

Gareth White: Audience Participation in Theatre

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White, Gareth. *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, x + 224 pp., \$90.00 (hardback), \$29.00 (paperback).

Gareth White's analysis of audience participation is timely given the surge of interest in contemporary forms of interactive and immersive theatre over the past ten years. White's study is also a valuable and distinct addition to the growing literature on such forms in two important ways. Firstly, his focus is not restricted to a particular aesthetic or recent trend of audience participation but seeks to pin down the essentials of audience participation across a wide number of forms, including Theatre in Education (T.I.E.), pantomime, stand-up comedy and festival performance, alongside the immersive performances of Las Furas del Baus and Punchdrunk, and the particular modes of spectatorial engagement in the work of Tim Crouch.

Consequently, White is able to dig much deeper through the various manifestations and diverse objectives of audience participation through to the one strategy held in common, and offer a detailed analytical breakdown of what he terms 'the aesthetic of the Invitation'. White's project, then, is to understand the processes of audience participation as an aesthetic act in its own right that can be identified, analysed and understood as distinct from, if not always unaffected by, the wider aesthetic concerns of the performance framework in which it takes place. White frames this aesthetic act of invitation as a type of 'procedural authorship', a term borrowed from Jan Murray who defines it as 'writing the rules for the interactor's involvement, that is, the conditions under which things will happen in response to the participant's actions' (Murray, 152).

In each chapter of the book White focuses on a specific aspect of the aesthetics of the invitation, via a wide and varied range of theoretical applications. Chapter one draws on Erving Goffman's notion of frame analysis beginning with Antony Jackson's interpretation of Goffman, in which Jackson produced a series of frames used to facilitate participation in T.I.E. projects. Jackson's model is valuable to White's project as it 'suggests a way of describing procedural authorship: as the manipulation of frames of interaction' (33). White extends Jackson's model to encompass a wider

range of audience participation, and to focus, in particular, on finding a way of describing how facilitators begin, end and guide participation within the various framings they establish. To this end White introduces a breakdown of types of invitations, or 'episodic conventions', such as '*overt, implicit, covert and accidental*' (40) which he then illustrates through examples ranging from pantomime to Shunt's interactive performance. From an examination of the setting up of such frameworks and invitations, White then turns attention to the necessity for the procedural author to 'take account of the myriad inhibitions, reservations and obligations that will come to play in a micro-sociological exchange like an episode of audience participation' (51). To this end White draws on Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* to supplement Goffman's conceptual structure 'to see how class, gender, age and other cultural distinctions will determine how frames of participation are used' (53), while turning to de Certeau as a reminder that the strategy of the procedural author can always be disrupted by the individual tactical response of the participant. White concludes the chapter with an examination of an Armadillo Theatre T.I.E. workshop through which he demonstrates how the various terminologies of the chapter might be applied in practice.

Chapter two examines the aspect of risk involved for both artists and audience. The most significant risk to all would-be participants, White argues, is the risk to their perceived public persona; a risk that constitutes, in Bourdieu's terms, 'an investment of social capital in a market where good returns are not certain' (113). Throughout the chapter White offers examples from Forum Theatre to the festival performances of Jonathan Kay that demonstrate how such risk might be foreseen by procedural authors and mitigated, or in some cases utilised, in their construction of the invitation to participate. Unlike the management of risk in participatory processes such as T.I.E. or drama for young people, where the emphasis is on reducing the participant's perception of what the risk to themselves might be, performance companies such as Ontroerend Goed and Las Furas Del Baus actively seek 'not to reduce [risk] but to guarantee its outcome, as a rhetorical strategy' (85). By inviting audience members to strip and literally expose themselves, as White argues, Las

Furas extends the anticipated horizon of participation of audience members in order to achieve a particular outcome for the piece.

In chapter three, White seeks to deepen his existing analysis, proposing that 'a further elaboration, based on the "state of mind" of individuals and groups of participants in the moment of invitation can restore the unconscious, the emotive and – to a degree – the psychological, to the picture' (115-16). White begins with an examination of the role that emotions might play in rational decision-making: 'both responding immediately and thinking through a situation are partly made up of emotional reaction, sometimes imperceptibly in the background of a rational assessment, sometimes to the extent that conscious thought seems not to have happened at all' (117). This offers a different perspective, White argues, on the 'risk assessment' outlined in the previous chapter and he draws on Bruce McConachie's cognitive approach to suggest how six basic emotional systems might either inspire participation or steer participants away from one kind of participation in order to involve them in another. White then introduces a range of phenomenological readings of embodied cognition and empathetic processes to theoretically ground his exploration of crowd-influenced behaviours, and the potential of liminal spaces to enable the 'public self' - earlier identified as central to the risk of participation - to be momentarily suspended. Drawing on Victor Turner, White suggests that '[i]n *communitas* the ritual subject has been stripped of social status and its trappings, and grouped with a number of others in the same condition, through ritual actions and markings they have been placed outside society, and they are expected to behave in opposition to what is "normal"' (140).

Chapter four expands on the notion of a 'horizon of participation', introduced in an earlier chapter, and draws on Martin Welton's notion of 'weather' to describe 'the prevailing *affect* within which performers do their work, and audience's receive it' (166). White concludes by an examination of the 'role' of the audience member who is called upon to 'act' in a fictional context and asks to what degree they are required, or able, to immerse themselves in the role. Drawing on Stanton Garner, Bert States and Nicholas Ridout, White suggests that the participant-actor is

comparable to the kinds of performer 'that bring out the sense of their 'real' being more easily, animal performers particularly, but also child actors' (183), and, as such, can complement 'the peculiar pleasures of live performance' (183).

White's objective to frame this invitation as an aesthetic act in its own right and by so doing to claim 'procedural authorship' for the artists involved in the construction of the invitation is a necessary and critically productive one, and is undertaken here via an extensive range of theoretical perspectives. There is much of interest and insight here for the reader already knowledgeable about participatory performance as well as for those new to the field. For this reader it did, however, fall somewhat short of expectation due to White's reluctance to develop his own analysis further, and to offer an onward trajectory from his own forensic examination. The introduction is clear that White's purpose here is not to enter into an ideological analysis of audience participation, which he feels has been covered elsewhere, and which he only touches on in the brief conclusion, but there are moments of frustration for the reader when White highlights the obvious ethical implications of strategies such as 'covert invitations' or 'manipulation' of the audience, but leaves the questions, and his own position on such issues, unanswered. Doubtless these are questions that others can take up with the benefit of White's analytical breakdown, but the lack of attention to them here makes the project feel somewhat incomplete.

This is exacerbated by a sense that, at certain points, the theories White adopts are explored to a depth and breadth that detracts from the usefulness of their application to the act of audience participation itself. Chapters one and two are much stronger in this sense, as there is an evident trajectory from White's theoretical analysis of frames, episodic conventions and social capital to a clearer understanding of how specific modes of invitation, frameworks, and risk prediction and management play a key role in different models of audience participation. The theoretical scope of chapters three and four, although interesting in its own right, feels less reined in. While the relevance of Turner's *communitas* to the case study of Las Furas del Baus is clear, neither feel so reliant on, or supported by, the detail of the preceding body of cognitive analysis, and the case study

of Tim Crouch in chapter four struggles to exemplify with clarity precisely how the theoretical landscape we have been taken through can illuminate – in ways that were not already accessible via existing terms of analysis – the processes of participation at play.

Considered as a whole, however, this study is undoubtedly a valuable resource for those wishing to analyse acts of audience participation, as it offers a wide and detailed range of vocabularies and theoretical perspectives through which the invitation to participate can be more rigorously and specifically examined. Perhaps what I found somewhat lacking - the absence of any kind of ideological narrative or thesis – is, in fact, White’s deliberately open invitation to others, to ensure that subsequent studies in this field have at their disposal a better equipped arsenal of theoretical perspectives and a more detailed understanding of the act of invitation that lies at the heart of audience participation.

Works Cited

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