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(House)lights out: encounters with darkness and compositions of going dark

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ABSTRACT

This article examines encounters with darkness through compositions of houselights and their elimination, arguing that not all brushes with darkness are alike. While eradicating houselights directs seeing and focuses attention, which already implies a dramaturgical-compositional significance, the design of light in the auditorium is predominantly relegated to a preshow preamble that will quickly be switched off. In response, I propose that houselights play an integral part in the performance event and carry a richer dramaturgical and scenographic role than is normally assigned to them. In a related move, within the growing study of theatrical darkness, the verb 'to plunge' has been embraced to refer to the immersion of audiences in darkness. However, the recurring use of the term obscures the many ways through which audiences are invited into darkness. Expanding the formulation of the plunge, this article traces the potential embedded in different encounters with darkness, paying close attention to the affective experiences of the juncture of light and darkness. Turning to theatre in the dark, I examine how (house)light is eliminated and darkness emerges in David Rosenberg and Glen Neath's Fiction (2015), Fye and Foul's Cathedral (2016) and my performance of Campfire (2016). I do so through a move between toning and tuning, suggesting how akin to the compositions of lighting on stage, designing lights in the auditorium and the course of powering them off can impact the sense- and meaning-making in/of the performance, setting the tone and attuning audiences to what is about to unfold.

This article examines encounters with darkness through compositions of houselights and their elimination. Considering the aesthetic, scenographic and affective operation of lighting in the auditorium, I explore the process of inviting audiences into darkness, arguing that not all meetings with darkness are alike. Nowadays, houselights are in many respects a given, with lighting fixtures, their focus, intensity and automated fade times usually predetermined in many auditoria. Quickly dimmed at the start of the event, they are often understood as simply a preshow preamble, a marginal design feature that will soon be switched off. Yet, closer examination of this sequence of illumination and attenuation

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reveals that, far from being a mere decorative tool, houselights play an integral part in setting up the performance event and thus can carry a richer dramaturgical and scenographic significance than is normally assigned to them. Their role, in that sense, goes beyond the mere functionality of allowing the audience to safely find their seats or signalling that the performance is about to begin. Tellingly, turning houselights off directs seeing and focuses attention on the performance space, which already suggests a dramaturgical-compositional purpose. By concentrating on this ushering of audiences into darkness, this article posits that by setting the tone and attuning audiences, akin to the design of lighting on stage, the hues, angles, tints, shadows and intensity of lights in the auditorium and the course of powering them off can set up a range of (first) impressions which impact the sense- and meaning-making in/of the performance and thus contribute to its overall composition. Consequently, rather than functioning only as a covert and separate configuration, I argue that houselights should be understood as a vital element of the performance's design.

The significance of light's eradication and the emergence of darkness is particularly evident when it comes to 'Theatre in the Dark' performances, which offer a fertile ground for analysing different encounters with darkness. Broadly, theatre in the dark refers to a diverse array of practices that are rooted in tradition, enhanced by innovation, [encompassing] a field that includes performances that utilize complete darkness or gloom, blindfolds and other similar technologies, the night sky and shadow play (Alston and Welton 2017, 9). Artists and companies such as Darkfield, Sound&Fury, Shunt, Extant, Lundahl & Seitl, Punchdrunk, Fast Familiar, Complicité, Pan Pan Theatre, Ontroerend Goed, Tim Crouch, Andy Field, Hofesh Schechter, Tino Sehgal, Ann Veronica Janssens, Sam Winston, Ayoung Kim and David Shearing creatively experiment with scenographic deployments of darkness and obstructed vision, situating their audiences 'in the dark' and seeking to alter, challenge or play with spectators' perception. Focusing on performances taking place in near/complete darkness, dark performances such as Sound&Fury's *Going Dark* (2010–2014), telling the story of a planetarium guide going blind, or the prolonged period of darkness in Cordelia Lynn's *Lela and Co.* (2015) in which a brutal rape scene is described, incorporate moments of darkness to activate the audience's imagination and suggest more symbolic/metaphorical connotations of darkness and obscurity. Others, including Darkfield's *Séance* (2017–) and *Flight* (2018–) or Dries Verhoeven's *Phobiarama* (2017), seek to exploit the disorientating quality of darkness to generate further perceptual uncertainties and question what and how one perceives. The above examples, as well as the case studies analysed below, extend the customary and practical elimination of light in the house (for a better view of the stage), and extinguish lights both in the auditorium and on stage at some point during the production. Accordingly, they start to reveal the compositional and affective qualities embedded in different encounters with darkness and the potency of houselights to shape these transitory movements.

Within the growing study of theatrical and engineered darkness, the verb 'to plunge' has been largely embraced as a means to refer to the engulfment or immersion of audiences and spaces in (some degree of) darkness (see for example Hurley 2004; Rayner 2006; Shearing 2015; Elcott 2016; Alston and Welton 2017; Kendrick 2017; Welton 2017; Lennon 2018; Shyldkrot 2019; Graham 2020; Dunn and Edensor 2021). However, the diverse manifestations and designs of these 'plunges' are often glossed over. Markedly, the unusual

and uncommon experience of being and seeing in darkness can elicit many affects and sensations such as vulnerability, exhilaration, trepidation, bewilderment or liberation. Likewise, while darkness can create a disorienting state, it can also evoke other forms of uncertainty, varying between confusion and doubt, indeterminacy, vagueness or ambiguity. Being in the dark then, metaphorically and literally, offers complex and diverse experiences where myriad modes of knowing, sensing, perceiving and feeling take place. These experiences suggest and are born out of different encounters with darkness. In that sense, while most 'plunges' into darkness – whether in theatre in the dark or in more conventional (indoor) performance settings – move the audience from some degree of light to some degree of darkness, not all instances of light's removal are necessarily a 'plunge'. Though many submersions in darkness might indeed consist of a plunge, the recurring use of the term risks concealing other creative engagements with houselights and the manifold ways through which audiences are lured into darkness. Seeking to expand the slightly glib formulation of the 'plunge', this article traces the potential rooted in the encounter with darkness. Notably, as Nick Dunn and Tim Edensor suggest, 'understanding how darkness has been variously utilised in design practices offers some clues to future directions for professional practice' (2021, 236). However, rather than observing darkness as an endpoint and focusing on what it means to be 'in the dark' or what happens under the cover of darkness – as theatre in the dark scholarship predominantly does – I focus on the process of crafting the arrival at darkness in the first place. Accentuating the broader significance of houselights, in what follows, I look at compositions of houselights and their extinction as a vehicle for highlighting the wealth of brushes with darkness.

Indeed, the appearance of darkness in performance is fundamentally interconnected with the design of light and, as such, the two are examined here in tandem. Yet, in my pairing of light and darkness, I do not mean to reinforce the ostensible and longstanding opposition – or binary – which implies that the rise of one necessarily means the removal of the other. Instead, I bring them together, as their joint evaluation presents a valuable touchstone for the growing and timely inquiries around theatre lighting and the possibilities of darkness in performance. These conceptualisations foreground the importance and manifestations of both, whether in and of themselves (see, for instance, Graham 2016, 2018, 2020; Palmer 2013, 2017; Moran 2017; Alston and Welton 2017; Shyldkrot 2019) or as part of a broader conceptualisation of scenography and performance (see, for example, McKinney and Palmer 2017; Aronson 2018; Hann 2019). Advancing these explorations, I turn to theatre in the dark as a noteworthy exemplar for studying houselights and their attenuation as a means of investigating the affective experiences of the juncture of light and dark in performance to further delineate the latent aesthetic potential of their design. In this respect, I also move away from the understanding of darkness merely as an absence or that which precludes seeing. In contrast, when considering the appearance of darkness as a noteworthy element of design, I conceive darkness as a 'form-giving entity' (Alston and Welton 2017, 3) and thus pursue 'notions of designing *with* and *for* darkness' as deliberate 'counterpoints to the prevailing practices of designing *against* it' (Dunn and Edensor 2021, 236, emphasis added). Extending the study and practice of light and darkness design and their analysis beyond the stage (and, as I will show, challenging the distinction between stage and auditorium in the first place), I examine the ways in which (house)light is faded and darkness emerges in David Rosenberg and Glen

Neath's *Fiction* (2015), Fye and Foul's *Cathedral* (2016) and my own directed performance *Campfire* (2016). I begin by briefly elaborating on the legacy of darkening auditoria and the adoption of the 'plunge' as a term to account for immersion in darkness. I then attend to the elimination of light, before addressing the appearance of darkness. I do so through a move between toning and tuning. Drawing from the flourishing scholarship around atmospheres, I examine how the design and removal of houselights can establish different (affective) tonalities in performance, shifting the general character of the auditorium and performance space. This is followed by a consideration of various compositions in which darkness materialises and how these attune audiences differently, prompting a variety of sensibilities. Again, these artificial distinctions between light/darkness and removal/emergence are principally for clarity purposes and do not intend to pose a hierarchy between the two. Despite their apparent contrast, I present these two currents of thought as complementary perspectives to study the same phenomenon. Manifestly, the design of houselights and set-up of darkness continuously blur categories: between light and darkness, stage and auditorium, the beginning of the event and the start of the performance 'proper'. Unsettling categories and perceptions, the fuzziness emerging from these encounters with darkness and light can suggest new modes of sense-making, dramaturgical meanings as well as shifting understandings within the politics of perception.

Going dark

Since darkening the theatre auditorium is a well-established convention nowadays, it is easy to overlook that it is a relatively recent practice. Though 'this cannot be attributed to a single moment in Western theatrical history', Scott Palmer remarks that 'as theatres moved into indoor spaces – from around the sixteenth century – the control of light and darkness assumed paramount importance' (2017, 38). Several historical accounts review the percolation of house lighting practices and expansion of darkened auditoria (see Baugh 2013; Palmer 2013, 2017; Elcott 2016; Welton 2017). Up until the late nineteenth century, auditoria were largely illuminated during the event, for audiences to see and be seen. Though instances of darkened theatres could be detected prior to that (and as early as the sixteenth century), the obliteration of light in the auditorium was not prevalent until the turn of the twentieth century.[1] As early as 1598, poet Angelo Ingegneri recognised how the 'darker the auditorium is, the brighter the stage will appear' (quoted in Palmer 2017, 48). Counterweighting light on stage, the dark auditorium not only facilitates seeing, it demonstrates how light and darkness were utilised to focus and direct vision, attempting to attune audiences and intensify 'absorption in the production' (Dunn and Edensor 2021, 8). In other words, the incorporation and movement towards darkness enabled light and its attenuation to craft and accentuate stage-images. Such a step underscores how light is both a means of perception and a perceived material in and of itself. By commingling with darkness, the two are employed to provoke different sensory and aesthetic experiences in performance to the point that, today, lowering houselights and casting auditoria in darkness has become a routine practice governing the majority of indoor performances.

Considering the moment and significance of the descent into darkness, Martin Welton states that the event

> should begin with the lowering of the houselights in the auditorium prior to the raising of those focused on the stage. For the audience this is preceded by a period (even if only a brief one) in which they wait, under the houselights, for their lowering. In it they take stock of their surroundings and of one another, and in this lull before the show starts, begin to develop something of a sense of themselves as a collective. Under houselights you watch others and wait. Reading a programme or talking to a friend, you prepare yourself for the experience to come. (2013, 7)

Similarly, when designing lights for a show, the creative team will typically start by looking directly at the stage, setting a preliminary lighting state (preset) followed by fading out the lights in the auditorium and on stage before rapidly moving to the arrangement of the first lighting cue. The accepted recognition that houselights – due to their traditionally warm or festive qualities – are perhaps more 'appropriate' for an audience to encounter than 'working lights',[2] already identifies how an alternative set-up can paint the house differently and thus generate a different performance experience. Entering a venue, for instance, as it is illuminated by bright white fluorescent lights generates a very distinctive tone for the performance compared to a warmer, yellowish first impression. Nevertheless, houselights are still habitually approached as part of this pre-performance 'lull'. In other words, despite being swiftly dimmed at the start of the event, it becomes clear that the role of houselights exceeds the pragmatic deployment of illumination in the house.

The same applies to darkness. Palmer, for instance, insists that darkness in performance 'has both a practical and dramaturgical significance' as it 'establishes a convention and a mode of behaviour in the auditorium' (2017, 38–39). For him, dimming the houselights and darkening the auditorium 'often mark and signal the precise moment at which the performance begins' (ibid., 37). Notwithstanding the scenographic operation of light, this framing, however, is somewhat limited. With the increased understanding of the role of luminosity (and dimness) in performance as surpassing the dramatic situation – where light is not simply utilised to make things visible – identifying houselights as merely a pre- or para-performance element disregards their broader dramaturgical importance and capacity to influence the composition of the overall event. Likewise, a gradual fade to darkness as opposed to a sudden one begins a very different performance. This is not to suggest that one is preferable to the other, but to illustrate how these performative moments taking place where the audience is sitting equally impact the spectators' experience. Even with regard to familiar compositions of 'cosy' or ceremonial house lighting, dismissing them as a preamble or lull reinforces common reductive exegeses which narrowly apprehend light and darkness as tools for embellishment, and which the scholarship cited above seeks to challenge.

When tending to the encounter with darkness, Stanton Garner proposed the term 'perceptual unmooring' (1994, 41), to refer to the initial shift when houselights fade out. However, when thinking about theatrical darkness more broadly, it seems that the 'plunge' has been largely embraced as a way to account for the sense of immersion/submersion when audiences are engulfed or at least covered by (some degree of) darkness. Alice Rayner, for instance, suggests that 'the effectiveness of the blackout, as both metaphor and event […] relies upon its suddenness, on the sense of shock of the disorienting plunge into darkness' (2006, 158). Similarly, Andrew Lennon questions 'how excessive darkness might spark a sense of fragility within a spectator plunged into complete

blackout' (2018, 57).[3] To give a more practical example, in her description of Glen Neath and David Rosenberg's *Fiction* (2015), Lynne Kendrick notes: 'After a swift induction to our headsets [*Fiction*] plunges us into [darkness] seemingly without warning, before throwing us back into light, with a final notice flashed before our eyes – "this is your last opportunity to leave"' (2017, 116). When the notice disappears from the large screen placed in front of the audience, the space immediately goes dark again and remains dark for the rest of the performance. Notably, the removal of light across the entire performance space – in *Fiction* and other theatre in the dark pieces – already challenges the labelling or conventional understanding of 'houselights' in and of themselves. Moreover, in this stark transition, the reference to a 'plunge' seems fitting to reference the audience's encounter with darkness. Concomitant with an unexpected descent or dip in water, 'to plunge' denotes a sudden thrust, a sense of being thrown, a quick, surprising fall into a state, environment or course of action that is forceful or even violent (Merriam Webster n.d.). It is a movement forward, down or into something (reminiscent of the direction embedded in the common reference to the 'descent' into darkness). Alluding to the popular trope of immersion and invoking a sense of finding oneself 'inside' the performance/experience – manifested here through the indistinctness and boundlessness of total darkness – this choice of wording is unsurprising. While not limited to the experience of theatrical obscurity, this formulation lends itself to the relatively unusual experience of total darkness, particularly if theatre in the dark is understood within the broader field of immersive theatre practices that, as George Home-Cook attests, '[claim] to be able to "plunge" the audience not only into the world of the performance, but into the world of experience' (2015, 134). Similar rhetoric pertains to the 'absorption' in atmospheres, where we can be, as Jean-Paul Thibaud suggests, 'plunged together into a single ambiance […] whilst experiencing different ways of feeling submerged' (2014, 288).[4]

Returning to Kendrick's description, *Fiction* included an initiatory appearance of darkness at the start of the show. This move into (and out of) darkness holds not only a phenomenological or affective significance but also denotes a compositional one. David Rosenberg, one of the performance creators, jokingly explains that giving the audience a brief 'taste' of darkness before turning the houselights back on attempts to mitigate the possible disturbance of getting a frightened audience member out of a completely dark auditorium.[5] Albeit seeming like a mere practical decision, this recurring device in Rosenberg and Neath's dark performances gains dramaturgical purchase in *Fiction* in its relation to the rest of the performance. This short preliminary darkness and quick movement from light to obscurity enhance the sense of fragmentation and rapid transitions between different states of consciousness that are manifested through sound later in the piece. Those quick jumps between locations and scenes, which deliberately disrupt the audience's ability to follow the show's narrative, are already encapsulated in this initiatory removal of light. After this quick opening 'plunge', the audience spends a short moment in darkness. In it, they hear the soundscape of a forest from which a distant voice is calling – 'Hey, where are you?' The listener is lost, puzzled, arguably confused as to where they have been thrown to. 'Plunging' the audience into this darkness starts to challenge their grasp on what is happening, while simultaneously insinuating what is about to unfold. Where are we? Where are we going? But before the audience has time to figure things out, the light snaps back on. This immediate and sudden appearance of darkness renders the start of the show indistinct. Is this moment in darkness a

preamble? A prologue? Already a part of the show? Such questioning is crucial here, as the action already reframes familiar aspects of the performance as unreliable, destabilising and unfixing existing conventions and expectations – such as beginning a show by lowering the houselights or even having visual references to follow during the performance.

Indeed, phenomenologically, the sudden appearance of total darkness – alluded to in this radical swift fade – can certainly disorient the spectator. As noted, being thrust into such overwhelming and unfamiliar conditions is likely to involve numerous (re)attunements and impressions. Interconnected with light, for Rayner, total darkness 'marks a point of leave-taking', which she characterises as uncanny, mostly due to the 'return of visibility that, in returning, […] puts in question everything that returns to visibility: What happened in the interim? And what, exactly, has returned?' (2006, 161). However, while all lures to darkness remove or withhold light to some extent, neither the shift from light to dark nor the initial set-up from which darkness appears are cut from the same cloth for every piece of performance. Put simply, not all encounters with darkness involve an extreme or radical transitory 'plunge'. The emergence of darkness can be gentle or aggressive, gradual and slow or immediate and can commence from a bright or dim auditorium. Likewise, when considering the possible characteristics of darkness – such as its texture, depth, lustre – the fading of light can introduce a variety of darknesses, whether crepuscular or inky, capacious or oppressive. Subsequently, darkness becomes a graspable variant, a form-giving entity that is context specific and stands in relation to other potential darknesses and compositions. Therefore, counter, perhaps, to the Heideggerian thrownness – 'the sense we have of being in a significant worldly situation that is not of our own making' (Ratcliffe 2013, 159) – I suggest that, despite the suddenness of certain 'plunges', experiences of darkness correspondingly rely on the contrast and (series of) impressions that initiate, charge or foster the perception of the dark environs. In other words, we are not simply thrown into darkness from nowhere. This suggests that though at times the 'plunge' is the most suitable term for the framing of certain encounters with darkness, its overly frequent use runs the risk of obscuring or disregarding other modes through which viewers are drawn into the dark.

Consequently, for the remainder of this article, I examine the elimination of light and appearance of darkness using toning and tuning (or attuning) as two complementary perspectives to account for the significance of houselights and emergence of darkness in performance. Paying attention to the particularities embedded in the design of different encounters with darkness, I argue that switching houselights off can be conceived beyond a routine mode of theatrical expression, as a creative and meaningful intervention in processes of sense- and meaning-making. Starting with the attenuation of light, the next section builds on growing scholarship explicating atmospheres to consider how the design and removal of houselights can elicit different (affective) tonalities in performance, using light to establish and shift the character of the space.

Set the tone

Light has characteristically been recognised as a crucial component in the production of atmospheres. The contribution of luminosity is evident if we think for instance about how a room might seem and feel different if light's intensity were to decrease, if the bulbs'

colour were pink in place of yellow or if the room were illuminated by candles instead of an electric device. These examples quickly illustrate how by transcending beyond the physical objects that emit it, light can be utilised 'to guide the moods around an activity' (Bille 2015a, 62). As Mikkel Bille clarifies, light 'is continuously used to create physical orientation in a room and to mentally attune to the situation' (ibid.). Thus, it is an active element that helps to shape the characteristics and vigour of the atmospheres formed. If light can make viewers see, perceive and feel in a certain way, I suggest that houselights are no different. As they emanate in and through the auditorium and move audiences between different states, houselights – through their colour, intensity, angle, glow, sparkle or animation – can importantly affect bodies and configure experiences. Moreover, looking at how performance spaces are tinctured by light, Katherine Graham notes how 'the affective "sphere" of an atmosphere in proscenium theatre reaches beyond and through the fourth wall, making it possible to both witness the light happening to the characters, and to be affected by its shifting tones and atmospheres' (2020, 9). In that sense, and as suggested above, light on stage is not detached from the darkened auditorium. This permeation and spilling over from one to the other implies that, despite the usual tendency towards brightness and stage lighting, it is their joint manifestations that prompt different sensory and affective stimuli. Therefore, the identification of light's ability to conjointly direct one's attention as well as influence one's perception is particularly helpful when considering the significance of houselights and their elimination. Akin to light's mediating properties, where it enables and tints different visions and perceptions, houselights may indeed serve practical purposes, yet they can also impact how viewers approach and relate to the performance to begin with.

As an example, I turn to Fye and Foul's *Cathedral* (2016), a performance I co-directed, and which toured across a number of London venues as well as the Brighton Fringe Festival. Since *Cathedral* was devised as a performance in the dark, particular attention was given in the making process to creative decisions around the audience's encounter with darkness and elimination of light; specifically, from which set-up darkness would emerge and how light could be withdrawn. Eventually, when the audience entered the performance space, they could hardly see the stage. All the houselights, including lights focused from the stage, were directed at the audience, beaming at full capacity. Partially visible in the front left corner, an old cassette player quietly played the sound of crashing waves. Instead of a tranquil or peaceful first impression of the auditorium, the end-on configuration was flooded with light, deliberately creating a harsh dazzling effect. In this composition, houselights sought to establish a disorienting, unsettling and uncomfortable beginning, where no matter where one sat, it was impossible to avoid the glare. As the performance began – with light in the auditorium still shining in full beam – a performer's silhouette gently appeared. Being backlit and slowly materialising as a vision against this confronting 'wall of light', it took time to notice and distinguish the moving body. Gradually becoming more prominent, it was mostly seen as an outline, a shadowy contour amid the harsh brightness. In such light, the performer's body seemed exaggerated and disrupted, leaving most of her features murky or unseen. As she reached the front of the stage, light began to dim over a relatively extended and gradual fade, and for a brief moment she was slightly more discernible – somewhat seen as she was kneeling, stopping the tape, changing cassettes and standing back up. Only, the light continued to

fade, giving an impression that it was closing in on the moving figure and rendering her outlines indistinct once again (see Figure 1). By the time she was back on her feet, she was unseen, as the space was fully covered in inky darkness. Notwithstanding the possible irritation and distress such dazzling configuration could entail, the unusual increase in light's intensity sought to push the juxtaposition between expected levels of light and darkness to the extreme so that when light would finally be eradicated, the invitation to, and arrival at darkness would almost come as a relief. Less an instantaneous 'plunge' covering space and audience in total darkness, the gradual obliteration of exceptionally bright houselights aimed to create the sense that light was almost aspirated out of the space.

Accordingly, giving rise to a variety of impressions – of the auditorium, the performance space, the lit stage, the performance itself – the design of houselights can be understood beyond granting things their visibility or as spatial shaping that indicates where to sit. In lieu, given light's ability to produce different sensations, visions and affects, crafting houselights can be seen as an endeavour to set a particular tone, establishing a lighting state that will charge the experience of the performance and how it might be perceived. Similar to accounts regarding the composition of atmospheres and analogous to broader conceptualisations of illumination as a device for atmosphere production, the design of houselights can be seen as a carefully considered material configuration, seeking to harness and orchestrate 'the physical parameters of a built environment' to 'endow an environment with a certain character, a specific mood, an emotional and existential value' (Thibaud 2015, 41). Instead of providing a 'definite' starting point for the performance, *Cathedral*'s opening sequence ignited or at least contributed to the generation of a series of impressions that would ensue and develop throughout the rest of the show. It is

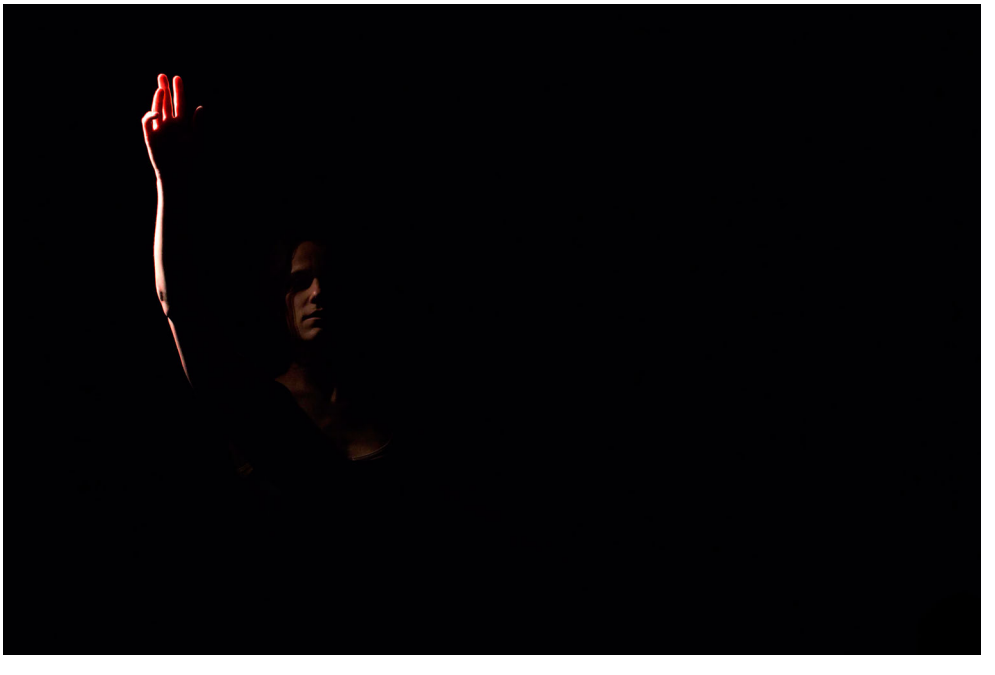

Figure 1. *Cathedral* (2016) by Fye and Foul. Photo: Noa Livnat.

obviously not essential for arrangements of houselights to be particularly intense to be meaningful. Still, when accounting for the fact that 'people do not simply become immersed in atmospheres on a blank slate but are inherently attuned by the norms of what to expect and by events that have occurred previously' (Bille 2015a, 58), this extreme composition helps to elucidate the latent potential of houselights, and how in this production they were adopted as an important device for crafting and proposing different tonalities.

In my focus on toning to address the significance of houselights in generating different encounters with darkness, I borrow from Jean-Paul Thibaud who studies the different processes contributing to 'setting the ambiance of urban spaces' (2015, 44). For Thibaud, installing and modulating atmospheres is 'a question of "setting the tone" of territories', which helps to account for how a 'physical environment manages to become a lived ambiance' (ibid., 44–45). The recurring reference to tone and tonality manifested thus far chimes with philosopher Gernot Böhme's early depiction of atmospheres, where he describes how 'they seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze' (2017, 12). While, in comparison to atmosphere, tone holds a stronger affinity to colours, hues and orchestration, the two can be easily conflated. Notwithstanding the slipperiness and apparent interchangeability between tone and atmosphere, as they both allude to an organising affect or general character in a space, text or artwork, I focus here on the former, as it denotes a mode of expression and the process of giving shape. Likewise, reviewing the design of houselights as an act of *setting* the tone is valuable as it points to their anticipatory function and affective capacity without dismissing their overall purpose. Importantly, though the reference to 'setting' may imply fixity or concreteness in the ordering of objects, I concur with Rachel Hann who resists such a reading, seeking to theorise scenographic aspects as exceeding 'the linguistic implications of set design or conventions of scenery' (2019, 67). Sidestepping these associations, by setting the tone I do not mean a conclusive formation of light to achieve a certain effect, nor is it a derivative or surplus of design. Rather, by bridging the material and experiential, setting the tone is a way to account for the significance and intentionality of houselights and lighting design by moving beyond decoration and the artificial separation between stage and auditorium. Crucially, especially in performance, light is (primarily) processual – transforming and shifting as it moves between various lighting 'states' that fade and bleed into one another. 'Setting the tone' can, therefore, clarify the different ways in which light contributes to atmosphere production and helps, in turn, to conceive houselights through their transitions from light to darkness as part of this composite of states, elements and overall design as opposed to a standalone feature.

Comparable to the amalgamation of sensory experience and dramaturgical interpretation in *Fiction*, the glaring light pressing and impressing on audiences in *Cathedral* can be seen as setting the tone dramaturgically and affectively – inviting elucidations as to the role of light in the performance while obtaining felt and sensory significances in and of itself. Thematically, *Cathedral* explored differing recollections of past events. As the performance unfolded, its lighting design was comprised of low and diffused lighting states together with small yet brightly lit sources, piercing through darkness. Producing blurry images on the one hand and partial images on the other, the performance intended to alienate the performers' bodies in addition to echoing faded memories

that were hard to reach. Akin to the vivid illumination of the opening image, as the performance continued, clarity was almost unattainable and whatever light there was became unreliable, evoking emotionally contaminated memories rematerialising and quickly falling back into obscurity. As a starting point, shining houselights brilliantly on audiences may have appeared as more graspable than the hazily unreliable light that followed. However, light's stunning presence was ultimately a hindrance to clear visibility. Pre-empting and setting the tone for what was to come, much like the incorporation of light throughout the performance – which bid to distance light from common expectations of granting visibility – its initial appearance (and removal) equally attempted to cast light as an element that could not be relied upon in order to make sense. In this respect, houselights were deliberately geared towards the creation of meaning even before the show had 'officially' started.

As well as inviting scepticism towards light and sight, the decision to create a harsh stunning effect before gradually moving to a state of complete darkness sought to generate particular affects and perceptions. These include, for example, the generation of 'after-images' – murky hues deciphered even when the eyelids were shut, attempts to construct extreme focus or efforts to avoid glare. When tending to the expressive forms of objects and the different effects they emit on their surroundings – as opposed to their concrete/physical parameters – Böhme considers how objects could radiate beyond themselves, and influence their surroundings based on how they are presented, perceived or sensed. What he terms the 'ecstasies of the thing' becomes a useful approach to reflect how certain objects emanate outwards and thus assist in establishing a dominant tonality (Böhme 2017, 5). As Bille further explains, 'the essence of an object's "being" also becomes the way it tones and is toned by other things' (2015b, 261). 'When concentrating on the ecstasy of things', he maintains, 'what is needed is not an understanding of what a thing is but how the totality of (temporary) ecstasies makes it what it is and, by extension, how these ecstasies affectively shape the way objects are perceived by the viewer' (ibid.). Literally radiating – or even pressing – forward onto the audience, the design of houselights in *Cathedral* embraced the physical and sensory affects of light to confound vision in an attempt to evoke a sense of unease or discomfort. Commingling seeing and feeling, rather than supporting visibility or the creation of stage-images, the intensity of light sought to dazzle viewers, utilising – and even imposing – sensory experiences and conditions of challenged visuality to hamper expected perceptions as well as to underscore a disconcerting tonality that would charge the encounter with darkness and influence the experience of the rest of the performance.

Despite its intensity, given the lengthy and gradual fade of light in *Cathedral* the plunge might not be the most apt framing for this encounter with darkness. While I have focused on a ferocious and extreme example to underscore the creative possibilities and heft of houselights, the attempt to foster different affective tonalities does not inherently demand radical, fierce or sudden movements or transformations. It could likewise proceed 'little by little, by slight impregnations made up of minute variations' (Thibaud 2015, 44), a small invitation to notice and attune to changes in light. Turning attention to an opening sequence comprised of these subtle modifications, I shift the viewpoint to the appearance of darkness and, in the next section, examine how it can attune audiences differently.

Tuning to darkness

This final section considers the appearance of darkness through/as processes of tuning. By appearance, I refer both to the emergence of darkness as well as the different ways in which it presents itself in a performance space. Equivalent to light, and given their intermingling, there are many ways in which darkness can materialise in performance. As such, I depart from a generalised classification of darkness, conceived as a single, unified and fixed element which repeatedly comes into sight through a swift flick of a switch that turns all the lights off. Instead, as I have emphasised, encounters with darkness do not always occur by means of a recurring/unchanging 'plunge' which consistently leaves audiences aghast. Given the variety of ways in which auditoria can be covered by darkness, the latter's arrival can be approached as a more nuanced happening, one which tunes and shapes spectators' engagement with the performance and environment they are in.

Drawing from my practice-research, I reflect on the composition of darkness and its arrival in *Campfire* (2016), a performance in the dark that I devised and that was performed at the Ivy Arts Centre in Guildford, UK. *Campfire* gathered the audience around a sonic 'fire' and, through a series of invitations, explored different configurations of togetherness and sociality in the dark. The performance 'formally' began with a long sequence in which light was eliminated in an extremely lengthy fade. The implementation of an ongoing intensification of darkness sought to defy the suddenness associated with many encounters with darkness that involves brief removals of houselights. Again, as the performance was held mostly in total darkness, the audience's early impression of the space was a significant aspect influencing the piece's composition. From a brightly lit corridor illuminated by white fluorescent lights, the audience entered a gloomy (in terms of light level), misty room, in which they found a circle of chairs. The room was lit just enough for the audience to find their seats. In the middle of the space, three speakers lay flat on the floor, mimicking logs and playing a recording of an outdoor campfire. I sat on one of the chairs, greeted the audience and invited them to sit down. Once everyone gathered around the 'fire', I passed around marshmallows and gummy bears, with the rustling sound of the bag echoing the crackling of the fire. The audience was encouraged to make themselves comfortable, keep warm, and observe the 'fire' and each other. After a while, the lights started to fade as the sound of the fire continued. First, the – already dimmed – (house)lights that illuminated the audience slowly waned, followed by the lantern (top profile) that lit the 'fire'. Briefly recalling the notion of tone setting, the softness and dimness of houselights in *Campfire* can be seen as part of the performance's overall composition and dramaturgical intent. In looking to set up a 'cosy' and intimate tonality, which might extend to similar sensations once darkness would emerge in space, the houselights were designed to emphasise a sense of shared presence, by simultaneously illuminating the audience and drawing attention to the company of others, an ambition also underscored by the round configuration.

As gloom thickened, darkness gradually emerged to its fullest extent, concealing fellow audience members in shadows. As a result of this slow cultivation of darkness, it became almost impossible to decipher whether any light was still on and if what the audience supposed they could perceive was, in fact, an illuminated object, a figure of the imagination or an afterimage glowing in the dark. Stretching the expansion of darkness in this settling

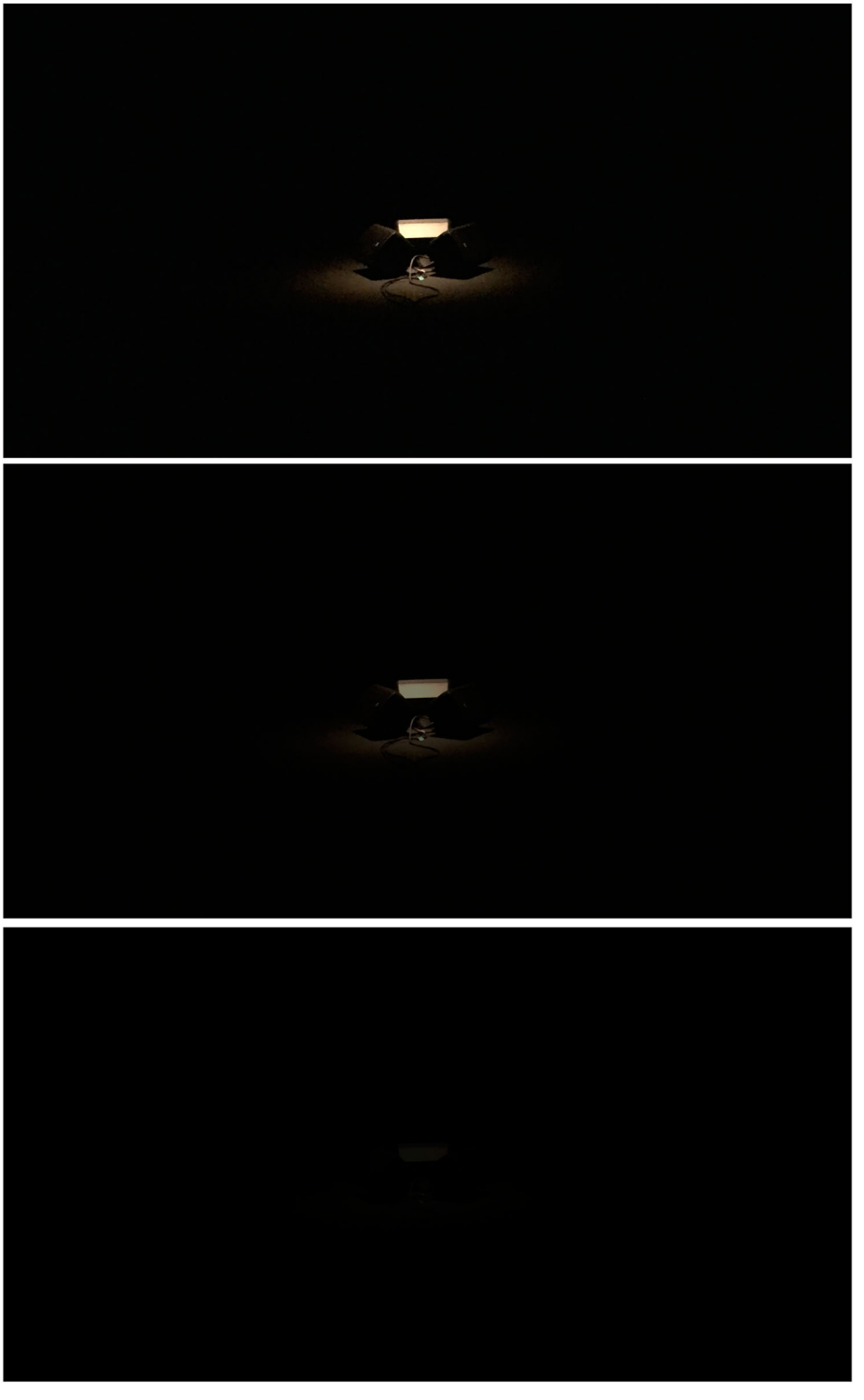

Figure 2. Slow descent into darkness in *Campfire* (2016). Photo: Yaron Shyldkrot.

of/to obscurity, the threshold of visibility was once again pushed to an extreme, as the difference between light and darkness – or the distinction between near and total darkness – became undecided (see Figures 2a, 2b, 2c). Switching off the final remaining lighting source little by little aimed to pull the audience in. The decision to leave one lantern on, albeit fairly dim, sought to establish a shared point of focus – in the centre of the circle – that would assist in attuning audiences to the dark.

In his often-cited articulation of stage set as a prototype for the study (and production) of atmosphere, Böhme asserts that part of the purpose of stage design is 'to provide the atmospheric background to the action' and 'to attune the spectators to the theatrical performance' (2017, 30). Despite the handy recognition of the affective capacities of design and its ability to prompt a variety of sensibilities (through processes of attunement), the reference to 'atmospheric background' diminishes the different ways in which design elements and practices can actively intensify experiential qualities. Indeed, I have already suggested that covering auditoria in gloom can direct eyes and signal where to look. However, this does not mean that darkness is merely a 'backdrop', deployed for accentuation or serving performance and performers. Recognising that brushes with darkness can conjure and even shape sensorial faculties allows darkness to be understood not only as a condition for performance (or immersion), but also, critically, as a medium or condition for perception. As Shanti Sumartojo explains in her study of darkness in contemporary art, 'darkness can also be apprehended as an almost tangible force that can immerse, permeate or press on us' (2021, 194). Moreover, as a thing perceived, its different manifestations could lead to numerous affects and sensations. Thus, darkness does not only represent or signal particular atmospheres; it is also a key component of what constitutes these atmospheres. Hence, regardless of its degree in the performance space, whether it is total darkness or half-light, on stage or in the auditorium, it should not be relegated to a decorative setting, a utilitarian solution for transitions or a better view of the stage. Far from a reductive 'absence', as a material of/for performance and a theatrical component that could be 'composed', darkness is revealed as a complex performative entity that can influence and manipulate the audience's experience, either as an independent agent or when working with other elements.

That said, as opposed to instrumentalising darkness to justify its utilisation in design and atmosphere production, my aim is to examine how its modulation can become meaningful compositionally and aesthetically. The emphasis on attunement – which is implicitly reiterated in Böhme's brief definition of atmospheres as 'tuned spaces' (2017, 2) – helps to clarify how various encounters with darkness can draw audiences and form their engagement by eliciting distinctive sensibilities. Much like toning, this additional musical metaphor also explicates how darkness might operate in performance, and underscores the significance in/of its emergence. Attunement in and to darkness could involve specific physical or physiological adjustments such as pupil dilation. However, as darkness confounds spatial and temporal perceptions, it can correspondingly give rise to new/different sensations, perceptions and insights. As Sumartojo explains, darkness, primarily due to the uncertainty it elicits, 'enables us to reach beyond our usual ways of knowing the world, adding a precious and important dimension to how we perceive and understand our surroundings' (2021, 201). While the reference to prototypical 'ways of knowing' risks feeding an ocularcentric bias, which prioritises vision and renders sight the dominant sense, Sumartojo helpfully exemplifies how making sense in/

of darkness stimulates a 'process of affective transformation as we get used to it, perhaps as a calming of the nerves, or a settling into the perceptive abilities of our other senses' (ibid., 192). For example, when analysing how darkness is sensed and understood, Sumartojo views tuning in terms of duration due to the time the human eye takes to respond to gloomy environs and 'the time required for changes to visual abilities to be perceived'; as she describes 'it takes around 20 minutes for a complete physiological adjustment to dark conditions' (2021, 194). More broadly, and moving beyond pupil dilation, the process of attunement, as Julian Brigstocke and Tehseen Noorani explain, 'speaks to subtle, affective modulations in the relations between different bodies' (2016, 1). As a relational and mediating act of ordering, attunement implies drawing and being drawn in or out, speaking to 'the fundamental ways in which we find ourselves disposed in such and such a way' as well as 'the capacity to be affected by or calibrated by our environment, especially by those forces of which we are unaware' (ibid., 2–3). Likewise, sowing the seeds of the conception of darkness as a medium for perception, Martin Welton brings together the material, climatic and perceptual, to examine the aesthetic experience of performance atmospheres and its relation to the medium of air, 'as an ongoing attunement to environmental conditions' (2018, 81). As part of this process of attunement – or in Welton's case, air-*conditioning* – performance can draw spectatorial attention in a way that commingles 'bodily, environmental and aesthetic conditions' (ibid., 89). In that sense, the appearance of darkness can generate an aesthetic relation with audiences, and, through its presence in space, highlight, to build on Welton, 'a sensual and material experience of one's situatedness within the environment' (ibid., 81). This is not to imply, however, being passively subjected to an irresistible affective power. Rather, I conceive the experience of different atmospheric conditions as an ongoing reciprocal process of shifting engagements through modifications in perceptions. In *Campfire*, as light levels grew weaker, shadows fluctuated, continuously shifting darkness's shape, altering the parameters and tonality of the environment, and in that sense, re-attuning audiences to darkness's different configurations. Building on anthropologist Kathleen Stewart and her review of Heideggerian phenomenology, Hann similarly suggests that attunement is 'predicated on how a worlding assemblage operates as a generative force that orientates moments of action, reflection, and worldly experience' (2019, 2). Worlding, here, refers to how a constellation of elements, materials and forces coalesce or assembles to a 'thing' (or momentary 'scene') that has distinct qualities and which not only orientates but also – and reminiscent of Bille – gives rise to different attachments. In that sense, and following Hann, scenographic traits – such as covering auditoria in darkness – can be seen as scoring 'ongoing processes of worlding through discrete interventional acts of "place orientation"' (ibid.) Therefore, *Campfire*'s slow production of darkness sought to establish different attachments to/with darkness, especially in comparison to expected engagements fostered by a stark 'plunge'. Experimenting with gradually expanding gloom when devising the piece, I questioned if it is indeed a brutal thrust when its duration is far lengthier. By giving the space an extended time to go dark, I sought to convey the feeling that the audience might get 'to know darkness better', feel safer in it or leave traces of the group in it. It was an invitation to capture as much as possible of the performance space, its features and everything in it in order to defer things' disappearance from sight. The brush with darkness in *Campfire* was therefore arguably less of a 'plunge' and more what Claire Bishop terms 'stepping into' darkness (2005, 82): a gradual acclimatisation to the dark.

In this regard, darkness's slow appearance attempted to ease the audience in, allowing them to re-adjust to the dark setting and its varying levels, before clarity was further disrupted by shadows and everything withdrew into the caliginous darkness.

Initially, the incorporation of low-lighting may have helped somewhat with orientation in *Campfire*'s gloomy environs by drawing attention to particular points through (relative) brightness that sustained a degree of focus. Yet, as light faded further, gloom destabilised and muddled objects of perception. As such, it demanded different interactions with the surroundings. In this re-adjustment to the emerging conditions of dimness and darkness, habitual modes of sensory engagement – often determined by politics of perception as dependent on fixity and clarity – were able to make room for other forms of perceiving one's environment, not necessarily visual, pre-determined or clearly measured. Unlike an immediate removal of all light, which can easily leave viewers 'stranded' when trying to position themselves in relation to the all-encompassing darkness, here the composition and appearance of darkness disrupted stage-images by continuously rendering them indistinct: less a sudden disorientating erasure of reference points, and more a vague and fuzzy moment of questioned sensibilities. In such low intensities, the changing 'degrees' of darkness – implied by this 'stepping into' encounter – elicit a lack of clarity in elucidations and categories, hovering between undecided interpretations of what is sensed or perceived. Whether conscious-critical or through corporeal transformations, these re-attunements (or attuned-ness, see Mitra 2016) influence the experience of the performance. Seen in this way, *Campfire*'s opening sequence, in its continuous blurring through increased dimness, articulates different processes of challenged clarity. Shifting perceptions and understandings of familiar objects, other audience members and performance environments, the removal of light and emergence of darkness illustrates first the significance of these initiatory compositions and how they influence the remainder of the event, and second, how diverse brushes with darkness can involve different attunements to murkiness in attempts of making sense.

Endings

Eventually, during or after the curtain call, the houselights come back on, concluding the performance. As darkness recedes into the shadows, the general hubbub of now departing audiences returns. If at the opening of the event, during the 'slow fade to darkness, an audible, collective intake of breath might be distinguished, followed by an excited air of hushed expectation as the auditorium becomes darker and the spectators prepare for the experience of the performance' (Palmer 2017, 38), the return of houselights marks a gentle (or deep) exhale, prolonging slightly the air of what has just unfolded, as the audience leaves the theatre. Beginning to tone and (at)tune visitors back to the world outside, in this article I have presented the case for reconsidering houselights. I proposed that while they are often taken for granted and in many auditoria are pre-determined, houselights are not simply a decorative tool, sandwiching a separate standalone performance. Though they are habitually switched off at the supposed 'start' of the performance, the design and attenuation of light in the auditorium can surpass practical deployment of illumination in the house or mere assistance with focusing the audience's attention to the stage.

In my attempt to advance the exploration around the role of light and darkness in performance, I sought to challenge and extend the generalised notion that houselights only

function as a ceremonial preamble, 'painting' the auditorium in a certain colour and shaping a vaguely 'atmospheric' quality. Tending to different (compositions of) encounters with darkness, I have paid close attention to the elimination of light and emergence of darkness to contend that not all brushes with darkness are the same. Focusing primarily on opening sequences and how they influence the experience of what continues to unfold, the examples I addressed demonstrate that the different ways in which houselights are designed and eliminated, or how darkness appears and covers auditoria, should be understood as part of an active composition geared towards producing particular effects. Put differently, by setting the tone and tuning audiences, the oscillation between houselights and darkness holds the capacity to influence and charge the overall experience of the performance, the different meanings generated and how sense could be made. In this respect, I propose that the process of lighting design needs to equally account for light (and darkness) in the auditorium as even a slight change in intensity, colour or angle could produce an entirely different encounter with darkness, light, space and performance, shifting how the event might be approached and understood.

Notes

1. The inauguration of a lasting state of darkness in the auditorium during a theatre production is often attributed to Richard Wagner, who sought to institute darkness in the auditorium at the opening of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus on 13 August 1876. Instrumental to the emergence of a novel aesthetic experience, the darkened hall 'was key to promoting a sense of immersion through the focus on the combination of word, music and action on the illuminated stage' (Palmer 2017, 43).
2. Working light refers to a general light used in venues instead of stage and house lighting during non-performance moments such as fit-up, get-out or reset between productions.
3. A similar sense of vulnerability is manifested in the poetic description of American lighting designer Robert Edmond Jones where he asks, 'How shall I convey to you the meaning of shadow in the theatre – the primitive dread, the sense of brooding, of waiting, of fatality, […] the descent into endless night?' ([1941] 2004, 122). While Jones' articulation alludes to more negative connotations, it starts elucidating the variety of affective and scenographic sensibilities emerging in the descent into darkness.
4. Interestingly, in her outline of the ontology of performance, Peggy Phelan references the live event as that which 'plunges into visibility' before it disappears into memory (1993, 148).
5. Rosenberg's explanation was given during 'Theatre Sense', a symposium dedicated to distinctive sensory engagements in performance. The symposium, which was held in May 2018 and organised by Martin Welton, was part of a series of events celebrating 20 years since Battersea Arts Centre's 'Playing in the Dark' season, a momentous milestone in the history of theatre in the dark (see Alston and Welton 2017).

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