Memos from a Theatre Lab

Spaces, Relationships, and Immersive Theatre

Nandita Dinesh,
UWC-USA

Cover design by Vernon Press, using elements selected by GarryKillian / Freepik.

For Lata Dinesh and Dinesh V. Nair
Without whom this journey would never have begun.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 1

Introduction

The audience members walk into a theatrical space. They have been invited to a performance – maybe they have been told that there is going to be interaction/ participation in the performance; maybe they haven't. In either case, when they arrive, they find that they are not ushered to a seat in a darkened auditorium, as they possibly anticipated. Instead, each audience member is asked to step into the shoes of a character. The audience member is told that they have to pretend to be someone else -- an Other -- for the duration of the theatrical experience. Maybe they are given a costume piece to step into this character. Maybe they are given a profile that tells them who they must embody.

And then, once these audience members have had the chance to understand the rules – or maybe they are explicitly <u>not</u> given the chance to understand the rules – they experience someone else's world; a small aspect of an Other's life. A scenario that has been carefully designed to allow these audience members an insight, albeit brief and vicarious, into someone else's experience.

Maybe the audience members are asked to step into the shoes of a refugee and undergo an asylum seeking process in an unnamed country. Maybe female spectators are given men's clothes and are asked to experience male privilege in a specific context. Maybe these 'spectator-participants' are asked to embody Alice their own multi-sensorial wonderlands.

In any/ all of these cases, the spectator-participants vicariously, controversially, embody an Other for the duration of a theatrical experience and through that embodied participation in an immersive world, they become… well, we don't quite know what they 'become'.

More empathetic, perhaps?
More politically conscious?
More… something?
What does Immersive Theatre 'do'?

In *Memos from a Theatre Lab: Exploring What Immersive Theatre 'Does'* (*Memos #1*; 2016c), I conducted a qualitative research project in which two different adaptations of Kay Adshead's (2001) *The Bogus Woman* were performed for, and by, creators and spectators from a College community in New Mexico. One of these performances was framed as an Immersive Theatre experience, while the other adaptation was created to be more 'conventional' in its theatrical form: script-based, set in the proscenium, asking audience members to engage with the play visually and aurally. The term Immersive Theatre has been used to define diverse aesthetic manifestations, and while my particular approach to this form (both in *Memos #1* and in this book) will be further defined in the following chapter, sufficed to say for now that in my approach to this aesthetic, audience members are invited to become spectator-participants who step into the shoes of an Other and navigate the experience *as* that Other. With this approach to immersion in mind, each of the two performances in *Memos #1* was followed by feedback mechanisms for both actors and spectators, and through an analysis of the data that emerged through these processes, *Memos #1* generated theoretical propositions about what Immersive Theatre might 'do' differently from its more 'conventional' counterparts. As a result of *Memos #1*, the following ideas emerged:

- that different shades of empathy might be catalyzed in response to these two different aesthetic forms. The data suggested that the proscenium performance led to a distanced empathy that allowed more multi-dimensional interpretations; the immersive performance seemed to cause emotion-based empathy, evoking autobiographical memories for audience members
- that, in the immersive experience, audience members were likely to be drawn toward a sympathetic character in the performance i.e., one that referenced their experience in some way. This character embodied the same power/ status as that of the spectator and provided the audience member with insights into how they might navigate their own experience
- that different kinds of interest might be generated as a result of aesthetic form: situation-centered interest from the immersive experience; topic-centered interest from the more 'conventional' performance. Situational interest is said to be a state in which a participant responds to aspects that characterize the theatrical situation, like novelty/ intensity. Topic interest, on the other hand, is a state in which preference is exhibited toward the topic of the event in question
- that different kinds of cognitive processing might have occurred for actors and spectators: conceptual processing as a result of the immersive experience; associative processing as manifesting from the 'conventional' performance. Conceptual organization occurs when items are grouped according to a larger idea; associative processing transpires when there is no (apparent) systematic modus operandi of categorization
- that a more systematic actor training framework might be necessary for immersive aesthetics

- that there was a far greater variety of responses to the immersive piece -- to a question that sought to ascertain real-world 'solutions' to the problems being addressed in the performances. In this question, actor and spectator groups were asked to rank four concepts in terms of which one they saw as being most/ least important in the 'real world', to address the global refugee crisis: Empathy, Information, Activism, or Policy Reform
- that there seemed to be increased investment toward the immersive piece, from its performers; compared to the interest demonstrated by the actors in the proscenium show. This was evidenced by the ways in the which the performances were spoken about, in the interest expressed by the actors toward performing again, and the larger number of performers in the immersive piece who came to the follow up sessions and made journal entries
- that there surfaced a potentially problematic judgment in how audience members' participation in the immersive piece was perceived as being 'good' or 'better' by actors. Audience members seemed to be judged based on how much they spoke/ interacted with the performers, without a critical awareness of the cultural/ personal codes that shaped each individual's participation
- that there were implications from pre-existing personal relationships between actors/ spectators/ spaces in an immersive event

While each of these ideas warrants further exploration, it is the final observation – about spaces and relationships -- that serves as the springboard for the project that is described in this book (*Memos #2*).

The reader might want to ask at this point: why these experiments with Immersive Theatre? While one part of the answer to this question lies in my affinity for the form as a theatre practitioner/ researcher – again, my particular approach to Immersive Theatre will be clarified in Chapter One – the other part to the answer lies in my repertoire of making theatre in times/ places of war (Dinesh, 2016a). And in order for the reader to better understand this positioning, I need to take a small detour.

While my theatrical forays have taken me to multiple contexts of conflict, since 2012, I have been particularly involved in creating theatre about/ in Kashmir: the still volatile conflict zone between India and Pakistan. Although this work in Kashmir began as a doctoral project with small-scale performances that invoked narratives of civil society, militants/ ex-militants, and the Indian armed forces in the region (Dinesh, 2015a), over the last few years, a longer-term, Immersive Theatre-inspired, project has evolved in collaboration with a theatre company in the region.

In this project, my colleagues and I began with the idea of creating a Kashmiri adaptation of Griselda Gambaro's (1992) *Information for Foreigners* (more on this in Dinesh, 2016b) – a piece that uses promenade and site-specific theatre techniques to showcase events from the Dirty War in Argentina. Set in a two-storied house with scenes occurring in multiple rooms, audi-

ence members in Gambaro's play are taken around a 'horror house' by guides. These guides place spectators in the shoes of questionable bystanders; bystanders who are asked to question their vicarious consumption of the images and vagaries of violence in Argentina. Using this powerful script as our point of departure, in 2015, my colleagues and I created an initial adaptation of *Information for Foreigners: Chronicles from Kashmir (IFF Kashmir)* in which existing scenes from Gambaro's play were adapted to the Kashmiri context and then translated into Hindi/ Urdu so as to be shared with Kashmiri spectators. From very early in its inception, *IFF Kashmir* was envisioned as being performed in different parts of the Indian subcontinent. This 'tour', it was thought, would occur after a few years of workshopping the piece with Kashmiri audiences who would give us feedback so as to make the piece better informed. Additionally, given that the politics and ethics of what I represent in Kashmir – as a female theatre maker from 'mainland'[1] India – are extremely contentious, this process of feedback and development is/ was seen as being integral to *IFF Kashmir* not only to aid the dramatic development of the piece. Rather the years of workshopping the play for Kashmiri spectators has also been about legitimizing my own standing as an Indian 'collaborator' in Kashmir; it has been about addressing the (understandable) local concerns that a Kashmiri theatre group was/ is in some way being manipulated by an outsider.

The first version of *IFF Kashmir* was shared in Srinagar in June 2015, and based on discussions with my co-creators, it was decided that high school/ university-aged students from mainland India would eventually be the best target audience for such a performance (more on this in Dinesh, 2016b). As a result, the June 2015 performance had two different audience groups: the first group included colleagues' of the theatre company's director, who are part of the theatre fraternity in Kashmir and whom the director thought important to invite. The second group of spectators included students from a school in Srinagar; a school that is comprised of both Kashmiri and mainland Indian students. The feedback from each of these groups was radically different and while I will get into the particularities of these differences later in this book, both groups of spectators' feedback was analyzed in relation to the actors' input. Ultimately, as a result of comparing and analyzing the various layers of feedback, *IFF Kashmir* evolved from being a fairly direct adaptation of Gambaro's work, to a Kashmir-specific piece that now simply borrows from the original: in being structured as a promenade performance, in using site-sensitive/ site-adaptive techniques, and in creating characters of Guides to take audience members to different spaces. Because of this evolution in the

---

[1] I use the term 'mainland' to refer to Indians who come from parts of the country that do not question their affiliation to the Indian nation-state.

content of the work, and because of the discomfort that emerged during the 2015 feedback sessions vis-à-vis the use of the word 'foreigner' in a performance that was ultimately targeting mainland Indians, we began to refer to the work as *Information for/ from Outsiders: Chronicles from Kashmir (IffO)*. The perspectives showcased in *IffO* are intentionally from the three primarily identified groupings vis-à-vis the conflict: civilians, those who are categorized as militants/ former militants, and members of the Indian Armed Forces. And while I can in no way claim that every single Kashmiri opinion/ voice is expressed in the piece, I can say that *IffO* not only seeks to provide a more holistic understanding of what is happening in the region but that it also seeks to invoke narratives that are less known; narratives that, in a variety of ways, inhabit the grey zones (Dinesh, 2015a).

As an Applied Theatre venture that purposefully seeks to apply itself to nontraditional theatrical contexts, *IffO* has become a twenty-four-hour long immersive experience in which spectators eat, breathe, and sleep Kashmir for an entire day. Although we began the piece with an hour or two's worth of material in 2015 – from shorter works in 2013 and 2014 --2016's objective of building a three/ four hour-long performance was thwarted by a sudden surge in violence/ protests while I was in Kashmir on my annual visit. As a result, a handful of colleagues and I – while stuck indoors under curfew – had to adopt a mode of workshopping the piece that resulted in more writing that any of us anticipated. As a result of 2016's 'housebound work', therefore, we developed the framework to 'test' a twenty-four hour version of *IffO* in July 2017, and although *IffO* continues to evolve, I have had to constantly revisit these questions: who might the 'right' audience for *IffO* be; what might the right space for *IffO* be? Is a mainland Indian university student audience indeed the 'right' target group, especially given the recent upsurge of (sometimes, violent) controversy about Kashmir's issues on Indian university campuses (TOI, 2017; The Hindu, 2017)? Or do my colleagues and I need to give more thought to the demographic for which *IffO* might be better suited, not only in terms of achieving the performance's pedagogical intentions, but also in terms of assuring the safety of all of us who are involved in the project? Given *IffO's* pedagogical underpinnings – of wanting to expose its spectators to different narratives and voices from Kashmir– would it be a more effective/ affective strategy to perform the piece in a location that has not witnessed a recent protest about Kashmir? Essentially, what are the implications of audience-actor relationships and spaces on the future of *IffO*?

IffO has the potential to become a provocative/ controversial/ inflammatory piece of theater. Indeed, in the 2015 showcase of the earlier version of *IFF Kashmir*, the responses we received from the two spectator groups were completely diverse. The first audience, Kashmiri adult-theatre aficionados, did not think that the piece did justice to their lived experience and were

harsh in their critique. I was told later that the harshness of their critiques was underpinned by existing rivalries between individual members of this spectator group, rather than being based on the content of *IFF Kashmir* itself. Responses from the second audience, Kashmiri high school students, were more considered and brought up questions about the temporal bias of *IFF Kashmir*. These spectators asked us to consider integrating perspectives about Kashmir's future in the performance, rather than hinging *IFF Kashmir* solely on the past/ present narratives of violence in the region. Audience demography was seminal to the reactions that we received in 2015; seminal in a different way, perhaps, than in a more conventional theatrical setting where spectators are neither expected to move around the performance space, nor engage in participatory/ interactive/ immersive ways with content about war. And here, this contextual detour takes me back to the question that began it: why these experiments with Immersive Theatre?

Each phase of *IffO*'s development has revealed/ continues to reveal new dimensions to the work and while these insights are always enriching, there remains a very real challenge in experimenting with the bounds of these new observations on the ground. Ethically, the stakes are high when I enter Kashmir as a mainland Indian theatre practitioner; politically, given the volatility of the context, my desire to try new dimensions of immersion often does not pan out due to curfews/ strikes thwarting some of my best-laid plans. Therefore, since the stakes of exploring particular dimensions to *IffO* and experimenting with them on the ground are really high, I have come to see laboratory-esque experiments as in *Memos #*1 and *Memos #2* as a useful testing ground. In these experiments, I work with my students in a less volatile College setting in New Mexico (the United World College at which I work, henceforth referred to as UWC) to test particular elements to Immersive Theatre on a smaller scale and in a more controlled environment, all the while considering how the findings might apply to *IffO's* evolution.

Therefore, when *Memos #1* highlighted a problematic judgment that pervaded actors' responses about particular audience members, and put forth the potential impact of pre-existing relationships between performers and spectator-participants on the affect created through an immersive experience, it was natural to ask: are performers more judgmental, in an immersive form, toward spectator-participants that they do/ do not have pre-existing relationships with? And, as an extension, are spectators' experiences impacted by their familiarity/ lack thereof with the actors and spaces in which the performance occurs? I began to see many ways in which exploring these questions might impact my future choices for who/ where *IffO* is staged – hence *Memos #2;* hence this project.

> Each of us changes himself, modifies himself to the extent that he changes and modifies the complex relations of which he is the heart.
>
> (Antonio Gramsci in Hogg& Abrams, 1998:2)

Social identity theory and intergroup theory share the hypothesis that "individuals define themselves in terms of their social group memberships and that group-defined self-perception produces psychologically distinctive effects in social behaviour" (Hogg & Abrams, 1998:vii). As per this idea, and given the questions that started *Memos #2*, I began to ask how an Immersive Theatre experience performed by UWC actors – my students in New Mexico – might be differently experienced by spectators from the UWC community (the ingroup) and from outside the UWC body i.e. from the community of Las Vegas, New Mexico (the outgroup). Since an individual's social/ group identity has often been cited as influencing one's behavior, I wanted to explore, through practice-based research, how UWC/ non-UWC based affiliations would impact both performers and spectators' experiences of an immersive piece. Furthermore, I hoped to use the findings from this New Mexican study to extend into audience/ spectator identity affiliations in *IffO*. I must clarify that the explorations in this book are not meant to be about individual spectator affiliations but rather, the notion of how <u>group</u> identities might affect the experience of immersive scenarios. I make this clarification about group identities being the focus since the larger group labels of 'Kashmiri' and 'Indian' have pervaded/ continue to pervade every stage of *IffO* and hold parallels with the UWC/ non-UWC affiliations in this project. Therefore, particularly in light of the potential volatility in bringing Kashmiris and mainland Indians together, I wanted to use practice-based research in *Memos #2* to help me more carefully think through the potential repercussions of group identity affiliations in *IffO*. In order to present the reader with a more consolidated understanding of the resonances between *Memos #2* and *IffO*, in terms of ingroup and outgroup participants, Table 1.1 presents the parallels between the contexts of the two projects:

PAGES MISSING

FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

BIBLIOGRAPHY

AACI. 2017. *What to do after you've been granted asylum.* Available: http://cst.aaci.org/files/2011/07/asylum.pdf [2017, April 16].

Adshead, Kay. 2001. *The Bogus Woman.* Oberon Books.

Alston, A. 2016. *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ascentria. 2017. *Client Stories.* Available: http://www.ascentria.org/our-services/services-new-americans/ilap/client-stories [2017, April 16].

Bitner, M.J. 1992. Servicescapes: The Impact of Physical Surroundings on Customers and Employees. *Journal of Marketing.* 56(2):57-71.

Blanck, P.D. 1993. *Interpersonal expectations: Theory, research, and applications.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Burgoon, J.K., Stern, L.A., & Dillman, L. 1995. *Interpersonal adaptation: Dyadic interaction patterns.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Chasteen, A.L. 2005. The Role of Age and Age-Related Attitudes in Perceptions of Elderly Individuals. *Basic And Applied Social Psychology.* 22(3):147–156.

Culture Plus, 2016. *Unconscious Bias Training.* Available: https://cultureplusconsulting.com/2015/11/03/unconscious-bias-training-that-works/ [2017, April 16].

Davidson, J., Bondi, L., Smith, M. 2007. *Emotional Geographies.* Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited.

Dinesh, N. 2015a. *Grey Zones: Performances, Perspectives, and Possibilities in Kashmir.* PhD Dissertation: University of Cape Town, South Africa.

Dinesh, N. 2015b. Delusions of singularity: aesthetics, discomfort and bewilderment in Kashmir. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance.* 20(1):62-73.

Dinesh, N. 2016a. *Theatre & War: Notes from the Field.* Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

Dinesh, N. 2016b. Information for Foreigners: Chronicles from Kashmir. *Journal for Artistic Research.* 11.

Dinesh, N. 2016c. *Memos from a Theatre Lab: Exploring What Immersive Theatre 'Does'.* London: Routledge.

Dinesh, N. Forthcoming. *Social Activism and Immersive Theater: Scripts and Strategies.* North Carolina: McFarland Books.

Free Images. 2017. *Silhouettes.* Available: http://all-free-download.com/freevector/download/creative_man_ and_woman_silhouettes_vector_set_542443_download.html [2017, April 16].

Frieze, J. 2016. *Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance. L*ondon: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gambaro, G. 1992. *Information for Foreigners: Three Plays.* Northwestern University Press.

Given, L.M. (Ed.) 2008. *The Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods.* Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Gomme, R. 2015. Not-so-close encounters: Searching for intimacy in one-to-one performance. *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies.* 12(1):281-300.

Hill, L & Paris, H. 2014. *Performing Proximity: Curious Intimacies.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Hogg, M.A., Abrams, D. 1998. Social Identifications: A social psychology of intergroup relations and group processes. London: Routledge.

Horhota, M. 2008. *The Role Of Stereotype Activation And Age On Communication Patterns And Impression Judgments In The Context Of Interpersonal Interactions.* PhD Dissertation: Georgia Institute of Technology.

Hubbard, P., Kitchin, R., Bartley, B., & Fuller, D. 2002. *Thinking Geographically Space, Theory and Contemporary Human Geography.* London & New York: Continuum.

Kenny, D.A. 1994. *Interpersonal Perception: A Social Relations Analysis.* New York & London: The Guilford Press.

Kite, M.E., Gabourel, S.A., Ballas, H.E., Chance, K.L., Ellison, S.M., Johnson, S.B., Meredith, K.L., Na, D., Robinson, L., Russell, A.B., Ryan, B., Simpson, M.D., Stuller, W.T., Szoko, N., & Turk, H.M. 2013. *Activities for Teaching about Prejudice and Discrimination.* Course Curricula: Ball State University.

Levine , J.M., Hogg, M.A. 2010. *Encyclopedia of Group Processes & Intergroup Relations.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Liviatan, I., Trope, Y., Liberman, N. 2008. Interpersonal similarity as a social distance dimension: Implications for perception of others' actions. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology.* 44:1256–1269.

Machon, J. 2013. *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Mencarelli, R. 2008. Conceptualizing and Measuring the Perceived Value of an Arts Venue as *International Journal of Arts Management.* 11(1):42-59.

Mirror. 2016. Available: http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/real-life-stories/asylum-seeker-was-asked-provide-7614388 [2017, April 16].

National Post. 2014. Available: http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/white-south-african-family-seeking-asylum-in-canada-granted-new-refugee-hearing [2017, April 16].

Nelson, T. 2016. *Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination [Second Edition].* New York: Psychology Press.

Open Jurist. n.d. *Immigration and Naturalization Service.* Available: http://openjurist.org/21/f3d/1113/kamaleddin-v-immigration-and-naturalization-service [2017, April 16].

Project Implicit. 2011. Available: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html [2017, December 3].

Refugee Council of Australia. 2016. *Stories.* Available: http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/getfacts/international/journeys/stories/zimnakos-story/ [2017, April 16].

Shaughnessy, N. 2012. *Applying Performance: Live Art, Socially Engaged Theatre and Affective Practice.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

TOI. 2017. *Azadi for Kashmir Poster.* Available: http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/azadi-for-kashmir-poster-surfaces-in-jnu-removed/articleshow/57440431.cms [2017, April 16].

The Hindu. 2017. *Protests in JNU over ABVP.* Available: http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/Protest-in-JNU-over-ABVP%E2%80%99s-Kashmir-event/article17047340.ece [2017, April 16].

Unsplash, 2017. *Facial Recognition.* Available: https://unsplash.com/collections/1236/facial-recognition [2017, April 16].

White, G. 2013. *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Zimbardo, P. 2007. *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil.* New York: Random House.

PAGES MISSING

FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

INDEX