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THE PROBLEM OF SPACE IN SILVIU PURCĂRETE'S RECENT SHOWS: *DEATH AND THE PLOUGHMAN* AND *GERTRUDE*

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BIO

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews two of the most important recent productions directed by Silviu Purcărete (*Death and the Ploughman*, staged in Iași in 2021, and *Gertrude*, staged in Bucharest in 2023), focusing on how the components of these two productions influence the audience's perception of the spaces in which they take place. The author will prove that the main objective of a theatre performance is to occupy this space through various means (scenographic and interpretative). Thus, through the presence of these elements, a theatre performance offers the audience a new understanding of the significance of space.

KEYWORDS

theatre space, presence, atmospheres, postdramatic theatre, multimedia theatre

Nowadays, theatre is no longer perceived as a physical performance of a written text; according to Marvin Carlson, theatre today is seen as a socio-cultural event, whose meanings and interpretations are not to be sought exclusively in the source text or in the events on stage, but in the experience of the audience that takes part in the creation of the event in its totality¹. The position is quite appropriate, given that this new way of looking at the theatrical performance automatically leads to a change regarding in how the space in which the latter takes place can be viewed. Some notable examples for what we intend to investigate in this article can be found in two academic works by Gay McAuley and Marvin Carlson. As for the work of the latter, *Places of Performance. The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*, we have chosen to discuss it in this introduction since it opened the field of spatial analysis by theorising performance spaces not as fixed places or given realities, but as spaces produced by society and therefore *transformable*. This premise is an inviting starting point if we relate it to the other work, *Space in Performance: making meaning in the theatre*, where Gay McAuley argues that

a theatrical performance is an event that fills a certain space and a certain duration². In other words, a theatrical performance creates and presents a fictional world, implicitly a series of events that form this universe, through two very important elements: the scenography and the actors' performance. This naturally leads us to the next question that needs to be answered: How, exactly, do these elements come to shape the audience's perception of the entire space in which the performance takes place? Starting from these examples, with the performances *Death and The Ploughman* (staged in 2021 at the Vasile Alecsandri National Theatre in Iași) and *Gertrude* (staged in 2023 at the I. L. Caragiale National Theatre in Bucharest) as analysis materials, we will test the applicability of these assumptions. In other words, we will analyse the way in which the component parts of Silviu Purcărete's two performances influence the audience's perception of the spaces in which they take place. A first step is to try to set a theoretical framework. This leads to the following question: What exactly do we mean when we talk about theatrical space? According to Paul

1 See Marvin A. Carlson, *Places of Performance. The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*, Cornell University Press, 1989, p. 2.

2 See Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance, making meaning in the theatre*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999, p. 126, apud. Alison Oddey and Christine White, "Introduction. The potential of spaces", in Alison Oddey and Christine White (eds.), *The Potentials of Spaces. The Theory and Practice of Scenography and Performance*, Intellect Ltd, Bristol, 2006, pp. 14-15.

Allain and Jen Harvie³, the theorists who have discussed the problem of space in theatrical environment have come to divide it into three distinct categories: *stage space*, *theatre space*, and *theatrical environment*. We call *the stage space* the area in which the actors perform (more specifically, the scenic space). By *theatrical space* we mean the architecture that includes the perimeter of the stage and the audience spaces. Considering this type of space will help us analyse the relationship between the actors on stage and the audience in the auditorium (or between stage and auditorium). As for *the theatre environment*, this refers to the place of the theatre in its wider geography. Put simply, where, exactly, it is geographically located and what meanings that location offers. The space that we will analyze in this paper is the theatrical space, the kind of space that can be understood as a common entity to the two worlds, that of the actors and that of the audience. This is because theatre is the meeting of human microcosms that are (for a moment) in the same space⁴. In the following, we need to sketch some general characteristics concerning the issue of space in

3 See Paul Allain, Jen Harvie, *Ghidul Routledge de teatru și performance [The Routledge Guide to Theatre and Performance]*, Translated by Cristina Modreanu and Ilinca Tamara Todoruț, Nemira Publishing House, 2012, p. 433.

4 See Octavian Saiu, *În căutarea spațiului pierdut [In Search of Lost Space]* Nemira Publishing House, 2008, p. 202.

5 Oltița Cîntec, Silviu Purcărete sau privirea care înfățișează [*Silviu Purcărete or the glance that depicts*], Camil Petrescu Cultural Foundation through Cheiron Publishing House, Bucharest, 2020, p. 62.

Silviu Purcărete's performances. His preoccupation with space is already well-known among exegetes. Besides, it is important to note that the director's perception of space is visual, plastic, and photographic. He likes "unorthodox spaces, dynamics, transformation"⁵. Throughout his directorial activity, in addition to the traditional performance hall, Purcărete has also staged in non-theatrical spaces, such as the Cultural Factory in Sibiu, a location where he has customized four spaces, namely: the *Lulu*, *Faust*, *Metamorphosis* halls, where the performances of the same name were played, to which we can add the *Eugenio Barba* hall, where the shows *Games*, *words*, *crickets...* and *The Scarlet Princess were performed* (for this performance the director formulated a space similar to the Japanese one, intended for kabuki theatre). As can be seen, Purcărete has created performances in spaces that have a close thematic relationship with the text he has chosen to stage. Each of these spaces came to determine the spectators' experience, given that they promised new possibilities for negotiating the relationships between actors and audience. In addition to these aspects, it

is important to note that in his performances, with small exceptions (*Decameron 645* and *Faust*), he keeps intact the equation of frontality in the theatrical communication between stage and auditorium, the performance space and the theatrical space being two distinct notions. We also believe that it is essential to emphasise the type of relationship that the performer establishes with the two types of spaces. Why exactly? We can look at the performer in Purcărete's performances as the element that connects the two spaces, given that he has to fill the whole stage space with a certain kind of energy that contaminates the spectator's space. In other words, Purcărete's construction of space is centered on this vocation of transmitting energy from the stage space to the auditorium⁶. We keep these aspects in mind, hence they are important for the discourse that we will develop from now on.

As I said in the beginning of this article, Gay McAuley, in *Space in Performance: making meaning in the theatre*, states that a theatrical performance, regardless of its genre, is an event that occupies a certain space and a certain duration. According to Alison Oddey⁷, from

a cultural point of view, we can read the messages of theatrical spaces, locations and sets as we do with any architectural and urban code, and through this reading we structure our entire environment. Starting from the idea that the way a theatrical performance functions in a space can influence the way spectators come to perceive it, we can come to see the place in which a theatrical performance takes place, as Nicholas Wood⁸ says, as a cube combining two spaces (the stage and the audience). But what exactly is the effect of a director's work on this cube waiting to be filled? As we shall see, the main objective of a theatrical performance is to occupy this space by various means (scenographic and interpretative). In this way, through the *presence* of these elements, a theatrical performance comes to give the audience a new understanding of the meaning of space.

Before moving on to our case studies, let's talk a bit about what presence means in theatre. Given its central place in the theatrical phenomenon, according to Phillip Zarrilli⁹, the concept of presence has come to be a debated and hotly contested term among a very wide range of scholars. To demonstrate

6 See Octavian Saiu, *op. cit.*, p.336-337.

7 See Alison Oddey and Christine White (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 17.

8 See Nicholas Wood, 'Flatness and Depth: Reflections', in Alison Oddey and Christine White (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 65.

9 See Phillip Zarrilli, "... presence ..." as a question and emergent possibility: a case study from the performer's perspective', in Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye and Michael Shanks (eds.), *Archaeologies of Presence*, Routledge.Taylor & Francis Group, New York, 2012, p. 121.

that presence in theatre is an extremely complex phenomenon, Cormac Power distinguishes three main types of presence: *the making-present* (theatre's ability to create presence, to make 'fictional entities' present on stage in front of an audience, creating the sense that the whole drama is unfolding as if it were taking place in that moment), *the having-present* (the ability of the theatre or actors to have presence, to convey a certain energy or *aura* to the audience) and *the being-present* (the ability of the spectator to be present, to be in the same place and time as the performance/performer)¹⁰. In her book *The Transformative Power of Performance: a new aesthetics*, Erika Fischer-Lichte emphasises that today's theatrical discourse sees presence as an aesthetic quality specific not only to the performer's body, but also to the objects and elements that are found and construct the stage space¹¹. Interestingly, she uses the term *presence* only when talking about the importance of performers' bodies in the economy of a performance. On the other hand, she prefers to use the concept of *atmosphere* in order to emphasise the major role played

by the stage space, and implicitly by the objects that make it up, on the audience's perception. This is because, according to her, through the atmosphere that these elements create, the spectator experiences the scenic space and the elements that make it up as being present. More specifically, the scenographic elements immerse the spectator in the general atmosphere of the performance¹².

A hybrid space.

Death and The Ploughman (2021)

Technology and art have become twin concepts that cannot be discussed separately. This is because the evolution of new technologies has had a major impact on the cultural-artistic field: firstly, technology has inspired artists to create completely new art forms, and secondly, it has also influenced the way traditional art forms (theatre, opera ballet, etc.) have adapted¹³. There are various examples of how modern technologies have influenced and inspired the arts, leading to the following questions: How can artists incorporate new technologies into their own artistic creations? How should we (as viewers) relate to

10 See Cormac Power, *Presence in Play. A Critique of Theories of Presence in the Theatre*, Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam - New York, NY 2008, p.11.

11 See Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: a new aesthetics*, Routledge. Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2008, p. 93.

12 *Ibidem*, p.116.

13 See Mária Tájtáková, *Theatre in the Digital Age: When Technology Meets the Arts*, available at URL: http://www.cutn.sk/Library/proceedings/km_2014/PDF%20FILES/Tajtakova.pdf, accessed on 07.02.2024., p.1.

technology-based artworks in the context of this century? The art world has gone through a variety of changes over the past decades, with the development of technology representing a major event in the way art has come to be thought about, made, and viewed. As we said, the intersection of contemporary art and technology can be found in different artistic fields, with technology transforming activities such as painting, sculpture, theatre or music¹⁴. Strictly speaking about theatre, digital technology has immensely influenced the staging elements of this art form, with new features ranging from simple video projections to sophisticated virtual reality theatre simulations, including interactive features¹⁵. According to the researchers¹⁶, the use of digital tools in contemporary theatre is a practice rooted in the particularities of this art form, as theatre artists use these tools because they allow directors to construct a new figurative and spatial vocabulary when working on a theatrical production. Thus, we see that it is impossible to talk about contemporary theatre without referring to it as a cultural phenomenon influenced by today's

digital world. The innovative technological solutions that are used in making the performance space not only provide the audience with spectacular images, but also contribute to the process of creating and maintaining a certain environment and atmospheres that support the whole performance¹⁷.

As we will see in the following, the use of digital tools in theatrical performances offers the possibility for artists to solve new scenic tasks and create a unique atmosphere, which is difficult to achieve through traditional scenography methods. Many academic studies discuss the importance of using digital tools in contemporary theatre practice¹⁸.

What is very clear is that these tools have greatly expanded the range of means to create theatre. In order to strengthen these claims, we will prove the validity of what has been said by drawing on different case studies.

First, however, let's take a look at the concept proposed by H.T.

Lehman of *postdramatic theatre*.

The term was used by Lehman in his book *Postdramatic Theatre* to describe the new theatre. According to Lehmann¹⁹, the adjective postdramatic defines a theatre that

operates beyond drama, in a time situated "after" the validity of the paradigm of drama in theatre has expired. More specifically, this type of theatre is one that abandons many conventions that have been valid up to this point. An essential feature of this type of theatre is that the directors of postdramatic theatre reject realistic (mimetic) settings and adopt a more abstract approach. Within this paradigm, the audio and lighting tools play a key role in creating and suggesting the atmosphere of the performance. In addition to all this, in his study H.T. Lehmann also talks about the importance of the use of multimedia technology in theatre art. He argues that the traditional theatre form is no longer in tune with our experience of being and living in the contemporary world. Therefore, the emergence of this new paradigm, postdramatic theatre is an organic response to the modern technologized world, the world in which both our relationship and our perception of it is changed. Given these changes, one might ask what are the implications of technology and how does the latter element affect the form of theatre as we know it today? We know from Lehmann that contemporary theatre adopts multimedia technologies to enhance the stage language²⁰,

to complement and transform the stage space in an innovative way. In order to support this hypothesis, we will try to analyse the main performances signed by the director Silviu Purcărete in which the technological component plays a key role in their materiality. We will start by emphasising that Purcărete's performances are no strangers to this concept. According to specialists²¹, Purcărete's 1990s show *Titus Andronicus* was the first to bring video projection to the Romanian theatre: at the beginning of the show, the image of Titus is projected onto the stage, and two televisions show the two sons of Caesar engaged in a public debate. However, we cannot say that technology played an important role in the economy of this performance, given that these projections did not help to create a certain scenic atmosphere that served the thematic of the performance. Instead, we can see this example as an early phase of this approach. In our opinion, the most important productions in which technology has played a key role are *Faust*, *Metamorphoses*, *Richard III*, and *Death and The Ploughman*. For now, we will briefly discuss the first three examples, given that in all these performances Purcărete uses technology to pursue the same

14 *Ibidem*, p. 2.

15 *Ibidem*, p. 3.

16 See Tetiana Boiko, Maryna Tatarenko, Kateryna Iudova-Romanova, Yuliya Tsyvata, and Yaroslav Lanchak, Yaroslav, "Digital Tools in Contemporary Theatre Practice", in Franco Niccolucci (ed.), *Journal on Computing and Cultural Heritage Vol. 16*, 2023, available at URL: <https://doi.org/10.1145/3582265>, accessed on 07.02.2024., p. 2.

17 *Ibidem*, p. 5.

18 *Ibidem*, p. 7.

19 See Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Teatrul postdramatic [Postdramatic Theatre]*, Translated

by Victor Scoradeţ, Editura UNITEXT, Bucharest, 2009, p. 21.

20 *Ibidem*, p. 265.

21 See Horaţiu Mihaiu, *Scenografi români contemporani [Contemporary Romanian Set Designers]*, Cheiron Publishing House, Bucharest, 2022, p. 139.

goal: in *Faust*, *Metamorphoses* and *Richard III*, the two components (the theatrical and the digital) were used to complement and illustrate each other, in these productions alternating video projections and events on stage. In *Faust* (2007), a performance based on Goethe's play, the space and everything that is brought on stage to transform it into the chamber of Goethe's famous hero, gives off a metaphysics of its own that serves the entire mise en scène. In this performance, video projections play two main roles in the economy of the stage action:

- They have a descriptive role (in the background of the scene, namely the window of Dr. Faustus' study room, the world outside is projected: in the first scene of the performance we have a full moon projected, and in the scene where the bells are ringing for the resurrection service, a church is projected in the distance);
- They suggest the subtextual atmosphere of certain scenes (the weather is constantly changing and the clouds are moving at a rapid pace in the sky when Mephisto first appears in the landscape; a fire suggesting the flames of hell burns in the background when Faust makes his pact with the devil).

In the case of *Metamorphoses*, in the background we have a big screen on which are played the actors'

passport images that are in a process of degradation, but also different video sequences filmed in different locations in Sibiu, which are meant to intensify, at a suggestive level, the episode of the plague presented in the stage space.

In *Richard III* (2017), staged at the Metropolitan Theatre in Tokyo, a key scene in which the video component played an important role in the economy of the performance takes place, chronologically speaking, after all the atrocities committed by Richard have happened: in an empty space, where the only set element is the throne on which Richard is sitting, he recites a monologue. This scene is important because in the background is a close-up video of Richard delivering this entire speech live. We note that, through its video component, this scene reveals Purcărete's use of set design to emphasise the cinematic nature of this sequence.

But perhaps the most telling example (and also the one that deserves a more detailed analysis) is provided by the performance staged by Purcărete in 2021, namely *Death and The Ploughman*, since in this show there are various interactions between the actors who play live on stage and the figures of those projected on the same stage. Written in the Middle Ages by Johannes von Tepl, *Death and The Ploughman*, is about life and death, as the whole piece is centred on the

philosophical dialogue between a ploughman (whose wife has died) and Death itself. As far as Purcărete's performance is concerned, what we are more interested in emphasising in this analysis is not the philosophical dimension of the fable, but the multimedia dimension of the whole performance (which we can regard as its central element).

We can say that the space of the performance gives the audience a feeling of hybridity, given the way in which it is used: the set designed by Dragoș Buhagiar creates an intimate space, where the few pieces of furniture delimit the rooms of the ploughman's house (the kitchen, the living room, and the bedroom). As for the walls that make up the space for acting on stage, they behave as a gateway to the other world, given that these walls are the screens on which the video projections will be shown throughout the performance, projections that are intended to bring Death into the landscape. Thus, the alternating planes between the real world and the world beyond are supported and materialised with the help of this digital component of the performance, the video-design conceived by Andrei Cozlac.

Another important element to bring up in this performance is the fact that the main actor appears both physically in space and projected on the screen: both the ploughman and Death are played by the same actor

(Călin Chirilă). Thus, we observe that this multimedia component of the performance offers the possibility of duplicating the presence of the protagonist, who embodies both the role of the live ploughman and that of Death in its filmed and projected version on stage.

***Gertrude* (2023).**

The aesthetics of fragmented space

Staged in 2023, *Gertrude* is based on the play of the same name written by Radu F. Alexandru.

Appreciated among critics and performing arts scholars as a theatre director attached to classical works, Purcărete surprises by his choice to stage this play, a creation that recontextualises the figure of Hamlet and manages to bring him into the present. This rewriting of the myth portrays Hamlet as the prince who refuses to follow the former king, his father, to the throne. The reason Hamlet gives for his decision not to take the crown and go back to Wittenberg is laid out at the very beginning: "None and never shall be like him". However, once the king has been buried, the throne will remain vacant if it is not taken by a rightful heir. Salvation seems to come in Hamlet's proposal: the only option left is for the country to be ruled by his uncle and mother. Initially, the two give us the impression that they are being forced to marry and take the throne. However, Hamlet realises

he's watching a poor comedy. He tries to explain it to his good friend Horatio, but Horatio does not believe him. The appearance of the former king's spirit further clouds the enigmatic answer to the central question that Hamlet has been trying to unravel since the beginning: How did his father die? The path to the answer raises several questions that need to be unraveled: Who killed the former king? Was it murder or suicide? As the plot of the play progresses we see how Hamlet's path to solving the case becomes labyrinthine. It is interesting how exactly this feeling of permanent mystery given off by the text is amplified in Purcărete's performance. He manages to do this through the scenography by Dragoș Buhagiar. In this stage production we find some of his main obsessions/recurring elements (we have scenic views that give the impression of a plastic painting, characters whose face or gender cannot be determined, but also scenes where a banquet takes place) that he mixes in a unique scenographic framework: with a few exceptions, the space in which the characters evolve is not fully presented to the audience, but is hidden by a screen that isolates the entire stage space. Along the way, this screen opens and closes different cutouts, creating a visual play of the frames. More precisely,

the story is presented to us in the form of a succession of frames that show us a fragment of the entire scenic device. By means of this artifice, the director manages to control and direct the audience's attention to certain moments and fragments of the scene, oscillating between the presence and absence of the characters evolving in the space: despite the fact that the characters in the performance wish to be seen (or not) by the others, in the next moment they are brought to the audience's attention in one way or another (whether their entire body is revealed to us or just a pair of legs orbiting in space). Once the screens are out of the way, the characters in the story are framed and presented to the audience at the moment they (seem to) least expect. This way of using screens in a theatrical performance is very similar to what Robert Wilson has proposed in various of his productions, using screens to structure the stage space, but also to control elements such as light or time and rhythm of the action²² (the best example of this is *Shakespeare's Sonnets*). Returning to Purcărete's performance, this show combines text, music, and visual effects (among the most important of such effects we find the use of screens, the latter having the role, as we have seen, of structuring the stage

22 See Erika Fischer-Lichte, *op.cit.*, pp. 134-135.

space by dividing it into frames and of amplifying, at a visual level, the enigmatic and dark atmosphere of the story). More precisely, these frames, through their movement, create a mysterious space that is in constant transformation. As I was saying, in this performance the screens are used to divide the stage space into frames, revealing the actors and different set elements, in order to highlight the atmosphere of the text. In addition to this, the screens also serve to mask the monumental structure of the set, as well as to control elements such as light and rhythm. In this space, the performance imposes a certain relationship between actors and spectators, opening up possibilities of perception and thus generating a type of space that Erika Fischer-Lichte defines as *atmospheric*²³. As Gernot Boehme says, the atmosphere is not tied to a place or architectural space, but rather belongs to the stage space. It does, however, end up spilling over and shaping it²⁴. Simply put, the atmosphere arises from the interaction between the specific elements of the stage space and the audience space. It homogenizes and transforms the theatrical space, immersing the spectators in the fictional universe. Since the 1960s, the theatre has revealed the

23 *Ibidem*, p. 114.

24 *Ibidem*, p. 115.

25 *Ibidem*, p. 118-119.

26 *Ibidem.*, p. 120.

atmospheric potential of the stage space and how the latter manages to influence the theatrical one. In terms of the main elements involved in creating this atmosphere, according to Erika Fischer-Lichte, body movements, lighting, rhythm, sound, and music play a key role²⁵. Through its presence or absence, lighting highlights or hides a visual picture. A very good example of this is the scene where Hamlet's father is exhumed on the orders of Claudius and autopsied, a scene which refers to Rembrandt's painting, *Anatomy Lesson*. Sounds and music surround and enmesh the perceiver, the spectator. It is through this auditory component that the atmosphere of the performance makes its presence felt. ("Emerging from the silence of the space, sound fills the space only to die and vanish in the next moment. Fleeting though it may be, sound still has immediate - and often lasting - effects on those who hear it. First of all, sounds impart a sense of space. [...] Theatre is constituted not just through sight «theatron» but always also through sound «auditorium»"²⁶). On top of that, this production has a rather slow pace (the movements of the actors unwind slowly, the changing/closing and opening of the screens also happens slowly). We can say

that the performance lures the spectator under its influence, given the atmosphere. According to Erika Fischer-Lichte, rhythm can be described as an organizing principle²⁷. When it becomes the primary organising principle of a theatrical performance (as is the case in this staging), it can establish either a connection or a disconnection between the theatrical elements (body movements, stagecraft, sound, and music). In Purcărete's performance, each system of theatrical elements follows a similar, slow rhythm. As we have already seen, the slow rhythm in which all the sequences of the performance follow one another is supported and emphasised by the sound universe of the performance (signed by Vasile Şirli), but also by the actors' body movements and the lighting. Thus, all these elements create a tension that, with the final scene, will flood the entire theatrical space.

Conclusions

As we have seen, Purcărete's creations are at the confluence of important theories of scenic and theatrical space. More precisely, this director's creations can be viewed and questioned through these theoretical lenses proposed by the scholars we have brought up here. After analyzing the performance of *Death and*

The Ploughman, we noticed that the innovative technological solutions that were used in the creation of the performance space did not only offer the audience spectacular and monumental images. Moreover, they contributed to the process of creating and maintaining a certain environment and atmospheres to support the whole performance. More specifically, in this performance, technology played an important role in the economy of this performance, as these projections helped to create a certain scenic atmosphere that served the theme of the performance: the mystical connection between the real world and the world beyond. With the help of this digital component of the performance, Silviu Purcărete conceives a space that is a hybrid. One in which the two worlds are presented to us in the same frame by means of technology that monopolizes the foreground and offers the possibility of duplicating the presence of the main protagonist. As for *Gertrude*, the space in which the characters evolve is not fully presented to the audience, but is hidden by a screen that isolates it entirely. Along the way, this screen opens and closes different cut-outs, thus creating a visual play of frames. As we have seen, this process has the function of structuring the

scenic space by dividing it into frames and visually amplifying the enigmatic atmosphere of the text. More precisely, in this space, the performance imposes a certain relationship between the actors and the spectators, opening up possibilities of perception and thus generating a type of *atmospheric* space. Here, the atmosphere arises from the interaction between the specific elements of the stage space (lighting, rhythm, sound, and music) and the audience space, thus immersing the spectators in the fictional universe.

In conclusion to all that I have said, in order to understand Purcărete's creations we must focus our attention both on the performance and on the container in which it is cast. Both the stage space and the theatrical space. The essence of theatre, after all, lies in the impression that all the elements that contribute to the creation of the final scenic product make on the audience. This is because theatre is essentially a reactive art.

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27 *Ibidem.*, pp. 134-135.