

# *Notes on Live Theatre*

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It has been a while since the last time I was involved in a theatre production. My focus has been pointing at live performance, performance art, visual art, and contemporary dance for the last three years. This 12-weeks residency in Juneau Alaska, immersed myself into two theatre productions, is an eye-opener as a performer. Besides learning about native Alaskan culture, history, and ongoing issues, I have been thinking about theatre as an art form: its unique attribute, its history, its existence.

There seem to be three plexus in theatre, each of which lines between are connected in the shape of triangle. The length of the lines should be proportionate to each other. These



plexus are 'Event,' 'Storyteller,' and 'Audience.' Leon Ingulsrud from SITI company said this at one of the workshops. He emphasized the line between 'Event' and 'Storyteller' since current theatre and film industry's focus on realism tends to combine those two points together, believing that the actors are re-living the event to be naturalistic rather than embodying the event to tell the story.

This analogy, which comes from Anne Bogart from SITI company and its members, was in a way quite familiar to me, considering I spend a lot of time training with them in the past. Also, it resonates with my introduction to professional theatre through Independent Shakespeare Company in mid 2000. My philosophy towards theatre was based on the pragmatic account, valuing "trained skills" such as voice and physical movement over transformative and emotional evocation in acting. Having said that, I just wanted to lay down my bias towards this subject.

I question this universal (seemingly universal) standard towards acting in relationship with realism. Essentially what this realism and believability in acting do is to help the viewers sympathize with the event or the character in the most direct and smooth way. It also encourages the suspension of disbelief. Realism acts as a tactic to distract the viewers from the phenomenology of its theatrical event (viewers sitting down to look at the fictional story on stage) in order for them to invest in the characters and story. Viewers forget that they are experiencing a theatre production that is based on the story. They instead fall into the illusion that they are witnessing the event itself.

We as a maker of performance often criticize a certain theatre works, using phrases like 'bad acting' or 'bad directing.' What does that mean? Does that mean we didn't believe the event? Does that mean the story or message didn't do anything to the viewers? One way to look at it might be that the act of storytelling was not in align with the story, ended up distracting the viewers to experience the story itself.

Actors make character choices. They analyze the script and create a character trait. Sometimes, actors who don't think about the overall production but themselves make choices out of research that are intellectual and logical. They show this choice, telling the viewers, 'Look at my research! This is how this character would behave!' This over-exhibition of research ends up complimenting the actor's homework rather than supporting the story. In this case, viewers come to theatre productions, ending up seeing the display of actor's skills. I believe actor's skills to be the fuel for the story. It is to serve the theme and story, not to serve actors' ego.

Also, when actors physically describe, through gestures and what not, what they say or how they say their lines, it ends up being a disservice for the writing and language of the play. Words in the play are written for the actors to vocalize and communicate, not to be over-fabricated. This over-fabrication, going back to the former point, leads to the distraction for the viewers. It interrupts the viewers' process of investing into the story itself.

Here, it might be beneficial to step back and look at my argument: focusing on the story. Theatre's main purpose is to tell a story. Well.. there's one more factor to that, which is the liveness of this story telling. The phenomenological experience. Otherwise, there's other mediums like TV, films, books, audiobooks, etc if you just want the storytelling.

We could ask this question: Why do people want to be involved in theatre performance? Why do we, actors, want to act on stage or on film? Why do we like doing it? The sensation of being seen? Adrenaline? A sense of being a team? Display of how transformative you are? Display of skills? Finding an emotional truth? In search of spot light/attention? I doubt that it is because you want to tell a story, or to be a part of story telling.

Now I wonder: Am I talking about this through actor's point of view, or performance maker's point view? Yet, aren't they both a part of theatre practitioners anyway? There's an educational aspect of theatre: Theatre of the Oppressed. Children/youth theatre. They are vital in their process, building confidence and sense of accomplishments as well as visibility of the issue and the actors themselves. Those might be beside the point.

Something to think about. Actor's role. Actor's craft. Storytelling. Viewers' experience. Fiction vs. phenomenology of theatre. These ideas are nothing new. Even nothing new to me, but it's nice to reflect on my current thinking in this way.

I'm going to stop here. Good night.

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Image: Courtesy of Perseverance Theatre, Juneau AK. From a production of *Bule Bear* (2014)