

POSTMODERN THEATER: A Manifestation of Chaos Theory?

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While the focus of this study is on contemporary avantguard theater and 'avantguard' organizational consulting, it is of course obvious that classic and modern theater practices exist side by side with the most recent developments in both fields. But the most novel though, it is assumed, bears the most interesting fruits for comparisons.

Starting around the mid-end sixties, the world of theater witnessed the emergence of a new avantguard theater. At that time, traditional theater (classics and musicals) were produced by theater companies situated near the western part of mid-Manhattan around Broadway while intellectually more demanding new plays or new renditions of classics were given outside of the main theater district, hence the expression Off-Broadway for such modern plays or modern interpretation of classic plays.

Smaller theaters which were not able to comply with the union rules of the Actor's Equity (2) staged their plays outside of the union and production regulated environment, hence their denomination as "Off-Off-Broadway". Many of them focused on new plays, revivals, classics etc. like the rest of Broadway and OB theater, other OOB theaters started to focus on consciousness itself and were later called "avantguard", "experimental", "art performance", "alternative" or "conceptual".

Such postmodern groups included for instance Mabou Mines, The Performance Group, The Manhattan Project, The Ontological-Historical Theater, and writer/actor/performer's such as Robert Wilson, Stuart Sherman, Alison Knowles etc. These new avantguard groups showed their plays mostly in areas of Manhattan such as the Lower East Side, Soho, Village and Brooklyn where the counter culture of the sixties flourished well and undisturbed from commercial pressures and the intellectual scrutiny of mainstream theater critics.

The features of these postmodern OOB plays were new and radically different from those shown by traditional B, OB and 'traditional OOB' Theater. They quickly outshined other OOB groups and the term 'OOB' became interchangeable with 'postmodern' for many theater critiques and practitioners. Hence, throughout the remaining part of this article, OOB stands for the postmodern variant of OOB theater.

Postmodern remains a vague term and does not enjoy full approval by many scholars and experts of the fields of art and social science. Spirited attacks on the term have been written by many, e.g. dancers Senta Driver, Sally Banes, Roger Copeland, (all in Theater and Drama Review TDR, Spring 1992).

Many of their points are well taken, others could be disputed. The aim of this paper is not a discussion of the term postmodern nor of the statements and claims made by J. F. Lyotard (1984) and Charles Jencks (1986). Instead, postmodern is used here as a historical

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term to describe the features of OOB Theater as it evolved from the mid-sixties to the present.

Summarizing and expanding on contributions made by Elinor Fuchs (1983), Richard Schechner (1979) and Dick Higgins (1979), I will highlight the main features of OOB Theater by contrasting it with its precursor, namely modern theater.

Grosso modo, modern theater is characterized by a core narrative plot which unfolds in logical, sequential manner like for instance plays by Pinter, Sartre or Albee. The actors take up roles of everyday citizens who tell a story based on life's tragedies and existentialist conflicts and the unfolding tragedy or comedy develops along a linear line starting at a beginning and ending with the last act of the play.

The goal of postmodern theater has been to dissolve existing ways of perceiving the world and one-self. The OOB play is meant to be like an event or process whereby the audience and the players/things/objects/space interact mentally. The focus is consciousness and much less emotional experience, political criticism or simple entertainment. OOB Theater's intention is to de-construct reality, not to interpret it nor to seek 'authentic' contact with the audience as was intended by the Living Theater.

Fragments of a protagonist's mind are for instance elevated to equal levels of reality and given separate roles similarly to a person suffering from personality disorder or a person experiencing states of dissociation or hallucinations or a person lying on a psychoanalyst's couch experiencing how his ID impulses are flushing into his consciousness. Sam Shephard, a well known playwright who combines pieces of storytelling with postmodern sensibility for instance states (1984):

"The stories my characters tell are stories that are always unfinished, always imagistic - having to do with recalling experiences through a certain kind of vision. They're always fractured and fragmented and broken. I'd love to be able to tell a classic story, but it doesn't seem to be part of my nature".

Another often used technique to break habitual ways of perceiving and conceptualizing the environment is the deliberate use of multiple media and multiple art forms shown simultaneously during an OOB performance, for instance by Meredith Monk, who is primarily a dancer but also uses art, sculpture and theater as equal component parts of her performance. Another example is the Wooster Group whose plays often consist of mixtures between parallel video films, acting and large scale sculpturing etc.

Being bombarded with several parallel events, the spectator's search for simple identifying cues which could help him 'guess' the meaning of the perceived bits of information remains frustrated. There is too much information to 'make sense' of. The spectator might for instance be simultaneously perceiving a film, dance or song played in parallel while the main acting scene unfolds. In OOB Theater, all awareness is treated as being of equal value, hence the terms often used to describe effects created by OOB theater plays are 'polyvalent identity' and 'multiplex information'.

Postmodern theater has also been heralded as the great break from anthropocentric art to a new form of transpersonal or postcognitive performance ritual where reason and everyday

logic are being expanded. Modern theater's normal narration is broken up into ideas, images and de-constructed fragments which form mosaic-like environments or four dimensional tableaux from which the spectator can select those bits of information which look interesting to him. Sort of a shopping mall where the spectator/client can pick from what fancies his mind at any particular moment in time.

Postmodern performances change from one performance to the next. There is no intention to repeat a play as consistently and methodologically as was for instance taught by the modern theater schools of Lee Strasberg, Stanislavski or Grotowsky. Each event or performance in OOB Theater is meant to create a new Gestalt made up of the sum total of all 'things' put and moved on stage on one hand and the spectator's mind who selectively tunes into different bits of information as he wishes.

This deconstructivist attack on conventional thinking and perceiving can be a liberating experience as is the case during many performances of Mabou Mines and Robert Forman and it can also offer pleasure especially if the de-coded material is part of a shared history or heritage which both performer and spectator share. Elinor Fuchs (1983) describes such a postmodern theater experience of a play by Daryl Chin titled "Apoplectic Fit" in PAJ 26/2, she writes:

The play proper consists of an interweaving of dozens of scene fragments quoted from or inspired by "classic" American films, interspersed with critical passages. The weaving of fragments never coalesces into an illusionist reality with plot and characters, yet coheres because the texts behind the text are part of our cultural narrative. Chin thrusts texts at his audience, books, articles, films, fiction, criticism...It is the world of textuality rather than a dramatic world that Chin is concerned with in most of his plays."

But non-narrative, non-character based postmodern theater can also be extremely shocking and disturbing if not traumatizing. Elinor Fuchs (TDR, Vol. 33, Spring 1989) describes such a scene of confusion and shock as witnessed during a performance of Karen Finley,

"Finley creates a mass of characters who erupt in jerky schizoid fragments. Stories trail off in midsentence. There are no finished narratives, and more important, as in Acker's fiction, there are no finished narrators; The mutating "I" is in turn woman, man, parent, child, all finding their level in the subterranean mesma of sexual abuse and numbing excess..."

The reason often mentioned for the use of such fragmentation techniques, according to Dick Higgins, is the search for a greater or broader identity, not a split or fragmented personality. He writes in PAJ (1979):

"But for postmodern performance artists especially recent postcognitive ones —there is not so much a question of having a multiple identity as a polyvalent one. One extends one's identity by doing a variety of things. Sometimes it even seems to be assumed that a greater identity -in the sense of a broader capability and scope - is qualitatively "better" than a lesser one".

The same critique also postulates a new maxim which supposedly rules these OOB performers stating "I am what I can do". Similar to a mediaeval renaissance man, performance artists seem to feel that they should have worked in video, cinema, dance and music. They seem to feel that their message is incomplete without such "polymathic catholicity" (D. Higgins).

Commenting on some narcissistic aspects of postmodern OOB theater, Richard Schechner observed (R. Schechner, PAJ 10/11, Vol IV, p.13) that narcissism does not mean egocentricity but instead:

"To see "I" at the center of the world is a modern feeling. For the self to see itself and become involved with that reflection or doubling as if it were another is a postmodern experience. To become conscious of this doubling - to posit a third self aware of the mutuality of the other two selves, this intense "reflexivity is postmodern".

This de-struction or fragmentation of the self represents a key aspect of postmodern theater. It bears strong similarities with experiences of deep meditation, for instance Vipasana Buddhism, during which the meditator experiences similar fragmentation and self-reflexivity. The same can be said about drug induced states, especially through psychedelic drugs. Both avenues of self reflexivity have been taken by practically all of the OOB Theater performers.

Moving towards cultural pluralism or multiculturalism, American performers, critiques and theorists are incorporating more and more non-Western and non-European theater into their own theatrical performances. Americans of Asian, African and Latin American origin are especially apt at blending different cultures thereby experimenting with forms of 'global theater' and cultural pluralism, thereby doing away with mono-culturalism. (R.Schechner, 1991).

OOB Actors and Audiences

Classical and modern theater are theaters which do their best at using illusions to imitate reality. The first one, classical repertory theater does it by using established historical forms to convey meaning (e.g. operas, classical drama like Shakespeare); the modern theater does it by the use of acting methods (Stanislawsky, Strasberg) which bring the actor and the scene as close as possible to real life situations.

OOB theater however does not intend to imitate life (conventional theatrical illusion) nor does it aim to improve on an existing piece of theater nor does it look for ways to entertain in a traditional sense. Instead, OOB theater focuses on the multiple levels of conscious awareness which a spectator could experience during a given OOB performance. For the OOB audience, there is no political or social message to be 'gotten'. The only thing to get is what the spectator makes out of the fragments of information made available by the performers.

Real or quasi-real characters are avoided in OOB because the audience's consciousness would have only preconceived 'old' precepts to identify with. Instead, the OOB performers wants to offer the spectators 'unpacked' material which he then can de-construct as he sees best fit.

Hence the OOB actor tries to be several things at the same time to different people, namely for instance: a voice, a physical object, a movement in space, a color within a larger frame made up of the whole stage etc.

For the audience, this can be quite a challenge since most of them have not been trained in de-constructing environmental data nor do they necessarily seek such an experience voluntarily. The frustrating part of being seated in an OOB play is that the human being's natural need to look for the familiar and his need to complete unfinished wholes remains oftentimes frustrated and incomplete. Impressions, sounds, images, colors, lights, tones, bodies can remain without an explanatory text which would allow the spectator to fall back on a given meaning normally present in modern or classical plays.

Being most of the time unable to move around in the audience, the spectator remains a seated captive audience which has to accept "undigested" raw information and put them into a larger explanatory whole. There is nothing 'there' to look for in a traditional sense. There are only raw data to construct something.

Many spectators can keep up for a while until the information overload puts too much stress onto their mental and emotional functioning. Hence, many people fall asleep during the performance or go into some fantasy world.

OOB Theater does not compromise. There are normally no narrated stories, no psychological characters with readily recognizable personalities, no historical context of the play and no linear chronological unfolding of a story line or if so, then only in fragments.

Hence, it is up to the spectator's mind and needs to make meaning out of the information, impressions, sounds, smells etc. Participation is absolutely necessary, consumption through osmosis of a ready made play is not possible. What is possible instead is the de-constructing and re-constructing of available bits of information.

Staying seated in an OOB theater requires participation not in the sense of following an existing text but in the sense of creating out of the multiple layers of subtext the kind of meaning which makes most sense for the spectator.

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