later was film and television. The development of technology made audience can watch others' life in a shorter distance by the medium. With the further development of the cultural industry, just watching is not enough. The audience not only want to see, but also need feelings. Therefore, various entertainment methods to further satisfy the audience's scopophilia came into being. Considering several points mentioned above, the immersive theatre has just been unfolding.

For actors, immersive drama is challenging. There has never been an art like an immersive theatre that emphasize watching. Actor know that the audience looking at them in a short distance. Every expression on their face will be magnified. Sometimes being seen will bring pleasure which can inspire the potential of their performance.

5. Prospect Analysis of Immersive Theatre

Any discussion is for the development in the future, the same as immersive theatre. There is no doubt that immersive theatre has a broad space for development in the future. The tendency can be seen from the popularity of the "sleep no more".

The immersive theatre breaks the traditional viewing relationship and immerses the audience in the drama to stimulate the audience's more emotional experience.

Nowadays, people want more immersive experience in entertainment. It's related to the "experience economy". 3D movies, VR technology and Li An's 120 frames per second film which called "Billy Lynn's long halftime walk" all represent the tendency. In contrast, the biggest advantage of immersive theatre is reality. It is not through computer technology that makes the audience feel real, but everything is truly in front of you, not only visible, but also sensible.

At the same time, the immersive theatre also represents a deep class dissolution. Every chair in the modern theater is equal. In the immersive drama, there are no longer different ticket files. From the moment you bring the mask into the theater, you and the other audiences no longer have any difference. "The hallmark of the theater is the transformation, transforming the stage into a drama space, transforming the actors into roles and turning the guests into audiences." The transformation of the immersive theatre is exhaustive, and the audience forgets themselves and immerses in the theatre in two hours. You are a part of the performance as well as other audience.

But the form of immersive theatre itself has some problems. First of all, watching is the most prominent problem. In the traditional theater, the audience is orderly, and the stepped theater design allows the audience to see the whole performance without being obscured even if they are sitting in the back row. Immersive theatre emphasizes the communication between the audience and actors, but often leads to the disorder. Imagining this, in a small corridor, if there is a viewer who is taller than you stand in front of a viewer all the time, what kind of feeling do you have? Therefore, it is important to bring new rules and regulation to immersive theatre. Because only in this way, can we make the audience "immerse" and improve the audience's viewing experience. Perhaps by limiting the number of visitors to each performance, perhaps designing the walking route of the audience in advance, or by increasing the number of actors and the capacity of the entire theatre, and so on.

Secondly, the means of immersive theatre to make the audience "immerse" mainly depends on external things, such as set, props, music, etc., although there are also actors who invite the audience to perform one-on-one performances to make the audience join the drama, but after all, The audience who can be invited to experience one-

on-one performance is a minority. They are not enough to make the audience immerse. At this point, "Double" and "Hideout" (A drama directed by Pavel Pasini and Polish Net Theatre may be good demonstrations. In the "double", the audience directly plays the characters in the play, and as the story develops and the actors take place, the truth of the matter is explored. And "hiding" works hard on the set, the audience needs to go through the underground passage covered with spider webs, and hide in the basement with the actors, the audience has the same fear as the actors. This fear will enable the audience to better understand the situation of Jews during World War II, and better understand the reasons behind the choice of silence.

Last but not the least, no matter how the external form of drama develops, the story is always the inner core of a drama. The immersive theatre is often fragmented and loose in narrative and plot. As a new trend, the audience is attracted by the unique expression of immersive theatre, but once it becomes common, the audience is already very familiar with this form of expression, whether it is still attractive to audience? While continually exploring new forms, immersive theatre also need to focus on the core of the story. How to integrate a moving story with emerging forms is perhaps a question that deserve all directors to think about.

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