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CHAPTER 5

Facilitating Narrative Agency in Experiential Theatre

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Abstract

This essay discusses the difference between *agency of engagement*, which is found in most experiential performance as the opportunity for the audience to choose their own journey, and *narrative agency*, as the ability to impact on (part of) the performance process, content, or outcome. It will explore the different ways in which narrative agency can be conducted for participants (from direct choices to creative agency), with a discussion of different facilitation approaches. Agency becomes meaningful for participants when they experience it – which is something artists and performers have limited control over. The essay will discuss this challenge and provide strategies to increase the possibility that participants will experience agency. It concludes with a practical exercise and questions for critical reflection for makers or performers – such as testing out any participatory strategy with audiences during development and carefully considering the reasons for using participation to ensure a meaningful audience experience.

Facilitating Narrative Agency in Experiential Theatre

Agency is an often-discussed term in connection to participation in theatre and performance (Alston 2016; Frieze 2016; Harpin and Nicholson 2017; Harvie 2013; Tomlin 2019; White 2013). Agency describes the ability to make decisions that in some way influence, change or impact the agent's situation (Schlosser 2015); in experiential performance this means, for instance, being able to influence the performance direction, contribute to the work's material, or change the show's outcome. It's useful to distinguish between the ability to contribute to a work during its creation and the opportunity to participate within a performance of that work (which likely happens multiple times). This essay focuses on participation *during* an experiential performance, but this does not exclude the possibility of a participatory process to create the work. Within this essay I will discuss the different types of agency in experiential theatre, strategies for facilitating audience participation, and highlight the ways that agency becomes meaningful when it is experienced by participants (which is not effectively determined through observation). As performers only have limited control over whether participants experience agency, I will discuss strategies to support performers to successfully facilitate such experiences. This essay also includes a practical exercise exploring facilitation

strategies for the different types of contributions invited by experiential theatre and critical questions for reflection.

Within experiential theatre there are two main types of agency: *agency of engagement* and *narrative agency* (Breel, forthcoming). Agency of engagement describes the ability of audience members to find their own journey through the work and the opportunity to decide on their physical relationship to the performance (i.e., getting closer to the action or exploring the space). A performance where the audience sits down throughout offers little agency of engagement, whilst a promenade performance offers a lot of agency of engagement, with different actions afforded by the way audience members are encouraged to move through the space. For instance, Punchdrunk's work offers the opportunity to explore the space to audience members, who can decide on viewing strategies such as following performers, exploring the set's corners to find details, or seeking a one-on-one encounter with a performer. Agency of engagement does not include the ability to change the performance itself, rather it is the relationship between the audience member and performance that is altered (which impacts on that audience member's individual experience).

Narrative agency is the opportunity for participants to make material contributions to or changes in the performance, which go beyond affecting the individual's experience to impact the experiences of other participants. Narrative agency can take a variety of forms, from a collective audience vote on what happens next, to the contribution of a personal anecdote that becomes part of the performance text. Kaleider's *The Money*, for instance, asks participants to make a collective decision on what to do with the money on the table in front of them within the rules presented (that it must be unanimous, legal, and made within 60 minutes), meaning that they contribute the performance content as well as determine the outcome. The ability to contribute to the performance material or direction is particularly meaningful for participants as the impact of narrative agency extends beyond impacting only on their own experience (as with agency of engagement) and builds a collective experience.

Both agency of engagement and narrative agency become meaningful when they are experienced, however audience research on the experience of participation highlights that not all acts of narrative agency are automatically experienced as agency (Breel, forthcoming). Agency can be conceptualized from two perspectives: through external observation of audience actions (by makers or researchers) and through participants' reflection on their own

experiences. Only audience first-person narratives can fully determine whether participants *experienced* agency during the performance, making it important to talk to audiences after any playtests during a work's development (a term from game development where a new game is tested before release to find and fix any bugs or design flaws; this is essential for experiential theatre as the work is incomplete until the audience arrives). This essay will set out an approach for teaching students about agency: by considering how to conceptualize audience agency, looking at facilitation strategies and a practical exercise to build skills and test ideas.

Conceptualizing Agency

When designing, directing, or facilitating participation in experiential theatre it's important to remember that it's not possible to *give* participants agency. Agency is something all audience members already possess; however, this agency can be restricted or conducted by a performance to create the desired aesthetic experience. Most experiential performances both restrict and conduct agency, for instance *The Money* invites contributions from participants in the form of suggestions on what to do with the money on the table as well as ideas on how to make a unanimous collective decision, whilst creating boundaries that mean these contributions can be meaningfully incorporated into the performance, such as the need for all to sign the pro forma before the time runs out.

A performance structure, including the relationship between performers and audience, the layout of the space and the invitations to participants to contribute, determines the specific ways in which the work conducts and restricts participants' agency. For instance, a Punchdrunk performance invites participants to walk through the space and choose where to stand which conducts their agency of engagement but will also restrict access to certain areas (likely for audience safety). An invitation to take on a role within the narrative that includes the ability to make decisions conducts a participant's narrative agency, but it is still constrained by the existing performance narrative and might come with options to choose between to move the story forwards.

To get a more detailed picture of how narrative agency can be conducted (and restricted) it is useful to distinguish between four levels (Breel, forthcoming):

- **Reactive:** Participants are given an explicit request or choice, such as answering a question with predefined options (verbally or physically). This enables the audience to

influence the performance narrative, but within clearly set boundaries. Often the type of response invited is explicitly set out, such as standing in a particular area of the room to indicate your choice or holding up one of three colored cards.

- **Interactive:** Participants are directly invited to respond to an element of the work, but without pre-decided responses to choose between. This enables a wider range of potential responses, which conducts narrative agency more effectively. For instance, performers might invite participants to discuss the best way forwards in relation to a challenge presented by the work; here participants can take anything they've discovered so far to come up with ideas to solve the challenge.
- **Creative:** At this level participants contribute something that responds to the affordances of the situation and adds something distinct to the performance that did not explicitly exist before. Where interactive agency asks participants to put forward their own perspective, perhaps reframing what has happened so far; for creative agency participants are encouraged to add something to the work that was not already present in a different form. This contribution might be a personal response or experience that is then incorporated into the performance, or it might be a request for participants to devise what happens next in the narrative.
- **Pro-active:** Pro-active agency consists of self-initiated contributions which are not explicitly invited by the work and where the response is situated outside of the situation's affordances. As such it is impossible to deliberately invite pro-active agency; however, it is important to be aware of it as something that might happen as some participants either mis-interpret the invitations for participation or deliberately test the edges of the work. The best way to prepare for pro-active agentic acts is to be clear on the work's boundaries and acknowledge contributions that cannot be incorporated in the narrative (weaving these in as best possible, so that participants feel their contributions have been heard).

These four levels of narrative agency describe the spectrum of different types of contributions you might elicit from your audience. The specific level invited by a situation is in part determined by the interpretation of the audience member and in part responsive to the facilitation style. For instance, an invitation to contribute to the decision of what happens next in the performance narrative through conversation might be facilitated by: offering three options to choose between (reactive), inviting open conversation on events so far (interactive), or making it clear that the ending is not predetermined by asking for suggestions of what to do next (creative). The same invitation can result in both interactive and creative responses from different participants, as their contribution depends on a range of factors (including their interpretation of the task and their confidence in taking part).

Facilitating Agency

It's important to remember that designing an opportunity for participants to contribute to an experiential performance will not automatically translate into an experience of agency for them (which is when agency becomes meaningful). However, a nuanced understanding of agency will support the design of more thoughtful and intentional invitations and enable effective playtesting strategies to refine the participatory elements of a work. Research on agency demonstrates that for someone to experience agency, they need to make the connection between their action and the result, even if this is not what they intended or expected (Bayne 2008; Gallagher 2005; Gallagher and Zahavi 2008). If this connection is missing, then agency is not experienced (Hallet 2011). For simple actions (i.e., pressing a button to turn a light on) a direct, and quick, result is important for someone to make the connection that leads to experienced agency. Participants' retrospective attribution of agency happens for both 'planned' instances, where their actions did materially contribute to a particular moment in the performance (such as the ending), as well as for events that would have happened irrespective of any audience contributions. Although for the latter we could see this as an 'incorrect' attribution, this does not make the experience any less meaningful unless the participant discovers that they have been purposefully misled as to the (lack of) consequences from their actions. In both cases, retrospective attribution is more common for complex actions, where the link between action and result is less clear and where often there are multiple contributions that together determine a result. The complicated and uncertain process of retrospective attribution of agency also highlights the importance of an iterative development process that includes playtesting and audience feedback, to develop the most effective facilitation strategies possible for the desired aesthetic experience.

Agency of engagement and narrative agency result in different types of experiences of agency for participants: in agency of engagement the connection between an action taken by a participant and the resulting impact on their experience is direct and often immediate (by moving across a room to discover something or talk to a performer). In narrative agency the relationships between acts and results are frequently more complex and longitudinal; for instance, the performance outcome might be the result of the contributions from a group of participants and this outcome might be at the end whilst contributions are made throughout the show. These aspects of narrative agency mean that it can be difficult for participants to

retrospectively attribute agency to their actions within the performance; but the nature of narrative agency means that if the attribution *is* made by participants, it is a more meaningful type of agency than agency of engagement. Makers and facilitators of participatory performance can support participants to make retrospective attributions of narrative agency through the thoughtful facilitation of invitations which implicitly or explicitly make clear why participants are asked to do something (this can happen at the time of the invitation or can be made clear at the point in the performance when the result plays out). Facilitated post-performance conversations can also support participants to make the connections between their actions and the outcome(s) within the work. This process supports a better understanding for the director and performers of how agency is experienced within the work by participants.

Practical Implementation

This exercise is a practical exploration of different ways to restrict and conduct agency through participation to support a critical discussion of facilitation approaches. The categories listed below can also be used as a framework for the analysis of existing performances.

Preparation:

Create three **sets of cards** (ten cards in total) with the bold words on each (the definition of each word is shared with the group rather than written on the card):

Types of contribution

1. **Personal:** Invite participants to contribute material to the performance that is based on or related to their own lives; for instance, past experiences, lived knowledge, or personal interpretations.
2. **Narrative:** Ask participants to make contributions that move the narrative forwards, including decisions on what happens next, voting, or influencing the performance ending by solving a problem.
3. **Role:** Provide participants with a specific role, which might be a task to carry out or a character to play (either individually or as a group); the aspects of this role might be explicitly set out or have to be inferred from the situation.
4. **Game:** Present participants with a clear goal or objective to achieve, such as winning a challenge, solving a puzzle, or achieving a collective task.

Facilitating levels of agency

1. **Reactive:** Facilitate audience participation through presenting clear choices or options for participants to choose between.
2. **Interactive:** Invite participants to use what they have learnt in the performance so far to respond to challenges, questions or decisions that need to be made.
3. **Creative:** Encourage participants to contribute their own perspectives into the performance, with the aim of adding something new to the situation (i.e., something personal or a new perspective on existing performance content).

Participant playing style

1. **Reluctant:** Participants should be reluctant or unsure about participating (but not unwilling); this might be expressed through questions for the performer about what is desired / invited or through being slow to respond to invitations.
2. **Enthusiastic:** Participants should be keen to take part and explicitly seek out any opportunity to contribute, whilst being respectful of what the situation is asking. Once an invitation is made the response is immediate and enthusiastic.
3. **Pro-active:** Participants try to contribute something that is *not* explicitly invited by the situation, this might be by deliberately mis-reading the invitations made by the performers or by trying to explore the edges of the participation on offer in the scene.

Exercise

Divide the class into small groups (2-4 people); for each turn one of the groups will be the Performers and the others will be Participants (depending on the overall class size the participatory scene might need to be performed multiple times). The Performer group chooses a contribution and agency card randomly (i.e., Game and Creative) and devises a short participatory scene either based around the work in development or a narrative that everyone is familiar with (good starting points are fairy tales or film plots). The aim is for the participatory situation to invite the type of contribution (Personal, Narrative, Role or Game) and level of agency (Reactive, Interactive or Creative) on the selected cards. Once the scene is ready, each Participant group selects a random playing style card that determines their approach to taking part (Reluctant, Enthusiastic, or Pro-active). If you have a large class, all small groups can devise their scenes simultaneously before they are played in turn; this also enables each Performer group to experience different playing styles.

In turns, let the groups experience each other's participatory scenes: the groups should not know in advance what cards the others have selected and both should be asked about their

experiences before these are revealed. The facilitator of the exercise then leads a group discussion to explore whether the Performers achieved their aim (including how they succeeded, any challenges, and new ideas for improvements). If multiple groups played each scene, a discussion on how the Performers coped with the different playing styles can support the development of facilitation skills.

Critical Reflection

The following questions are offered to support critical reflection, either as part of the above exercise or in relation to the development of an experiential performance:

- What is the purpose of participation in this work?
- What type(s) of contribution are you inviting from your audience? Why?
- How will you facilitate these contributions?
- What type(s) of agency are you hoping participants might experience? Why?
- How can you test the audience experience in your work?
- How will you communicate that participants can choose whether to take part and how can they signal that they would rather not participate?

Experiencing agency is a significant part of what can make experiential theatre meaningful for audiences, but makers and performers have limited control over whether participants experience any agency. However, an experiential performance can restrict and conduct the agency audience members already possess to create an aesthetic experience, whilst a thoughtful approach to facilitating participation can support audiences to connect their actions to the performance outcomes to make it more likely that they will experience agency. This essay has made suggestions to support participants make both immediate and retrospective attributions of narrative agency, for instance through invitations that make the outcome of their decisions clear or by facilitating reflection at the end or post-performance.

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