Why The Ghostlight? Theatrical Superstition, Ritual, and Sacred Space

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Why The Ghostlight? Theatrical Superstition, Ritual, and Sacred Space

Patsy Collins Bandes

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Abstract

Theater artists have long practiced superstitions and rituals such as leaving a light onstage to keep ghosts from taking up residence in the theater or not saying the name of the play *Macbeth* for fear of being cursed. The question we must ask is why? And what purpose do these rituals serve? By examining the history of the lineage of these superstitions through the lens of both practitioners such as Tony Church and Richard Huggett and theatrical scholars Gabriel Egan and Aoife Monks and looking at cultural and religious practices through the work of Victor Turner and Mircea Eliade, we see that the practices of superstition and ritual create the bonds of a community. In addition, they are part of what sanctifies a space, or prepares it for performance. In this sacred space, the performers and audience together can be transformed by their collective and communal experience. Through the lenses of communications theorist James W. Carey and Jacques Ranciere we can look at artists and movements who have pushed back against mere transmission of information or the spectacle theater to create ritual communication and communal processes engaging both practitioners and audiences. But can that transformational space exist in a virtual medium? When the global COVID-19 pandemic forced theater-makers to move their work online, the collective now existed digitally. Theorist John Perry Barlow of the Electronic Frontier Foundation defines cyberspace as a digital web where participants interact, and Jaron Lanier argues that it is merely the sum of its users. While both speak about it as if it is a space, it is metaphorical, not tangible. The question that must be asked is whether community and sacred space can be created in a digital format or is a physical environment a necessity for the creation of a sacred space and a community to create within it?

Author's Biographical Sketch

Patsy Collins Bandes currently serves as the Chair of Theater at Boston Conservatory at Berklee, a position that she has held since 2019 after a year as interim Chair. Collins Bandes joined the Conservatory in 2004 as production stage manager and, in 2006, became a member of the theater and dance faculty as an Assistant Professor. During her time at the Conservatory, Collins Bandes stage managed or directed more than 100 productions.

Prior to joining the Conservatory, Collins Bandes served as a stage manager at the Denver Center Theatre Company, including the 1998 season, in which the theater won a Tony Award for excellence in regional theater. In this role, she worked on the world premieres of *The Laramie Project and Give 'Em a Bit of Mystery: Shakespeare and the Old Tradition* (with Sir Tony Church, a founder of the Royal Shakespeare Company), in addition to many other productions. She was also the production stage manager at the National Theatre Conservatory and at Lizard Head Theatre Company in Telluride, Colorado, where she stage managed for Roscoe Lee Browne and Anthony Zerbe on their production of *Behind the Broken Words*.

A respected theater artist, Collins Bandes has worked as a freelance stage manager and director for many companies in Boston and Denver, including North Shore Music Theatre, Aurora Fox Theater, Prometheus Dance, and Intermezzo Chamber Opera.

Dedication

To Polly Noone, Lloyd Norton, Tony Church, and those who passed the

superstitions and rituals to me, and to those who might learn them from me in the future.

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My very special thanks and appreciation go to my advisor, Dr. James Stanley, for his thoughtful and insightful guidance during this project. It would not have been possible without him, and I am eternally grateful. I am also thankful that he found the humor in his Avant Garde class to not fail me when I turned in a paper that was a collage of scribbled quotes and a hand drawn angry face in response to an assignment on Dada.

I would also like to thank my many friends and colleagues at Boston Conservatory and my research advisors Dr. Talaya Delaney and Dr. Richard Martin. Special thanks go to Dr. Helen Deborah Lewis and Dr. Theresa Lang. Their undying moral support, advice, and proof-reading has kept me from fleeing to Tahiti on more than one occasion.

Finally, a particularly large thank you to my family, Charley, Maija, and Ari, who will eternally remind me that I work too much and yet always encourage me to do what I love.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

The image of a solitary light alone in the middle of a bare stage is a common

symbol of the theater. Called a ghostlight, traditionally a bare bulb on a pole, this tool

ensures that the theater[1] never truly goes dark. Modern technology has made slightly less

romanticized adjustments in using energy-efficient LED overhead or wall lighting, but

they serve the same purpose. Why is this? While there are certainly practical concerns,

namely those around safety or OSHA[2] requirements, many theater practitioners, myself

included, are superstitious, and have come to believe there is a greater reason for this

practice. I have been told by colleagues and collaborators various versions of the light's

purpose over the years, stories that they learned from other practitioners before them.

One is that the light keeps the ghosts from taking up residence in the theater. Another is

that it prevents the ghosts in residence from causing any mischief, as they only like the

dark. My personal favorite, however, is the idea that with a constant light onstage, the

theater never truly closes. The circle of performance is never broken. While the ghosts in

residence may continue to be there, the stage will remain the platform of the community

of the living, even if there is not an actual performance currently happening. Like many

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[1] The use of the spelling theater (versus theatre) is a hotly debated topic among theater practitioners. Some make the argument that -er describes the physical space, while -re the artistic practice. Others say that -re is the British English spelling and -er the American English spelling. While there is significant linguistic research and justification for either spelling, I will default to -er unless an artist or author's work specifies otherwise.

[2] Occupational Health and Safety Administration, which oversees workplace safety.

theatrical superstitions, this version originates in the creation of a community, and a particular space for that community to convene. While that space is primarily defined as a physical location, I maintain that it is also experiential. The sacred space of the theater is a place where an audience and performers come together to share something that exists only in that moment. They then leave somehow changed by the experience.

In this thesis I will establish that superstitions and rituals serve multiple purposes in the theater community. While there is certainly a piece of the practice that is comforting to the individual actor or practitioner, the superstitions and their continued existence serve larger purposes. The primary purpose of passing superstitions from person to person is to create a community with shared traditions, rituals, and practices. This mimics the idea of an initiation, or of hazing, where one can only truly be a member of the society when one has learned the secret handshake and password. Building on the idea of the creation of community, superstitions are themselves a part of the rituals used to create a sacred space that is then used for the performance. This not only has an effect on the participants, but also on the space itself, or the participants' collective experience of the space. I will also analyze the question of whether community and sanctity can exist in a digital environment, or if shared physical space is a requirement.

Theatrical performances are unlike many other forms of entertainment that can be viewed over and over. They exist only in that one moment, never to be repeated in the same way. In that sense they are a moment of communion, or coming together, between the performers and the audience, which has a strong resemblance to the moment of communion that occurs within a congregation in a place of worship. If there is a creation of something out of nothing that comes from the gathering of a group of people that can

only exist in that moment, the space of that creation is sacred. To help prepare that space, the participants would have established rites and rituals that they would practice to help create that space. This can also be seen in public spaces when a group of people gather for a specific purpose, such as a rally or a protest. Space is not limited to a physical building but can be defined as any physical location where people are able to gather. While theater is frequently thought of as entertainment, my argument is that it serves a more spiritual purpose for its practitioners. Much of the information around why members of the theater community still believe these superstitions and practice these rituals is passed on through oral tradition rather than in scholarly documentation, handed down from person to person, and the stories grow and change slightly with each passage. However, they are the through line of the community that binds it together.

Those bonds of theater communities were tested when the continuing outbreak of COVID-19 involuntarily shut down theaters across the country, and quarantines and lockdowns forced people to isolate in their homes. Commercial theater was particularly hard hit, with thousands of people out of work and venues shuttered. However, while the industry was dealt a significant blow with shows closed for more than a year, the theater never truly goes dark. Instead, practitioners took advantage of one of the most consequential global events of the modern age to reexamine the purpose of their work in the world. Theater artists quickly moved their craft into the virtual realm, creating theater in new mediums that had not yet been explored. The context of the performances was different, but the objective of the ritual stayed the same. Virtual theater was created with the goal of creating and connecting. What happens to the transformational space when the

physical space disappears? Can the collective experience transcend the digital barrier of moving online and being physically separated?

The lineage of theatrical culture means superstition and ritual are handed down from practitioner to practitioner, even when the practical origins no longer exist. Why do we, as a community, keep going back to these rituals passed down from practitioner to practitioner, from the late 1500s to today? The utilitarian reasons for (most) theatrical superstitions and rituals no longer exist. We still consider it bad luck to whistle in the theater, even though flying scenery is now operated by computers instead of sailors, who used whistling to communicate to each other. Even some of those who are not members of the theater community have heard such statements as "Break a leg," or "don't say Macbeth in the theater," or such terms as "the limelight" or "being a ham." Actors no longer bow with their legs bent or are called down past the wings (also known as legs) by their patrons. Lime is not burned for lighting, much to the relief of fire departments, and ham fat is not used to spread pancake makeup on a little too thickly (with "schmaltzy" having the same meaning in the Yiddish theater), but theater people continue to teach new members of the community these practices year after year.

Some of these have even eclipsed theater to become part of everyday vernacular and belief. While very few people in the general public would believe that the presence of peacock feathers would invite evil (as is a common belief among actors), referring to someone getting a lot of attention as being in the limelight is very common. Many people also describe a person who is acting like a buffoon or a clown as a ham, or say they are schmaltzy. The superstitions of theater have transformed everyday language and practice as part of society as well as those within the theater community.

In looking at the theatrical lineage that these superstitions are passed through, we must also explore how those inherited practices have influenced contemporary Western theatrical forms. Many superstitions refer to physical space, which leads to the idea that the space has value beyond just a location. In this perpetual inheritance, a community of artists bonded to spaces by these unwritten ceremonies is created. It must then be asked if those groups of people who are coming together with shared or ritualistic practices are doing so with the intention of creating transformational or sacred space.

In the way superstitions influenced the larger society, the transformational space extends beyond just the performers to include the audience in the somatic experience during the performance as well. There is evidence that it is not just a belief or metaphor, but something with a physiological effect on the participants. In 2017 neuroscientists from University College London, in partnership with Encore Tickets, attached heart monitors to audience members during a West End performance of the musical *Dreamgirls*. While it might be expected that audience members watching a show may have similar emotional responses, this study also found something surprising. The heart rates of those watching synchronized, rising and falling as the drama unfolded onstage. A community bond was formed beyond just being in the same theater space. The scientist leading the study, Dr. Joe Devlin, said, "Experiencing the live theatre performance was extraordinary enough to overcome group differences and produce a common physiological experience in the audience members" (Encore). The implication of this is that sharing a physical space during a performance physically alters our body to create a shared experience with those around us.

Theater and religion are intricately intertwined, and certainly many theaters bear a resemblance to houses of worship. Theorists write in support of this when comparing theater and religion. One is David V. Mason, who, in his book *The Performative Ground of Religion and Theatre*, argues that while theater and religion come from different cultural backgrounds, and serve different purposes in society, they are not fundamentally different. However, in this case sanctity and religion are separate. Like a church or temple, sacred space in the theater offers participants the opportunity for transformation. That communal experience may take many forms, including physical, spiritual, or mental.

In examining shared superstitions and rituals, we must look at not only their origin, but also what purpose they serve in a community, how they bond its members together or protect them from outsiders, and what roles those rituals might play in the society of that group. To make those arguments, I will examine several different perspectives. First, in chapter two I will use anecdotal accounts from actors Tony Church and Richard Huggett and perspectives from theatrical scholars Gabriel Egan and Aoife Monks to explore a practical history of the evolution of theatrical superstition through the lens of the superstition of "The Scottish Play," or not saying the title of *Macbeth* inside a theater. Then chapter three will explore the role of rites and rituals in a community, as well as the transformational or liminal space in which they occur, as found in the theories of cultural anthropologist Victor Turner. In addition, Mircea Eliade's concepts of communal use of ritual as a religious tool to bring sacred order to profane chaos will inform how theatrical communities use their shared superstitions to sanctify their shared space. The historical response of artists to the transmissive nature of spectacle theater and

the need for community and ritual communication will be explored in chapter four, as I examine what artists were creating and how they used ritual theater practices beginning in the late 1800s. In addition to what was being created I will look at what it was in response to, frequently global or political environments or as a rejection of the commodification of theatrical practice. This chapter will also explore why there was a need for ritual and magic to form communal bonds. Finally, in chapter five, I delve into how these superstitions and rituals help continue creating space in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, when audiences and performers are not allowed to gather in the same physical space and have turned to digital mediums. I also use the theories of digital pioneers such as John Perry Barlow of the Electronic Frontier Foundation and Jaron Lanier, as well as communications theorist James W. Carey to consider the differences of digital versus physical space, as well as examining the roles media as space play in society and culture. I also explore whether it is possible for virtual space to be sanctified.

At a time when our communities are not able to be physically together, how do we continue to practice the rituals that define us? If those rituals are what sanctifies our space, and the magic created within those spaces is what defines us as a community, what does that mean if we are not able to share physical space? Or alternately, are these practices more valuable in 2021 because we need connections to our communities more than ever? Perhaps more importantly, how will this influence theater moving forward as artists begin to return to physical spaces? What lessons from the virtual realm will we bring to our work in the future? Will we be transformed by our collective experience and create something new on the other side?

Chapter II.

The "Scottish Play": A Practical Background and History of Superstition

The belief that one should not say the name of the play *Macbeth* inside a theater has been written about in both scholarship and anecdotally in mass market books for the general public. Since this is one of the most well-known superstitions, it is a good entry point to the background and history of theatrical ritual as it is anchored in history and thoroughly documented. A significant amount of this has been passed down from person to person through oral tradition, over sometimes hundreds of years, with the stories finally documented by researchers and practitioners. By including the public, as if they were an audience in a theater, the practitioners who are writing their versions of the stories are sharing the password for the secret society, typically known only by those in the theater community. While the stories may shift slightly over time, these "peeks behind the curtain" are another way to help the cultural documentation of the theater community.

There are a variety of theories on the origin of the *Macbeth* superstition. Scholar Gabriel Egan, whose work is focused on textual analysis, cites historical birth records and documents to suggest that the curse on *Macbeth* began in the seventeenth century, rather than two hundred years later, as was popularly thought. In Egan's *Notes and Queries* article, "The Early Seventeenth-Century Origin of the Macbeth Superstition," he states, "Popular belief that the superstition began in the seventeenth century has been sustained by repetition of a story about the death of an actor called Hal Berridge while playing

Lady Macbeth on 7 August 1606" (Egan 236). A different theory is put forward by

Richard Huggett, a highly regarded playwright, biographer, and actor, in his book *The

Curse of Macbeth, and other Theatrical Superstitions: an Investigation*. Huggett's theory

on the origin of this curse is that it possibly came from the text of the play itself (143),

although Egan also openly challenges Huggett on the curse of *Macbeth* origin, decidedly

stating, "The only book devoted to the topic of the supposed theatrical curse on the play

Macbeth makes no attempt to substantiate its assertions (Huggett 1981)*"* (Egan 236). Yet

another theory is put forward by actor Tony Church, who was a founding member of the

Royal Shakespeare Company in London, a life-long actor and director, Dean Emeritus of

the National Theatre Conservatory, as well as my friend and colleague. Church also

proposed the origin of the curse comes from the death of Hal Berridge, a fact that he

learned in the book *Brief Lives* by actor John Aubrey and goes on to say that Berridge

died under mysterious circumstances on opening night. Contradicting all these theories is

scholar Lina Perkins Wilder, who in her article, "An Alternative Form of the *Macbeth*

Superstition," also in *Notes and Queries,* strongly disputes Egan's claim that the *Macbeth*

superstition began in the seventeenth century, instead positing that it is a later invention

from the late 1800s or early 1900s. She suggests that the curse originated in the late

1800s from both interstitial and choral music written by Richard Leveridge for the

witches' scenes in the play, amplified by the legendary superstition of actor Sarah

Bernhardt (393-394). This is contradictory to a curse written in the text or saying the title

in a theater, which is considered the current way to invoke the curse. This idea put

forward by Wilder is also referenced by Tony Church in his play *Give'em a Bit of

Mystery: Shakespeare and the Old Tradition*, as well as a theory that the curse lies in the

text, when he claims, "Others say that there is a real curse concentrated in part of the witches' doggerel. Or some say it comes in the tune that Matthew Locke wrote for the witches in Davenent's rewrite of the play" (1999 22). Of course, Church references a different composer than Wilder, and indeed several other possible origins, which underlines the changing nature of the oral tradition of these superstitions.

One thing all these scholars and practitioners agree on, however, is that there is a curse, and a ritual must be performed to break it, or tragedy will ensue. Huggett's book *Supernatural on Stage: Ghosts and Superstitions of the Theatre,* addresses the actors who have either embraced rituals to protect themselves from the "curse" of that show (179) or have been beset by tragedy while working on productions of it (153). Huggett also notes the rituals that an actor practices to break a theatrical curse of any kind, whether it is from saying Macbeth or lines from the play, or from whistling in the theater, to which he explains, "Profanity has a healthy neutralizing effect, and a stream of obscene words will quickly banish any evil spirit in hearing" (43). Nigel Cliff identifies a similar theme of how to break the curse in his 2007 book *The Shakespeare Riots: Revenge, Drama, and Death in Nineteenth-Century America,*

> Macbeth was known as the Scottish play, because even to speak its name was enough to invoke the black magic of the weird sisters and compel all sorts of long-winded recantations. Leaving the theatre, swearing, and spinning around three times was the favored purgative; variations included spitting over your shoulder, petitioning Shakespeare while quoting Hamlet, or just cursing like crazy. As superstitions went, this one had an impressive track record. (36)

The variation of breaking the curse that I was taught by Church, after an unwitting young intern made the mistake of saying the name of the play during a rehearsal, was that you must leave the theater, spin around three times, spit, and then knock on the door and

plead for readmittance. Only after your fellow actors took pity on you and allowed you to reenter were you safe from harm. The joy that theater people seem to take in these practices and rituals is echoed by Huggett, who in explaining that theater people are superstitious, opened his book *The Curse of Macbeth, and other Theatrical Superstitions: an Investigation* with the statement, "We actors are undoubtedly the most superstitious of all professionals, a fact which is freely, indeed cheerfully, admitted" (1). Huggett's acknowledgement and exploration of these practices as intentional choice, or something that a group of practitioners participate in willingly, is also indicative of these superstitions being part of creating a communal experience. In this case the members are self-selecting to associate, rather than being chosen, however the result is the same, where a group has shared practices that identify them as a unit. There is also a sense of connection to celebrity or to fame that helps encourage members to join a group or to participate in its rituals. Indeed, that young intern was charmed by the possible six degrees of separation between herself, Church, Ian McKellen, and Patrick Stewart, among many others.

The *Macbeth* curse is by no means the only superstition to have been handed down throughout the years. In his biography, *A Stage for a Kingdom,* Church discusses how he created his 1999 play, *Give'em a Bit of Mystery: Shakespeare and the Old Tradition*, in which he connects the line of actors from Richard Burbage to himself, citing how stage business and superstitions such as the curse of *Macbeth* were passed down. He documents both his own journey and relates historical tidbits from as early as the 1800s. Notes Church in *A Stage for a Kingdom*:

> ...there was a tradition in the use of stage props, business, movement and gesture
> that has propelled an evolution of acting styles in Shakespeare's plays. While the

best actors have both utilised and rebelled against this tradition, it extends in an unbroken line from the actors who first played Shakespeare to the ones who will play him next. (227-228)

It is not just practitioners who have documented this transference of communal ritual practice in theater. Aiofe Monks' scholarship focuses on the practice of passing theater lore within the theater community. In her article, "Collecting Ghosts: Actors, Anecdotes and Objects at the Theatre" in the *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Monks discusses in detail the premise that theater relies on items and ideas that connect the living to the dead, told through the conceit of actor Patrick Stewart seeing the ghost of 1880s actor-manager John Buckstone (146). This rite of passage, of seeing Buckstone's ghost, cemented Stewart in the annals of history of great actors, connecting him to those who came before him, and in theory, to those who will come after him. It is a demonstration of the theater lineage, of how these beliefs are handed from person to person. Monks references this, recounting that, "seeing the ghost put Stewart in good company. He took his place in a long line of luminary Buckstone confrontations that included Dame Judi Dench, Sir Donald Sinden and Dame Margaret Rutherford" (146). She continues the connections, saying, "Patrick Stewart may have reasserted the longstanding image of the theatre as a superstitious and haunted world, but he also ensured his place within the lineage of such anecdotal histories, taking up his position within a narrative tradition of star superstition" (146). Monks' conclusion that, "While objects are mastered by (and master) actors in performance, they also function as secret talismans in systems of superstition and familial inheritance on and off the stage" (150) is particularly relevant, as superstitions with origins as far back as the 1600s are still inherited by and held as sacred by contemporary theater practitioners. Huggett concurs with Monks on this point, in discussing the

supernatural occurrences or beliefs of theater such as the appearance of the ghost of John Buckstone in the Haymarket Theatre Royal (131).

I have my own connection to this incident of Patrick Stewart seeing Buckstone's ghost that Monks refers to. Stewart was a dear friend and collaborator with Tony Church, who in turn was my friend and colleague. Tony once said to me when something unexplained occurred in the theater, "My old friend Patrick always said you never made it in the theater until you've seen the ghost!" While I have no way of knowing that the ghost of Buckstone was the ghost in question, it did create a personal interest for me, as a career theater professional, not only in how these superstitions have been handed down throughout history, but how they are often tied to a physical space. That may be the space the ghosts inhabit, or the theatrical space that the *Macbeth* saying actor must leave. It is as if the physical space holds the memory of the community, and the rituals they have practiced within its walls. It also felt like my moment of initiation into this theatrical lineage, having received a piece of theatrical lore that bonded me to a prestigious community.

This ritualized inheritance of the practices suggests not only a close community, but one where there are pieces of information or behavior that someone must learn or demonstrate a knowledge of to become a member of that community. Here we begin to move away from superstition into something more tangible. Ritual behaviors, both on and offstage, begin to define who belongs to a particular group, or what physical space that group might inhabit. It might also indicate who did not belong to the community, which has led to not just disagreements between actors, but riots and death in the streets.

What began as a friendly rivalry between two actors turned into a nasty dispute across two continents, which culminated in the 1849 Astor Place Riots, leaving more than twenty dead and over one hundred injured. Closely tied to their Shakespearean performances, British actor William Macready's and American actor Edwin Forrest's escalating rivalry was amplified by simmering tensions between the two nations, at a time that the monied aristocracy and the newly rich endeavored to separate themselves from the working class and a massive influx of immigrants. While their disagreement began over acting style, it gradually began to include the audience behavior during their performances, with Macready's upper-class decorum versus Forrest's rough and tumble, more rowdy crowds. Many working-class Americans saw Macready's style as too oppressively British, representative of the British rule from which the country had not long before won independence. Cliff characterizes their differences this way, "Macready's determination to make the theatre respectable had made him the archetype of the Victorian Englishman. Forrest's frontier populism had made him the hero of the new America" (208). In Edinburgh in 1846, during a production of *Hamlet*, Macready danced a small jig during the players scene, and a loud hiss was heard from the audience. Macready accused Forrest of being the hisser, who after much denial and many newspaper notices back and forth eventually admitted that he did hiss in disgust at Macready's stage action. The conflict devolved from there and became more and more entangled in the politics of America and its class structure. This led to the tragic events of 1849, when both actors were playing the lead role in *Macbeth* in New York City, Forrest downtown in the Bowery, and Macready uptown at the brand new, high-class Astor Place

Opera House. With the latter as a symbol of the British, a large number of b'hoy[3] and

other immigrants came together and attempted to storm the theater to interrupt his

performance. As the crowd swelled and those in the theater pelted Macready with rotten

vegetables and other objects, the Mayor of New York called in the military. During this

unrest, Macready soldiered on through his performance, likely unheard by anyone in the

audience, until the middle of the fourth act, when he finally left the stage and was spirited

out of the theater, and of New York, by friends. The b'hoys were pelting the theater and

the military with rocks, and the command was given to return fire. When the smoke

cleared, dead and dying littered the streets. Finally, forty-eight hours later, peace had

been restored, but the events of those days had a long-term effect on American society

and on the theater. Macready quietly returned to England, Forrest dominated the

American stage for years to come, and the line of who did and did not belong was clearly

drawn. When the boundary of the community extended across the stage into the audience,

it became clear how intensely those communities took theater as an expression of

community identity. It was, as Cliff states, "A feud that started with Hamlet and a hiss

had become a contest to decide who controlled American culture" (208).

Most theatrical disagreements do not lead to martial law and mass violence. They

are generally thought of more whimsically, though often taken very seriously by those

who practice them. I argue that there is a more philosophical purpose beyond just the

practical, which is that these rituals and superstitions are handed down as a way to build

or create community among a group of people. It demonstrates who has been initiated

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[3] The b'hoy were working class men from the Bowery neighborhood, not specifically a gang (although some b'hoy were members of the Bowery Boys). They were made up of a diverse population of both immigrants and native-born Americans. Many were of Irish descent, although not entirely.

into the inner circle, and then will one day teach the traditions to someone new. Monks investigates this passage of belief in theater lineage as well. However, she approaches the work from the idea of anecdote as a method of historical narrative or community connection. She also claims that the superstition and sharing of stories is a means of cultural preservation, saying, "The theatre relies on a series of collections – of objects and stories – that guarantee its survival and return, and which bring living actors into contact with the dead" (152). The concept of cultural preservation and knowledge of the role they play in the community is one that speaks to the way that these traditions and rituals have been handed down from person to person as an inherited legacy. Ultimately the stories will vary and grow and change as the years pass. However, the hard evidence of their origins is of less value than their lineage, and the change that comes to them over the years as they grow into anecdote only makes the handing down that much more important.

In looking back to the *Macbeth* superstition, there is no agreement on the actual origin. However, the importance of shared community, and community identity is apparent throughout all the stories. That legacy of connection is significantly more important than the factual details of how a particular ritual or superstition began. In addition, the way that the rituals are tied to physical space and are used to define the belief structures practiced within that space are also significant. It is communal identity that is outlined and passed down that is the fundamental importance of the theatrical lineage, and in that a spiritual or sacred connection between members of the community, both practitioners and audience, can grow.

Chapter III.

Science and Religion as Connected to Sacred Space

In many ways, the rites and rituals of theatrical performance are analogous to a religious event. Participants gather in a designated space at a specific time. They wear special garments, use specific objects meant only for that purpose, and perhaps have unique music or songs that are used. These parallels between theatrical events and religious rites also go beyond these basic frameworks. If we look more deeply at the comparison, both use these rituals as a means of connecting communities and their members together. As in the case of the Astor Place riots, it is also a means of identification, which allows those with similar beliefs to unify with each other. Examining the purpose of ritual in a community through the theoretical frameworks of psychology, religion, and cultural anthropology gives a broader perspective on the societal significance of superstitions and why they are handed down from person to person. The scholars who research these areas are not theater practitioners, nor are they applying their research to theatrical performance. Looking at the broader human experience to better understand the theatrical experience helps distill the role that ritual, superstition, and magical thinking define the power of belief. I maintain that there are ways a theater community is analogous to a tribe or a religious sect. There are accepted beliefs, cultural practices, rites and rituals, special garments that are worn, and spaces in which the work is done. Those similarities help designate the group of people who observe them as an individual society.

Perhaps the most compelling research comes from cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, an expert in rituals and symbols, who extensively researched the rites and rituals

of tribal peoples. His 1969 book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* examines the phases of existence that groups of people move through while participating in cultural or religious rites. While his work in this book is focused on the Ndembu tribal culture rather than theater, his idea that a culture can be understood through analysis of its ritual and symbolism is particularly useful when looking at the culture of theater practitioners. He espoused that the use of ritual is a transformative process in creating a culture. Turner's work provides a global view of how the ritual practice of superstitions in theater moves us from a point of structure, or just normal people in regular societal hierarchy, to a point of liminality, a neutral state or blank stage, or as he says, "moment in and out of time" (96). Liminality partners with the concept of communitas, where all people involved in the performance at that moment have met on a similar plane or level. This creates a "sacred space" in which the theatrical performance can take place. Like a religious rite, it exists only in that time and place, and when finished disappears and everyone returns to their point in the structure, altered by the ritual they just experienced.

Applying this theory to theatrical performance makes clear how Turner's ideas support the idea of theater as a transformational space. The audience and actors begin at a point of structure as they enter the theater in their regular society. Through pre-show rituals, which may vary from standing in line at the box office and finding one's seat to walking the stage or touching each prop the actor will use that performance, the people in attendance begin to move towards a point of liminality, which culminates in the true liminal space when the lights go down before the performance. By the end, both the audience and performers have reached a state of communitas, where all parts of the production have come together to create something greater than the sum of its parts. Only

after the bows have been taken, the curtain has closed, and the house lights have returned

does everyone return to structure, having been changed by the experience. This concept is

also supported by professor, director, and author Ralph Yarrow. In his 2008 book, *Sacred*

Theatre: Theatre & Consciousness he looks at how that connection between performer

and audience transforms both. He describes what happens between the words as the most

transformative, saying,

> Liminal interiority in sacred theatre, then, is a void in thought shared by
> performer and spectator. Not reducible to the mundane, this void lies in the gaps
> between words and thoughts, in the background of all language and ideas as a
> silent beyond-ness, and immanently [sic] within knowledge as its generative
> condition of unknowingness. (69)

In taking the connection between people out of the text, Yarrow identifies part of where

Turner's transformative space exists, where a group of people participating in a ritualized

practice are fundamentally changed through the process. This is the space I define as

sacred, allowing the participants to be transformed by having experienced it.

The concept of a moment in time that exists only during a performance is also

backed by religious research. In his book *Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of*

Religion, Romanian religious historian and philosopher Mircea Eliade puts forward the

idea of imago mundi, or image of the world, which is a sacred space that creates order out

of fundamental chaos (52). This idea is fundamental to religion, but I contend that it is

also useful in theater. Superstitions and rituals help us create order out of chaos. I assert

that the rituals practiced before a performance have no substantive difference from those

practiced by priests at the beginning of a mass. This demonstrates a parallel of a

culturally accepted set of rituals that create sacred space. In the case of the church, it is

used for worship. In the theater it is used for performance. They are means to the same

end. Eliade also posits that a religious person can transition between a sacred space and a neutral space (69). This mirrors the theatrical idea of a moment in time that exists only during that performance, which then the practitioners can step away from, moving from the sacred space of the stage to the neutral, or profane in Eliade's words, space outside of the theater. Psychologist and drama therapist Susana Pendzik makes a similar case in her article, "The Theater Stage and the Sacred Space - A Comparison" published in *Arts in Psychotherapy.* She references Eliade's idea of creating order out of chaos to create the sacred when she states, "the sacred space is a microcosm. The creation of a sacred space parallels the establishment of Cosmos (order) in the midst of Chaos (the infinity of space). Hence, the enclosed space constitutes an imago mundi- a world replica in a microcosmic scale (Eliade, 1959)" (26). In essence, each performance creates a microcosm between those onstage and those observing, that comes into being, lives, and dies through the cycle of each event.

There has been a significant amount written on the comparison of theater and religion that should be acknowledged, as many scholars have explored the similarities and intertwined natures of the two. In his 2019 book, *The Performative Ground of Religion and Theatre*, David V. Mason examines this overlap between the two, saying in his introduction, "This book proposes that some comparative study may reveal some ways in which religious people themselves create their sanctity and theatre people realize their fiction" (8). His theory is that both theater and religion approach ritual or ceremony through a perspective of poesis, meaning making or creating, rather than just mimesis, or representing. Therefore, the transformational experience that occurs in a religious ceremony parallels the experience an actor undergoes when taking on a character

onstage, or how an audience is transported as the theatrical world comes to life. Mason

also argues that the differentiation in the spiritual nature of religion and theater has

historical and political origins, but he believes they are not fundamentally different.

Another perspective comes in the collection of essays gathered by Lance Gharavi in

Religion, Theatre, and Performance: Acts of Faith. Together with thirteen other scholars,

Gharavi explores the intersections of these two areas from a broad perspective of

religious traditions, with a particular focus on how religion should or should not be

integrated into theater higher education. A final example, although there are many more

worth investigating, is *Between Theater and Anthropology*, by Richard Schechner, with a

preface by Victor Turner. Schechner, a theater practitioner and theorist, challenges

anthropologists such as Turner for not fully examining the theatrical process and its

potential to help define social structures and systems.

It is likely that not everyone who attends a theatrical performance experiences a

religious or cultural transformation and, given the number and variety of types of

offerings that fall under the broad definition of theater, it would be an unmanageable feat

to attempt to research or gather such data. However, there is substantial evidence that the

rituals of the theater community serve a valuable purpose in the culture. As Turner

describes in his observations of tribal rites or Eliade in his discussion of religion,

engaging in theater rituals create an order out of chaos or a liminal, neutral space where

transformational art can be formed. This change may be somatic, or physical, as was

documented in the Encore heartbeat study, or psychological, or even spiritual, leading to

the colloquial title for practitioners "those who worship at the altar of the theater," as if it

were a religion of its own. The superstitions and rituals practiced allow for something

greater than the sum of its parts to be created.[4]

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[4] There is also a significant amount of research into the connection of spirituality and sacred space in performance beyond the colonized West. For additional reading on these practices in Indian and Bengali cultures, please see Rama Kundu's 2002 article in *Interlitteraria*, "Cad Baniker Pala: The Return to Ritual and Folk Form in Avant-Garde." For an exploration of Turner's theories applied to the use of liminality in Indian folklore to create sacred space for mythic retelling see Felipe Pereira's 2017 article in *Asian Theater Journal*, "Ritual Liminality and Frame: What Did Barbosa See When He Saw the Theyyam?" in which the observations of 17th century explorer Duarte Barbosa of Theyyam (South Indian ritual performance) is analyzed through the lens of Jerzy Grotowski. For further reading on the connections between ritual and performance in West Africa, look at Pius Ngandu Nkashama's chapter, "Theatricality and Social Mimodrama," in *African Drama and Performance*, where he investigates the role gesture plays in creating the physical performance space and engaging the audience. Finally, for an argument that research into African ritual performance and its significance should be redone by African scholars rather than through a post-colonial lens in order to truly understand their nature and practices, please see 2017's "Rethinking African Indigenous Ritual Festivals, Interrogating the Concept of African Ritual Drama" in *African Studies Quarterly*, by Morufu Bukola Omigbule.

Chapter IV.

Ritual and Response: Spectacle Theater and the Need for Community

In his 2008 book *The Emancipated Spectator*, French philosopher Jacques
Ranciere argued that theater should not alienate its audiences with spectacle, but rather
allow the performers and audience to create together. The struggle between these two
objectives can be seen in Western theater since the late 1800s. The latter aligns with the
need for ritual as a means of creating sanctified space and community. The two forms
coexist, often created in response or opposition to the other in a cyclic fashion. For the
purpose of this argument, I will be defining conventional theater as spectacle theater, in
the broadest sense, meaning it is meant to be observed by spectators, rather than to be
participatory. Spectacle theater was more likely to be commodified, and presented to the
people, rather than, as Ranciere suggests, created by the people.

In analyzing this dichotomy, we must look at the common denominators in the
artists who were creating collaborative, ritualized work. Frequently there was a rejection
of capitalism, but there were also some artists that spoke more politically against
ideologies such as fascism. These artists used their art to draw a line in how their
community did or did not collectively identify. Distilled even further, it can be narrowed
down to access and agency. In conventional or spectacle theater few people have access
to the power of creation, and therefore it is not the ritual of the collective. Those who turn
to community in response in rejection of an idea such as capitalism or fascism allow the
power of the group to define the shared identity.

Some of the return to ritualization or spiritualization can be identified as a departure from the commodification of theater, moving it away from the bourgeois and back to the common people. There are also the cycles of theater as a means of processing grief or death, which lead to a rise in the connection with its use as a spiritual medium. When compared to a historical timeline, the theatricality of spiritualism has risen around world wars, pandemics, and other moments of loss or crisis, when there was a need for collective ritualistic processing. The challenge to the community psyche creates an urgency for new space as a response. Theater as a group experience, instead of as an individual experience, becomes more popular. In comparing this to Ranciere, the need for communal agency drives the desire to move towards ritual theater. This is opposed to spectacle theater, which is received individual rather than engaged with. However, in times when the world is more peaceful, the pendulum swings the other direction, and there is a move back to realism.

The avant garde of the early 20th century offers examples of this cyclical response to art, as described by Jeffrey C. Alexander in his 2014 article "The Fate of the Dramatic in Modern Society: Social Theory and the Theatrical Avant-Garde," where he states,

> The (re)dramatic and re-fusing avant-garde of the early 20th century limed Nietzsche's call for restoring ritual to drama, a call that looked not only to [Richard] Wagner's project of opera as total art form but earlier still to the wellsprings of Romanticism itself. (7)

Alexander's claim of art's cyclical response can be seen throughout the avant garde movements. These artists were creating in parallel with more conventional theater makers, such as Gilbert and Sullivan writing their operettas at the same time as Wagner,

Lillian Hellman published *Little Foxes* in 1939, the same year Bertolt Brecht finished *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Galt MacDermott's musical *Hair* debuted at the same time as Peter Brook's *The Empty Space*, and The Living Theatre has continued to produce works throughout the writing of all of August Wilson's American Century Cycle.[5]

One differentiation between the commercial or conventional theater and these other artists is that, unlike the commercial theater, they all shared an explicit endorsement of theater as ritual. That is not to say that more conventional theater, such as Broadway or companies such as the Royal Shakespeare Company, have no ritualistic practices or sacred spaces. However, it is in the backstage spaces, those that Church and Huggett gave glimpses of, that these agreements exist. They wrote for the general public, whereas the authors discussed in this chapter wrote for theater practitioners, describing how to share the audience community with the performers. The idea that sociologist Erving Goffman delineated in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* defined the separation of these public or private spaces, which these artists sought to break down.

It is still possible to define all these disparate works as acts of sacred theater, going back to Ralph Yarrow's definition. He stated, "Sacred theatre, then, may be defined as theatre that entails a voiding of thought, and by implication a shift in consciousness that effects [sic] a blurring of boundaries between subject and object, self and other" (68). While Tennessee Williams and Jerzy Grotowski approached the work from very different perspectives, one through presentational realism and the other a reactive engagement of the audience, both created art that asked the audience and the

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[5] The American Century Cycle, also called the Pittsburgh Cycle, refers to 10 plays written by Wilson between 1982-2005, each chronicling life in a different decade of the Black American experience.

performer to shift their perception of reality, to mentally step into an unknown journey, out of which they would hopefully emerge changed.

Another theorist who may help clarify this is James W. Carey, who wrote extensively on communication. Carey modeled two different forms of communication, transmission and ritual, which he defines in his book of essays on the subject, *Communication as Culture*. He posits that for a significant amount of time communication was primarily transmitted, or sent out, primarily as a means of disseminating information, or as he says in his essay "A Cultural Approach to Communication," "communication is a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people" (13). In comparison, ritual communication is more a two-way street, or focused on shared participation or communion. Carey describes it this way, saying, "A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs" (15). This exchange of discourse both sent and received is what creates the community within the shared ritual. If we correlate this to Ranciere, spectacle or conventional theater is transmission communication, performed as a means of disseminating information to the gathered masses, whereas participatory theater engages in ritual communication, with collaborative or shared information allowing for agency of collective creation.

It is helpful to look at the timeline of some of these movements, to see how the cyclical nature of theater, as Alexander suggests, parallels the historical timeline. This also allows us to see some of what the artists were creating in response to, whether it was

post-war national grief, fascism, or the commodification of the art form. In exploring the progression of these practices, it should be noted that the practitioners who have been documented have been predominantly male identifying. This does not mean that there were not female identifying artists exploring this work, in fact there were many. However, their biographies and stories were not recorded with the same thoroughness of their male counterparts.

The Gilded Age of the late 1800s saw a move away from the bombastic oratorial spectacle of the theater of Edmund Kean and the naturalistic realism of Edwin Booth as an interest in theater as a sacred art able to spiritually transform increased. As the Industrial Revolution peaked post-Civil War and an economic boom fueled by immigration benefited wealthy tycoons, people across Europe and the United States began to explore connections to spiritualism and non-Judeo-Christian religions including in the art and theater of the era. This movement was referred to as the 'Occult Revival.' In the introduction to his book *The Theatre of the Occult Revival*, Edmund B. Lignan describes a heightened importance of art overall during this time, saying, "art came to be viewed as a means to unite human beings with the divine. In particular, the art of theatre became an important tool for expressing and disseminating alternative spiritual ideas" (2). In parallel to this rise of spiritualism is the departure of superstitions from their practical origins, as technology and theater practices evolved and changed.

One of the earliest artists to bring these occult influences to the European stage is composer Richard Wagner, who was profoundly influenced by German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Wagner, divisive in the music world due to his open anti-Semitism, wrote compositions that, in opposition to others of the time period or those

written previously, synthesized both music and poetry, story and tonality, and created

leitmotifs drawing the audience into the spell being woven onstage, leading to him

sometimes being referred to as the "Sorcerer of Bayreuth."[6] One example of this is

Wagner's 1859 *Tristan und Isolde*, which he defined as a gesamtkunstwerk, or total work

of art.[7] In his book, *The World as Will and Representation,* Schopenhauer says Will is

desire, wanting, striving, effort and Representation is unknowable reality, unity, or

oneness. Although he was writing about life and existence in general, he also wrote

specifically about how this applies to music, and further to composition of music, stating,

> The composer reveals the innermost nature of the world, and expresses the
> profoundest wisdom in language that his reasoning faculty does not understand,
> just as a magnetic somnambulist gives information about things of which she has
> no conception when she is awake. (260)

In comparing a composer to a sleepwalker, Schopenhauer implies that the music comes

from a connection to the dream state, rather than from conscious thought, meaning that

music comes not from the Will, but instead from the Representation. In Wagner's *Tristan*

und Isolde, Schopenhauer resonates throughout the opera, both in the storyline and in the

composition of the music. The two lovers must release their desires and allow themselves

to be transformed so they might meet in death. In creating a total work of art, not only

would the characters in the story be transformed, but so would those both onstage and in

the audience as well. While it might be possible to consider Wagner's productions as

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[6] Bayreuth, Germany was Wagner's home near the end of his life, and the festival that he founded, the Bayreuth Festival, which was in operation until 2020, when productions were suspended indefinitely due to COVID-19.

[7] Though Wagner did not identify his work as opera, but as musical drama or gesamtkunstwerk, for ease of discussion here I will use opera.

spectacle, they were a significant break from other popular composers at the time. One example of what Wagner was writing in response to was the bel canto, or beautiful singing, operas of Giuseppe Verdi. While they were contemporaries, Verdi's operas were meant to showcase the singers, with story and production values secondary. He often adapted plays and novels, including *Macbeth* and *La Dame aux Camellias* by Alexandre Dumas fils. In comparison, Wagner created all parts of his total works of art including the score and the libretto. Additionally, he had input on production elements such as scenery, lighting, and costumes. This permitted him to create an environment that allowed the audience to fully engage in the ritual and the magical thinking of the complete production. In this way they became participants rather than spectators.

Wagner's music and friendship also had strong influences on another leader of the Occult Revival, Edouard Schuré, an early 20th Century French philosopher, poet, and playwright. In his book, *Genesis of Tragedy and the Sacred Drama of Eleusis*, he wrote of Wagner, "The dramas of Wagner are formidable epitomes of life. In them, the dream of the Soul finds its fulfilment" (96). Schuré also created work with the goal of fulfilling the soul, with strong nationalist influences. He was a Theosophist whose work focused on recreating the rituals and performance practices of ancient religions with the objective of reviving them. In describing Edouard Schuré's beliefs, Lignan states, "Schuré insisted that theatrical rituals had awakened supernatural enlightenment and powers within human beings within the secret temple-theatres of ancient mystery religions, and he called for the contemporary reconstruction of such a theatre in the present" (21). Schuré's practice had a strong focus on the feminine, and he would restage ancient Greek plays accenting both the female roles and their connection to spiritual power. His work also promoted the

benefits of democracy; however, he also included his support for the hierarchical caste systems in India as a way to maintain pure Aryan bloodlines, making his endeavors less egalitarian than they may have originally seemed.

At the same time as Schuré focused on reviving ancient religions and power, French writer Antonin Artaud was creating his Theater of Cruelty movement. Partially in response to the horrors and tragedies of WWI, this work was a break from traditional, or passively observed, theater, in which part of the intention of the performers was to assault the senses of the audience. This was done with the goal of breaking into the consciousness of the audience or activating their awareness of the world around them. Artaud shunned the idea of audience as spectator, and like Ranciere, pushed the idea of active engagement between audience and performer. Originally published in 1938, Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double* is the groundwork on which much of the experimental and avant garde theater philosophies are based. Many practitioners[8] of the 20th Century were inspired by this series of essays, and connections to Artaud's work can be seen throughout many of these practices.

Deeply inspired by Artaud, another group in the United States was creating transformative performance space that allowed for spiritual transcendence. The Living Theatre began in post WWII 1947 and was formed by husband and wife Julian Beck and Judith Malina in New York City, with the goal of pushing back against hierarchical producing structures and moving towards a more communal or egalitarian model. Many

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[8] It should be noted that there has been a movement away from engaging with the work of some of these artists, particularly Grotowski, Brook, and even Artaud, in contemporary theater study due to their appropriation, misogyny, Eurocentrism, and misinterpretation of non-western performance traditions. While they certainly should still be studied, they must be examined through a post-colonial and intersectional lens of scholarship.

of their performances reflected Artaud's desire to create theater without passive

observers. They broke down the barrier between performer and audience, to awaken and

engage them and to create a performance space that allowed for spiritual transcendence.

In 2021 this community of artists continues to produce theater as one of the oldest

experimental theater companies in existence. Julian Beck penned their manifesto, still

found on the company's website. It declares,

> To call into question
> who we are to each other in the social environment
> of the theatre,
> to undo the knots that lead to misery,
> to spread ourselves
> across the public's table
> like platters at a banquet,
> to set ourselves in motion
> like a vortex that pulls the spectator
> into action,
> to fire the body's secret engines,
> to pass through the prism
> and come out a rainbow,
> to insist that what happens in the jails matters,
> to cry "Not in my name!"
> at the hour of execution,
> to move from the theater to the street
> and from the street to the theater.
> This is what The Living Theatre does today.
> It is what it has always done. (Beck)

This call to "pull the spectator into action," partnered with a pacifistic embrace of

anarchy, allowed Beck and Malina to create performances that nurture social change

from a substantive liminal experience. In his 2013 *Theater Symposium* article "Ritual

Performance and Spirituality in the Work of The Living Theatre, Past and Present,"

David Callaghan describes the 1960s work of the company this way,

the Living Theatre by the early 1960s was most interested in awakening what it perceived as a passive, spiritually alienated audience. Frequently, its experiments were rooted in myth and ritual harkening back to the origins of theatre as a means of restoring a sense of vitality and importance to contemporary performance. (37)

Their connection to myth and ritual allowed the Living, as they are known, to take stories that were familiar but move from passive engagement to active engagement, drawing on the strength of the collective audience and experience. The Living Theatre was, and continues to be, the embodiment of the principles Ranciere and Carey put forward. Beck, Malina, and their successors have created non-traditional performance spaces that engage the observers into active engagement in the creation of art. The Living moved beyond the boundaries of a traditional theater space, including into the streets and parks of New York and the favelas of Brazil. Callaghan describes it this way,

By offering a freewheeling dimension of time and space beyond the borders of the formal proscenium stage, the secular rites of the Living's work in this period allowed for an intimate connection between actor and spectator that could spark liminality, new identities, and a feeling of group communitas. (40)

This goes back to the theories of Victor Turner, and the concept of ritual creating a transitional space that those involved enter, and then the changed state of the group after the ritual is completed. The secular theatrical rituals of The Living Theatre brought the audience into the creation of the liminal space, as part of the sacred collective, in actively engaging in generating art.

At the same time Beck and Molina were creating the Living Theater in the United States, in Europe Bertolt Brecht broke classical forms of theater and performance with his ideas of Epic theater and alienation. Considered one of the cornerstones of the avant garde movement, his work in Germany in the 1930s through the 1950s, with a stint in

Hollywood during WWII after escaping the Nazi regime, was built on the idea of theater as a mechanism for social and political commentary. He removed the "fourth wall," or the invisible barrier separating the audience from the performers, allowing the actors to directly communicate with or engage the observers. In looking through the lens of Carey's communication models, he moved from transmission to ritual communication, asking the audience to find their own agency to speak out against oppression. Brecht's objective was to prevent the audience from forming an emotional bond with the characters. He would break the action to remind the audience that what they were watching was not the truth, but rather a reflection of it. His goal through this "alienation" was for the audience to not just engage with the moment of the performance, but to be forced to reexamine those moments through their own lens of self-reflection. This was not just intended as a tool of personal growth, however. Brecht's work pushed the observer to see reflected back social injustices and their own role in them, and incite them into taking action, particularly against the fascism that he strongly opposed.

In the 1960s another artist exploring the sacred psychophysical effect of art was Polish director and theater artist Jerzy Grotowski, who began his work under the harsh censorship of the Iron Curtain. After studying with the great Russian theater practitioner Konstantin Stanislavski in the 1950s, he returned to Poland, where he built on the physical actions techniques that he had learned. While it is sometimes thought that Grotowski and Stanislavski were polar opposites with regard to technique, Grotowski himself praised Stanislavski in a 1983 letter, "Reply to Stanislavski," translated into English and published in *The Drama Review* in 2008. Grotowski said,

> Basically, I can only reveal my own myth of Stanislavsky, as others have done before, without knowing to what extent these other myths were founded on

reality. When I was beginning my studies in the acting department of the theatre school, I founded the entire base of my theatrical knowledge on the principles of Stanislavsky. ... I began to think that maybe it was only a new mythology. When I realized that the problem of building my own system was illusory, and that there is no ideal system that could serve as the key to creativity, then the word "method" changed its meaning for me. (32)

Grotowski described his own method, that starts with knowing one's self, as "poor theatre." It was also built on the group culture of the ensemble, stripped of extraneous props and costumes, in non-traditional spaces. When a piece was chosen to be shared, the audience was placed on all sides or interspersed among the actors. Grotowski would use ritualized movements and sounds, sometimes snippets of pieces of plays, to create a communion between performers, or between performers and audience. The objective of this was for the body to disappear and a spiritual trace to be left behind. Long periods of the training process in Grotowski's method were engaged in near or complete silence, with the director preaching the concept to his company that from external silence comes internal silence and, in that silence, to ask themselves what it means to be human.

As his work moved into the 1970s Grotowski began to move more towards what he called Theater of the Source, and away from theater that could be commodified. His public performances became less frequent, and his work changed as he worked to find the origin of the spiritual connections between theatrical forms and ancient rituals. While there are echoes of Schuré in this search for primitive customs, Grotowski's practice differed in that he was not attempting to revive these old religions, but rather bridge their spiritual ceremonies with contemporary performance rituals. The question moved from what it means to be human to what the origin of the essential spark of humanity is, which Grotowski traveled the world in search of. That essential spark of humanity is part of

what ritualistic practices bring out to help create a sacred or transformative space. In his later years, his work morphed again to what has been titled Objective Drama, which explores the ritualistic role of physical actions. In many ways this later work mirrors that of his early teacher, Stanislavski, whose method is based on exploring physical actions in the given circumstances. The Grotowski method of acting, built on these models, is still taught in many theater training programs today, with his 1968 book, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, considered essential reading.

In parallel to Grotowski was a return of the avant garde movement in theater. The avant garde wanted to reintroduce the occult and use ritual to fight against the commodification of theater, which had again moved more toward spectacle. Artists such as Peter Brook also drew inspiration from Artaud to try to create transcendent experiences of seeing beyond that which exists. Of all the artists influenced by Artaud, Brook was perhaps the most successful in synthesizing the philosophy into reality onstage. Brook's work allowed the actor to exist within the moment together with the audience, bridging the sacred space without barriers. After opening his book with, "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (1), Brook then breaks down theater into four types: deadly theatre, holy theatre, rough theatre, and immediate theatre. The first type, deadly theatre, describes the commercial theater, where the actors are not given the space for exploration of the text, but rather work towards the preconceived idea of the audience's expectations. In describing the commodification of Broadway, Brook said,

> Broadway is not a jungle, it is a machine into which a great many parts snugly interlock. Yet each of these parts is brutalized; it has been deformed to fit and

function smoothly. This is the only theatre in the world where every artist—by
this, I mean designers, composers, lighting electricians, as well as actors—needs
an agent for his personal protection. (20)

In comparison, Brook called his holy theatre "The Invisible-made-visible" (49).
His idea in this was that a director could take that which wasn't seen and put it onstage to
be experienced. This created a sacred space in which a "greater reality could be found"
(64). Brook connects his holy theatre to Artaud and the Theatre of the Absurd, where it is
distilled down to the most honest of human emotions, and audiences could engage at a
pure level without defenses. But he challenges the idea that the audience in Artaud's
frame was still passive, where he strove to find active engagement and discovery. His
goal in holy theatre was to create "happenings" or moments of true connection, a spark of
magic or art between people in a particular moment.

Brook then moves to his third form, rough theatre. This was a more grounded,
base form that could exist in any space, and was intended to entertain while maintaining a
strong connection to the audience. Rough theatre exists more in the here and now of the
tangible world, rather than the invisible of the holy theatre. Immediate theatre is the last
of Brook's forms and is the most abstract and holistic. It is the theatre that exists only in a
given moment between an audience and a performer, almost as if it is a living, breathing
entity. This immediate theatre, which in practicality includes the entire production
process starting from the early designs, ebbs and flows with the interactions between
people, and between people and space, in which the participant must be fully present to
actively experience it. Brook says, "He [the actor] must bring into being an unconscious
state of which he is completely in charge...Catharsis can never have been simply an
emotional purge: it must have been an appeal to the whole man" (156-157).

In these forms of theater, Brook outlined the framework in which he created his own work, both onstage and on film, and used ritualistic theater practices to create a community of artists and sacred spaces in which to perform. While he was strongly influenced by the avant garde, his theories and approach have been equally applied to more traditional theater as well, allowing his work to bridge the conversation between the two.

What all the artists of the avant garde are seeking in their attempts to create a sacred space is connection, each in a slightly different way. With Wagner it could be an otherworldly connection, whereas Brook and Grotowski seem to be seeking something more human. Brook, Artaud, the Living, and Brecht emphasized shared space with the audience, a group experience versus an individual experience. However, the similarities are there, and can also be seen in the artists of today. One example is the Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović, whose work is focused on feminist identity and the ritual communication between the artist and the audience. One of her most well-known pieces was presented in 2010 at New York City's MoMA, titled *The Artist is Present*. In this piece she sat at a table in an open gallery, and visitors were invited to spend five minutes sitting in a chair across from her, with instructions to not speak or have physical contact. It was extremely popular, and the lines for a turn to participate were long. In response to this Abramović said, "It was [a] complete surprise…this enormous need of humans to actually have contact" (moma.org). In this she clearly distills what all these artists were working to create. While her performance setting of a table and chairs is certainly a far cry from the complexities of the theater at Bayreuth, they serve the same purpose of holding a space for two or more people to share a

connection in which something, either spoken or not, is exchanged, and both leave

changed from the experience.

Chapter V.

Theater and Connection in the COVID Era

Theater was dealt a significant blow in the spring of 2020 with the COVID-19 outbreak. Companies across the country were shuttered. The ability to physically share space and contact was prevented by government mandate and significant health risk. Suddenly the rituals and superstitions, and how they connected us to theatrical spaces, could no longer be practiced, for fear of spreading this deadly illness. However, there was still a need for community and for the creation of art in a shared space. Faced with this challenge, many practitioners began to look at how theater works when you can't bring people physically together. In the way the post-Civil War Occult Revival drew people to use art as a means for spiritual connection or The Living Theater's development in the years after WWII, the pandemic brought to the forefront a need for ritualistic processing. While there has been a movement towards ritualized participatory or immersive theater in the 21st Century with shows such as Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, COVID-enforced quarantines made it a necessity. Artists started exploring new mediums to share performances, and audience members were forced to, as Vinson Cunningham described in his article in *The New Yorker*, "watch plays alone, in the crannies of our homes, instead of drawing us into proximity with strangers" (Cunningham). Zoom Theater, or plays shared in a digital web conferencing platform, became part of the everyday vernacular. What had been an art form that relied merely on a performer and an audience member now required technology and an internet connection. One question that this brings up is the medium in which shows are performed. We must look at media space or media as space.

In the early 2000s, the internet became more broadly available to the mass market, where users could share and contribute content rather than just receive information. While it had previously been used in government and academia for sharing purposes, the proliferation of high-speed internet connections and home computers allowed anyone to now engage with it as a participatory environment. Sites such as WordPress and MySpace created forums for anyone with access to be able to create a community and share their personal thoughts and interactions. In 2009 Carey delineated the theories behind these modes of communication. Early forms of the internet were transmission, used for the distribution of information sent out by a limited few in power. Web 2.0, as it is known, moved to ritual communication, with more equitable exchange of ideas and dialogue. This began to lay the groundwork for cyberspace as a place of production or creation. In his chapter, "The Webcam Subculture and the Digital Enclosure," in the book *MediaSpace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age*, Mark Andrejevic says,

> the development of interactive, networked communication technologies offers to transform sites formerly devoted to passive reception into spaces of production. Digital convergence ostensibly overwhelms the spatial divisions associated with the concentration of power, and with the alienation of consumers and viewers from the production process. Thanks to the new medium, we can all gain access to the means of production by migrating into the undifferentiated, liberating realm of cyberspace. (194)

In the transition into cyberspace as a location for creating rather than a tool for transmitted communication, we have begun to identify it as an actual space. However, we must ask: How can communion occur in a space made of digital ones and zeros? Can we create a sacred space in cyberspace? Taking it further, how does that creation of ritual communication in a virtual format apply to theatrical performance? If we are not sharing

a physical space, breathing the same air, a potentially lethal concept in a pandemic, can we still have communion between performers and audience?

Before we can determine if a virtual space can be sacred, we must ask what is the ontology, or nature of being, of this digital realm. In 1996, as a response to the passage of the US Telecommunications Reform Act John Perry Barlow claimed the internet as a place of freedom in his manifesto published through the Electronic Frontier Foundation. He stated, "We will create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace" (Barlow) and claimed that the internet belongs to both everyone and no one, declaring that it was a space that could not be controlled by, "Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel" (Barlow). In this manifesto he also outlines not only his hopes for self-governance and equality of cyberspace, but also defines what he believes it is made of, asserting that, "Cyberspace consists of transactions, relationships, and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the web of our communications. Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live" (Barlow). A slightly more spiritual perspective can be found from digital philosopher and creator Jaron Lanier, one of the inventors of virtual reality technology. Lanier, who has written several books on both the positive and negative aspects of connected technology, describes cyberspace as a reflection of its users. In a 1998 interview in *Wired* Magazine, he expanded on this idea, claiming,

> The Internet has created the most precise mirror of people as a whole that we've yet had. It is not a summary prepared by a social scientist or an élite think tank. It is not the hagiography of an era, condensed by a romantic idealist or a sneering cynic. It is the real us, available for direct inspection for the first time. Our collective window shades are now open. We see the mundanity, the avarice, the ugliness, the perversity, the loneliness, the love, the inspiration, the serendipity, and the tenderness that manifest in humanity. (Lanier)

Lanier's argument that the internet is merely the sum of its users humanizes it more than Barlow's idea of an interconnected web inside of which users interact. While this concept of the internet as a separate entity from its users does lend itself to the idea that it would then have a space that could be occupied and made sacred for a performance. However, the creation out of communion concept of Lanier's creates more rich possibilities for that space to be made sacred. This echoes Eliade's ideas of an imago mundi, finding order in the chaos to create something larger than the sum of its parts. The ontology of this has historically been applied to a physical space, particularly when looking at it in a religious context or a historical theater context, but in applying Lanier's theory the ontology of the virtual space becomes the same. As opposed to Barlow and Lanier, who try to define the 'what' of digital space, Carey's explorations are more useful in looking at the 'how' of it. In applying this to virtual space, it is the difference between sending a bulk email and an interactive chat board, with the former being only transmission, and the latter a community engaged in ritual communication.

For many people, digital space has created a means of connecting to other people in Carey's model of ritual communication, possibly those who they might not have been able to connect with otherwise. This has been amplified during the COVID pandemic and has made the internet a lifeline of communication. While certainly it has been used for final goodbyes or funerals, it has also been used for weddings and celebrations of new life, allowing people from all over the world to share in these rituals together, even if they are physically distanced. A generation of grandchildren have learned how to teach their grandparents how to use FaceTime and Zoom, and families have created new rituals

around the joint lighting of Shabbat candles or puja offerings across multiple time zones. While not everyone may understand the technology behind it, people have come to understand that digital space can be defined as many things depending on the needs of the community using it. This is also true in how it is defined for theater, where the artists serve as the translators of access into this new realm.

The concept of artists as facilitators of experience is discussed in depth by Ranciere in *The Emancipated Spectator*. He says,

> What the artist does is to weave together a new sensory fabric by wresting percepts and affects from the perceptions and affections that make up the fabric of ordinary experience. Weaving this new fabric means creating a form of common expression or a form of expression of the community. (56)

Here we again return to the idea of communion and community. While Ranciere was writing more specifically of art that existed in a physical space, it is also relevant to art created in a digital space. Virtual theater has democratized access, but has it come at the cost of a shared physical space and communitas? In addition, how can the shared physiological effect, or somatic transformation exist if participants are not together in physical space? To truly know for sure, a study such as the Encore heartbeat study would need to be repeated in a virtual context, but I posit that it is unlikely to have a similar outcome with audience members not sitting immediately next to each other.

In exploring whether theatrical virtual space is equal to a physical space, there also seems to be a generational divide between digital natives and others who did not necessarily grow up with digital technology as a daily part of their lives. Lanier also commented on this generational divide in 1998, well before the idea of "zoom theater" could have been imagined, but again approaches it with a hopeful spirit. He states,

Adults are more terrified. They fear losing control to a younger generation that is more digitally nimble. Because parents can't understand what their kids are doing on the Web, there are calls for a level of censorship and control of communication that no dictator has ever enjoyed. There have been hysterical reactions to young cyberpranksters. What needs to be remembered is this: We are witnessing the most productive, intelligent, and optimistic example of youthful rebellion in the history of the world." (Lanier)

This "youthful rebellion" that led society into the internet age has also led us into the age of virtual theater, as they have been the most comfortable with the technology that enables it. Many of the earliest companies that created digital theater were not the large, well-established, older companies, but rather the smaller, newer companies that were able to nimbly shift their work to an entirely new platform. There are also parallels to the historical cycles in theater, when artists or smaller theater companies would create art in response to not only the conventional theater happening around them, but as a means of addressing what was happening in the larger world. Brecht using new methods of performance to call attention to the rise of fascism evolved over a longer period than the move to virtual theater in the COVID pandemic, but the similarities are striking.

One of the first companies to explore the possibility of creating community and performance in a digital space was Arlekin Players, based in Needham, MA. Artistic Director Igor Golyak and his partner, Darya Denisova, transformed their living room into a performance space when they created *The State vs. Natasha Banina*, a one-woman adaptation of the play *Natasha's Dream* by Yaroslava Pulinovich. As computer generated graphics augment her story, sixteen year old Natasha (played by Denisova) pleads her murder case to the jury, in this case the audience logged in via Zoom to watch the show. The audience is given polls, and after Natasha weaves her story of loss, injustice, and

perceived betrayal, they are asked to vote on her guilt or innocence. As Maya Phillips says in her June 17th *New York Times* review of the piece, "Zoom ironically makes the interaction even more personal; Natasha looks at the screen and calls out the names of audience members, pleading with them to see her side of the story." The production is created in a cinematic fashion, with multiple cameras, close ups, and digital effects. After the performance I attended in April 2020 Golyak discussed his need to create and to connect with others after Arlekin's performance space was closed by COVID. He described how he and Denisova put together the production for themselves as much as for audiences, through trial and error, and never expected the success that the production was finding. Their goal in the ritual of their theater practice was to find the sacred or transformational space for themselves, and they ended up connecting with a worldwide community. On the night that I attended there were audience members from not just Massachusetts, but from across the United States and several other countries, and according to an October 2020 profile in *The Boston Globe* by Don Aucoin, Golyak references attendance by such celebrity artists as Jessica Hecht and Mikhail Baryshnikov (Aucoin). This production took advantage of Barlow's theory of the internet being made up of an interconnected web where users interact, placing audience members from all over the world together in one virtual location. However, by Carey's theory, there was very little ritual communication. While Denisova spoke directly to those in attendance, there was very little opportunity for response, other than voting on the character's innocence or guilt in a poll. There was the implication of interaction, echoing what one might experience in a physical space, but only on a surface level.

In this way, digital performance has increased access, and theater can be accessed not only from the other side of the world, but by audiences that may have never been able to afford a trip to an actual performance venue. This equality in access to theater in cyberspace has been used as a strong argument for why digital theater or Zoom theater holds similar (or more) value than its original form. However, there is still the question of the space that is created. Certainly, in an interactive setting the performers and the audience can participate as members of the same moment and take the same narrative journey. However, there is a disconnect that will always exist with the limitations of a screen, and the theater-going experience is much less immersive in a digital format. Sociologist Erving Goffman, in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, suggests that a limitation such as this may help create important boundaries between the audience and performers. He states, "It is a widely held notion that restrictions placed upon contact, the maintenance of social distance, provide a way in which awe can be generated and sustained in the audience" (Goffman 45).

Beginning in 2010, Theater for One eliminated the disconnect between actor and audience by creating single seat custom road box theaters that were then placed in Times Square. These mini theaters partially mimicked the peep show booths that were at one time popular in the area. Each box would hold one audience member and one actor, performing a 10-minute play just for them. This eliminated the boundary between the two, in opposition to Goffman's theory of a social distance needed to create awe in a theatrical moment. Reviewer Charles Isherwood, writing for *The New York Times* in June 2011 asked, after seeing a Theater for One show, "What better place to reassert the ideal of the theatrical experience as intense communion between performer and audience?"

This intimacy between two people is perhaps the pinnacle of the creation of sacred space in theater. It exists not only just in that moment, but also only between those two individuals, who both leave the experience changed in some way. COVID-19 forced Theater For One to align more with Goffman's ideas of boundaries between actors and audience, which meant social distancing had to be enforced on their next project. Creator Christine Jones and her co-Artistic Director Jenny Koons had to adjust their work in a way that would keep both actor and audience member safe. This adjustment coincided with both the 100th anniversary of ratification of the 19th Amendment and a radical exploration of racial justice in the United States, including in the theater. In an *American Theater* article discussing the 2020 updates to Theater for One, Jones and Koons are quoted from a joint statement they issued, saying,

> A spectrum of responses is essential to create lasting change in the fight against systemic racism. …*Here We Are* is our vision of American theatre: one where a vibrant chorus of the most innovative and eloquent artists are centered to share their voices. Theatre for One is made by many. We are committed to creating intimate exchanges in equitable digital and physical spaces. (Editors)

To facilitate these intimate exchanges, Theater for One created the show, *Here We Are,* on a custom online platform to mimic their roadbox theaters, adding a shared waiting space or digital lobby, where patrons could mingle before the performance before they went into a virtual room with the actor performing their show for the evening. In addition, according to *American Theater*, to address the social justice movements that are occurring in both the country and the theater, Jones and Koons hired all Black, Indigenous, and women of color writers and directors (Editors). The question with Theater for One is the same as it is for Arlekin Players: Can sacred space be created in cyberspace? Here the answer is clearer, as the intimacy and immediacy of contact

between one actor and one audience member allow for the rituals of shared interaction

between the two, permitting Turner's liminal space to be created. This shared

interactivity also allows Carey's ritual communication to be exchanged between both

parties, and not just transmitted from the actor to the audience. This was amplified by the

creation of a virtual lobby, which allowed the audience members to connect with each

other as well before moving on to the personal interaction with an actor. Cunningham

describes his experience after being asked a question by the actor in his performance as,

"I could feel my own presence, and imagined that my expression—which I hoped said

"Generous Listener"—was subtly influencing Guevara's performance, that I was the

unspeaking scene partner in an acting exercise" (Cunningham). This connection could

equally describe a moment in a physical theater as one on a webcam.

Moving away from that connection and going in a completely different direction

in trying to create a virtual space is Theater in Quarantine, made by Joshua William Gelb,

who live-streams on YouTube with the viewing audience able to chat during the

performance. In describing his work on his website, Gelb poses the question,

> How can theater practitioners artfully push against these new boundaries of social
> distance to embrace the limitations of remoteness? Is it possible to make theater in
> a digital arena that doesn't sacrifice the act of collaboration or our shared
> theatrical values: feats of liveness, collective experience, ephemeralness, the
> protean empty space. (Gelb)

Gelb's short performance pieces, which he creates inside a small white box, or as he

describes it, a closet, are abstract and digitally manipulated to make it appear as if there

are multiples of him, or that he is not alone. Since Gelb is ultimately transmitting his

performance, it is missing the closure of the feedback or response loop from the audience,

unlike either Arlekin or Theater for One, where there was live interaction. While the

audience can chat through text during the performance, there is no direct connection between the actor and the audience. This creates a connection between the audience, but it is disconnected from the typical actor/audience bond, which denies the possibility for ritual communication. In addition, these pieces can be watched offline, or outside of the live-streamed format, and the audience member can have a similar experience. This goes beyond what Goffman describes as desired boundaries and creates a true separation. While Gelb's Theater for Quarantine pieces are evocative and elegant, I challenge their connection to theatrical ritual and their ability to create a space that is solemnized. While they are essentially short films, Gelb resists becoming cinematic. He holds the space in a broad, horizontal single shot, similar to what you would expect in a proscenium theater. However, without the partnership between two people, whether that is two performers or actor and audience, transformation cannot occur.

The question must be asked of how much of the transformation relies on the actual space in which the performance is taking place, and how any given performance is affected by all the performances that have come before it in the space. This is more obvious in a physical venue, where there may have been hundreds of plays performed on the same stage through as many years. Physical space has memory, both in the tangible sense of left behind props or paint on the floor, but also in the intangible, where the ghosts of words long ago spoken still linger. These memories that are held by the physical space are a significant contributing factor to the superstitions and rituals that theater practitioners hand down as the cultural inheritance in their communities. The ghosts that the ghostlight keeps from causing mischief are not malevolent spirits that come in from the external world. They are the ghosts of past performances, and

occasionally the ghosts of company actors who have passed, still holding on to the physical space where their art was created. However, digital space has no memory. Certainly, there is the expression that nothing is ever forgotten on the internet, but in live performance happening in a virtual arena, there are no physical structures to absorb any of that sacred energy that is created every night. The challenge to this is that each new medium must establish itself before it can have a history, and simply because we cannot observe the place where the memory is held in cyberspace does not mean that it doesn't exist. Is it possible that as we move forward into new means of defining space in a digital platform that those ghosts of past performances will also return? I argue that any time a sacred space is created in performance, a piece of that sanctity will linger, even if its record in the lineage of ritual is recorded in ones and zeros.

So how do we contextualize digital theater? Is it, as Laura Collins-Hughes says in her *New York Times* column, "Digital Theater Isn't Theater. It's a Way to Mourn Its Absence?" Or is it a separate way of communion, to mourn the loss of the traditional form? Perhaps transformation is impossible without sharing the same physical space, and theater in cyberspace is not theater at all. If we use Lanier's theory that the internet is made up of its users, then anywhere a group of people choose to commune may become sacred. This would also be true in physical space as well, that it is the ritual and the community that make the space sacred, rather than a space being inherently sacred. It can either mimic a physical theater experience or it can connect people in an entirely new way. In the same way that Jerzy Grotowski and the Living Theater broke out of the traditional theater space to create performance space that allows for spiritual transcendence or to ask, 'what does it mean to be human,' Arlekin Players, Theater for

One, and Theater in Quarantine are again breaking out of the traditional space into a

virtual one to create communion and a sacred space in a 21st century model.

Chapter VI.

Conclusion

As the COVID-19 pandemic begins to wane and artists examine what they have
learned from the past eighteen months, we must look at what the future of theater is in
this new reality. We are at a point of transition, or a moment of liminality, and how
theater will be transformed when we move into the next phase is not yet fully known.
Theater is a fundamental piece of our society and culture. It is a tool for preserving our
history and our stories, and the community created through the passing down of these
rituals is part of that. In a time when we have been more disconnected from those around
us, the transformative experience that occurs in the sacred space of performance allows
us to relate and helps us better understand the members of the society around us, even
those from very different backgrounds. The sacred space and shared ritual allow a
community to connect, build, and grow.

Throughout the past 150 years artists have responded with ritual practice to
commodified spectacle theater, political extremism, or in grief or mourning of traumatic
events. COVID-19 is not the first crisis that has affected the theater. William Shakespeare
and his company of players dealt with multiple closures of their theater from outbreaks of
Bubonic Plague at the turn of the 17th century. The b'hoy took to the streets outside the
Astor Place Opera house in New York to push back against the upper class and their
attempt to suppress the boisterous communal atmosphere. In 1918 Broadway stayed open
during the Spanish Flu, and in fact welcomed audiences to distract from the national

crisis. There have been two world wars and multiple other smaller wars and military conflicts that took audiences out of the theater. To all of these events theater makers answered with shared rituals to restore the collective space. They metaphorically spun around three times and knocked on the door of the theater to ask for readmittance, returning to a space that had been held for them in their absence.

In 2020 every artist was thrust into the same situation and faced with the same challenge. All of us who create theater had to become experimental artists, exploring unknown mediums, developing work in response to the political and global situation around us. Each of us was faced with the choice of how to respond. Some chose to step back and wait until the commercial theater could return, and they could continue producing grand spectacle for audiences to receive. Others chose to delve into new ways to share their art, protected from the virus by the digital distance between participants. In doing so they continued to attempt ritual practices, or as Ranciere suggested, allowed communities to share experiences between audience and performer. This was not always successful. However, it underlines the tremendous need for communitas and communion in the creation of theater. What we do, we do together, whether physically or virtually.

One question that arises is whether virtual theater can be defined as theater, or if it is a different entity of equal value. Theater exists in many forms, defined by those who create it, and digital theater may simply be a 21st century expansion on that idea. However, it cannot be the same or replace theater in a physical space, which will always be a more powerful and transformative experience. The metaphysical exchange of energy and the sharing of breath cannot be replaced by virtual reality no matter how advanced the technology. There is no ghostlight for a digital space, keeping the ghosts company

until the next performance. Those virtual spaces are transitory and appear and disappear for each use. A physical space has continuity, history, and perhaps even a memory.

This research serves as a case study of why live theater is still important, as it identifies some of the limitations of digital platforms and their inability to provide the essential qualities that make a live theatrical experience important. While a physical performance space can be made sacred by the actions of the practitioners it is used by, the question that remains is if a virtual space can be sacred. To explore this, we must also look at the inadequacies we have discovered in the digital theater world. Current technology does not allow shared audience/performer interaction beyond two people, so an audience larger than one person is not able to engage with each other as well as the performer as they would in a physical space. The same challenge is true for actors who are not in the same location, as there are limitations on how many people can speak at one time and who can be heard while someone else is speaking. It lacks the fundamental somatic experience that happens in a traditionally embodied art form. In addition, there is slight signal lag that is affected by internet connections, which means that even though it may be imperceptible, not all participants are experiencing events at the same moment. The internet has become a space used more for commerce and transaction than for the creation of art, and this too is a challenge for the ability of a virtual space to be sanctified. A ritualized space should be transformational, not transactional, and the commodification of the digital realm is deeply ingrained. For these reasons I assert that with the technology that currently exists and the tools that are currently available, a space that is sacred to both performers and audiences cannot exist. However, there can be a space that is created for a group of performers who repeatedly return where a significant facsimile of a sacred

space can exist. Perhaps then virtual performance should be described as theatrically adjacent. A new form has been created, equal to theater, but different in its essence. Since the need for this work arose quickly as the global COVID-19 pandemic spread, we described it in terms we were familiar with, but as it develops into its own artform, new language will be created to help define it. Perhaps as digital performance grows it will also build its own set of superstitions and rituals among those who practice it, but that is something that only time will tell.

As we have seen, much of the cyclic change of theater happens in response to a political conditions or social movements. It is also informed by developments in media and art, as well as global and local crises. Part of where we are going is informed by where we have been. Perhaps live theater, or theater in a shared physical space, and virtual theater should coexist in the way that the avant garde theater existed and was created in response to conventional theater. If we look back to Carey's proposal of communication models, conventional theater is perhaps closer to transmission, or the sending out of information. It is also much more likely to be commodified or presented in a commercial format. Most examples of virtual theater would also fit this transmission idea, where content is sent out. However, in most virtual formats there is not a true exchange or interaction between performers and audience, meaning there is not communion between the two. It is possible that future technology, such as virtual reality, will change this and help develop a new paradigm of connection, but this is not currently an actuality. Compare this to avant garde and live theater, which more clearly falls under the ritual communication of Carey's theory. A communal interchange among people with shared culture or traditions would also be more likely to have accepted rituals that help

foster and create a space that can be sanctified. The ritual communication that enables the transformation is more likely to exist in a physical space rather than a virtual one. Looking back, another significant turning point in theatrical forms was in the late 1800s, as Wagner began to bring his total works of art to the stage and ritualized theater became more prevalent. Additionally, there was a cultural split[9] that began to occur in American theater, between the participatory, social space where all cross-sections of society intermingled and the highbrow, well-heeled audience that sat in silence to take in the show. This conflict of transmissive versus ritual communication between audience and performer was a significant factor in the Astor Place Riots. In this instance, two actors became the representatives of broader cultural discord, and the fighting went from beyond theoretical to reality.

This is part of why the theatrical moment is important, to document the society and culture of the community around the artists who create it. The COVID-19 pandemic challenged theater to reinvent itself by physically separating the participants in a way that had not happened before. Live theater in a physical space is not going away and will not be replaced with its virtual partner. This does not negate the value of work created in alternate formats. Theater created in a virtual space drastically increases access to the art form, particularly to under-resourced communities, and helps build a more inclusive theatrical community in the process. How do we bridge the transformative physical space with that inclusion and access? This is ongoing work that does not have an answer yet. As theaters begin to slowly reopen, it is the responsibility of all practitioners to deeply

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[9] For a deeper exploration of this cultural division, please see *Highbrow/Lowbrow: the Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* by Lawrence Levine.

engage with that question and find a balance between the needs of collective physical space and reaching those who previously may not have been able to be present in that space. In parallel to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the American people became more aware of the pandemic of systemic racism in the United States. This led to a deep examination of what was missing in companies that were producing theater, from the lack of access to the lack of people of color in leadership and artistic roles. Unable to be onstage, many artists took the time to deeply examine the industry in which they were working and found significant flaws in inclusion, diversity, equity, and access[10]. They have started to define how the industry should look and be guided as professionals slowly return to work in late 2021.

Communities are returning to physical spaces with a need to mourn and grieve. More than 600,000 people died of COVID in the United States alone, and many others all over the world. In defining how the art of the next few years should be created, there is a strong trend to push against returning to the way things were before the quarantines. Companies are asking why they are doing particular shows, and who has access to creating them. Change is being made with intentionality. Engaging in this ritual communication with their communities allows for an exchange of ideas and practices and prepares the lineage of the theater ritual to be handed to its next generation. After a time when the COVID pandemic forced communities physically apart, we need more ritual rather than less. The communal bond needs to be rebuilt and redeveloped, and shared practice is how that can happen.

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[10] One group that has been a leader in this work is We See You White American Theater (WSYWAT), a collective of theater makers of color, whose open letter of demands for inclusive and equitable work practices has more than 50,000 co-signatories.

I started this research looking at this topic from a very different perspective. The original intention was exploring the origins of theatrical superstitions and why they have been passed from person to person through to contemporary practitioners. It grew and changed from the what into the why, but ultimately settled on where. While superstitions are still the entryway into this work, the exploration of the need for community and sacred space among theater practitioners has been compelling, and there are certainly many unanswered questions for the future. My friend Tony Church once said, "The theater has kept me, and for that I shall be eternally grateful." While he was primarily referring to having been able to be a career working actor, he also spoke of the fulfillment of the art form, and the community that was created among the people who practiced that art. Part of the answer to the original question of why these superstitions are passed down can be found in that community, and the shared sacred space that has kept them together for hundreds of years. The culture of the theater is about relationships between people, which has shaped and changed how the work has been created even though many of the rituals and superstitions have stayed the same. While many of us have made our living from it, it is not the commodity, but rather the commune that is truly important. That is why we hold the space open for it, rather than allow the darkness or the ghosts to take up residence. The eternal ghostlight of theatrical practice holds open the sacred space for practitioners yet to come.

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