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# Theatre, Fragility, and Connection: An Intimate Space

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## Abstract

Intimacy is a focal point of contemporary theatre. According to Patrice Pavis: “immersion theatre\* or the theatre of participation\* are now experiencing such success, because they require an ability to accept, if not to share, a certain emotional intimacy instead of remaining content, ‘just like before,’ with a conscious and unconscious identification with the character up there on the stage.” (Pavis, 2016) Intimacy is frequently required for a theatrical experience that allows audience members to investigate their own subjectivity, creating a tension between public and private.

Therefore, this article’s main question is whether intimacy is created by the ‘actors-performers’ or through spatial circumstances. Is the size of the space and the size of the audience an important aspect of fostering intimacy?

Following a theoretical introduction based on the work of Patrice Pavis and Robert Pierce, instances drawn from the author’s personal experiences (The Symposium on Performing Arts and Intimacy and personal work at Dafa Puppet Theatre) will be examined in further depth.

Robert Pierce explores the concept of intimacy and its function in theatrical performances in a straightforward, practical manner. He argues that intimacy is a key element of successful theatrical performances and suggests that it can be achieved through a range of techniques and strategies, such as using small performance spaces, direct eye contact, shared experience, or subtle physical gestures. He also emphasizes the role of emotional authenticity in creating intimacy, suggesting that performers must be willing to be vulnerable and expose their emotions to the audience.

The article also discusses the importance of intimacy in developing a sense of community among audience members. Pierce suggests that by creating a sense of intimacy between performers and audiences, theatrical performances can foster a sense of shared experience and promote a feeling of connection among the audience.

Patrice Pavis, when approaching intimacy, uses the battlefield analogy; he stresses the zooming in from the greater group of the community to the individual: “Many authors, from Fichet to Minyana, from Noëlle Renaude to Patrick Kermann, describe the human soul in the same way a battlefield was described in the nineteenth century, with the same attention to detail and the same distance: no longer with a view to accuracy and completeness, but showing an ability to observe, isolate and transform into words the little things of life, and ultimately create an epic of human beings. This distancing of intimacy is probably due to the suspicion of any psychology of the authentic\* self and any intersubjectivity.” (Pavis, 2016)

During the Symposium on Performing Arts and Intimacy in Skautský institut v Rybárně, young creators shared their practices about intimacy in the theatre and art. It was a genuine realization that none of the speakers associated intimacy with eroticism, as a superficial interpretation would suggest. Instead, they discussed the social and cultural meanings, their distinct approaches, and creative work experiences.

Thought-provoking questions arose: Is physical closeness necessary for intimacy, or can stage distance emphasize its presence? How can we communicate and experience intimacy in theatre? How can performance art critically challenge our disconnection from the physical world and oppose it with touch, tenderness, and intimacy?

Michał Salwiński, one of the presenters, defined intimacy as a way of being together. He shed light on the surprising way the audience experiences intimacy in the supermarket. (the moment the family comes together, creating emotional closeness in a superficial environment) “Through playful and intimate interactions, the audience enters different layers of reality on an imaginary journey that triggers changing the audience’s experience of environments such as the supermarket” (Salwiński, 2024)

New wording immersed or, if you like, terms were rephrased in intimate art-making:

The audience becomes a companion, the stage a shelter, and the drama evolves into ‘being together’ or meditation.

The conference presenters were primarily analyzing their own performances. I’m familiar with one of them: Spoonfed, by Nitish Jain and collective. The creators described it as an “intimate, multisensory performance for 3 audience members.” Three performers interact (one-to-one) with the audience, wearing blindfolds, listening to varied audio on headphones, and facilitating sensory acts. The ‘stage’ is a small table.

The organizers’ statement made me think intimate theatre performances are a channel to reconnect with everyday life/ reality. As the conference organizers formulated in the Facebook event description:

“Our goal is not only to explore how to be more intimate for the theatre itself but rather how to use contemporary performance art as a trainer for people to open up and come back to themselves - especially in non-theatrical reality, in everyday life.”

The potential of a larger study arose to examine if intimacy in theatre can reconnect us to our senses and build trust with our surrounding reality. Pavis, in an interview, points out the use of “theatre or literature as weapons

and as a means to understand our political and personal world better.” (Pavis, 2020)

I am the set and puppet designer of a solo documentary performance, *Smooth Life*. It is puppetry for eight people, with puppets made from little branches and grains of rice. The audience is seated around a 120-centimeter diameter table, close to each other, without visibility concerns. This set attempts to evoke a family dining scene, which I believe is an intimate, vulnerable position with the spectators. Throughout the creative process, I tried (unconsciously) to use intimacy to avoid stereotyped or politically one-dimensional interpretations of refugee stories, not to set up the performance “in contrast to political theatre, as a writing centered on the concerns of the individual” (Pavis, 2016) but rather to work aligned to the idea that the personal is political. *Smooth Life* is based on Husam Abed's own biography, and by implementing Pierce's practical intimacy acts, the performance fosters emotional authenticity and a feeling of shared experience. The political context is kept in the background while a deeper personal truth is unveiled.

I now propose a 'zooming out' to a larger perspective. Pavis criticizes big productions that try to “seduce at all cost, manage in a corporate way, stage with an efficient immediacy that leaves no lasting scars in the memory.” (Pavis 2020). And yet, Taylor Swift's stadium concerts, for example, attended by 70,000 people, have been described as having “startling intimacy” (Petrusich 2023). Questions arise: Is a 'one-way' correspondence (performer to audience), present because of the mass, allows space for intimacy? Who can tell if massive productions are simply 'seducing' or amplifying intimacy to promote “audience camaraderie”?

My opinion is that intimacy cannot be commercialized; trading audience connections is wrong. However, the loss of monoculture means that “we no longer consume the same cultural objects at the same time or in the same way, and as a result, we feel disconnected, adrift, lost.” (Petrusich 2023), and so when artists are challenged with it, they increasingly commonly localize practices and use intimacy to generate a feeling of community among the few spectators.

Both *Smooth Life* and *Spoonfed* are advertised as intimate encounters. The audience has the chance to make an informed choice when attending these performances. Physical closeness is a conscious part of it. This closeness and smaller spatial circumstances provide more intense stimulation for the senses. Being blindfolded (*Spoonfed*) or sharing a meal (*Smooth Life*) puts the audience in an intimate position. Intimacy is a transformational power: it redefines the role of performers and spectators. They can become family members, as happens during *Smooth Life*.

## Conclusion

The keywords of my definition of intimacy are vulnerability, reciprocity, and spatial closeness. Spatial proximity limits the size of both the space and the audience, when fosters intimacy. Intimacy in the theatre can be described along the lines of personal, emotional, sensorial experience, and institutional duality. Intimacy in the theatre can be described along the lines of personal, emotional, sensorial experience, and institutional duality. According to Pavis: “performers are frequently led to talk about themselves, rejecting the mask of theatrical performance for the ‘presentation of self in everyday life’ ... This desire for authenticity\* in performance requires

an intimate relationship with spectators ..." (Pavis 2016). The creation processes used by the above-mentioned alternative theatre companies blur the boundaries of the institutional/personal binary, artist scenographical choices, and the alternative performing space options (homes, riverbanks, studios, etc.) determine intimacy as space. A space where fragility is present and the tension between public and private transforms it into a key component of a deeply rooted, engaging theatre.

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