

An Overview - Environmental Theatre

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Abstract

*The present article is to bring out the salient features of ENVIRONMENTAL THEATRE – a branch of the New Theatre Movement of the 1960s which was popularized and thereafter nourished by Richard Schechner in 1967. To experiment with Environmental Theatre he formed the performance group in New York which entirely broke down the traditional barriers between Performers and viewers and envisaged the need for actor performer relationship. His main objective was to develop a **theory of performance** that is separate from the **theory of texts**. He asserts that the theatrical event is a set of related transactions among performers, among members of the audience, and between performers and audiences. The theatrical events can take place either in a totally transformed space or in a found space. All production elements speak their own language. The text can be neither the starting point nor the goal of the production, there can be no text at all.*

The main objective of this article is to know the modes and outlines of Environmental Theatre very well laid down by Richard Schechner providing a fertile ground for Research in Folk Theatre. Schechner's Environmental theatre can also explain the Indian theatre forms like, Kathakali, Ramleela, Rasleela and other Classical folks.

Keywords

Performance, Conventional space, Performing technicians' no bifurcation of space, collaborative, path of infinity, Conventional Theatre, Transaction, Audience mobility.

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Broad Outlines of Schechner's Theatrical Theories

Richard Schechner's formulation of the experimental dimensions of the Environmental Theatre first appeared in the '6 Axioms' published in *Tulane Drama Review* 12:3 (Spring) 1968, an issue devoted to 'Architecture/ Environment' and edited by Schechner himself. These six axioms bear his maturity and understanding of theatrics to the time when the Performance Group began its experiments on the first of the three productions *Dionysus in 69* (1968), *Macbeth* (1969), and *Commune* (1970).

In the paper, he declares first that 'the theatrical event is a set of related transactions. Rejecting the traditional definition of theatre with a distinction between art and life, he insists to explore a new definition of theatre as a system of interaction and transportation. He says that the theatrical event includes the audience, performers, text, sensory stimuli, architectural enclosure, production equipment, technicians, and house personnel. It ranges from non-matrixed performance to highly formalized traditional theatre, from chance events and *Intermedia* to the production of plays. A continuum of theatrical events blends with its 'Pure/Art' at one end and 'Impure/Life' at the other and extending from Traditional Theatre at one pole through Environmental Theatre to Happenings, and ending with Public events and Demonstrations at the other pole.

He thinks that the theatrical events are a complex social interweave, a network of expectations and obligations, and the exchange of stimuli-either sensory or ideational or both - is the root of Environmental Theatre. Environmental Theatre, he adds, cannot work detached from its audience, a long series of confrontations between actors and spectators is essential to promote this change.

Grotowski, the director of the Polish Laboratory Theatre, also followed the same theory of confrontation between actors and spectators, when he directed Wyspianski's *Akropolis*. He has said, in an interview with Schechner, published in *TDR* (1968), that a theatre is a meeting place between a traditional text and a troupe of performers:

I didn't do Wyspianski's *Akropolis*, I met it . . . One structures the montage so that this confrontation can take place. We eliminate those parts of the text which have no importance for us, those parts with which we can neither agree nor disagree . . . We did not want to write a new play, we wished to confront ourselves.¹

Schechner takes support from the excerpts of an interview with John Cage published in *TDR* 10:2 (1965), where he has offered a most inclusive definition of theatre:

I would simply say that theatre is something that engages both eye and the ear, The two public senses are seeing and hearing; the senses of taste, touch, and odor are more proper for intimate, non-public, situations. The reason I want to make my definition

of theatre that simple is so one could view everyday life itself as theatre. I think of theatre as an occasion involving any number of people, but not Just one.²

A fine example related to the definition of Cage can be seen in the New Orleans Groups production of *Victims Of Duty* (1967). where all three private senses were an important part of the performance. As Schechner describes, during a deduction

scene that perfume was released in the room; frequently the performers touched the audience, communicating with them with hand and body contact; at the very end of the show, chunks of bread were forcefully administered to the audience by the performers, expanding the final gesture of Ionesco's script. Hence one can integrate into a single working aesthetic such far-removed events as Kaprow's *Self Service* and Tyrone Guthrie's *Oresteia*.

This relational situation of theatre is the first of the six axioms of Environmental Theatre. He further includes that the first axiom identifies three primary transactions in the theatre - among performers, among members of the audience, and between performers and audience- which comprise the theatrical event.

The first transaction, he says, begins during rehearsal, and continues through all performances. In Stanislavski - oriented training, the heaviest emphasis is given to these transactions; they are, in fact, identified with 'the play', and the theory is that if the interaction among the performers is perfected, the production of the play will be artistically successful. There are many examples showing that this theory is inoperative. It is simply not enough for the performers to be an ensemble. And where it does work, the art is special one in which the audience merely watches as Stanislavski put it. The transaction between performer to performer, Schechner thinks, is essential, but it is not exclusive functioning alone, it is not enough.

The second transaction- among members of the audience - is usually overlooked, because of the strict rules made by the conventional theatre for the audience by fixed seating arrangement. But in some Intermedia and Environmental Theatre, the audience is invited to Performance. In events on the far left of the Performance continuum, it is difficult to distinguish the audience from the performers. A street demonstration or sit-in is made up of shifting groups of performers and spectators and in confrontations between demonstrators and police, both major groups fill both roles alternately, frequently, and simultaneously. A particularly rich example of this transaction, as Schechner views it, occurred during the March on Washington. The demonstrators had broken through the military lines and sitting-in in the Pentagon parking lot. Those in the front lines sat against the row of troops and frequent small actions nudging, and exchange of conversation - turned these front lines into focal points. Every half-hour or so,

both the front-line troops and the demonstrators were relieved. Demonstrators, who were watching the action, became part of it, the same for the troops. For someone at his home, the entire confrontation was a performance and everyone - from McNamara (Co-director of the performance group), at his window to the ad-hoc demonstration leaders with their bullhorns, was acting according to the role.

The third primary **transaction- between performers and audience** is a traditional one. An action on stage evokes an empathetic reaction in the audience which is not an imitation but a harmonic variation. Thus, sadness on stage may evoke tears in the audience or put into play personal associations which, on the surface seem unrelated to sadness.

With these three primary transactions, there are four secondary ones too - among production elements, between production elements and performers, between production elements and audience, and between the total production and the space in which it takes place.

Traditionally the production elements have been understood as scenery, costume, lighting, sound, make-up, and so on. With the full-scale use of electronic film T.V, taped sound, projected still images, etc - the production elements no longer need 'support' a performance. At certain times these elements are more important than performers.

Schechner asserts that the technicians themselves must become an active part of the performance. The technicians are neither used as a means of handling sophisticated equipment, nor are their role limited only to perfecting during rehearsal, but during the performance itself the technicians should participate, improvise, and modulate the uses of their equipment, night to night, Just as the performers themselves modulate their roles. During many Intermediate performances, the technicians are free to choose where they will project images, and how they will organize sound contexts. There is nothing sacred about 'setting' technical elements. If human performance is a variable, then a unified effect will be better assured by a nightly variation of technical means.

Thus, Schechner insists, possibilities for '**performing technicians**' exist, whose 'language' is the film-strip or electronic sound and whose range of action includes significant variations in 'where' and 'what' is to be done. The traditional separation between performers and technicians is eroding as new equipment encourages either the complete programming of all material or the nearly total flexibility of bits that can be organized on the spot during the performance. The 'performing group' is expanding so that it includes technicians as well as actors.

Once this is granted, Schechner hopes, the creative technician will demand fuller participation in performances and at many times during the performance, the actor will support the technicians whose activated equipment will center-stage. A wide-ranging

mix is made possible in which the complexity of images and sounds is endless. In order to achieve this mix of technical and live performers, nothing less than the whole space is needed. There can be no further bifurcation of space, in which one territory is meted out to the audience, and the other to the performers. The final exchange between performers and the audience is the exchange of space, the use of the audience as scene-watchers as well as scene-makers.

Thus, Schechner locates Environmental Theatre somewhere between Conventional Theatre and Happenings.

The second axiom states that in the Environmental Theatre, all the space is used for performance, and all the space is used for audience, unlike **Conventional Theatre**, where special place is marked off for the performance and for the audience. Schechner aims for the Environmental Theatre to provoke the audience into participating, and make the entire space a performing space. He very nicely sums up this goal of Environmental Theatre, in his book *Environmental Theater* (1973) (sic), in the following words :

. . . Environmental Theater [sic] encourages give and take throughout a globally organized space in which the areas occupied by the audience are a kind of sea through which the performers swim and the performance areas are kinds of islands or continents in the midst of the audience.⁴

Once one gives up fixed seating and the bifurcation of space, entirely new relationships are possible. Body contact can naturally occur between performers and audience, voice levels and acting intensities can be widely varied; a sense of shared experience can be engendered. Most important, each scene can create its own space, either contracting to a central or a remote area or expanding to fill all available space. The action 'breathes' and the audience itself becomes a major scenic element.

For example, in the New Orleans Groups' production of *Victims of Duty* (1967), as Schechner quotes, the audience would crowd in during intense scenes and move away when the action became broad or violent; they usually gave way willingly to the performers, and reoccupied areas after the action had passed by. During the final scene, Nicolas chased the Detective all around the periphery of the large room, stumbling over the audience, searching in the audience for his victim. Nicolas' obstacles were real - the living bodies of the spectators - and the scene ended when he caught and killed the Detective. At several points in the performance, a member of the audience didn't want to give up a place in which an action was staged. The performers in character had to 'deal' with these people, sometimes forcibly moving them out of the area.

Hence, the exchange of place implies the possibilities of conflict over spaces such conflicts have to be coped with in terms of the performance. They can be turned to

capital advantage if one believes that the interaction between performers and audience is a real and valuable one. In many Intermedia Performances, the spectators

participate actively. Often the entire space is a performing space; no one is just watching. Consequently, the environmental use of space is fundamentally **collaborative**; the action flows in many directions, sustained only by the cooperation of performers and spectators. Environmental Theatre design is a reflection of the communal nature of this kind of theatre that encourages participation. Generally, the model is closer to home; the streets. Everyday street life is marked by movement and the exchange of space, street demonstrations are a special form of street life that depend on the heightened applications of everyday regulations. There are no settled sides automatically dividing the audience off against the performers. Thus, the same atmosphere prevails everywhere among actors and spectators.

The third axiom Schechner defines is that 'the theatrical event can take place either in a totally transformed space or in a found space. The environment can be viewed in two different ways first, what one can do with, and in, the space; Secondly, acceptance of a given space. In the first case, one creates an environment by transforming a space and in the second case, one negotiates with an environment, engaging in a scenic dialogue within a space. In the created environment, the performance in some sense engineers the arrangement and behavior of the spectators, in a negotiated environment a more fluid situation leads sometimes to the performance being controlled by the spectators.

In Traditional Theatre, the scenery is segregated; it exists only in that part of the space in which the performance is played. The construction of scenery is guided by sight-lines even when 'the theatre' is exposed - as in Brechtian Scenography - the equipment is there as an indication that 'this is not real. In short, Schechner meant that conventional attitudes towards scenery are naive and compromising.

In **Environmental Theatre**, on the contrary, if the scenery is used at all, it is used all the way to all the limits of its possibilities. There is **no bifurcation of space**, no segregation of scenery, and if the equipment is exposed, it is there because it must be there, even if it is in the way.

The theatre of the Bauhaus group was not also interested in scenery. They wished to build a new organic space in which the action surrounded the spectators or where the action could move freely through space. Most of the Bauhaus projects were never built. But the Environmental Theatre learned from the Bauhaus about the new audience-performer relationship. Frederick Kiesler (1898-1966), a member of Bauhaus between 1916 and 1924 designed the Endless Theatre (but never built) seating

From the Bauhaus and men like Kiesler, the Environmental Theatre learned to reject Conventional space, and to seek in the event itself an organic and dynamic definition of space. Allan Kaprow, the key figure in the development of 'Happenings' suggests an altogether different source. He goes on to say that with the breakdown of the classical harmonies following the introduction of 'irrational' or non-harmonic juxtapositions, the Cubists tacitly opened the **path of infinity**.

Thus, Schechner views, there is no planning of the set, where the performance has to be played; the director, performers, technicians, and production crews had been working for about a month in the space in which the play was to be performed. In brief, by not planning at all, by working they understood well what was needed.

The principles are very simple; firstly, the given elements of any space - its architecture, textural qualities, acoustics, and so on are to be explored, not disguised; secondly, the random ordering of space is valid; thirdly, the function of scenery, if used at all, is to understand, not to disguise or transform, the space, fourthly, the spectators may suddenly and unexpectedly creates new spatial possibilities.

Most found space is found outdoors or in public buildings that cannot be transformed. Here the challenge is to acknowledge the environment and cope with it as best as one can.

It is possible, Schechner says, to combine the principles of **transformed and found space**. Once a space has been transformed, the audience will 'take their places', Frequently, because there is no fixed seating and little indication of how they should sit, the audience will arrange themselves in unexpected patterns, and during performance, these patterns will change, 'breathing' with the action Just as the performers do. The audience can thus make even the most cunningly transformed space into found space; it is not possible to block actions in this kind of situation. The performers should take advantage of **audience mobility**. Considering it a flexible part of the performance environment.

In fact, Schechner concludes in Environmental Theatre the use of the text is just like a map with many possible routes where one can push, pull, explore and exploit it to find a suitable way, where one wants to go. This can be done during the rehearsal time, and following this one can go in totally different directions, opposite to the intention of the playwright, In brief, Environmental Theatre can never work with a **fixed text**.

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