

## Theatre and the Real

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In his major study of the phenomenology of theatre entitled *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*, Bert States points out that theatre more than any other art uses elements that are the same as what they represent. An object in the plastic or literary arts will be represented in another substance, in words, or oil paint, or marble, but a chair or a person in the theatre is normally represented by an actual chair or person. In most world theatre some form of stylization or abstraction works to keep the real object and the stage one distinct. The stage actor will for example, sing his lines, or speak in verse or some other artificial style, will wear exaggerated costumes and move in a non-realistic manner.

In the Western theatre, however, especially during the past century, and important part of experimentation within this art has been devoted to eroding such distinction between actual life and its representation on stage, and this has affected every element of theatrical production—the words spoken, the actors who speak them, the scenery and properties surrounding them, and the physical structure of the theatrical space itself. I have examined these various types of experimentation at some length in my study, *Hamlet's Shattered Mirror*, and what I propose to do today is to provide some important examples of this process, consider some of the reasons for it, and suggest what it implies for current and future experimentation in the theatre.

From the eighteenth century until the present, the distinction between real life and its stage representation has steadily grown narrower. One of the first major such changes was the shift from poetic, often rhymed language to prose. This was especially significant in more serious drama, which during this same period shifted its subject matter from the affairs of kings and heads of state to more everyday citizens, who more closely resembled the audience members who attended the theatre, and who tended to dress, speak and act in similar ways.

Obviously connected with this was the rise of realism, which from the middle of the nineteenth century onward steadily changed the nature of dramatic writing as well as the mechanics of physical production.

One of the pioneers of the realistic theatre, Andre Antoine in Paris, is particularly remembered for his use of real elements on his stage—real sides of meat in a scene in a butcher shop, real running water in his stage sinks. For his first production, in a contemporary living room, he used actual furniture from his mother's home.

By the end of the century the novelty and appeal of real objects on stage often became the major attraction of certain productions. No longer content with wood and canvas reproductions on stage of the forest scenes in plays like Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, experimental companies set up stages in actual forests, where their actors could move among real trees and bushes, and even real rabbits and deer.

Varieties of productions set in real locations outside the theatre, exterior and interior, often called environmental or site-specific performances became increasingly common. They sometimes used general locations like a woodland for *As You Like It*, and other times used such specific locations as the actual castle in Elsinore which Shakespeare had imagined as the setting for his *Hamlet*.

The single feature that has most distinctly separated dance and theatre from the other arts has been of course, the use of living bodies as the central expressive medium. This feature has always created a particularly close bond between theatre and the real, since an actor, however much he gives his body a different appearance, or alters his movements or voice, cannot escape the reality of that body—a body that may sneeze, or sweat or bleed quite beyond the control of the actor.

Traditionally, actors have sought to minimize such breakthroughs of reality that would disrupt the theatrical illusion, but obviously no such concern appears in the case of live animals on stage. Therefore, these have long made an important contribution to the use of real elements on the stage. Performing animals of various kinds—dogs, horses, elephants, stags, and others, were an important part of the nineteenth century stage. Most of these were animals like horses or dogs that could be easily trained to perform specific actions, thus avoiding the spontaneous and unexpected action more typical of real life.

Occasionally, however, mostly for comic purposes, an animal was brought on stage which would amuse with its unpredictability. A famous example is the clown's dog Crab in Shakespeare's comedy, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Crab is funny precisely because it is just being a dog, whatever it does, and the audience enjoys this radical yet somehow appropriate activity. In more recent theatre live animals are much more rarely seen, experimentation with reality having focused much more on the far more complex situation of the living actor

Traditionally, although audiences have often been interested in the private lives of their favorite actors, a fairly clear line existed between those lives and the characters the actor played onstage. With the rise in realism in the nineteenth century, however, some actors consciously combined these two. A striking example is the American actor William F. Cody, or Buffalo Bill, who for many years served as a frontier scout and Indian fighter in the summer months, and during the winter, recreated on American, and eventually world stages, episodes from his real life. He not only appeared as himself, but surrounded himself with elements from his real life—real horses and stagecoaches, real buffalo to kill, and even real Indians to fight and defeat. His reality based Wild West Show became one of the most popular and influential entertainments of the century.

Toward the end of the century, another kind of autobiographical performance became an important part of Western experimental theatre, closely related to the growing interest in various minorities which had been under-represented in traditional Western theatre, a theatre whose creators and performers from the beginnings had been mostly white heterosexual males. From the late 1960s onward, representatives of these under-represented minorities increasingly insisted upon theatrical representation and their influence on subsequent theatre, especially in America, has been enormous. The first group to gain attention was the African-Americans, then women, and in the new century a wide range of ethnicities and gender preferences

Especially in the early days of these movements, an important part of their work was solo performance, largely based on material from the individual's personal life and experience, which had hitherto been suppressed or ignored. Although clearly a certain amount of this material, like Buffalo Bill's fights with the Indians, was fictionalized, its claim was that of real experience, and it was on the whole accepted in that spirit by audiences.

Such autobiographical performance was naturally self-generated, but in the twenty-first century a number of new experimental groups appeared interested in placing on stage the reality of other persons. Probably the best known internationally of these groups has been the German Rimini Protokoll, who have created a variety of productions in which the performers were non-actors who presented audiences with examples or descriptions of their everyday life. These presentations were then framed in various ways by the company. Rimini Prokotoll refers to these performers, who appear as themselves, as experts of the everyday.

Not surprisingly, as experimental artists have continued to explore the real on stage, difficult questions concerning propriety, legality and exploitation occur. Real nude bodies have long been a source of conflict and debate, but real passionate acts, real urination, and real physical violence to other humans or animals have been aroused by the new theatricalizations of the real. A striking recent example these new tensions was the highly controversial 2013 piece *Disabled*, by French choreographer Jerome Bel. Bel has long experimented in dance with the use of non-dancers, who introduced a new reality to this traditionally abstract form. In *Disabled*, Bel's performers were actual mental patients with Down's syndrome, who, like Rimini Protokoll experts of the everyday, were put on stage to discuss and display their mental illness. This production has been heatedly debated, on both moral and aesthetic grounds, and these debates continue.

The greater use of real elements—language, objects, animals, and human bodies—is clearly not only an artistic concern, but raises serious moral, legal, social and cultural questions as well. It seems certain that as such experimentation grows, so will the controversy and challenges it poses to those who study and practice the art of the theatre.