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Article:

Babbage, F.H. (2016) Active Audiences: spectatorship as research practice. *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 36 (1). pp. 48-51. ISSN: 1468-2761

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2015.1111013>

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Active Audiences: Spectatorship as Research Practice

Frances Babbage

I've run for hours in the woods at night, getting muddy and exhausted. I've been strong-armed down a London high street by a security guard. I've had secrets whispered in my ear, and offered one in return. I've lain in someone else's bed, my head on their pillow. And I've sat in an auditorium: intrigued, or disappointed, or delighted, or overwhelmed, or combative, or bored, or on edge. All these are my spectator experiences: I love theatre and see all I can. But I am also a researcher of performance, an academic, and so approach theatre-going critically with particular questions in mind. Unsurprisingly, my encounter with productions as audience is shaped by a research agenda, although I hope I remain open to the unknown 'offer' extended by the work itself. What weight does spectator *experience* carry in that research process? What does it matter what I did, felt, said, puzzled over, during the event? And later, writing about the work I witnessed and was a part of, (how) can I reflect meaningfully on that individual, partial and biased practice of participation and treat this as a source of legitimate knowledge, worthy to be shared?

Over the last twenty years or so, practice-as-research has become firmly established as a productive, valid, widespread and diverse mode of critical enquiry. Within the theatre, practice-as-research comfortably encompasses exploratory investigations by actors and deviser-performers, in modes of direction, generating text, in design, with sites and spaces, with light and sound, in digital media. All these forms of practice can function as a mode of research enquiry, not simply by bringing the added dimension of embodiment or material realization to the pursuit of a research question, but as the means of gaining knowledge that could not otherwise have been uncovered. Is there a place in this vibrant, active field of practice-as-research for the practice of audiences? By this, I am not thinking of artist-led investigations into the spectator's role, or of research into audience behaviour more generally, but refer rather to an *audience-led* 'practice' of attending performance: a practice of watching, thinking, feeling, interpreting (and reinterpreting), and – sometimes – of moving, speaking, doing? In other words, to what extent could the theatre spectator be regarded as a researcher working through practice, and what might be the implications of doing so?

A peculiarly self-consciously focused practice of spectatorship has become increasingly fundamental to my research process. I seek out, consult and draw knowledge from live performances, regarding this activity not as the equivalent of studying materials in written form (I have seen this production/I have read that book) but in recognition that experiential

engagement produces discoveries that cannot be reached by other means. As audience, I pay attention not (only) to the show as something that exists outside of/separate from me, but (also) to the particular quality of each encounter: the bodily sensations, the minute-by-minute thoughts and emotions – not yet solid enough to constitute ‘interpretations’ – running through my head. I regard all these interim stages as valid and meaningful in themselves, rather than as preliminary, partial impressions that should be subordinated to the critical conclusion that might come later. This kind of reflection, or self-awareness, occurs above all during the practice of spectating and is valuable partly because it is less easy to recover once the event is over. And whether a production locates me as ‘passive’ spectator or demands direct participatory action, my position is that of participant-observer, in the ethnographic sense, simultaneously immersed in the field and critically noting what occurs *within* as well in front of and around me. Of course, this kind of split attention – that sense of being divided between the spectacle and one’s *experience* of the spectacle – is at some level part of all audience experience, at any theatrical event (although it is surely heightened for those whose business it is to reflect on and analyse performance). Equally, I make no generalised case here: attendance at the theatre is not normally conducted in the spirit of a research enquiry, nor will a ‘research-active’ spectator necessarily be (or *want to be*) in research ‘mode’ whenever s/he attends a performance. Manifestly, the practice of being audience *in general* does not constitute research - but neither does the practice of performing, designing or dancing operate as research unless the doer conceives of and formulates that activity in those terms. But acknowledging that qualifier makes it possible to apply the same rigour to what I am terming ‘spectator practice’, since it suggests that the being and ‘doing’ of audience, likewise, *might* legitimately be regarded as practice-as-research if it is conceived of and formulated as such. So when could that be valid and how might it be feasible?

To address this, we need a definition of practice-as research: a workable one, if not (of course) the only one that can be offered. Discussing practice-based research in context of the visual arts, Graeme Sullivan describes ‘reflexive practice’ as a creative research method that can be used ‘to “work against” existing theories and practices and [that] offers the possibility of seeing phenomena in new ways’. Reflexive practice is further broken down, by Sullivan, into four parts: first, *self-reflexivity*, a process ‘directed by personal interest and creative insight, yet [...] informed by discipline knowledge and research expertise’; second, continuous *reflection* on information gathered during the process, ‘so as to review conceptual strategies used and consider other approaches’; third, entering into *dialogue* with that information, so that the significance of meanings derived from the process is subject to debate as ‘a dialectic between the researcher and the researched takes place’; fourth, active

questioning of 'content and contexts as problematic situations are revealed within particular settings' (Sullivan 2005: 100-101). Sullivan's account of the creatively-rooted research process makes explicit the interdependence of these different attitudes, or components: it describes a research journey progressing outwardly and inwardly, moving forward and doubling back, accepting that the path taken at any time is not the only possible/plausible route.

It is not difficult to apply this model of reflexive practice to the activity of consciously research-curious spectatorship. In fact, the application is if anything too transparent; on these grounds, there would seem little difference between spectatorship as 'reflexive practice', and spectatorship understood in hermeneutical terms, which argues that understanding of an art event is arrived at through a spiraling interpretive process – intellectual *and* emotional - built on the critical interplay of 'established knowledge, informed guesswork, [...] leaps of the imagination and newly-accumulated knowledge' (Martin & Sauter 1995: 67). However, although the kind of terms used to detail the sub-processes of practice-as-research can, I suggest, be applied to frame the self-reflexive activity of spectatorship, what is in danger of slipping through the cracks is the element of *artistry*. Perhaps what is at stake in this enquiry is not so much the issue of how to validate the prejudiced, incoherent, physically exhausting, emotional or otherwise messy aspects of individual spectator experience as a source of research knowledge, but rather the question of whether audience activity can be considered as in any sense creative.

In terms of wider debates about the nature of practice-as-research, 'spectator practice' can arguably be drawn into the frame only if the case is made for spectatorship as a creative endeavour. It could be objected straight away that a spectator is, by definition, on the edge of (because *looking at*) the event 'proper', and that even when performance demands physical participation, and further, when it requires a spectator-participant to take decisions and reap the consequences of these, s/he is still only brushing up against an art experience that is crucially pre-shaped, and ultimately controlled, by others (artists). The spectator's practice is reactive, not active; s/he cannot alter the artwork in fundamental terms and indeed, would lack the artistic competence to do so. From this position, spectatorship might be accepted as fully practice-based but not as *creatively* so. However, if theatre is understood not as a sealed object displayed for but separable from its audiences, and instead as an act of communication occurring *only* when presentation and perception come together, the spectator's role is revealed as vitally creative – even if the form of creativity an audience brings is not identical with that of the event's presenters.

To try and understand better what is at stake in spectator's role, and why it matters, I (re)turn to Augusto Boal, who remains one of the most insightful, passionate and influential commentators to speak out against audience passivity and resulting disempowerment. Famously, Boal argued for 'spect-actors', a participating audience able to move readily between detachment and immersion, observation and action. The term 'spect-actor' evokes the quality of physical fluidity, at one moment on the outside and the next entering into (for example) a Forum play; it also conveys an attitude of mind, an ability to identify with and be moved by the scene presented but without ceding the right to critique and challenge its operations. The spect-actor, like Sullivan's reflexive practitioner, shifts continually between action and reflection, immersion and detachment, emotion and analysis, and always in the interest of deepening understanding and promoting dialogue. Of course, in the kind of theatrical models Boal promoted, the knowledge-seeking process is both explicit and collaborative, and is also *collective*: for Boal, each and every audience member is a spect-actor, not just a privileged few. This collectivity applies regardless of how many people intervene physically in a Forum, since, Boal argued, whoever steps up to do so 'does it in the name of all the other spectators, because they know that, if they don't agree, they themselves can invade the stage and show their opinion' (Boal 2002: 25). There is a critical distinction here between participating 'in the name of' other spectators, and speaking *for* them. Rather than imposing one view to the exclusion of all others, each individual contribution made 'in the name of' the audience can be as messy, biased, emotional and incoherent as it needs to be, because it is understood both that this response truly *represents* the audience, and that it does not represent *all* that the audience is. Could it be possible to extract Boal's model of the spect-actor from its original context and apply this to help think through research-curious spectatorship for other kinds of theatre, even for enquiries that are unobtrusive and individually conducted? And as part of this, is there a way that the 'theatre practice' of even a lone spectator-researcher be mined for useful knowledge framed in the name of other spectators – with no implication that it speaks for all?

Cut back now to that night time performance in the wood. A very active audience is running down a track and in the gathering darkness someone behind me pants that it's a miracle none of us has fallen over. Seconds later I catch my foot on a root and pitch heavily to the ground. I drag myself up immediately, blinking away tears, laughing - 'I'm fine!' - and I carry on, but with a pain in the wrist and knee, a new sense of vulnerability, and the anticipation of serious aches in the morning. When I signed up for this show I knew it would hurt but I have definitely got more than I bargained for. Inevitably, the jolt of falling colours the rest of the performance as I experience it. This sensation distracts from the show but still feels integral

and even pleasurable, since falling has intensified what the effort of running already produced: it has brought me so absolutely into self-awareness. And in this particular production about finding wolves in the woods, requiring its 'spect-actors' to explore fear and courage, and the excitement and danger of the unknown, I know that the weight and, later, the bruise of the fall have impressed these themes upon me in a unique way. Even if the savagery of wolves is only simulated, the wildness of environment is real: actors and spect-actors alike are consistently out-acted by the landscape.

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The performance in the woods was Burn the Curtain's *The Company of Wolves* (Brighton Festival, May 2015).