Who is the Audience? (And what is theater?)

MIHAI PEDESTRU[*]

Abstract: This review attempts to synthesize the many points of view concerning contemporary American theater and audience engagement collected and curated by playwright Caridad Svich into the online salon Audience (R)Evolution. The articles, coming from theater practitioners mostly from the independent side of the spectrum, try to shed light on the debates about dwindling theater attendance, particular audience engagement strategies and the ways American theater copes with the new generations of spectators.

Keywords: Audience engagement, theatre audiences, American theatre, virtual theatre

Starting in 2012, the Theater Communications Group in partnership with the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation has developed and implemented a complex program, *Audience (R)Evolution*, aimed to study and devise audience engagement models across the United States theatrical landscape. The 150 theater practitioners participating in the program, supported by $ 65000 grants from the Foundation, were asked to "(Re)Model or (Re)Imagine" audience engagement. The results, published since 2015 as small articles, opinion pieces, manifests and even poems were gathered into an "online salon" curated by playwright Caridad Svich and are freely available on TCG's website. This gallery contains (as of this moment) 50 pieces, ranging from practical approaches and project descriptions to theoretical models and even radical manifestos stretching the traditional boundaries of what we are used to call theater.

We intend, in this review, to briefly summarize the vast landscape of insight provided by the initiative by means of three distinct topics: "who is the audience?", "how do theaters engage the audience?" and, last but not least, "to what extent is (American) theater willing to change its set of fundamental axiomatic definitions in order to accommodate a changing audience?" While this last item

[*] *Teaching Fellow at the Babeş-Bolyai University's Faculty of Theatre and Television, Cluj-Napoca, e-mail: mihai.pedestru@mail.ubbcluj.ro*

certainly does not seem to fit with the rest, it emerges as a vital one after reading the articles in question, because non-traditional and even "heretical" strategies seem to prove the most effective in engaging otherwise apathetic spectators.

Who is the (new) audience?

The most concise definition of a "new audience" comes from *Applied Mechanics*, a Philadelphia-based ensemble working in immersive theater. In the collectively-signed article "Activating Audience: Theater of Radical Inclusion", they state their observation that: "Applied Mechanics has been developing new forms of audience engagement over the last six years and we've come to see a different kind of audience: people who grew up on video games and internet want art they can walk through and not just watch."

The idea is reinforced by Tiffany Vega, General Manager of *Hi-Arts Theater Company* who, after working in community theater in East Harlem, notices that "An active and engaged audience needs to feel like a theater company is constantly thinking of them, as if a season has been curated specifically with them in mind … We want our community to feel like they have ownership of the art and the space."

What both Hi-Arts and Applied Mechanics seem to have in common is the rather small audience and strong community involvement. In fact, this "theater for the community" ideal occurs recurrently throughout most, if not all, articles in the series. We see the companies setting aside the mass bourgeois entertainment industry of Broadway in favor of small towns or boroughs, where the relationship between artists and spectators can be much intimer and personal. Such is the case of the Obie Awarded *PearlDamour* team's project *Milton*, in which the artists visit five small towns named Milton across the United States, directly engaging their inhabitants, sometimes all of them, both online and offline, in order to devise a performance about small town life, to be performed in the Miltons.

The main merit of the online gallery, however, is that, by allowing contradictory points of view, it sparks a solid debate about both what audiences need and want and the role they play in the theater phenomenon as a whole, without pointing out an obvious answer. As the curator herself asks, in her article suggestively entitled "Please Please Please Let me Get What I Want (even if) You Can't Always Get What You Want": "Who is our audience, then? Who do we think is our audience? And is there such a thing as a monolithic body called the audience in the first place?" She goes on to bring a counterargument to the community audience initiative by quoting an anecdote:

A producer wisely remarks in one of the discussion sessions over these last few days in Kansas City that when a practitioner with whom she was working once asked a group of homeless people living in a tent village in one of our American cities about what kind of theater they most wanted to see, the answer was not one that represented their own misfortune, but rather "Dreamgirls" instead. Give me the glitter and magic and spectacle, please, and not mere verisimilitude of what my own life is like!

The audience, as seen, is certainly not a monolithic body, with unified needs and desires. Some people react positively to close, intimate experiences, others to glamour and lavish shows. There is no such thing as "one theater audience" as there is no such thing as "one theater".

There appears, however, to exist a sort of dichotomy between two echelons of spectators: the elder (and dying) audience of regulars and a young, disinterested, irregular audience, enraptured by video games and reality television, who does not care for theater and, as playwright Justin Maxwell puts it, "The new audience is out there, but it doesn't know we exist; it doesn't know that what we do is possible, and it is trained not to look."

This change of generation is at the heart of TCG's project and all audience engagement strategies are meant to prepare both theater for its new audience, and the new audience (also called "millennials" or "digital generation") for theater spectatorship. This new generation, however, is not monolithic itself, not even in its disregard for the performing arts, and here resides one shortcoming of the entire series; few articles if any, even if they differentiate between "old" and "new", proceed to further examine what this "new" is and how different its segments can be.

Melissa Hillman, Artistic Director of Impact Theatre in Berkeley, starts from the lucid observation that "The main concern about diversity in our industry isn't creating art that attracts young people and people of color – we have that already – it's creating art that keeps the upper echelon of theatremakers employed in a changing demographic environment". And then she presents an extremely poignant argument, perhaps the most interesting in the entire series, about the role money have in shaping audience research and, subsequently, our weltanschauung concerning these audiences. Theater "that counts" (for audience studies and surveys), she says, is the well-financed theater, with budgets exceeding 100.000 dollars, centered on elder, white spectators. As these spectators are slowly dying of natural causes, so is this instance of theater. Because scholarship focuses extensively on this form, ignoring the others, we perceive that theater, in its entirety, is dying as well.

This is not the case, says Hillman, as the independent scene is flourishing; it manages to attract and maintain young and diverse audiences by adhering to three simple principles: "Tell the stories that audience wants to hear, all the time, charge realistic prices, and create a welcoming environment". By addressing small audiences in different settings instead of a large, mixed audience in a unified setting, independent theater, it seems, has already found the solution to the falling attendance problem, rendering the whole discussion about audience engagement rather moot. To surmise the author's opinion, instead of trying to attract young spectators to the dying mainstream theater, we should let it die and focus on the one that is alive and well, even if this would mean breaking with tradition.

How does (American) theater engage the audience?

The specific actions undertaken by the artists and professionals participating in the *Audience (R)Evolution* project are varied. They do, however, fall under three main categories with one common goal - narrowing the gap between performer and spectator: *creating about the spectator*, *creating with the spectator* and *cultivating community*.

In the expressively titled article "Stop writing for zombies: Teaching students to create for contemporary audiences" playwright and Pennsylvania University professor Jacqueline Goldfinger challenges the foundation of artistic education in the field of theater, criticizing the art schools' over-insistence on classic authors and aesthetics. Quite radically, she states: "Let's leave the O'Neill, the Mamet, the Wilson, the Greeks, Shakespeare, even the Sheppard (whom I love more my luggage) in the literature classes, in the theater history classes, in the script analysis classes. Let's keep our playwriting workshops and contemporary theater classes current, vibrant, electric with possibility."

Her main argument is that, by relying on the same fundamental texts and models in teaching playwriting to different generations, "we are only exposing our students to ideas, aesthetics, and forms that audiences have often already absorbed and moved beyond." If the audiences cannot connect with the narratives, characters and ideas presented on stage, she contends, they will fall prey to the more comfortable mass-media.

The same ideas appear in Jody Christopherson's article "Stages of the Lower East Side and Our Audience", albeit in a more practical setting. The article describes the artist's devised performance *Because You Are Good*, which employs some means of verbatim theater (the author does not mention this) such as interviews and everyday life observations in order to stage the stories of people from the Lower East Side neighborhood of Manhattan in front of their friends

and neighbors. According to Christopherson, spectators "are really excited about this work … These stories transcend the fourth wall. They are part of a legacy that belongs to the audience as well, much like the Lower East Side. And by bringing awareness to that it creates a rallying cry to preserve our history and carry that inspiration into the future." The purpose of the performance is, thusly, threefold, encompassing all three categories of action mentioned above: the audience can connect with the stories, they are part of the creation process and the performance itself helps strengthen the sense of community; the same situation as in the case of PearlDamour's *Milton*, and many others.

The connection between spectators and narratives facilitates the connection between theater and audiences, connection which is, in its turn, reinforced by allowing the latter to participate in the creation of the performance itself. This series of reconnections allow independent theater to exploit the visceral experience of the encounter, which theater alone can offer. As Maxwell says, again about the new audience, "These students born and raised in the digital age (and educated in the contemporary American idiom) believe theatre to be the most sterile productions of Shakespeare, and maybe a little Ibsen, or some long-dead 'Greek dude.' They don't know the unique things our artistic genre is capable of; they don't know why it isn't film and tv." Independent theater, it would seem, managed to seamlessly "educate" its spectators about what it can offer. We will not present here all strategies employed by the artists, as these are freely available and certainly worth a more in-depth reading.

What is (no longer) theater?

Unavoidably, new audience engagement strategies reach into a gray area of "theater heresies" such as virtual theater, mediated theater and hyperdrama. We will attempt to briefly discuss some of the more interesting such initiatives described by the artists involved in the project, without wanting to spark an argument about what is or is not theater. We find them important, however, if not as performances per se, than as efficient means of appealing to the "new audience".

Director Erin B. Mee, involved mostly in site-specific theater, presents his performance *Ferry Play*, a smartphone play, which is "an emerging genre of theatre that take advantage of mobile technology to create site-specific audio-based theatrical experiences". While riding the Staten Island Ferry in New York, the spectator/participant can download a smartphone application containing the play, whose action happens on the ferry, in audio format. The entire environment becomes a stage, reimagining familiar items and places and immersing the audience (ranging from five to eighty year olds) in an interactive and ever-changing experience.

Middlesex County College theater professor Anna Sycamore DeMers presents her otherwise disinterested students' reaction to a site-specific performance based on Shakespeare's Macbeth, *SleepNoMore*. The event consists of the audience (masked and silent) freely exploring and interacting with a five story building where actors perform, in different spaces, different scenes. DeMers notes that "The mystery appealed to the students, their ability to choose where they went and which story/character they followed. They were also intrigued by the extreme physicality of the performers and that even though they did not speak very often, a story was communicated to them." She concludes that "The students not only had an experience as a spectator but they also had an experience as an actor. Without a doubt, these students were greatly impacted by this immersive performance and will likely seek more experiences like Sleep No More."

Playwright Steve Moore presents "an absurd experiment with technology" which managed to double attendance to his company's live performances. The narrative of their play "Computer Simulation of the Ocean" was delivered to the audience in real time, over the span of six months, solely through text messages from the three characters, received on the spectators' cellphones.

While all these approaches might seem to purists as divergent from what theater is or should be, they seem to work very well to encourage proximity with an audience for whom proximity is most always mediated.

***

To sum it all up, Caridad Svich's Online Salon showcases a theater that is alive, healthy, and which, searching for ways to engage its audiences, had managed to do that in a seamless and natural way. The "secret" resides not in teaching people to like theater, but in letting theater evolve together with its audiences and the world, as it, as a matter of fact, always had.

The only drawback to the gallery of texts is its lack of organization, the lack of a guiding line to help the reader navigate this impassioned corpus of manifestos, experiences and scholarly approaches. It remains, nonetheless, in my opinion, a mandatory reading for anyone interested in theatre, in general, and especially for those decrying its demise. It contains both careful reflections and practical experiments and experiences, proving a true "survival handbook", a model of action for the ailing Romanian theatre system.

References

Applied Mechanics. "Activating Audience: Theater of Radical Inclusion". *Audience (R)Evolution Online Salon.* www.tcgcircle.org, n.d. Web. 10 September 2015.

CHRISTOPHERSON, Jody. "Stages of the Lower East Side and Our Audience". *Audience (R)Evolution Online Salon.* www.tcgcircle.org, n.d. Web. 10 September 2015.

D'AMOUR, Lisa, Katie Perl, Ashley Sparks. "MILTON: A performance and community engagement experiment". *Audience (R)Evolution Online Salon.* www.tcgcircle.org, n.d. Web. 10 September 2015.

DEMERS, Anna Sycamore. "Engaging students in immersive theatre". *Audience (R)Evolution Online Salon.* www.tcgcircle.org, n.d. Web. 10 September 2015.

GOLDFINGER, Jacqueline. "Stop writing for zombies: Teaching students to create for contemporary audiences". *Audience (R)Evolution Online Salon.* www.tcgcircle.org, n.d. Web. 10 September 2015.

HILLMAN, Melissa. "The Lies We Tell About Audience Engagement". *Audience (R)Evolution Online Salon.* www.tcgcircle.org, n.d. Web. 10 September 2015.

MAXWELL, Justin. "Making Eye-Contact with Millennials: the ephemeral and the visceral". *Audience (R)Evolution Online Salon.* www.tcgcircle.org, n.d. Web. 10 September 2015.

MEE, Erin B. "Diverse Audiences for Smartphone Plays". *Audience (R)Evolution Online Salon*, www.tcgcircle.org, n.d. Web. 10 September 2015.

MOORE, Steve. "New Opportunities for Surprise". *Audience (R)Evolution Online Salon.* www.tcgcircle.org, n.d. Web. 10 September 2015.

RUBY, Jay. "The Volt of Resistance". *Audience (R)Evolution Online Salon.* www.tcgcircle.org, n.d. Web. 10 September 2015.

SVICH, Caridad. "Please Please Please Let me Get What I Want (even if) You Can't Always Get What You Want (or how the Smiths and the Rolling Stones can teach us a thing or two about theatre)". *Audience (R)Evolution Online Salon.* www.tcgcircle.org, n.d. Web. 10 September 2015.

VEGA, Tiffany. "Hi-ARTS and audience sustainability". *Audience (R)Evolution Online Salon.* www.tcgcircle.org, n.d. Web. 10 September 2015.

MIHAI PEDESTRU *is a Teaching Fellow at the Babeş-Bolyai University's Faculty of Theatre and Television. Holding a PHD in theatre studies, his main research interests focus on the way the digitalization process has influenced theatrical spectatorship.*