

Fusing Stage and Screen in Search of Empathy

Ross Brannigan

Abstract

The liminal, intermedial space where cinema and theatre come together is still comparatively new territory. This paper specifically explores that space where performance exists, not wholly as stage or screen, for its potential to enhance empathy. The new space affords opportunity to interweave visual aspects – both pre-recorded and of the live performance and to build new practice-centred understanding of how to negotiate the combination of processes involved.

An experimental performance was devised to explore the possibilities of combining the cinematically visual and the live. A somewhat constrained version of this is presented here, not just as illustration but as a means of discourse. A heuristic approach has been adopted to allow tacit knowledge to play a substantial role in the shaping of the enquiry. This performance as research exercise is offered as a provocation. It is the first of a series of explorations which will culminate in a full length work. Whether that work will be a piece of theatrical cinema, cinematic theatre or some new form evolving from the experimentation remains to be discovered.

The results of the performance experiment indicate that, given the potential to harness the immediacy of theatre with the extreme visual intimacy of the close up, empathetic responses can be enhanced. It highlights also that there are caveats, obstacles and creative constraints to consider.

The experiment suggests that the intermedial art form will evolve and that the body of experience and discourse within the community of practitioners and the audience will play a major role in that evolution. Practitioners stand at the threshold of new forms and the liminality of the space is an exciting opportunity to create new types of performance.

Key Words: Performance, theatre, cinema, intermedial, liminal, actor, visual.

1. Introduction

There is a space between stage and screen, a liminal, inbetween space of possibility. This paper addresses the question of whether there is potential in that space to enhance empathy. It is an exploration of a space where performance exists, not wholly as live and present stage performance but also as mediated, screened performance.

In order to address that question I have devised a practice as research experiment as an integral component of the presentation of this paper. Given the limitations of documenting or translating a performance this paper, illustrated only with description, will necessarily include only a shadow representation of the performance.

Given that a goal of theatre and of cinema is often to create an empathetic response in the audience which encourages investment in character, plot and theme it would follow that enhancing that bond through exploration of the possibilities inherent in the intermedial space would be a positive and useful endeavour. My aim is to build new practice-centred understanding of how to negotiate the combination of stage and screen processes involved. The practice as research approach is designed to tap into practitioner tacit knowledge and to offer the process as well as the findings as a contribution to discourse.

2. Context

The use of screened material in stage productions is not new but it is only comparatively recently that theorists and practitioners such as Bay-Cheng, Kattenbelt, Lavender and Nelson propose that we have now reached a “distinctive intermedial moment in digital culture”¹ where developments in technology and theoretical approaches to a network of aspects of intermediality can be better understood. My research is offered as a contribution to this discourse on current theories of the intermedial by focusing on the potential enhancement of empathy specifically from the perspective of the intermedial performer.

Since the birth of film projected elements have been incorporated in stage productions. Take for example Winsor McCay’s 1914 film/stage hybrid “Gertie the Dinosaur”. This animated short tale of a dinosaur was produced to amaze audience’s of McCay’s vaudeville act who were intrigued by what was probably the first animated film they had seen and by McCay, clearly live on stage in front of them seeming to interact with a projection.

The concept then of integrating the live and the mediated is not new but it is only more recently that it has begun to be more fully theorised. Giesekam² surveys recent major exponents of exploring the use of screen on stage. Experimental theatre companies as diverse as Robert Lepage in Canada, The Wooster Group and the Builders association in the United States. Lepage emphasises using whatever techniques he can to produce live shows which, while having a sophisticated cinematic orientation, have less performer-driven substance. He notes that “How do you maintain a sense of intimacy with a thousand people? You have to rely on technology to magnify you.”³ The Wooster group concentrate on the content and style of the material they screen without exploring each new technology as it arises. The Builders Association use video, projection and computer animation in

every way they can to explore the impact those technologies can have on storytelling. Discussions of intermediality have shifted from seeing the liminal space as one of in-betweenness to one of productive fusion in the inter-relation of media.⁴

3. Empathy

What is empathy? Is it a desirable affect to strive for in an audience's response to a play? If so, with whom is the audience feeling empathetic and furthermore is it valuable for the actor to feel empathy with the character?

In order to explore the question of whether increased empathy can result from fusing aspects of the process of making and performing a work of stage and screen it is necessary to define what I mean by empathy. Furthermore the question arises of whether this empathy is in relation to the actor and the character or to the character and the audience. Finally the question must be asked of whether increased empathy is a positive goal.

When Coleridge wrote of a "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment"⁵ he was also acknowledging the empowerment of the audience to become imaginative participants in an aesthetic world of the play. Through an act of will audience members are able to not just understand but also share in the feelings of another. This is distinct from the more objective term sympathy which encompasses only observation and understanding of another's feelings. Herein lies the magic of the shared theatrical experience. It evokes a response from the audience that aids in understanding another human being's emotions by partially feeling along with them. This, used well, promotes a deeper appreciation of and understanding of the human condition. Empathy is however not something which an audience member has complete control over. Responses can be automatic and it therefore does carry a range of dangers, many of which are noted by Blair⁶, including the possibility of indulging in a narcissistic or solipsistic experiencing of someone else's pain. Empathy, like spectacle, is a powerful tool that a theatre maker can use to grab and engage the audience but it is only one tool and its use without purpose, other than eliciting an emotional response, is shallow and a wasted opportunity.

Rhonda Blair⁷ approaches the question of empathy through the lens of cognitive neuroscience. In this field of psychology empathy has been a rich focus of research. It is notable that the various theories about empathy surveyed by Blair relate an empathetic reaction to our evolutionary need to decide how to respond to a stimulus. People have an ability to visualise an event in order to know how to respond to it. This implies that empathy requires an ability to engage the imagination and that that engagement has a visual aspect. Indeed the image that precedes an empathetic reaction can be triggered by any of the senses. Blair⁸ summarises the definition cognitive and neuro-scientists have of empathy as having three essential components. The first being the presence of an affect – an

embodied response to someone else – feeling what they feel. Secondly this implies that there is a cognitive capacity to visualise the other person’s situation. Thirdly there is also a capacity to know that the experience originated in someone else. It should be noted that there is a physical response here and an action ensues. Empathy is linked to visualisation and to action.

This is an important point. The experiencing of empathy requires engagement with the visual aspects of performance. It would therefore follow that whatever visual elements can be utilised in performance to engage the eyes and imaginative visualisation should provoke a visceral response. This was something I wanted to test out in practice.

If, as a performer, I can provoke the audience to a strongly-felt empathetic response by suggesting and then leaving them to do the feeling then I will have achieved a goal of sparking an emotional journey for them. I do not see my role as to portray the whole journey for them since I believe that audiences do not go to theatre to observe objectively but rather to participate in an emotional journey; to have their own responses to the world they choose to engage in; to “willingly suspend their disbelief for the moment” in.

This engagement is very much a two way interaction with actors keenly aware of the responses from the audience

This begs the question of whether the actor should also develop an empathy with the fictional character they are portraying. Should the actor feel what the character feels? Is it the representation of the character that the audience responds to or the actor or some felt blend of the two?

Why is empathy an essential part of theatre? Why is it desirable for an audience member to feel what actors and or characters are feeling? Actors come from a variety of traditions and do not always truly or completely feel what they are presenting. They may access emotions from emotional memories which approximate what the character is supposed to be feeling or they may simply be exhibiting a technical and outward show of emotional responses. The audience however is expected to feel whatever they are inspired to feel by the complete production they are experiencing. This production, if it is a traditional theatrical play will derive its meaning from the theatrical event and environment, the writer’s script, the director’s concept and guidance, the designer’s visual contribution, including set, costumes and props and, of course, the acting ensemble’s presence and performance. In intermedial theatre the event, environment and the digital media tools available to the design team will afford an expansion of these elements.

The actor’s emotional positioning with respect to the character is a source of much debate and a variety of theories of acting technique reflect this. David Mamet⁹, for example, in his system of Practical Aesthetics proposes a technique of the “As If” to help the actor detach from their engagement in the fiction, find the truth and then reapply it to the scene. Mamet¹⁰ further contends that the “As If”

requires no preparation or belief from the actor. By implication anything the actor feels will flow naturally from the action carried out. Actors are not to remember how they are supposed to feel but simply remind themselves what they are about to do. Mamet's technique therefore seeks to achieve spontaneity of feeling for the actor and a kind of empathy with what the character is presented as feeling.

Stanislavsky's¹¹ early work, continued by various proponents of Method Acting also sought to create a depth of empathetic feeling in the actor. These real emotional responses were to be mined from the actor's own memories however in a technique called Emotional Memory. They would therefore be both personal and deeply felt and approximate what the character was supposed to be feeling. This technique of accessing, appropriating and repurposing emotional memory was later abandoned by Stanislavsky as unnecessary and possibly psychologically damaging to the actor. He and later American adaptors of his theories came to rely on the engagement of the actor's creative imagination by using a variation of the "As If".

Other schools of theatre and acting sought to objectify the experience for the audience by having the style of the play and the actor step away from a pursuit of psychological realism. Brecht, for example, strove for detachment. The goal was to encourage objective appreciation and engagement with the ideas of the play rather than empathy. Elly Konijn¹² surveyed professional actors in the Netherlands and contended that there was little difference in the emotional intensity reported by them in performances regardless of whether the style was one of detachment or involvement. She mapped the actors' self-reported emotional intensity to that of the portrayed-character and noted a correlation of most emotions but at a reduced intensity. This suggests that actors seek empathy with the character regardless of the style of the production.

4. The Experiment

Using practice as research methodology I devised a performance experiment to discover, from the practitioner's perspective whether screened elements could be used in a Shakespearian soliloquy to enhance the feeling of empathy the audience felt for the characters. A traditional rather than deconstructed soliloquy was chosen to deliberately test the suitability of various types of screen elements. The intention was to avoid devising the theatre to suit the screened elements but rather to explore the ways in which the screen could serve the stage. I chose Hamlet's "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I" for its impassioned introspection. Since a soliloquy is a direct address to the audience it allowed the character, and therefore the performer, to take control of digital screen elements.

The excerpt began with Hamlet having a video chat session with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They obediently leant in to their webcam and Hamlet was able to disconnect them at will. The image of their chat screen was projected on a screen behind Hamlet. He then searched for a promotional video of the Players and their production of "The Murder of Gonzago" and watched it, assessing the quality and

suitability of the piece for his undisclosed purpose. This he shared with the audience, pausing to consider his next move. With the title of the play on screen he then rang the First Player by cell phone and arranged for the play to be performed and for them to adapt the performance to his purpose. He then reconnected the chat session with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, controlling their ability to see him and shutting them off dismissively.

This technology is familiar to an audience and vesting control of the media in the character allowed it to be a natural component of the *mise-en-scène*. The screened elements drew attention when necessary but were able to be put in their place when the narrative demanded the attention be thrown onto the live performer. By interacting with the mediated elements the performer instantiated the prerecorded as live.

The next screened element was designed to disrupt the audience's safety and draw them in to the inner turmoil felt by Hamlet. He took the webcam and pointed it at the audience, asking "who calls me villain?". The convention of direct address in a soliloquy renders this as within the world of the play. The audience was forced to see images of themselves projected in large scale on the screen behind the performer. The last element was a sequence of still images of the debauched King Claudius which Hamlet showed as though illustrating his point with a presentation. All of these elements were actively used by the performer and the focal point of the narrative was controlled. Auslander¹³ warns that screened digital media elements take precedence in the attention of the audience by virtue of their scale, novelty and perceived ephemerality. Audiences are conditioned to expect a film or television show to play continuously as linear time-based media and they therefore pay close attention. They have no access to a remote to pause or replay the material. In the experiment I felt it necessary to allow them to see Hamlet controlling the playback and to see him actively using the control he had to tell his story. The actor could pause before delivering the next part of the narrative if a shift in focal point could be felt to need an adjustment time. Colin McColl, director of the Auckland Theatre Company noted the need for a cool down period after an exciting screen element before audiences could switch their attention to the live performer. It was therefore something of a risk to leave an image of Claudius on screen while Hamlet fleshed out his plan and canvassed his fears at the end of the soliloquy. I chose to utilise a form of animated image known as a cinemagraph.

The cinemagraph is an interesting format which has attracted a great deal of attention from cinematographers recently. The term was coined by American photographers Kevin Burg and Jamie Beck in 2011. Cinemagraphs are images which are, in the main, still but which have a minor element that is animated and looped. The BBC used the technique in coverage of the World Snooker championships in 2013. Interestingly the theme of the coverage was time and the feel of the images was suited to the intense concentration inherent in the game of snooker. The experiment in intermedial theatre that this presentation includes

explores the possibility that a cinemagraph might be useful to provide both a continuing presence and a focal point for a defined moment in time. It's subtlety and recurrent nature provide opportunities for its use in intermedial theatre. Actors and script should be able to claim attention after a cinemagraph has been viewed, allowing it to recede within the attention of the audience. Whether it is used to illustrate, extend, deepen, counterpoint, contextualise or introduce an otherwise impossible world the cinemagraph proved to be a useful tool. I made an image of a drunken Claudius, face turned away from the camera, unconscious and surrounded by the detritus of his debauchery: alcohol, a woman's underwear, broken glass, grapes and a knife. All of this was still but the cigarette in his hand subtly emitted an animated whisp of smoke.

5. Conclusion

Given that, in the view of neuroscientists, we are wired for empathy perhaps the question is not how to foster empathy but rather what can get in the way of what is a natural phenomenon. My experiment highlighted for me that Auslander's¹⁴ point about the privileging of the mediated is valid within performance. Auslander wrote convincingly of the privileging of screen content over the live performer in intermedial productions. Size, novelty and familiarity with the ephemerality of broadcast video demand attention. However this can be used as a creative constraint by designers. At any given time in a production there is usually a defined focal point for the narrative. Actors are highly conscious of the need to give focus and not to upstage another member of the cast who, given the exigencies of the narrative, has the attention of the audience at any given point in the play. It may be helpful to think of the digital media element not as a design feature but as another actor. It would therefore have its own time as a focal point but be expected to be invisible when the focus belonged elsewhere. This invisibility could conceivably be literal, the image and sound could be turned off. It could also be that the attractiveness or urgency of it be substantially reduced.

The process of designing digital media components of a production would therefore, logically, benefit from being a part of the rehearsal where actors and director discover their iteration of the play. To fully realise the potential of intermedial theatre the process of creation could be a blend of digital media and traditional processes.

Notes

¹ Bay-Cheng, Sarah, Kattenbelt, Chiel, Lavender, Andy, and Nelson, Robin. *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010)

-
- ² Gieseckam, Greg. *Staging the Screen, the Use of Film and Video in Theatre*. (Palgrave, 2007)
- ³ Gieseckam, Greg. *Staging the Screen, the Use of Film and Video in Theatre*. (Palgrave, 2007) 219.
- ⁴ Bay-Cheng, Sarah, Kattenbelt, Chiel, Lavender, Andy, and Nelson, Robin. *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010)
- ⁵ Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985)
- ⁶ Blair, Rhonda. 'Cognitive Neuroscience and Acting: Imagination, Conceptual Blending, and Empathy,' *The Drama Review*, 53.4, (2009).
- ⁷ Blair, Rhonda. 'Cognitive Neuroscience and Acting: Imagination, Conceptual Blending, and Empathy,' *The Drama Review*, 53.4, (2009).
- ⁸ Blair, Rhonda. 'Cognitive Neuroscience and Acting: Imagination, Conceptual Blending, and Empathy,' *The Drama Review*, 53.4, (2009).
- ⁹ Mamet, David. *On Directing Film*. (Penguin, 1991).
- ¹⁰ Mamet, David. *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor*. (Vintage, 1998).
- ¹¹ Stanislavski, Constantin, and Benedetti, Jean. *An Actor's Work*. (Routledge, 2008).
- ¹² Konijn, Elly. 'Actors and Emotions: A Psychological Perspective', *Theatre Research International*, 20, (1995).
- ¹³ Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. (Taylor and Francis, 2002).
- ¹⁴ Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. (Taylor and Francis, 2002).

Bibliography

Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. Taylor and Francis, 2002.

Bay-Cheng, Sarah, Kattenbelt, Chiel, Lavender, Andy, and Nelson, Robin. *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010.

Blair, Rhonda. 'Cognitive Neuroscience and Acting: Imagination, Conceptual Blending, and Empathy,' *The Drama Review*, 53.4, 2009.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985

Gieseckam, Greg. *Staging the Screen, the Use of Film and Video in Theatre*. Palgrave, 2007, 219.

Konijn, Elly. 'Actors and Emotions: A Psychological Perspective', *Theatre Research International*, 20, 1995.

Mamet, David. *On Directing Film*. Penguin, 1991.

Mamet, David. *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor*. Vintage, 1998.

Stanislavski, Constantin, and Benedetti, Jean. *An Actor's Work*. Routledge, 2008.

Ross Brannigan lectures in Performance and Digital Media at AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand. His research interests include the liminal space between stage and screen, the application of digital media technologies to live performance and the actor/director matrix. He has more than 30 stage productions and 50 screen acting credits, including feature films, Television series, commercials and short films.