

‘The Cacophony of Failure’: Being an audience in a traditional theatre

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Abstract:

Traditional theatre audiences have on the whole tacitly agreed to a learned set of strict behaviours: arriving before the beginning of the play, sitting in an allocated seat, not moving or talking during the play, and reacting or applauding at specific times. This is particularly surprising because the phenomenon is relatively recent – barely more than a century old, say historians – and stands in contradiction to the general trend towards a more relaxed attitude in cultural consumption. Based on semi-directed interviews with French theatregoers, this article examines how contemporary audiences feel about theatrical experiences and studies the different strategies they employ to articulate respect for actors’ work. It also studies how disengagement from the play might come through in physical manifestations, whether involuntary or deliberate. The theatre performance is described as an interactional situation underpinned by fragile balances and complex situations of interdependence.

Keywords: theatre, audiences, behavioural norms, actors, interactional order

Introduction

In general, cultural consumption is increasingly tolerant to audiences behaving in a relaxed manner. Reading often takes place as an accompaniment to commuting, with audiences making adjustments to incorporate the discontinuity of the experience. Audiovisual culture has withdrawn into the home, with the advent of on-demand services particularly allowing audiences to watch television without needing to pay close attention. Cinema encourages ever-greater conviviality, new music concerts urge participants to dance, and the street arts have adapted to mobile audiences that are simply passing by¹. In the context of contemporary cultural consumption, then, the rigid behavioural norms that traditional

theatre audiences are expected to follow can be seen as relatively unusual. Despite unquestionable differences between varying types of performances, traditional theatre audiences have on the whole tacitly agreed to a learned set of strict behaviours: arriving before the beginning of the play, sitting in an allocated seat, not moving or talking during the play, and reacting or applauding at specific times. This is particularly surprising because the phenomenon is relatively recent – barely more than a century old – and is contrary to the general trend towards a more relaxed attitude in the consumption of culture. Here I refer to ‘traditional’ theatre as performances by actors of scripted plays taking place in front of audiences who are seated within buildings usually constructed for that purpose.

For centuries theatre audiences were undisciplined; they used their right, as an audience, to tyrannize the actors, to challenge the dramatist’s text, and to talk to the people around them (Levine 1988; Lagrave 1972; Descotes 1964; Yon 2005). Serge Proust situates this domestication of the audience’s bodies as a gradual assertion of the specific nature of the live event, which happened in several steps: expelling the audience from the stage, seating members of the parterre, plunging the hall into darkness, and reducing the audience to silence. Proust argues that this work on the body was the result of education into new behavioural norms conveyed by the educated middle classes. It laid the foundations of ‘theatre as it was constituted in the late 19th century’ (2005: 116). How do contemporary audiences feel about this increasingly antiquated cultural experience? That is what I investigate here, in research based on fieldwork exploring the responses of theatregoers living in various parts of France.

The study

The primary aim of this research was to investigate the social dimensions of the theatrical experience. Who do audiences ask for advice when choosing plays, or on which critics do they rely? With whom do they usually go to the theatre? What are their perceptions of other audience members during the show? The fieldwork began with a series of interviews conducted in 2008 with a sample of Parisian theatregoers (N=30), who had subscribed to the ‘friends’ programme run by Chaillot, a well-known public theatre in Paris². Following this, I encountered a new form of question in the survey ‘Cultural Practices in France’ (Donnat 2009) that I felt might be useful in my own research. The question was: ‘when you last went to the theatre, who were you accompanied by?’, with the options given as ‘alone’, ‘couple’, ‘couple with children’, ‘other family members’, ‘friends’, and ‘friends with whom you go regularly to the theatre’. The answers showed different patterns according to gender, with men tending to attend as part of a couple, and women going more often with ‘regular friends’ (Pasquier 2012). In 2009-10, 50 more interviews were realized in different parts of France and in varying settings such as small and medium towns. I conducted half of the interviews myself, and the other half were undertaken by two PhD students in sociology, Florence Eloy and Tomas Legon. The ‘we’ in this article refers to this collective fieldwork.

A huge proportion of audience members interviewed said they were accustomed to going to traditional theatres, in which the audience is seated and watches a play performed by actors. However, we tried to vary the type of attendance – frequent or occasional – and to recruit people interested in different types of plays, including comedy, classics, *boulevard*, and contemporary creations. In all our interviews we asked questions about how audience members perceived the constraints placed on their position as members of an audience, as well as about their perceptions of the other members of the audience present in the same hall (making a distinction between people they knew and strangers). Finally, we discussed with them the particular nature of their experience of live shows, and their relationship with the actors.

Answers to all these questions varied depending on whether the individual goes to the theatre regularly or occasionally, whether he or she goes mainly to private theatres³ or not, and whether they live in Paris or in one of the provincial towns. There is nevertheless a general consensus on two points: respect for the actor's performance during the show, and overall acceptance of the behavioural norms expected in the theatre itself. In this paper we examine the potential reasons for this consensus, exploring how audiences consider this to be an indispensable part of the emotional build-up of the performance. Productions can therefore be studied as an interactional situation, during which each member of the audience has to adjust their behaviour to that of the other members as well as to the presence of the actors.

However, although behavioural norms are often internalized, they are not always easy to respect. At times the body asserts itself. For instance, negative reactions to a show can trigger physical manifestations of disengagement. These may be involuntary or deliberate. How might this breach of behavioural norms be experienced by the actors and by other members of the audience? This question forms the basis of the final part of this paper, in which we distinguish between those departures from the rule that are perceived as being a break in the interaction, and those that are deemed to be acceptable because they are seen as practices taking place 'backstage', in the Goffmanian sense of the term.

Respect for the actors

In his work on Shakespearian plays in the United States during the latter half of the 19th century, Levine (1988) analysed theatregoers' education. Before being a revered, high-cultural playwright whose works were staged in fashionable East-coast theatres, Shakespeare was seen as a truly populist author. His plays were put on everywhere in the USA, from inns to boats going up the Mississippi, and audiences were recruited from all social classes and age-groups. Audiences had no respect for actors and actors had no respect for the text, which was cut and interrupted by burlesque interludes. By the end of the 19th century, East-coast cultural entrepreneurs managed to construct very different audiences (DiMaggio 1987). Dedicated halls were built, and more pricey tickets led to a radical decline in social mixing. Respect for the text became a rule. Audience participation

and disruptive displays of emotion were no longer welcome, and people were actually taught when to clap. Shakespeare became a classical author.

This change in the audience-actor relationship was swift and spectacular. In 18th century France, the actors were systematically humiliated through booing and whistling, and the parterre could decide on the performance's fate (Ravel 1999; Corbin 1991; Féret 2012). Jean Claude Yon explains that this stemmed from a general feeling of audience superiority over the actors on stage (2005: 331). Today the situation has reversed, with stage actors often accorded a higher cultural status than cinema and TV actors.

In fact, the ephemeral nature of the theatrical experience comes from the physical co-presence of actors and audiences. For many audiences this feeling of the event as special nurtures their taste for theatre:

There are real people on the stage, they're acting at such-and-such a time, at such-and-such a place, and if you miss them, you're not sure to be able to see them again (65 year-old man, suburbs of a large town)

This goes some way to explaining how audiences place value on these experiences, often placing theatre far above other forms of culture that are easier to engage in:

There's a side to it that's alive and that you don't find in television or cinema. You've got the impression, or at least a little, perhaps this is presumptuous, but that you're communicating with the actors... And with a film, it's much more difficult, it's a representation... well I have the impression, that theatre, you have the impression, that it's lived, that it comes out of the person and all that, whereas with cinema, it's more... they shoot five or ten times to make sure it's all perfect! I'm not looking for perfection... I want sincerity, the first version I'd say! Cinema is just a screen and I have the impression of being passive. When you're close to the stage in general, you feel emotion, you get goose-flesh. I have the impression of real life when I go to the theatre, which I don't feel when I go to the cinema. On the one hand, you have people in front of you, and on the other you have a screen! It's really not the same thing! It's more alive...⁴ (64 year-old woman in Paris suburbs, retired manager).

Interviewees often report feeling individually connected to the performance, feeling as if this has been presented to them by actors. They offer numerous examples of the personal contract linking them to the actors on the stage:

My view is that the actors invite us in a sense into their creation. When you're invited to someone's place, you don't leave before the end of the evening, well, I don't know, for me that seems inconceivable. I stay, out of courtesy and consideration for the actors and... for everyone! Because leaving just isn't

polite. For everyone. Sometimes one forces oneself. Like this play, *Les Misérables*, yeah well, I forced myself to stay... (58 year-old woman, French teacher, Paris)

‘Courtesy’, ‘invitation’: these words are strong, and attest to the fact that audiences are aware of the role that they themselves play in the production of a play. But the aspect of respect for the actors’ work is also strongly present. The following interviewee explains the particular nature of the contract with the theatre actor, as opposed to the contract binding her to other creators:

I don’t know, I go to see a play, it’s like... it’s as if I signed a contract, I watch it through to the end! And then afterwards, you liked it or not, but there’s respect for someone else’s work... Yes, for me, it’s shocking. I commit, when I go to a play, I commit to remain present till the end. Otherwise I find it’s a bit too easy! If it’s not good, you leave, and this can be applied to many other situations, and it’s too easy a solution. On TV, I’d easily stop watching... But yes, I think that there’s this story of the person in front of us... She’s working, you’re not watching something that’s been filmed! And the person sees you leave. No, I want to listen through to the end, to the work that she’s doing. Whereas a book, you can put it down, no one, the author, he won’t even know... (43 year-old woman, no profession, Chambéry)

All those comparisons between theatre and other cultural practices refer to a sort of nostalgia for serious engagement with cultural production – here the actors’ performance and the constraints provided by the theatrical experience act as a sort of antidote to the short attention spans provoked by mass media.

Being an audience: a fragile interactional situation

We looked at audience members’ relations not only with the actors but also with other audience members. There are two types: firstly, relations of mutual knowledge and complicity between people who have come together to watch a show, as well as those who are seated next to one another⁵; and secondly, a simple contract of association with the other members of the audience, with whom they share the experience of a particular play. In general, our interviews found that people tend to be highly attentive to the reactions of the other people in the audience, especially those who accompanied them on the outing. The emotional charge of this contagion of negative and positive emotions differs, depending on whom the person is with. For instance, we identified differences between reactions in couples, on the one hand, where one partner (most often the woman) shows anxiety if their companion (generally the man) seems to be disinterested in the play; and on the other hand, between groups of friends, where, on the contrary, there seems more likely to be a

sense of complicity that enables them to laugh together afterwards about their flopped theatrical experience (Pasquier 2012).

It is audience members with whom one is unacquainted that this 'tuning in' is most difficult. As Mathias Broth notes, 'to continuously define oneself as a member of the audience' it is crucial 'to interpret "correctly", that is, in the same way as everyone else, what is happening on stage and in the audience' (2002: 39)⁶. Broth analysed four video recordings of shows at the Théâtre de la Colline in Paris. His aim was to identify the points at which coughing and throat-clearing noises were heard in relation to the course of the play, and to monitor the process of contagion of laughter and its duration. The results are very interesting. The study shows that most of these noises occur between scenes or between two sequences of action, at a time when the actors are not actually busy acting: 'the audience members visibly seek to make noises only at certain times and these times are sorts of "micro hinges" in the interaction on the stage, that is, points of transition from one action to the following one' (2002: 76). Broth concludes that 'the audience members seek to remain completely silent, and that those who do effectively make noise make a real effort, internally, to ensure that they make it at those times when it will disturb others as little as possible' (2002: 78). Broth's study also found that audience members coordinate with one another to laugh at the same time. An individual who laughs alone will stop laughing if others do not join in. On the other hand, if other people's laughs mingle with his or hers, the laughter in the theatre will increase, rising to a crescendo before stopping when the dialogue resumes, thus leaving the space free for the actors to carry on. For individuals to form an audience in a theatre, each person must individually adjust to the others and grant 'sustained, subjected and cohesive attention' to the performers' actions (Broth: 153). The theatre is a stage on which the audience members each have a role to play in order to maintain a situation that is compatible with that of the other audience members (Goffman 1973).

We can assume that the actors themselves are constantly interpreting the audience's reactions. This guides them in conducting their performance, and can also affect the level of their engagement in the action. An experiment carried out by Ravar and Andrieu (1964) indicates that actors are highly attentive to audience feedback. These authors made sound recordings of 30 performances of the same play – *Monsieur Biedermann et les incendiaires* at the Théâtre de Poche in Brussels – and then interviewed the actors. First, the recordings showed that no two performances were exactly the same: the audience did not always laugh at the same times, the silences did not have the same quality, and there were strong variations in the number and volume of sounds recorded (whispering, seats squeaking, coughing). The actors interviewed after these recordings said that all the noises in the theatre were messages from the audience: silence is an indicator of strong emotion – and thus of a very good public – while small noises of discomfort are interpreted as boredom, and isolated laughs without the rest of the audience joining in signify a misunderstanding of the script or the staging. In short, there is an alchemy that either happens or not. It also depends on the attendance rate (performances when the theatre is

full are better than those when it is half empty) and the day (Mondays are always more difficult than Saturdays).

The cacophony of failure?

The moment of 'communion with the actors' – as an interviewee put it – is eagerly anticipated but is not always sure to be successful. Antoine Hennion has noted that, for people who love Baroque music, 'the concert is not a distributor of music but a performance: what makes things happen' (Hennion 2000: 222). Similarly, the theatre performance is an interactional situation underpinned by fragile balances and complex situations of interdependence.

The arousal of collective emotion can be disturbed by tiny, seemingly harmless incidents. Coughing, squeaking seats, yawns, light snoring, sighing, or whispering have a real ability to undermine the audience's solidarity. In the cinema one hardly hears them; in a theatre, one hears nothing else. We have seen that they disturb the actors, but what about the audience members who also hear them? This question seemed to be relevant and important to interviewees. Audience members tended to analyse these in exactly the same way as the actors: coughing was seen not as an uncontrollable physical symptom but as a clear sign of boredom, a real break in the interaction between partners:

It's true that it's very disturbing, I do prefer someone to leave, they disturb for once and for all, rather than someone constantly coughing or moving. It's the sign that they're bored, to say the least, when someone moves in the theatre or makes a noise, it means there's something that's not okay. It means they're not absorbed in the atmosphere. I think that it's a matter of courtesy towards the actors, to avoid untimely coughing! It shows that the people aren't interested, yes well, no one forced them to be there! At least they could respect the work that's being done, that's been done. (65 year-old woman, retired manager).

Others go even further, like the following theatregoer who qualifies noises in the theatre as a 'cacophony of failure':

When one's concentration goes, the body needs a release, by crossing one's legs, sitting up on one's chair... and coughing of course. That's the cacophony of failure. One senses the dispersion, people who start moving, changing position, who're leaning like this on their hand, who dip their head or look at others, you feel they're thinking 'shit, this is never going to end', who look at their watch, so it does show. I've got antennae, things where people are really bored, it shows, people who're in front who start looking left and right, so one says to oneself 'OK, I'm not the only one'. People in the audience who're bored, you feel it, there's noise, comments. You can really feel the

atmosphere in the theatre, if everyone is asleep... You can feel it, if people are engaged, if they're absorbed, or if everyone's asleep. (68 year-old man, retired, Paris suburbs)

On the whole, unpleasant comments on the play are condemned. Expressing aloud one's poor opinion, whistling at actors or insulting them are forms of participation that are now seen as shocking; most audience members would not behave in this way. People are expected to keep their opinions to themselves, and always for the same reason: not destabilizing the actor's performance.

Behind me, there were three people who said: 'Yeah really, this is rubbish, it's useless...'. So, they were really saying what they thought, and quite loudly, and I find that really disrespectful because okay, if they want to talk about it alone afterwards, over a drink if they want to go out, but not in the theatre. [...] It's really important to respect the actors, it's not always easy to act and so yes, you work and you can at least be respected. It really annoys me when someone criticizes openly, during the play. (22 year-old woman, employee, Paris suburbs)

There are some exceptions to this rule. For example, contemporary dance audiences are described by interviewees as more impertinent than those of theatre. There are also behaviours that are allowed in some theatres but that would be unthinkable in most others. For example, audiences at the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris – a theatre that puts on mostly contemporary dance – is known for its departures from the norm, such as booing, enthusiastic calls, or noisy exits during the performance. Young audiences also have the reputation of often refusing to adopt the prescribed codes of civility and tending to behave as audiences did two centuries ago, talking loudly, clapping spontaneously, or doing anything but watching the performance.

Most audiences however adopt far less direct strategies to avoid breaking the behavioural rules. There are two acceptable ways of disengaging from the action without breaching their contract with the actor and with other members of the audience: sleeping in one's seat, and leaving at the interval. Sleeping is even seen by many as a 'polite' sign of disinterest, in so far as it does not disrupt the work on stage: one sleeps without making a noise, without leaving one's seat, and without the actors seeing:

Leaving, no, I don't do that, I prefer to sleep, it's not so obvious, and it disturbs the actors less. (50 year-old woman, teacher, large city North of France)

Leaving discreetly at the interval is also accepted, as it is not done in front of the actors while they are acting:

If there's an interval I do it, no problem, and if there isn't an interval, it bothers me a bit more, because I find it awkward leaving right in the middle.
(54 year-old woman, artist, Paris)

This is probably one of the most interesting paradoxes of theatre audiences: most of those who lose interest in the play nonetheless adopt behaviour in keeping with the established behavioural norm. There is an ethic of self-control that is sufficiently strong to prevail over personal reception of the work. The audience members come together around codes of civility.

Nevertheless, some interviewees did raise their voices in defence of less obedient behaviour. One theatregoer, who lives in a small town with only one theatre, complained about the weak reactions that are usual in that theatre:

It's very cocooning, there are no waves, there are rarely fits of enthusiasm where everyone stands up at the end. (45 year-old woman, no profession, small town West of France)

Another defended young audiences:

Those who ask not to be with school kids, they're a bit dumb. If you're not prepared for a bit of atmosphere, because that's also what makes the richness of the thing, then, well, rather stay at home. (35 year-old woman, visual arts teacher, North of France)

Others express their frustration at not being able to express their emotions during the performance:

Sometimes one feels like shouting out. We've got an education that limits us. It's true that things have evolved in a way that's rather stilted, the theatre has become elitist, that's why. (60 year-old man, executive, Paris)

Conclusion

After seating the parterre at the end of the 18th century, should an effort now be made to get audiences back on their feet? Clearly, some theatre directors have asked themselves this question, and for the past few decades have been seeking to change the model: taking theatre out of specific venues (such as the theatre decentralization model¹ described by Rauch 2008); putting audience members back on the stage; banning clapping rituals, seen as a sign of the audience's subjection as in Living Theatre and militant theatre (Biet and Neveux 2007); encouraging the public to move along with the actors⁷. Baz Kershaw notes that 'applause became more important to Western theatres in the second half of the twentieth

century as other forms of audience engagement were reduced' (Kershaw 2001: 135). One might, as he did, call for 'unruly' audiences as a key source of resistant vitality.

But my research has also shown the extent to which audiences are actually attached to the cultural exception provided by theatrical attendance. Even if, at times, some of them diverge from the prescribed behavioural norms, a large majority clearly approve of the pre-eminence of the stage, enjoy the particular rituals that frame arrival and behaviour in the theatre, and recognize the actors' right to lead the game. The audience members work as a team to maintain a coherent façade, like the social actors that Goffman described, even when they are not personally enjoying the performance.

However, behind this attitude there might be an element of protection of the cultivated nature of theatrical attendance and of the artistic status of this cultural form. Theatre audiences are known to be mainly from an educated background, with those who go regularly making up the majority of the audience for traditional theatre. The national survey Cultural Practices in France shows that 63% of individuals with no school degree never went to the theatre in their life, compared to only 14% of executives and teachers (Donnat 2009: 182). After all, theatre was able to recruit audiences from the working classes when it allowed a broader repertoire of overt reactions (Levine 1988). The wish to maintain an ascetic approach might therefore put some audiences off from accessing theatre for the first time (Bourdieu 1984).

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Notes:

¹ Audiences of street shows and new music concerts have increased considerably over the past decade, while those of classical music concerts have declined and aged (Donnat 2009: 179).

² This particular fieldwork with theatregoers who had joined the ‘friends’ group found that participants were strongly influenced – negatively and positively – by the people with whom they came to the theatre, with discussions about the performance afterwards having a powerful impact on their perception of the play (Pasquier 2013). Matthew Reason has studied the same process, but using experimental methods, in his audience exercise in which group discussions were organized after the performance: ‘the group demonstrates pleasure in agreement, pleasure in sharing and affirming joint memories [...]. 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’ (2004, np).

³ As in the cultural sectors of other nations, a large proportion of France’s theatrical production is offered financial assistance by the French state. The state might totally run the theatres (for example, in the cases of 5 National Theatres, 70 National Scenes, and 40 National and Regional Drama Centres) or give regular grants. It is very difficult to obtain exact figures, but it is estimated that half of all French theatres are state-supported.

⁴ The verbatim interview scripts have been translated from French into English. Liz Libbrecht translated this article.

⁵ The *Pratiques Culturelles des Français* survey in 2008 found that only 4% of theatre-goers attend the theatre alone, compared to 9% in the case of visitors to museums, and 38% of cinema-goers (Donnat 2009).

⁶ As with other extracts from French publications, this reference to Broth’s text has been translated from French.

⁷ In her analysis of changes in the positions of audience members and actors during the performance of *1789*, a play by Ariane Mnouchkine, Marie Madeleine Mervant-Roux talks of the association between acting of the first type (the actors’ theatrical work) and of the second type (the audience’s support): ‘the audience members who participate tacitly agree to their successive reactions being integrated into a whole that they do not themselves control’ (Mervant-Roux 1997). Street theatre adopts this principle with audiences on the move, who participate in the performance. Anne Gonon’s (2007) PhD thesis on relations between actors and audiences in street theatre shows the extent to which this corporal presence by audiences in the staging of the play modifies their reception of it.