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Theatre Audiences and Perceptions of 'Liveness' in Performance

Abstract

That theatre is performed live is central to its definition, particularly in contrast with non-live performances on film or television. Yet, despite the centrality of the issue, there is little qualitative research asking whether there is indeed a distinct nature to the experience of live performance. This paper employs techniques of discourse analysis to explore empirically originating understandings of how live theatre is constructed as live by audiences today.

The paper first establishes its contextual background – examining prominent challenges to conceptualisations of liveness and looking at possible relationships between language and experience – before describing and analysing the findings of a small scale exercise in audience research. Through participant directed discussions, the paper reveals the centrality of shared memory, awareness of the human performer and sense of the audience to the experience of theatre and asks to what extent these represent the articulation of a distinct perception of liveness.

Key words: theatre audiences, discourse analysis, live performance

Theatre Audiences and Perceptions of 'Liveness' in Performance

That theatre is performed live is often presented as central to its definition, particularly when making contrasts with non-live performances on film or television. Additionally, this 'liveness' has increasingly become seen as something consumed when attending theatre performances, a commodity specifically purchased by audiences, again especially in contrast to non-live performances. At the same time, however, there is little empirical research asking whether there is indeed a distinct nature to audiences' experience of live theatre.

Prompted by this lack of experience-centred discussions of liveness, this paper presents the findings of a small-scale exploratory exercise in audience research. This exercise uses techniques of discourse analysis to examine participant directed discussions of a theatre performance, with the objective of understanding how audiences construct their experience of the live theatre through language. The paper first establishes its research context, examining recent debates about the conceptualisation of liveness and

considering the relationship between language and audience experience. It then describes and analyses the findings of a small scale exercise in audience research that brings the free flowing discussions of audiences about the experience of theatre (or 'audience talk') to the fore. Through this exercise the paper investigates how the experience of theatre is implicitly and explicitly articulated, constructed and valued as live in the talk of audiences. This then enables theoretical conceptualisations of liveness to be returned to and reflected upon in the conclusion of the paper, which also briefly considers another recent and valuable exploration of theatre audience and liveness.

Liveness

In March 2000, Edinburgh based arts development organisation The Audience Business launched an advertising campaign designed around the slogan 'You'll Love It Live' (2000). The campaign consisted of a press launch, PR stunts and series of posters, including one carrying the slogan 'Experience the thrill of a live performance.' Aiming to increase awareness of the live arts among casual and infrequent audiences, the campaign is a telling illustration of how live performance is often packaged and promoted as *live* performance.

Explicitly, as in this example, or more implicitly elsewhere, live arts companies, festivals and productions frequently attempt to attract audiences through the description of performances as live performances. This is not least the case with theatre. Indeed, that theatre is live – 'live actors on stage in front of a live audience' (Jellicoe, 1967:67) – is often presented as central to its definition, frequently as an unreflective assumption. More recently, however, this live status of theatre has become of central concern to researchers, producing contrasting ontological and deconstructionist interpretations of the significance of 'liveness' (see for example Connor, 1989, Thom, 1993 and Wurtzler, 1992). Equally, many practitioners implicitly explore the nexus between the live and the non live in their work, which is performed before audiences more used to recorded media. Yet, despite the centrality of the issue, there has been little research into how different forms of performance might be differently experienced by audiences. Instead, much discussion of this area is primarily theoretical, philosophical or even occasionally anecdotal; the experiential impact of liveness on actual audiences, by its nature something elusive and difficult to access, remains an under-researched area.

A telling example of this, worth exploring in some detail, is Philip Auslander's forceful book *Liveness* (1999). Here, Auslander develops arguments to counter what he sees as the implicit prejudices and unconsidered judgments that often underpin cultural perceptions of live performance, particularly its valuation over non-live performance. In particular, Auslander formulates his arguments in response to Peggy Phelan's influential construction of performance as 'representation without reproduction'. Although she does not specifically mention the word, Phelan locates her definition of performance in qualities of the live, displayed as she writes that 'Performance's only life is in the present', and continues:

Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. (1993:146)

Performance here stands for live performance; the 'circulation of representations' could cover a range of possibilities Phelan perceives as secondary to, or parasitic on, that live performance. Secondary representations include, perhaps, memorabilia, marketing, criticism, photography and, inevitably, non-live performances – but not, importantly, audiences' talk about a performance. Crucially, Phelan formulates this definition as ontological, a description of the essential nature of performance. In response, Auslander argues not only that the status and perception of live performance as *live* is historically contingent, but that it is in fact constructed upon the very idea of non-live performance. Indeed, Auslander points out that as a phrase 'live performance' dates back only as far as the 1930s and the development of relatively high quality recording and producing techniques in various media (1999:52-53). Expanding outwards from this point, Auslander argues that the very idea of liveness is the product of 'mediatization', and the existence of performance within recordings, non-live media and other circulating representations.

To support his arguments, taking popular music, theatre and television as his principal territories, Auslander works through a lengthy series of investigations of practical examples of the mutual entanglement of live and mediatized performances, systematically seeking to question, erode and finally discard as irrelevant, insignificant and unconvincing any residual value and ontological differentiations between live and non-live performances. His examples include the now notorious case of Milli Vanilli (who not only lip-synched to their records during live performances, but who didn't sing in the original recordings either): here the impossibility of audiences discerning what element of the performances was live and what recorded suggests that such distinctions are redundant. Auslander also points out that a frequently used synthesised version of clapping hands is now, apparently, perceived by audiences as more real than the real thing: suggesting that live performance does not have an intrinsic claim to superior reality. Another illustration suggests that the use of large screen replays at sports events and rock concerts presents the audience with higher quality viewing, and again a more real experience, than the live performer far away in the distance. Alternatively, ostensibly live performances, such as restaurant appearances of Ronald McDonald or Disney stage shows, are created from non-live originated templates that are replicated and multiplied endlessly and identically. Here the live can neither claim to be unique in itself, nor the original to a non-live recording that in fact precedes it.

Liveness is certainly persuasive; Auslander's central aim of correcting the imbalance that he sees existing in the privileging of the live and neglect of the mediatized is significant. However, within his layering of examples upon examples, all too frequently it seems that serious consideration of the perceptions of actual audiences is neglected. While strong in his attempts to describe changing cultural attitudes to different forms of performance, Auslander ultimately seems uninterested in exploring what experiential distinctions might exist, even in the particular historical context in which he is writing. In seeking to debunk the unquestioning valuation of the live over the non-live, Auslander does not actually explore the phenomenological experience of the various forms of live, live like, and non-live performance. Removing or disregarding the discussion as to social prestige or cachet, Auslander's conclusion that the valuation of the live experience is a phenomenon created by the non-live does not negate the potential impact of audience perceptions of the live nor suggest what that experience of liveness might be.

Language and Experience

The conceptual debate about what live performance is, invites exploration through the examination of actual descriptions of audience experiences. Such descriptions could be located in written sources, such as letters, diary entries or on line discussion forums, but will also be present (if much more fleetingly) in informal conversation – people who see live performances talk about their experiences. Such audience talk forms a discourse that represents and constructs the speakers' experiences of theatre performances. Is it possible, through analysis of such talk, to reveal how an experience was directed and defined by the live nature of the performance?

There are, unfortunately, very few detailed explorations of the relationship between language and the articulation of the experience of theatre performances. Those considerations of this area that do exist are much more likely to focus on music (see for example Crafts, Cavicchi and Keil, 1993, DeNora, 2000 and Harris, 1997). This greater body of reflection on the relationship between language and music is perhaps unsurprising, as the non-referential nature of music creates fundamental difficulties in expressing musical experiences in language. Indeed, George Steiner declares that 'When it speaks of music, language is lame' (1989:19), while Roland Barthes (1985) and Hans Keller (1987 and 1994), among others, have reflected on the difficult relationship between language and music. Nonetheless, despite the distinct characteristics of music, discussions of the relationship between music and language are worth looking at further as the extremities of this particular field highlight more widely applicable points about the relationship between language, expressivity and the experience of performance. In particular, I want to use some comments by Theodor Adorno to explore what kinds of talk might be of particular interest.

In his work on the sociology of music Adorno frequently writes about the difficulty of communicating experiences of music in language, leading him to reach a sceptical conclusion on the validity of verbalised audience responses in empirical research:

Musical introspection is a most uncertain thing. Besides, most people who have not mastered the technical terminology will encounter insurmountable obstacles in verbalising their own musical experiences, quite apart from the fact that the verbal expression itself is already prefiltered and its value for a knowledge of primary reactions is thus doubly questionable. (1976:4)

Clearly identified here is the problem of talking about artistic experiences. However, the two conclusions that Adorno draws from this need developing further. First, Adorno places particular emphasis on 'technical terminology', suggesting that the difficulty of responding to music is lessened for experts sharing a developed technical vocabulary. Similar points are frequently made in relation to other performing arts: for example, both Martin Esslin, in *Anatomy of Drama* (1976:55-66), and Janet Adshead, in *Dance Analysis* (1988), suggest that the solution to the difficulty of articulating experiences of theatre and dance is the development of a strong technical vocabulary. However, a quick reading of any discourse on music, theatre or dance, however 'expert', soon reveals the frequent employment of vocabulary far from technical and far from codified. Indeed, the mixing of technical and non technical language is something often observed in writing about music, with Frank Sibley suggesting in 'Making Music Our Own' that everyone who discusses music uses such extra musical terms. Sibley argues that this additional language is essential, as technical vocabulary may articulate the character and qualities of music, but does 'little to explain why music may engage us as appreciative listeners' (1993:168). In other words, attention needs to be focuses on languages of pleasure and experience as much as on technical talk.

Adorno's second conclusion is equally interesting, but perhaps if we are interested in pleasure-talks then its significance is questionable. Adorno observes that verbal expressions are pre-filtered, mediated by consciousness, by wider social structures and by language itself. Consequently, Adorno suggests, such expressions do not present a perfect access to, or knowledge of, primary reactions; any attempt, employing any method, to externalise experience already removes it from the original experience. For Adorno, therefore, the fact that audiences' pleasure-talks are mediated through the problematic act of verbalisation describes the limitations of such expressions to sociological enquiry. Alternatively, as methodologies of discourse analysis demonstrate, the actual significance of audience talk can be located in the very cultural shaping and structuring of language that Adorno is suspicious of. It is this approach to the relationship between language and experience that is worth briefly revisiting here, considering exactly what kind of access to audience experience discourse analysis might provide.

While there are many different strands of discourse analysis, they all share a common interest in the significance of language and the production of meaning through language. In *Applied Discourse Analysis*, Carla Willig introduces the methodology as concerned with the ways in which language constructs objects, subjects and experiences, including subjectivity and a sense of self. Discourse analysts conceptualise language as constitutive of experience rather than representational or reflective. (1999:2)

The important point is that the interest in language is held for its own sake, and not as part of an attempt to get through language to a truth, reality, or original experience outside of language. Discourse analysis maintains that we do not only use language to describe the world, but also to constitute it. Its interest is not in asking *what* things are, but examining *how* people construct things through their use of language. For such an approach, experiences, personal responses and ideas rooted in social interactions – such as prejudices, jealousies or personal identities – are not things that can be discovered, 'but are created by the language that is used to describe them' (Burman and Parker, 1993:1).

Clearly, however, there must exist some kind of relationship between the phenomenological experience and its linguistic constitution, and there are also clearly key differences in the way language is conceived to relate to the world beyond it – with possibilities balanced between suggestions that language 'describes', 'constitutes' and 'constructs' experiences. One possible illustration of this is the writing of history, where the discovery of 'fact' and construction of a historical narrative plays between existence purely in language and existence in the world. Language does not construct the actual events of history, but it certainly constitutes their position within experience and the world made meaningful. Similarly, attempts to articulate the experience of a live performance constitute perceptions of that performance in particular and of 'liveness' more generally. Returning to Adorno, therefore, while he argues that audiences' articulations of pleasure and experience are of little use in accessing 'primary reactions' to music, discourse analysis would maintain that the verbal expressions of music bring music, or rather the experience and perception of music, into being. Such talk does not reflect or surround the experience of live performance, is not secondary to the experience, but instead constitutes that experience. As a result, audiences' pleasure-talks about live performances provide an opportunity to explore cultural perceptions and constructions of the live experience.

Audience Research Exercise

The virtual non-existence of in-depth analysis of the talk of theatre audiences, particularly about actual performances, invites the practical exploration of the possible utility of such

an approach. As a demonstration exercise even a small sample of such research has wide ranging potential. Indeed, small numbers of participants are also not necessarily a problem, particularly in the detailed process of discourse analysis. Further, as well as any analysis that might be made in relation to audiences' experience of theatre as live performance, the exercise would also place markers for future research in terms of methodology and potential outcomes.

With these goals in mind, an exploratory exercise was conducted, involving students from the University of Edinburgh. To obtain participants a number of classes were approached, asking for people willing to attend the theatre for free and talk about it afterwards. None of the participants had previously studied theatre as a specific subject. This decision to approach students was made purely on pragmatic grounds, although a couple of benefits should be noted: first, the participants were all aged between 20 and 29 (the students were mainly in their 3rd and 4th years, with one post-graduate) and consequently were likely to share cultural references and experiences; second, as students they would all be familiar with group, seminar-style discussions. A total of twelve volunteers came forward and were invited to attend a performance of *O/ga* at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh. (Brief contextual details about this production are provided at the end of the paper.)

The participants met up in two groups the following day to discuss the performance. One group consisted of five members (Elizabeth, Ewan, Justine, Nicola and Roger) the other of two (Miranda and Susan), forming an unplanned but analytically interesting contrast between a group discussion and two-way conversation. The remaining participants failed to turn up. (The names of the participants have been changed to ensure anonymity and permission to use the material was obtained.) With the intention of prompting a free flowing discussion the sessions were begun with a quick exercise asking the participants to write down their main 'likes' and 'dislikes' about the performance on different coloured post-it notes. These were then laid alongside each other and compared. The objective was to provide an initiative to get conversation flowing round a group of people who did not know each other, and to provide a point to which to return for additional stimulus if conversation ever flagged. Although the exercise did frame the initial discussion in terms of likes/dislikes, this at least matched the archetypal first post-performance question: 'did you enjoy it?'

The sessions were designed to encourage discussion without offering clear conceptual categories to participants that might influence their responses or the phrasing of their discussions. This methodology follows that employed in other applications of discourse analysis, such as Keith Harris, who also recognises the danger of the research constructing the object of analysis through pre definition (1997:5). In particular, therefore, no indication was given of an interest in the performance as *live* performance; instead participants were invited to simply talk about the play they had all seen the previous night. In practice this approach successfully initiated and maintained conversation, with the level of significant intervention from the researcher fairly low.

The discussions were recorded and transcribed, with the results analysed to identify recurring themes, repetitions and patterns, along with linguistic markers of the group dynamics, including points of firm agreement and discomfort, as well as more explicit discussion about theatre or live performance. The analysis is presented here in five sections – sub-headed 'Memory and Peers', 'Evaluative Judgements', 'The Actors', 'The Audience' and 'Theatre' – starting with points not specifically related to the title interest in liveness, but possibly manifested in the talk of audiences more generally. The paper then moves on to aspects more specific to theatre audiences that do appear to construct a distinct response to the experience of live performance. Clearly, a crucial and recurring question is the extent to which there exists a distinct articulation of liveness in the talk of

audiences – indeed, the paper will ask whether elements of the participants' talk can be described as articulating a sense of 'presentness' rather than 'liveness' – and this is something that will be returned to at the end of the paper.

Exercise Analysis

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Memory and Peers

Although the occasions in the discussions when the speakers were at their most articulate are especially illuminating, their less eloquent moments of conversational exchange are also revealing. Indeed, the first aspect of the discussions to observe is the mutual support provided to each other by the individual group members, which I did not notice so much at the time but is very conspicuous on the recordings. This occurs repeatedly, especially in the group discussion, with a background of sounds expressing agreement or recollection supporting whoever happens to be speaking at any moment. These demonstrations of support are in the form of isolated sounds, distinct words ('umm', 'right', 'yeah'), and longer interjections. I suspect that many of these verbal gestures of support were largely unconscious on the part of the group members, as such conversational tics are habitual and instinctive. Doubtless, many of them form part of the good-manners of conversation, a principal function being to show someone you are listening. (These gestures of support are more prominent on the recording because at the time they were literally background noise to the principal focus on the speaker.)

However, although many of the background interjections constitute the verbal equivalence of eye contact, offering support and confirming attention on the speaker, in this context they are more than simply good conversational practice. They also play a part in what I would describe as affirmation of each individual's — and collectively the group's — memory of the event. The interjections indicate that the listeners agree with the speaker, also affirming the speaker's memory, asserting that his or her recollections match their own. Below is a short example of this, in which (as in other extracts) I have attempted to identify all of the speakers and their contributions, although on occasion this is impossible as the particular becomes drowned in a general murmur:

Elizabeth – The thing is, that kind of, not madness but eccentricity (Nicola: Umm), was developed at the beginning with her cutting off her shoes (Roger: Yeah), but then it seemed to just go away (Nicola: Yeah; Roger: That's right; Justine: That's true; general noises of agreement). She seemed quite (Nicola & Justine: Normal) sane (Roger: Normal; general noises of agreement) from then on.

Several aspects are evident in this example, including the good manners indication of attention ('umm') or general agreement ('yeah'). Accompanying this is a more forthright declaration of support; here over the dropping of the character Olga's more visible eccentricities. Three listeners interject with audible contributions of agreement and recollection; their memory and sense of the event are the same as the principal speaker's, and they want to make that clear. In one case ('that's true') the interjection also suggests a memory inspired: the speaker has reminded this group member of something in the performance they had forgotten. Additionally, some of the listeners undertake to complete the speaker's sentence – 'She seemed quite (normal)' – with a third listener also, more belatedly echoing their agreement 'normal'.

These aspects – completion of each other's sentences, interjections of support and recollection, indications of general agreements and repetitions of what each other say – occur frequently and consistently through the group discussion. While completion of each other's sentences is conventionally expected between people very familiar with one

another, here most of the group members here did not know each other at all. Instead, prompted by their not knowing each other and in response to the unusual and potentially awkward focus group situation, such phatic talk quickly established the group as a group – socialising and stabilising the situation. Within this strategic response the participants' shared familiarity with the event becomes the focal point of the group relationship, manifested in frequent prompts to recollection and memory. This is present, for example, in explicit reminders of particular moments: 'You know when Rundis rings the doorbell?' Indeed, often the structure of the conversation is directed by these kind of aspects; another, longer, extract from the transcript indicates this:

Justine – I liked the music (Nicola: Umm). I wasn't expecting music, so I thought that was kind of (pause) just nice. I think that I like the music, in and of itself, as well as the way that it was used (Nicola: Yeah).

Ewan – I'm not sure I even (Elizabeth: No) noticed.

Elizabeth – I didn't really notice (Nicola: You didn't?) either.

Nicola – You see, I noticed. I always think about music though, in a play, because you think that now it suddenly isn't realistic anymore because suddenly there is music. I always find it kind of jarring (Justine: Yeah?), because suddenly, why is there music?

Ewan – It was just mood (Justine: Yeah) wasn't it? Lots of xylophones (Justine: Yes, exactly) (general laughter and agreement).

This extract begins with the kind of conversational tics I would describe as habitual, sounds of agreement and attention. The conversation then moves to a moment of doubt over memory, with some group members recalling an aspect of the performance more than others do. Here, and elsewhere, such mis-recollections cause a slight disturbance, indicated by surprised or hesitant tones of voice, as the negotiated group relationship is challenged by disagreement. Often this prompts an individual to move to back-up their memory by directly asking for support, by providing elaborating detail, or other justification. In other words, such disturbances prompt quick resolution, reaching consensus on memory and resettling the group dynamics. Here Ewan, who was initially not sure of the particular recollection, makes the first move to resolution by making the effort to remember – partially abandoning his previous position in favour of agreement. The other group members swiftly accept this gesture: 'Yes, exactly'. Laughter ends this particular segment, indicating a group once more comfortable and in agreement. As indicated here and throughout the discussion there exists clear pleasure in agreement and, in particular, pleasure in identifying peers and affirming shared memories.

This exchange continues:

Justine – And it would work, when they were out in the woods and they would send in all that cloud (Nicola: Yeah), white smoke stuff, and then it would be music (Roger: Umm?). That's what it would sound if you were in Finland in the middle of the night.

Roger – I thought it was strange actually. To get back to Yacob [actually Rundis], he was suddenly a bird watcher in that scene (general noises of agreement). Before this he was a waste of space who cleaned old grannies' houses and basically didn't clean them (Justine: Yeah) and fell asleep on the couch and was a slob (laughter) and then suddenly he was the most committed bird watcher (Justine: In the world) in the world.

The apparently abrupt change in conversation in the above passage, prompted by recollection of a particular scene, in fact runs very smoothly in the group's conversation. The rest of the group instantly recognise the moment the speaker is referring to and are quick to communicate that recognition. Throughout a longish statement by Roger, sounds

and words of support can be heard, along with laughter. This support is consummated when a listener moves to complete the speaker's sentence for him. The conversation continues:

Nicola – But that was like his one, cos she kept trying to say there is something about you, like you must have an interest or you must have this. So that bird watching thing was the one thing that made him special. At least he did have one passion, something he could get excited about (pause). And he did mention it kind of, he did just mention it vaguely at the beginning (Justine: he did?) With the bearded tit and all that (Justine: Ah I missed that). He kept going

Roger – Is that why it was such a big deal when he sold his book on birds? (Nicola: Yeah yeah; Justine: ah right)

Nicola – And also it was a present from his girlfriend.

It is difficult to present the full dimensions of this exchange in a transcript: as here there is an additional element that supports the conversational tics already described but far harder to indicate on paper. It needs a stage direction, replacing '(pause)' with '(trails off slightly despondently, before continuing with renewed enthusiasm)'. Through the initial statement above, there are no audible indications of agreement or recognition on the recording; Nicola's fairly long speech is suddenly isolated, without sounds of support from the rest of the group. This is in complete contrast to the similarly extended speech by Roger I examined just before, which the group supports with continual background verbal agreement. Clearly Nicola feels this isolation, as her voice trails off markedly through the phrase 'something he could get excited about', followed by a pause no-one else interrupts. The revival occurs with recollection of a particular moment of the play – elaborating on detail to support memory – which inspires first vague and then stronger recollection on the part of the group. The doubt ('he did?') becomes worried uncertainty ('ah I missed that'), before reaching a relaxed acceptance ('ah right'); meanwhile the original speaker's concern is replaced by a relieved and delighted 'Yeah, yeah!' Once more, a possible disruption to the group's memory moves swiftly to resolution with evident pleasure. A final segment indicates the completion of the group's re bonding.

Ewan – And also he was a bit of a failure as a bird watcher, having done it for ages and Olga comes along and sees the parrot being eaten in mid air (laughter) (Justine: That was really good; Nicola: That was hilarious)

Ewan – The best bit of stage stuff (Nicola: was the feathers) was the feathers coming down. That was so funny (laughter).

Here, again, the group demonstrates pleasure in agreement, pleasure in sharing and affirming joint memories, and in contrast doubt and disturbance over unsettled or questioned memories. Often the flow of conversation itself forms a semi structured comparison and confirmation of memories, with a grammar ('do you remember?') and tone ('I didn't notice') that indicated the identification and negotiation of a shared group experience. Together these aspects prompt a greater urgency to share memories and reach consensus. This is partly the result of strategic responses to the immediate situation in which they find themselves, seeking to quickly establish a group identity in a socially artificial situation. It is also, however, an indication that there exists for the group a definite sense of a shared experience, with the group forming a homogeneous community taking pleasure in their mutual experience. The pleasure that emerges in being able to affirm and share memory is therefore a pleasure in identifying and having peers.

This desire to affirm the memory amongst peers, demonstrated in these group dynamics, reflects in a wider urgency to talk about (and thereby 'remember') the performances experienced. Indeed, the discussion participants' displayed an evident willingness, even an evident pleasure and need, to talk about their experience of the performance. That this urgency to talk is grounded in the need to affirm one's memory of the event is demonstrated by the clustering of much of the conversation around an overarching question: 'what was it we saw?' Upon leaving any event conversation represents the only method of immediately gaining access to something outside one's individual memory, and therefore is the only method of affirming memory. Within performance theory this description of the relationship between memory and the ephemeral event is frequently presented as central to the experience of live performance. Along with Phelan's formulation of performance as that which disappears, for example, Eugenio Barba places positive value on the existence of live performance only within the transformative and fragile memory of audiences:

In the age of electronic memory, of films, and of reproducibility, theatre performance also defines itself through the work of living memory, which is not museum but metamorphosis. (1992:78)

For Barba, therefore, the unrepeatable ('representation without reproduction' in Phelan's terminology) nature of live performance places particular emphasis on the present moment of its experience and subsequently on audience memory in a manner that is distinct and different to that of the inherently reproducible non-live performance. However, while responses to memory and peer experience are clearly manifested in the talk of this exercise's participants, the extent to which this represents the verbalised reaction to the unique ephemerality of a live experience is worth questioning.

Indeed, the relationship between audiences and the potential (or lack of it) reproducibility of a performance is something that Auslander challenges from a conceptual perspective in *Liveness*, again responding to what he sees as ontological judgment that values the live over the non-live experience. In response to this position Auslander constructs a double argument, suggesting: first, that the repeat experience is only a possibility with non-live performance, neither inevitable nor significant in the first experience; and second, that live performance does not enact an unrepeatable present, with processes of promotion, construction and the economies of production meaning that live performances are always already a reproduction or representation. The full implications of Auslander's arguments cannot be explored here, although his conclusions do ignore the importance of the *possibility* of repeating non-live performance in our culture in contrast to the relative impossibility of exactly repeating the live performance – something that is likely to have an impact on how audiences use and approach the different media. In this context, however, it is worth questioning to what extent any of these group dynamics would be demonstrably different with participants drawn from a cinema audience (or other non live performance), where certainly the group relationships, the pleasure in talk and the identification of peers would be largely similar. In particular it is worth suggesting here that ideas of memory, of 'remembering' the event through talk and with peers, are the verbalised response to any performance experienced by audiences in a specific temporal location. Does such talk constitute a sense of 'presentness', articulating the importance of being there and sharing the experience, rather than a more specific idea of 'liveness'? Such potential differences between the memory of a live and non-live performance were something that the group themselves approached at the end of their discussion and a question I will return to later.

Evaluative Judgements

Another distinctive and very prominent trait in both the group discussion and two-way conversation was a fairly standardised language and judgement scale employed by the participants, both individually and collectively, to assess the performance. Evaluative statements were consistently formulated in a language scaled between believable and unbelievable; from true to false. Some extracted examples will make this clearer:

I was convinced

I believed it

It was real

I didn't believe him

Just so alive

That was so false to me

It was so right

As is implicit in all these statements, the speakers conflate 'good' and like with 'believable' and 'bad' or dislike with 'unbelievable'. Two examples make this relationship clear:

Roger – I thought she was really believable, really good.

Elizabeth – I thought he was very good, very believable

The speakers not only apply these assessments to the performers, but to the production as a whole, where something either feels 'right' or is 'not convincing'. It is very tempting to conclude that opinions, effectively 'I liked it' or 'I didn't like it', are simply substituted with judgements based upon a sense of the believable. In turn the believable founded upon ideas of 'realism', the closer the production gets to the participants' expectations of 'realism' the more believable it is and hence the better it is. An example from the audiences to *Olga* makes this relationship explicit:

Elizabeth – I struggled with that concept (Nicola: Oh yeah, I didn't at all), I didn't think it was that realistic ...

As this particular exchange continues, it becomes clear that the disagreement – which is not over memory, something that provokes movement to consensus, but over interpretation – is over differing judgements of 'realism'. One speaker dislikes a moment for its lack of realism; the other defends it on the same grounds: one speaker found it realistic; the other did not.

The participants' grounding of their evaluative statements in the language of realism is almost certainly not specifically a result of their of *Olga* as a live performance. Indeed, Ien Ang identifies similar patterns in her analysis of television audiences of *Dallas*, writing that:

'Realism' seems to be a favourite criterion among viewers for passing judgement on *Dallas*. And here 'realistic' is always associated with 'good' and 'unrealistic' with 'bad'. (1985:34)

Further, and again matching the judgements of 'realism' articulated in response to *Olga*, Ang explores how fans will describe elements of *Dallas* as realistic and therefore good, while critics will see the same elements as unrealistic and therefore bad. While film,

television and theatre researchers are familiar with complex conceptualisations of realism, this vernacular usage of the term seems almost actively resistant to such precision of terminology. In *Watching Dallas* Ang explores three possible standards against which her respondents are using the term – ‘empiricist realism’, ‘realistic illusion’ and ‘emotional realism’ – identifying the first as the principal judgment applied by critics as the programme and the last as the chief measure of its fans. With the discussions of *Olga* a similar analysis would be possible – with the participants partly responding to empirical feasibility of the action, partly to the transparency and consistency of the play’s structure and partly to the emotional, psychological realism of the characters. In other words, the participants measure the production against a set of internal expectations which itself is based upon a complex set of expectations and understandings of ‘realism’.

One possible interpretation of this recurring evaluation of the production in terms of believability would be to describe the responses as indicating the participants’ expectations of the performance. In other words, by constructing their evaluations in terms of ‘believability’ the participants are measuring the production against their internal, implicit desires as to what they feel the production should be like. Indeed, phrases like ‘I didn’t get that at all’ and ‘I didn’t see it at all’ – used at different times by all the participants’ – seem to directly reference an internal set of expectations about how the production *should* be and what it *should* be like. They are judgements made as to how the performance matched up to the individual’s map of how it should have been. More specifically, this map or set of expectations appears to be based upon perceptions and positive valuations of ‘realism’.

What is intriguing about this, however, is that the participants hold these expectations of the performance without having a strong, corresponding commitment to or investment in the production themselves. In *Knowing Audiences*, Martin Barker and Kate Brooks point out that it is quite possible for different individuals and audience groups to see the same film (or no less another performance event) with ‘quite different requirements, hopes, fears and expectations of it’ (1998:235). These ideal viewing expectations, Barker and Brooks suggest, are linked to the level of investment and kind of engagement that audiences have with the film or production they are going to see – the higher the level of investment, the higher and more particular the level of expectations. With this exercise, however, the participants’ level of investment in *Olga* as a production and the Traverse Theatre as a company was virtually nil – none were regular theatregoers and only one had been to the venue before. The question this prompts – what stimulated the participants’ expectations of *Olga*? – can only be considered speculatively, although it is interesting to consider the extent to which the expectations were prompted by the structure and style of the production itself as it was being watched, by perceptions of ‘theatre’ more generally, simply by their own understandings of what they liked and didn’t like or by wider social discourses that value realism and the ‘real’ in performance.

It is also interesting to speculate as to the potential impact that these expectations, and the dominance of this discourse of ‘realism’, had on the participants’ responses to *Olga*. Potentially the grounding of judgements on a scale of believable/unbelievable militates against their engagement with the elements of the production resisting broad ideas of ‘realism’. In terms of the production’s status as a *live* performance, it is also worth exploring whether a system of evaluation that conflates believability with realism with goodness has the potential to obscure alternative articulations of the experience of liveness. Illustrating the potential problems of this evaluative discourse are the tensions that exist when such scales of believability are applied to the existence of live actors on stage. With *Olga*, in particular, the problem of the actors being described in any sense as ‘unbelievable’ was enhanced by their

indisputable physical presence, and more particularly by their evident ages, as will be discussed next.

The Actors

The previous two sections have explored interesting and recurring motifs evident in the participants' talk about *Olga* as a performance. As I have discussed, however, whether or not this talk articulated a particular sense of the play as a *live* performance is more ambiguous. The following sections move this question to centre stage, looking at aspects of the participants' talk that seems to provide more direct evidence of the particular ways in which they experienced the live theatrical moment. The first of these emerges in the discussions and exchanges made about the actors' performances, which was also one area where the method of communicating evaluation on a scale of believable/unbelievable was most in evidence. The following passage, for example, discusses the 85 year old character of Olga (played by 66 year old actor Eileen McCallum):

Roger – I thought she was excellent.

Nicola – Yeah brilliant (Justine: I did too) (pause). She was just so natural and like relaxed.

Roger – Yeah I though she was really believable, really good.

Ewan – Her rambling were quite believable, I mean they just, just sound just like my grandpa. Talking about whatever and just ...

Roger – Slightly mad as well (laughter).

Nicola – You felt so sorry for her.

In this exchange, purely evaluative words – 'excellent', 'brilliant' and 'good' – are matched by assessments drawing on realism – 'believable', 'natural' and also 'relaxed'. What is also clear is that none of the participants is particularly at home discussing the actors' performances; they lack a clear vocabulary to talk about them beyond the assessment of good and bad. This no doubt encouraged the linkage: good = believable; I like = convinced; I didn't like = unrealistic. The interest in the age of Olga, and the actor playing her, became a repeated theme in the discussion and the attempted assessment of her performance. The following extract comes from the two way conversation:

Susan – The woman that played Olga, she was just like amazing.

Miranda – (indication of agreement)

Susan – She was so irritating, when she was supposed to be irritating and she was just really like on those tirades about her life and her childhood it was oh my god. She was just so good at being this loveable old lady, I just thought she was a really good actress.

[...]

Susan – She was just really human to me.

Miranda – Yeah, I don't think a lot of her speeches were that well written (Susan: no) I think she, I think she (pause) compensated, I just think she was really there. I just think she was she was just very human. I don't know what kind of acting you'd call it, method acting or I don't know, I believed this. The fact that she was an old woman talking about dying looking back on her life (Susan: Yes, she was an old woman. That helped). The actress is an old woman. The audience is full of old ladies.

Susan – And she got older and older as the play progressed and she was really like shaking at the end. She just really *was* that woman. The walk. She was consistent. Her walk was consistent her mannerisms were consistent (Miranda: the stoop). The stoop. Everything about her, she was just very consistent.

It is interesting that at the same time as demonstrating a sophisticated awareness of the different input of the author (not much admired) and the performer (judged excellent), these speakers continue to articulate their evaluative assessments on a purely mimetic scale. While this is a more detailed assessment of the performance, it again comes down to the fact that, in the logical conclusion of method acting, the actor was 'really' old (in all senses of both words). The phrases used – 'Yes, she was an old woman. That helped' and 'She just really *was* that woman' – indicate how with the indisputably real age of the actor the boundary between actor and character becomes increasingly blurred.

Three aspects increased this repeated emphasis on the age of the performer, the first being the intimate space of the Traverse Two auditorium – more on which in a moment. Second, I suspect that the age of the group members, all in their twenties, caused them to notice the contrasting age of the performer. While I do not think it caused them to relate to the young man (Rundis) in response, I do think it prevented an immediate empathy with Olga beyond awareness of her age. That is not to say that it prevented an acute awareness of her as a person; if anything it emphasised it – something I will also come to in a moment, along with the participants' self-declared fascination with the ages of other members of the audience. Finally, however, the possibility of sexual contact between the principal characters prompted alertness to the performer's age. A discussion initially on the performance of Paul Thomas Hickey as Rundis quickly leads to this element. Note again the use of believability as the basis of evaluation:

Nicola – I thought it was brilliant, was that just me?

Elizabeth – Yeah he was good.

Nicola – He was so vibrant and alive, I just totally believed his character

Justine – I didn't believe him until about half way through. I thought he got better (Nicola: Yes) as it went along, and by the end I was convinced.

Ewan – I still wasn't sure when I left, because I was still kind of freaked out by this relationship (laughter) umm so I was trying to, once I got over my initial disgust I was

trying to work out whether I liked him. I think I probably do, I think he was believable in a completely weird and unbelievable situation.

Roger – Yeah, I would say that as well.

The group returns to the possibility of a sexual relationship between Olga and Rundis later, in an extended discussion that once again is phrased in terms of believability and realism (accompanied by a fair amount of defensive laughter). Very apparent is a sense of distaste about the possibility of sexual contact being played out on the stage. A gender split is clearly evident here, with the men finding the possibility of sexual contact most disturbing – although employed with an element of humour, the words ‘disgust’ and ‘hideous’ are both used, with the male consensus in particular being that they were glad the play had not pushed in that direction:

Roger – I think it was quite good they didn’t do that, I think that’s pretty ... You can allude to that you don’t need to show

[...]

Ewan – It was just the thought of it, it might happen, was far worse. My imagination is far more horrible than anything they could have put on stage

This gender divergence in the degree of discomfort suggests that it was most likely the particular social circumstances of the performance and prospective relationship (old woman/young man) that prompted the responses, rather than a more inherent discomfort with the prospect of *any* sexual context being enacted on stage. However, I suspect that the discomfort was enhanced by the liveness and literal ‘reality’ of the performance, which rendered the actor and character of Olga indistinguishable. The resulting physical presence and age of Eileen McCallum was consequently very much ‘believable’, causing any sexual contact to be all too real for the participants. Because of the indisputable reality and ages of the performers, the imagined action (if performed) would have been ‘real’, however bad (and thereby unbelievable) the performance might have been. As a result it is possible to see that the linguistic representation of live performance in a terminology which conflates ‘believability’ with ‘realism’ with ‘goodness’ inevitably fails to adequately articulate the multi-layered experience of other human beings that is the result of liveness.

The Audience

The strong reaction to the possibility of sexual contact in the performance, and to Olga herself, was therefore partially produced by elements resulting from presence and liveness. This is already in evidence in the extracted passages above, but becomes clearer when the conversation turns to talk about the theatre space and the audience.

One of the passages above contains the line ‘The actress is an old woman. The audience is full of old ladies’. The smallness of the Traverse Two space, the particularities of the seating, with the audience always partly lit, and the age of the participants no doubt encouraged awareness not only of McCallum’s living presence in the room but also alertness to other audience members. Joining and enhancing consciousness of McCallum’s real age was awareness of the presence in the audience of other old ladies. In this extract the group talk about the venue, where only one of them had been before:

Ewan – I thought it was really nice actually. Having just that...

Nicola – Very cosy, intimate (Justine: Very intimate). And I like seeing the audience, being able to watch everyone else in the audience at the same time.

Elizabeth – I found myself doing that with some of the references to old people and memory (Ewan: Suddenly you thought; Justine: oh yeah; Nicola: All the oldies in the front row) and seeing how they reacted to that because they must have had a different perspective on it.

Such mindfulness of the presence of the audience later combines with the urgency to talk about the experience that I discussed earlier. It also matches Sartre's observation that 'each member of an audience asks himself what he thinks of a play and at the same time what his neighbour is thinking' (1976:67). Attending a performance is a social event, resulting not just in an awareness of others, but also in an awareness of the personal responses of others. The eye to eye and thigh-to-thigh contact that the small Traverse Two space enforces makes physical and mental awareness of your neighbours inevitable. With *Olga*, such intersubjective relationships spun an intriguing net of age and generational tension within the audience and between the audience and the stage.

What is clear, as a result, is a reminder that it is necessary to talk of audiences in the plural and to be continually aware of the heterogeneous construction of empirical audiences. This is in contrast to the mythology of the communal, collective and singular audience that often exists within public discourses, whether produced by reviewers or the theatre as an industry. As is suggested here, the actual relationship is a more complex blend of difference and sameness. Another exchange from the second group is worth looking at on this point:

Miranda – I really liked the audience. The whole front row was really adorable.

Susan – The audience was really clever too.

Miranda – They were all little old ladies.

Susan – And the audience was really into it too, I mean they all really laughed when they were supposed to laugh (Miranda: Yeah they loved it). No one laughed when they weren't supposed to laugh.

[...]

Susan – The audience really gave the energy back, it was a really good audience. I really like it, I think the space, I thought the space was really clever.

What is interesting about this exchange is how the speakers denote the audience as 'they', as *other* to the speaker. Perhaps this is in part a response to the distinct awareness of the older members of the audience, a 'they' as opposed to the younger speakers' 'I'. (The speakers attended the performance on a night when there were indeed a number of 'old ladies' in the audience, although in no sense did they constitute a majority amongst the wide range of ages represented.) Additionally, one of the speakers consistently refers to the audience as another, as 'they', as 'the audience', and at one point (slightly condescendingly) praises the audience for really being into it. This visioning of one's self as detached from the audience – 'I' and 'they' not 'we' – again runs counter to any envisioning of an audience as a homogenous community. It would be worth exploring this with further research, but I suggest it displays an ever-present awareness of one's individual consciousness ('I') alongside a collective audience from which one is actively excluded (the 'they') but that occasionally becomes whole ('us'). Difference and sameness are emphasised in the heightened space of a theatre, demonstrating in practice the phenomenological *thereness-for-me* of others.

These various and temporary communities are constructed partly through demographic differences (relative youth verses 'old ladies') but also partly, and perhaps more significantly, as a result of audience responses and perceived expectations. What caused

discomfort for the participants was not, in itself, that other members of the audience were older, but rather the possibility that they might have a different response to the performance. What caused pleasure was the identification, through laughter in particular, of similar responses. As discussed before, there is an evident pleasure in finding peers and community after the event through memory. Similarly, there is evident pleasure in the collective response during the event, and a contrasting discomfort when located in a more heterogeneous audience – heterogeneous in response as well as in class, age and other demographics. In other words, the mythology of the collective, singular, homogeneous audience perhaps survives because of its seductive appeal and the powerful effect of its fleeting experience.

Theatre

Towards the end of their discussions, the groups moved from talking about the production to more general conversation about theatre and, in particular, the relationship between theatre and film. With one exception, the participants all felt much more at home in the cinema, attending far more films than plays. This explicit discussion of 'theatre' to some extent diverted from the intention of listening to audience members talking about an actual performance. However, the discussion does provide an engaged, clear and unprompted discussion on the nature of theatre and the live experience. Two longish extracts of this discussion are provided here:

Justine – I kept wondering if, we were sitting over on the [gestures] and I was wondering if you had a different experience and see a different play if you were sitting centre front (Nicola: Yeah). Because you would feel a lot more, I would think, a lot more invested in what was going on if you were actually almost in it.

Ewan – There was definitely, there wasn't... Instead of having that kind of binary relationship between audience somewhere else and stage there was kind of, you saw a lot of the audience and you were aware that a lot of the audience was seeing it from a very different way than you were. I really liked that.

Nicola – It was nice being. We were in the front row and we were right on the stage. And right in there.

Roger – We were right at the back (Nicola: totally different). Heckling.

MR – What do you mean by the word intimacy?

Nicola – Just being so close, I guess just being so close and not having any barriers between you and what's going on because we were just right there. I had to keep moving my legs out of the way as they walked past (Elizabeth: Yeah).

Justine – And even to get to your seat you had to walk across the stage

Nicola – That was weird.

In this exchange, the group's conversation covers many aspects that might form the key conceptual definitions of theatre as live performance. For example, the group discuss the proximity of the actors, the sense of immediacy, the possibility of something going wrong, awareness of other audience members, a sense that other people are having a different experience with a different perspective, the sense that it is a one-off event never to be repeated and a feeling of community with other audience members. Inevitably, not all group members agreed on all the points. For example, one respondent was very aware of the possibility of things going wrong, but did not like it. Other group members suggested that the sense of knowing the audience during *Olga* was in part due to the intimacy of this particular theatre, and would not be the same at large proscenium arch

venues. Often speakers described a sensation without the ability to really explain or justify it. Clearly, however, these exchanges constitute live performance as a special kind of performance, experientially distinct from non-live performance.

As a final example of the group conversation, I have extracted the last exchanges on this point. Here, the group discusses the relationship between film and theatre, their points suggesting possible answers to some of the questions I posed earlier. The final two contributions are particularly interesting:

Roger – With a film it's been finished and filmed months before it's been presented to you and it's presented to you as a finished piece. Whereas in the theatre you are watching it, you are watching them act and you're watching it evolve in front of you so you're really important to them, to keep them. If you don't clap at one point (Nicola: Yeah) it will disrupt the performance. Whereas in a film if everyone stood-up and went out it would carry on. So in that respect you are part of the whole spectacle, so you and the rest of the audience are obviously very important, more so than in a film.

Justine – And do you think that people who are in the audience feel that?

Ewan/Roger – Yeah I think so.

Justine – I mean is that part of the whole theatre experience? That you go, and you and the rest of the audience are part of what is going on on-stage? (Roger: Yes)

Ewan – There is that kind of nervy feel to a theatre audience, where like you said there is a possibility of a failure (Justine: Umm). Someone might lose a line or drop a prop. And that possibility of a failure is dependent on the audience performance as much as it is on the actor's performance.

MR – [To Justine] Did you as a virtual first time theatregoer feel that?

Justine – I don't know if I felt *that*, but I did feel that (pause). When I leave a movie I don't really feel that I *know* anybody that's been in that theatre with me, but I kind of got the sense on leaving the theatre that there was some kind of, maybe superficial or innerficial [unclear], cohesion that went on in the audience. That it was a group of people leaving rather than just singletons wandering out.

Ewan – No one will ever see that particular production of *Olga* (Justine: Right, right) ever again. And we're the only people that actually saw that... (Justine: Yeah) People talk about particular productions, or particular recital of some violin concerto or whatever, but there is something individual about live performance that you don't get on film I think.

This exchange demonstrates some possible distinctions between cinema and theatre audiences, suggesting that my earlier descriptions of memory and group dynamics could indeed hold greater weight for live than for non-live audiences. Additionally, the emphasis on the ephemeral experience, suggests that audiences – in contrast to Auslander's criticisms of the concept of the 'unrepeatable' live performance – do construct theatre as temporally unique in a different way than non-live performances. This clearly needs further research, but I would suggest that it must have some kind of impact on how audiences consequently use live and non-live mediums of performance. Also noticeable in the above extracts is how the participants' explicit discussion of theatre, film and liveness matches, to a certain extent, Auslander's argument that the live in performance is always defined and perceived in relation to the non-live. This is something that Martin Barker also notices in his exploration of audience responses to stage and screen presentations of J.G. Ballard's *Crash*. Barker's findings are presented in a paper that, like

this one, explores perceptions of liveness through audience research resulting in some interesting similarities and differences with this investigation.

Discussing the findings of his audience analysis, Barker writes that, 'In our audiences' talk, theatre's qualities are always best grasped by stating them *in opposition to* something else: in this case, the cinematic' (2003:34). Further, Barker observes that his respondents frequently seek to denigrate film in order to arrive at a social, cultural and even moral valuation of the live experience over the non-live. Again, as Barker also points out, these findings relate directly to Auslander's arguments, particularly his attempts to challenge ontological attempts to assert the essential integrity of the live over the inauthentic and secondary experience of the non-live. However, in contrast to Barker's findings, I would suggest that the comparison of the theatrical experience to film, or other performance media, was present only as a minor theme in the discussions explored in this paper. Instead, the majority of the conversations considered the immediate experience alone, it was only when the debate became more abstract that the participants begun to construct comparisons with other media. Even here it would be difficult to argue that one medium was routinely denigrated in comparison to the other as although in their general conversation the participants articulate the nature of theatre as in comparison to film, they do not appear to construct either as intrinsically superior or more valuable than the other. Instead, they attempt to describe more specific, phenomenological distinctions in the contrasting experience of the two media. Further, it would be possible to argue that the participants did seem to implicitly hold up filmic realism as the standard by which to compare the theatrical performance, suggesting that rather than denigrate the experience of film in comparison to theatre at times theatre was assessed according to its ability to match up to film.

To an extent these contrasts with the findings of Barker's exploration of theatre audiences and concepts of liveness can be put down to differences in the approach and interests of the researcher: Barker was explicitly interested in comparing responses to stage and screen presentations; this no doubt encouraged and highlighted responses focused upon this aspect. This observation is telling, and of significance beyond the contrast between these two particular research projects. Clearly, spoken discourses, such as those of audiences, are elusive, transient and disappear almost as they come into being. It is only possible to study audience talk through active intervention, through direct and deliberate inquiry and the staging and recording of conversations or interviews. This should remind us that the methods of research, of material compilation and the objectives of the research have the potential to be determining components in any enquiry. The activity of research, therefore, needs to be recognised as potentially crucial to the outcomes of the research.

Articulating Liveness?

Looking at the material examined in this paper it is possible to see how the experience of liveness is rendered meaningful by the process of putting that experience into language; and the participants do articulate a sense of their experience of *Olga* as being one of a particularly *live* performance. However, there are two overlapping questions that need asking of these findings, exploring their validity, scope and significance. Each question can only be answered hesitantly at this stage, with the principal purpose in raising them being as markers for future research.

First, to what extent is it possible to claim that this paper reveals an articulation of liveness that is fundamentally distinct from possible verbalisations of the experience of non-live performance? On this point it would clearly be valid to argue, as has been suggested in this paper, that aspects of the participants' discussion of *Olga* (particularly that concerning memory and group dynamics) could be equally produced in the content

of other, non-live forms of performance. Equally, it would be possible to suggest that even more direct articulations of a sense of 'liveness' could be conceived as not unique to events that are strictly speaking or entirely live, but instead also located in events experienced in heightened social spatial environments (cinema, public presentations and gatherings etc) or with some degree of temporal determinacy (live broadcasts, premieres, news flashes etc). Perhaps, in this context, there is the need for 'presentness' as a concept that accounts for how audiences to both live and non-live performances articulate and locate their experience within time. However, such verbalisation of live-like-ness, or presentness, need not necessarily undermine the significance of articulations of liveness; indeed, perhaps the reverse. Either way it would seem to me that the languages audiences use to talk about theatre performances do contain the articulation of a sense of liveness, constituting it as something central, valuable and intrinsic to their experience.

This raises my second question: to what extent are the articulations of liveness identified in this paper constituted in the participants' own language, rather than reiterations of socially received vocabularies and constructions? Here it is worth remarking how the language employed by participants demonstrates the difficulty of matching experience to expression. For example, the tentative movement towards expression is there in the phrase 'I don't know if I felt that, but I did feel that'; while active movement towards a more definitive constitution of the experience is present in the conclusion: 'that was a group of people leaving rather than just singletons wandering out.' In contrast other phrases and images used are much more pat (such as 'you feel part of it') could have been drawn almost directly from arts marketing campaigns (see 'you'll love it live'). This suggests an interesting combination of perceived simplicities and commonplaces and more tentative awareness of deeper complexities and real experiences. Importantly, the existence of this more hesitant and clearly personal language suggests that the participants are not just echoing socially established articulations on the nature of live theatre. Instead, I would suggest that the ideas are more often unquestionably formulated in the language and minds of the speakers.

If this is correct then the participants' language can be understood as drawn from their phenomenological experience of *Olga* as a live performance. Importantly, this is not an ontological conceptualisation of what live performance is, but rather a contingent description of how it is perceived. This recognition of the live experience is unconsciously embedded in the desire to share recollections, implicit in responses to the present human performers and explicitly stated in discussion of the relationship between film and theatre. The language used constitutes a shared appreciation of the experience of the performance as live.

Clearly, on its own the exercise explored in this paper does not represent adequate research into how people talk about their experiences of live performance. Indeed, it is necessary to highlight again that this demonstration exercise had only seven participants; from such a small sample no statements of widespread application are really possible. Nor does it fully reveal whether such talk reflects the nature of the experience or if articulations of liveness are drawn from wider social, cultural (perhaps even moral) constructions. What are identified are interim findings, methodological possibilities and potential areas worthy of particular attention. For example, the exercise identifies the need to investigate the extent to which the articulation the live experience is socially established rather than experientially produced. Also worth examining further is whether the explicit valuation of the live is always matched by implicit articulation; along with exploration of the extent to which articulations of the live experience differ between performance genres or between audience demographic groups. However, the very raising of these questions is significant, suggesting that audience talk can indeed be seen

as a discourse that does represent how live performance is constituted for those that experience it. In particular, it should be clear that Auslander's deconstruction of values of liveness and Phelan's ontological descriptions of performance can be usefully tested, augmented and analysed through theatre audience research.

Some notes on *Olga*

by Laura Rouhonen, in a version by Linda McLean

performed by Traverse Theatre Company, directed by Lynne Parker

Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 4 – 22 December 2001

Olga	Eileen McCallum
Rundis	Paul Thomas Hickey
Ella	Jenny Ryan
Antiques Dealer & Postman	Frank Gallagher
Policeman & Savolainen	Lewis Howden

Promotional description

Olga is as old as the world changing around her. She's alone now, hoarding her belongings and wishing she could visit her home in the country for the last time. But one day a young man comes into her life and changes it forever.

Everything's disposable to Rundis, especially women. When he meets a crazy old lady who keeps junk mail under lock and key and rants about the past, he's irritated, then interested, then fascinated. Can their love survive the differences between them?

Olga is a mad-cap race through modern Finland, exploring how the past has impacted a divided country through the unforgettable romance between a strong willed and unconventional old woman and an unprincipled young man.

Performance review

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[Elisabeth Mahoney \(For The Guardian, Thursday December 6, 2001\): *Olga*](#)
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Contact (by e-mail): Matthew Reason

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