Memos from a Theatre Lab

Immersive Theatre & Time

Nandita Dinesh,
United World College, Montezuma, New Mexico, USA

Series in Perfoming Arts

VERNON PRESS

www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street,
Suite 1200, Wilmington,
Delaware 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Perfoming Arts

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018948067

ISBN: 978-1-62273-435-1

Cover design by Vernon Press, using elements selected by visnezh / Freepik

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF IMAGES

Chapter 1

Setting the Stage

In July 2017, *Information for/from Outsiders: Chronicles from Kashmir (IFF Kashmir)* had its premiere as a twenty-four hour long immersive, theatrical experience. A piece that has been in development since 2013, as a collaboration between myself and a Kashmiri theatre company, *IFF Kashmir* invited its audiences to 'live' in our theatrical Kashmir for a day. In so doing, spectators walked between different spaces across a sprawling campus and encountered diverse narratives: narratives from less-mainstream voices; narratives that were embodied using different aesthetic forms; narratives that invited distinctive degrees of engagement from the spectators. While I have written about this work and its development in multiple other forums (Dinesh, 2015a; Dinesh, 2015b; Dinesh, 2016a; Dinesh, 2016b; Dinesh, 2018a), there was one question that all of us – creators and spectators alike – were left with when *IFF Kashmir's* twenty-four hour manifestation came to a close: why twenty-four hours? What does duration 'do'? What would the differences have been if the piece – with similar content and aesthetics – had been staged as a more 'conventional', two-hour, production? What difference does time make, in Immersive Theatre?

The *Memos* Series

In 2016, *Memos from a Theatre Lab* was conceptualized as a series of publications in which I would conduct/ write about Immersive Theatre 'experiments' from the relatively safer context of New Mexico, where I am based for ten months of the year. The findings from these experiments, I have stated from the outset, are aimed at informing my work in Kashmir – understanding that such exploratory work is much more difficult to implement in a context that is in the throes of conflict.

The first work in this series, *Memos from a Theatre Lab: Exploring What Immersive Theatre "Does" (Memos #1;* Dinesh, 2016c*)* sought to understand what Immersive Theatre 'does' differently than its more 'conventional' proscenium counterpart, by analyzing responses from spectators and actors who experienced the same content, in two different forms. As a result of *Memos #1*, the following ideas emerged:

- that different kinds of empathy might be catalyzed in response to these two different aesthetic forms (immersive and proscenium): a more distanced empathy for spectators to the proscenium performance; emotion-based empathy, which evoked autobiographical memories, for spectators to the immersive performance
- that, in an immersive experience, audience members are likely to be drawn toward a sympathetic character in the performance, i.e. one that references their experience in some way. This character would embody the same power/ status as that of the spectator and provide 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 each aesthetic form: situation-centered interest from the immersive experience; topic-centered interest from the more 'conventional' performance. Situational interest is considered as being a state in which participants respond to aspects that characterize a 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 occur 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 is one in which there is no (apparent) systematic modus operandi of categorization
- that a more systematic actor training methodology might be necessary for immersive aesthetics
- that there were a far greater variety of responses to the immersive piece than its proscenium counterpart. This was observed in actors and spectators' responses to a question that sought to ascertain 'real-world' solutions to the problems being addressed in the performances. In this question, respondents 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 a general sense of increased investment in 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 which the performances were spoken about, in the interest expressed toward performing again, and a larger

number of actors 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 (from the performers) of the cultural/ personal codes that might have shaped that individual's participation
- that there might be implications from there being personal relationships between actors/ spectators/ spaces in an immersive event

The last finding formed the basis for *Memos from a Theatre Lab: Spaces, Relationships, and Immersive Theatre (Memos #2*; Dinesh, 2018b*),* which explored the impact of pre-existing relationships between spaces and actors/ spectators in a form like Immersive Theatre. In this experiment, the same immersive piece was staged in three different locations, with actors from the College at which I teach (UWC). Each performance's audience group was composed of twelve spectators: six individuals from the UWC setting, and six participants from outside the campus community. Furthermore, the performance spaces were chosen such that one location was familiar to UWC spectators but unfamiliar to non-UWC spectators; a second performance was at a space unfamiliar to UWC spectators but familiar to non-UWC spectators; a third performance took place at a location that was unfamiliar to both groups. By collating post-performance data from actors and spectators, *Memos #2* led to the following observations*:*

- that, among actors, spectators belonging to double outgroups vis-à-vis institutional affiliation and age (non-UWC adults) were just as likely (if not, occasionally, more likely) to be as well evaluated as audience members who embodied double ingroup identities (UWC students)
- that, amongst spectators,
    - more members from the double outgroup (non-UWC adults) thought the actors were really engaging with their responses
    - double outgroup members were least likely to state that actors made them nervous
    - double outgroup members were also most likely to say that they felt complete freedom in the piece (compared to some freedom)

- that Immersive Theatre, as I use it, because of the intimacy it utilizes between actors and spectators – heightens the possibilities for individuals' implicit biases to shine through. Thus, necessitating performer training that explicitly leads to an uncovering of actors' biases
- that actors' social distance from their spectators – as strangers, acquaintances, friends, very good friends – seemed to impact the extent of expected/ unexpected responses/ actions that were viewed as being favorable. 'Good' participation seemed to be framed by the performers in very particular ways; based on who the spectator-participants were. This is to say that for UWC spectators who were better known to the actors, the standards for participation were different: influenced by prior knowledge that actors had about those individuals' personalities/ abilities. This might also be a potential explanation for why UWC adults seemed to be less favorably evaluated than non-UWC adults, since knowing the UWC adult spectators' personalities potentially overshadowed the performers' age bias. In *Memos #2,* as social distance increased, the desire for completely unexpected responses decreased. When completely unexpected responses did occur, the age of the spectator-participant became the next mitigating factor that influenced the positive/ negative valence with which that response was evaluated. And, ultimately, because of the way in which *Asylum* was scripted, the intersections between social distance, the (un)expectedness of the action, and the age of the spectator-participant determined the acceptance/ denial of the spectators' asylum application within the frame of the performance
- that actors' responses to the space impacted their moods and subsequent performance quality, as a result, negatively impacting their evaluations of spectators' engagement. However, spectators were likely to experience more comfort in the spaces that they knew and there were more instances of complete freedom that were articulated in these locations

In light of the above-mentioned observations from *Memos #1* and *Memos #2,* there were a number of avenues that I could have chosen for *Memos #3.* Any and all of those choices, I daresay, would have resulted in considerations beneficial to *IFF Kashmir,* to the *Memos* series, and in contributing toward wider Immersive Theatre scholarship. However, ever since the initial decision was made to craft *IFF Kashmir* as a twenty-four experience in 2016 – and more so since the work's execution in 2017 -- I knew what I wanted my next Immersive Theatre experiment to be about. Time.

The Framing

At the outset, it is important that I put forward a few framing ideas for *Memos #3;* framing ideas that have also been seminal to *Memos #1* and *#2*.

The first clarification I would like to make is that 'Immersive Theatre', as a term, is one that is widely (and rightly) contested. However, while many of these existing discussions are fascinating in their own right, they also lie outside the scope of this book. Therefore, when I use the term 'Immersive Theatre', I refer to nothing more or less than my particular use of the form. That said, despite this study being centered on one researcher-practitioner's approach to immersive aesthetics, the ideas that are discussed and proposed in these pages have much wider applications. Readers of this book are invited, and encouraged, to draw parallels between the various considerations that are presented in this book, and their own approach to/ understanding of, Immersive Theatre.

My approach to Immersive Theatre lies in inviting spectators to 'become' someone else for the duration of their time in the theatrical experience. In *IFF Kashmir*, for example, spectators are asked to develop 'Outsider' characters for themselves: they are asked to create a real/ fictional profile of an outsider to Kashmir and are asked to remain in that character for the twenty-four hours that they spend with us. In a similar vein, *Asylum* – the work that has formed the basis of the *Memos* series thus far – asks its spectators to become asylum-seekers for the duration of their experience. This requirement of stepping into the shoes of an Other lies at the heart of my approach to Immersive Theatre; an approach that is also hinged on drawing in narratives related to current, global socio-political events; an approach that, in addition, seeks to foster pedagogical outcomes for myself, my co-creators, and our spectators.

The second clarification that I need to make is that *Memos #3,* like its preceding counterparts, does not pretend to offer formulaic answers for questions surrounding Immersive Theatre. The experiments that I conduct -- as a function of the resources that I have, both financially and in terms of time -- engage a small group of participants. As such, it would be disingenuous of me to claim that considerations that emerge from my work with a small group of people in northern New Mexico can be directly applied to my own work in *IFF Kashmir,* let alone the projects of other practitioners and researchers. What I do aim for these experiments to provide, however, is a 'conceptual bridge': a bridge between my experiments in New Mexico and the work that I do in Kashmir; a bridge between my musings, and the work that the readers of this book might be engaged with. I make this clarification since, at some points in this book, I do turn to numerical information to consider emergent concepts from the data; I do use language that might belong in a more 'conventional'

PAGES MISSING

FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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

Abramović, M. 1975. *Art must be beautiful. Artist must be beautiful*. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kXnrVDxtyc [April 8, 2018].

Ariely, D & Loewenstein, G. 2000. When Does Duration Matter in Judgment and Decision Making? *Journal of Experimental Psychology*. 129(4): 508-523.

Beckett, S. 2009. *Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces*. Grove Press.

Belarus Free Theatre. 2013. *Trash Cuisine*. Available: https://moc.media/en/50 [April 8, 2018].

Bennett, M. J. 1993. Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. In *Education for the intercultural experience*. R. M. Paige (Ed.) Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press. 21–71.

Biggin, R. 2017. *Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience: Space, Game and Story in the Work of Punchdrunk*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Block, R.A. 1985. Contextual Coding in Memory: Studies of Remembered Duration. In *Time, Mind, and Behavior*. Michon, J.A. & Jackson, J.L (Eds). Berlin: Springer-Verlag. 169-178.

Campaign for Disability Employment. n.d. *Who I Am*. Available: https://www.whatcanyoudocampaign.org/psa-campaigns/who-i-am-psa/who-i-am-poster-series/ [April 10, 2018].

Charest. R. 1997. *Robert Lepage: Connecting Flights*. London: Methuen Drama.

Crimp, Martin, 2007. *Attempts on her life*. Faber Drama.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. 2008. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper Collins e-books.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. & Robinson, R.E. 1990. *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter*. California: J. Paul Getty Trust.

Deakin University. 2013. *Time management activity*. Available: https://www.deakin.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/72148/Year-11-Time-management-Activity.pdf [April 10, 2018].

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. Available: https://www.openbookpublishers.com/product.php/500/theatre-and-war--notes-from-the-field?500/theatre-and-war--notes-from-the-field [April 8, 2018].

Dinesh, N. 2016b. Information for Foreigners: Chronicles from Kashmir. *Journal for Artistic Research*. 11. Available: https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/233777/251932 [April 8, 2018].

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

Dinesh, N. 2018a. Information for/from Outsiders: Chronicles from Kashmir. *Textshop Experiments*. 4. Available: http://textshopexperiments.org/textshop04/information-for-from-outsiders [April 8, 2018].

Dinesh, N. 2018b. *Memos from a Theatre Lab: Spaces, Relationships, and Immersive Theatre*. Delaware & Malaga: Vernon Press.

Farbman, D.A. 2015. *The Case for Improving and Expanding Time in School: A Review of Key Research and Practice*. National Center on Time & Learning.

Gudykunst, W. 1979. Intercultural contact and attitude change: A view of literature and suggestions for future research. *International and Intercultural Communication Annual*. 4:1–16.

Hektner, J.M., Schmidt, J. A., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. 2007. *Experience Sampling Method: Measuring the Quality of Everyday Life*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Kahneman, D. 1999. Evaluation by Moments: Past and Future. In *Choices, Values and Frames*. D. Kahneman, D. and Tversky, A. (Eds.). New York: Cambridge University Press and the Russell Sage Foundation. Available: https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c708/aea54904d3bbef4d87c98c4d29cfa2f00908.pdf [April 8, 2018].

Kaufman, M. & the Tectonic Theater Project. 2001. *The Laramie Project*. Dramatists Play Service.

Knowles, J.G. & Cole, A. L. 2008. *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Leavy, P. 2017. Research Design: Quantitative, Qualitative, Mixed Methods, Arts-Based, and Community-Based Participatory Research Approaches. New York: The Guilford Press.

Leong, C. & Ward, C. 2000. Identity conflict in sojourners. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. 24:763–776.

Lewis, R. 2014. *How Different Cultures Understand Time*. Available: http://www.businessinsider.com/how-different-cultures-understand-time-2014-5 [April 8, 2018].

Live Better Media. 2017. *Best Elevator Music*. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A84-wCLLVjQ [April 8, 2018].

Magnet Theatre. 2008. *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking*. Available: https://magnettheatre.co.za/productions/every-year-every-day-i-am-walking/ [April 8, 2018].

MAI. 2017. *The In Residence Diary: The Exercises*. Available: https://mai.art/kaldorartistresidency/2015/7/17/the-in-residence-diary [April 12, 2018].

Morewedge, C.K., Kassam, K.S., Hsee, C.K., Caruso, E.M. 2009. Duration Sensitivity Depends on Stimulus Familiarity. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*. 138(2):177–186.

Medina-Lopez-Portillo, A. 2004. Intercultural Learning Assessment: The Link between Program Duration and the Development of Intercultural Sensitivity. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad.* 10:179-199.

Moneta, G.B. 2012. On the Measurement and Conceptualization of Flow. In *Advances in Flow Research.* Engeser, S. (Ed). New York: Springer. 23-50.

Myslinska, D.R. 2018. *Preparing Persuasive Documents for Your Asylum Application.* Available: https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/preparing-persuasive-documents-your-asylum-application.html [April 8, 2018].

Nakamura, J. & Csikszentmihalyi, M. 2009. The Concept of Flow. In *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology.* Snyder, C.R. & Lopez, S.J. (Eds). USA: Oxford University Press. 89-105.

Office Oxygen. 2018. *Time Management Activities.* Available: http://blog.trainerswarehouse.com/time-management-activities/ [April 10, 2018].

Project Implicit. 2011. *Implicit Association Tests.* Available: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html [April 10, 2018].

Refugee Council of Australia. 2014. *Bright Ideas: Refugee Art Project.* Available: https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/publications/bright-ideas-refugee-art-project/ [April 8, 2018].

Ronco. 2014. *Ronco Showtime Rotisserie & BBQ.* Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GG43jyZ65R8 [April 8, 2018].

Silva, E. 2007. On the Clock: Rethinking the Way Schools Use Time. Education Sector Reports. Washington, D.C.

Ullén, F; Manzano, Orjan de; Almeida, Magnusson, P.K.E.; Pedersen, N.L., Nakamura, J.; Csíkszentmihályi, M.; Madison, G. 2011. Proneness for psychological flow in everyday life: Associations with personality and intelligence. *Personality and Individual Differences.* 52:167-172

USCIS. 2018a. *Asylum.* Available: https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-asylum/asylum [April 8, 2018].

USCIS. 2018b. *I-589, Application for Asylum and for Withholding of Removal.* Available: https://www.uscis.gov/i-589 [April 8, 2018].

USCIS Asylum TV. 2000. *USCIS Asylum Interview.* Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DhlJIr8ISk8 [April 8, 2018].

Zakay, D. & Block, R.A. 1997. Temporal Cognition. *Current Directions in Psychological Science.* 6(1):12-16.

Ziadah, R. 2011. *We teach life, sir.* Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKucPh9xHtM [April 8, 2018].

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

INDEX