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Immersive Theatre:

Balancing Landscape and Theatre, Creating Place and Memory

Landscape Theory

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Introduction

I roll up my boot-cut jeans and carefully slide down the slightly sloped slime-covered slate; the water lapping just as carefully at my ankles. Water rushes yards from my ears and the damp smell of an ancient woods caresses my nostrils. I open my eyes, blinking, and without thinking twice I climb the outcropped wall, oozing with water and archaic secrets, to the top to see the source of the babbles and white noise. I run. I open my arms and run, coating the holy ground with my virgin footprints, leaving my story behind me as I go. A spiritual awakening dawns within me and eases an uninhibited smile across my face, arm-span, torso, feet. The only thing in my way is the pull of the persuasive moss beneath me, as I let the air and space and ancients guide me to the next moment. A memory and place I will never forget.

I roll up my pressed shirt's sleeves and breathe carefully inside a small wooden room with nurses, doctors, locked chests, and ten strangers; each breathing and waiting just as carefully, next to me. The scene begins and I am baptized into a theatrical cacophony of delicate dances, rooms of mystery, and a story that rolls itself up just as quickly as it unravels. I dream. I open my eyes and dream, finding small pockets of art and nostalgia for *Alice* and her wonderful land. A deep-rooted sense of whimsy and curiosity seeps through my body as I merge with the playful spirit of my childhood and its ancient tomes. Nothing but the gentle control of energy within this choreography can slow my eagerness for what awaits inside the next rabbit hole. A memory and place I will never forget.

Two unforgettable experiences: one outside, free from control and persuasion; one inside, choreographed by minds much greater than my own. Both Childs Park in Pennsylvania and *Then She Fell* (an immersive theatre experience in Brooklyn, New York) presented me with memories of place that remain deep-rooted and far from representational. This paper will look at two forms of art and experience that have personally affected me throughout my life: Landscape and Theatre. Specifically, it will delve into case studies of how each discipline has attempted to cross-pollinate the other in innovative ways. This paper will begin to examine these manipulations and how they may have shaped certain performance and landscape design strategies of today. In addition, we will see how this cross-disciplinary progression has resulted in the popular trend of Immersive Theatre. Finally, we shall examine the next step for these two fields and discover how someone may be fully immersed into a balanced theatrical and landscape experience.

Place

Immersive theatrical experiences have been popping up all across the globe over the past decade.¹ According to Gareth White, Senior Lecturer in Applied Theatre and Community Performance at the University of London, this style of performance is defined by its expansive environments, and mobile and participatory audiences.² In his paper, "On Immersive Theatre," he discusses how and why this new experiential performance art has become so effective at portraying a variety of stories in a multitude of locations.³ It is important to look at the events and strides in theatrical and environmental design up until this point in

history in order to further understand the significance of this emerging art form. It all begins with “place,” which is essential to one’s experience and memory of a moment in space.

Likewise, meaning is critical in determining attachment, satisfaction, and behavior in a place, according to Richard Stedman, Associate Professor at Cornell’s Department of Natural Resources.⁴ In his paper “Toward a Social Psychology of Place,” he defines “place” as a “center of meaning...based on human experience, social relationships, emotions, and thoughts.”⁵ It is the duty of the designer to create this meaning for his/her audience. Throughout history, there have been many attempts and successes at creating this sense of place. More contemporary theory suggests that landscape should be “explorative, uncertain, and tentative” to suggest “a character of flirting,” according to David Crouch, professor of Cultural Geography at the University of Derby.⁶ Crouch discusses how landscape experience relies on “openness and becoming in performance...Landscape in performance can be transformative *and* reassuring.”⁷ He presses on the significance of how landscape exhibits the capacity of belonging to a place, which Stedman also references in his research. Both Crouch and Stedman agree that the elements of place-making require an experience that removes one from the self in order to reflect on the attachment that is created (or not created) in every moment.

Movement and Landscape

In order to emphasize this concept of experience and place-making, Crouch uses Dance Theory as an example, which stresses the importance of

detaching one's self from the performance and feeling a part of the wider environment.⁸ One prime example of the incorporation of Dance into Landscape Theory is the life works of Anna and Lawrence Halprin. This dynamic and landmark duo were at the cutting edge of both dance and landscape design and were able to work fluidly between both disciplines. Anna, being from a dance background, greatly influenced Lawrence's landscape design work and vice versa.

What they unearthed was the concept of structured choreography within landscape and how to balance strategy with its alternative force of unstructured play and freedom.⁹ Anna's work taught us the difference between Ballet, which is a spatial design of movement, and an Avant Garde form of dance, which writes and performs the spaces in which it occupies. This new form of Modern Dance, which she develops, is an animation of the landscape.¹⁰ She discovered how people can creatively inhabit architectural spaces and she compares space to design as movement is to dance. These discoveries helped inform Lawrence of his own findings in landscape architecture. He began to acknowledge gardens as stage sets for a dance. His landscapes became scores for people in the his spaces to move in patterns and experience and participate with their environment.¹¹

These discoveries and cross-disciplinary research methods helped to awaken a new age of design in both performance and landscape. They were the foundation in the creation of novel spaces that set the visitors as actors and dancers. This manipulation accelerates one's attachment to the sense of place

through interaction and movement within it. An example of this would be the Lovejoy Fountain (Image 1), which created a constantly moving, changing, and dancing stage with which visitors could touch and interact.¹² As a result, the public became the actors on the stage or an audience watching an organic story unfolding and were therefore immersed into the constant performance of this place.

On the other side of this cross-disciplinary spectrum lies the cutting-edge stylings of Julie Taymor, contemporary director and designer of theatre, film, and opera. Julie is considered innovative for her use of puppetry and costuming to bring scenes and people to life through what she calls “anthropomorphism.”¹³ In an interview, led by Richard Schechner, she discusses her use of mime technique as the foundation for her ingenious designs. Mime expresses shape, form, and substance without the physical use of them. To further this process, she uses puppets and costumes to get her actors out of themselves and into concrete, exterior forms, much like Halprin’s dance theories. Taymor discusses how she works with her cast to act out landscape with their movements, which in turn creates “ideographs” of multiple levels of meaning. In other words, the actors learn to represent what is both seen and inferred. She discusses her love for theatre because there is no illusion to it. The audience knows exactly how it is done. This concept is exploited in her design of *The Lion King* on Broadway (Image 2), as the mechanics and puppetry are not hidden, but rather shown off to the audience to create a better awareness and attachment to the place in which she is consuming them.¹⁴ The actors are fused with the scenery to literally

become the landscape. There is a human quality to the every aspect of the space as a result. This, in turn, persuades the audience to feel a part of the romanticized African landscape.

Looking at these two opposites of the Landscape-Theatre spectrum, we can see similarities. Both Halprin and Taymor work to use elements of the other discipline to embellish their respective works in order to emphasize a greater sense of place. While Halprin's involvement of dance within his landscapes creates an immersive experience for the visitor, it could be considered too manipulative, controlling, and opaque. There is a "hand of God" motif running through his landscapes and this choreography may or may not be the most effective way of handling place-making in the landscape. In other words, visitors of the space can either touch the water walls or watch the performance unfold. Either way, there is a specific set of "dance steps" with which the "actors" need to learn and follow. On the other hand, Taymor's immersion lies within her ideographic and anthropomorphic "illusionlessness." However there is a factor of distance that may need to be taken into account when considering her place-making qualities of theatrical design. In other words, while the actors "become" the landscape that she is creating for the audience, there is still a physical separation from the stage and the audience member, sitting 30 feet or more from the "landscape." So is there a sweet spot and middle ground that takes the best elements from both disciplines? The new wave of "Immersive Theatre" could be on the right track.

Immersive Theatre

Immersive Theatre is an up-and-coming form of theatrical art that involves not only breaking the “fourth wall,” but grabbing the audience and pulling them right through it. Examples include Shunt’s *Tropicana* (2003), Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More* (2003), and Third Rail Projects’ *Then She Fell* (Image 3). These theatrical experiences take a variety of sizes of audiences through a multitude of places and stories, both archaic and novel. What makes them unique is that they present their respective stories in spaces, both found and made, that contain secret passages and rooms, locked chests and doors, elegant food and drinks. Audience members are led or let loose to explore, create, choose paths, and experience the actors and environments in endless possibilities.

Gareth White, who was mentioned previously, discusses his take on immersive theatre in his paper. He notes that the qualities of immersive theatre include expansive environments, and a mobile and participatory audience. The innovative and core characteristics of this type of theatre include choice making, movement from place to place, and access to the “inside” of the theatre.¹⁵ If you’ll notice, these successful characteristics are found in the styles of both Julie Taymor and Lawrence Halprin. What they do so well is that they immerse the audience members into the performance until they feel a part of it; until every user is a dancer (like Halprin). In addition, there is no facade or illusion of the “man behind the curtain” (like Taymor), which creates the ability to see what is “inside” the performance and therefore a further sense of inclusion for the user. White discusses the importance of Performance Theory and Cognition in that we understand metaphor much more effectively if we experience it first-hand.¹⁶ That

way, we can relate the metaphor to experience and explore it much more deeply than if it were handed to us verbally or otherwise.

All of these traits belonging to immersive theatre are the next step to combining landscape and performance art. Taking the inclusion of Halprin's landscapes and the illusionlessness of Taymor's theatre, we can grow closer to experiencing the ultimate sense of place. However, White notes a flaw in this new form of theatre. He discusses how these experiences are still not *quite* immersive enough. There is still a distance that is created. There is still a point where we remember that we are audience members or that the show must start and end.¹⁷ In other words, we can only be immersed in a place to a certain point, until we realize that it is still just a performance and not truly a reality. In turn, our sense of place, while strong, is still an illusion designed and performed by actors and directors. So how can we fully immerse someone into a theatrical experience? How can we go beyond Immersive Theatre? I believe the answer lies in going outside of four walls, as all of the recent productions have yet to do.

The Next Step

I decided to test the limits Immersive Theatre by breaking out of its architectural elements with a play that I am to direct in the Summer of 2015. Along with a "zero-dollar budget" theatre company that I started with my good friend, I plan on directing Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Rutgers Gardens in New Brunswick, NJ. The vision will be to incorporate the elements of theatre into the outdoor elements of landscape design. We will achieve this by creating close interaction with audience members in order to fully

immerse them into the woods and gardens discussed in the classic play. By leading the audience through natural rooms and corridors, we will achieve a new level of both theatrical and landscape expression.

In terms of theatrical-landscape design, the next step would be to take the lessons learned from moving actors and audience members through a landscape and apply them to design principles. I will ask questions like “What defines an actor versus an audience member?” and “How can I design a space that influences motion and adventure and a feeling of uninhibited bliss?” These are principles that will be discovered after feeling what it’s like to bring theatre into a landscape setting.

Conclusion

I feel called to create of an outdoor space that is unique in its performance qualities, but also allows for that sense of inhibition; freedom to feel joy and immersion into one’s own place. Designing a space that incorporates elements from Halprin, Taymor, and Immersive Theatre could very well allow for an experience that isn’t quite so choreographed or distant from its goals. It can bring us closer to designing an experience that resembles what I discovered for myself in the waterfalls of Childs Park, PA or the corridors and story of *Then She Fell*. The next step is working closely with other disciplines to find a point of translation that can create a deep, immersive metaphor to enwrap us in an experience; to create attachment and interaction; to provide a true and pure sense of place and a memory to last a lifetime.

PHOTOS



Image 1. Lawrence Halprin's Lovejoy Fountain with people interacting with it.



Image 2. Julie Taymor's *The Lion King* gazelle costume/puppets.



Image 3. Photo of Immersive Theatre experience: *Then She Fell*, featuring “Alice” crawling from the school desk room.

NOTES

¹ ALICE CABANAS (2013). "This rise of immersive theatre puts design in the spotlight." *World Stage Design*. Aug 3 2013. <http://www.wsd2013.com/blog-category/this-rise-of-immersive-theatre-puts-design-in-the-spotlight/>

² GARETH WHITE (2012). On Immersive Theatre. *Theatre Research International*, 37, pp 221-235 doi:10.1017/S0307883312000880 .

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ RICHARD STEDMAN (2002). Towards a Social Psychology of Place. Predicting behavior from place-based cognitions, attitude, and identity. *Environment and Behavior*, Vol 34 No 5 pp 561-581.

⁵ *Ibid.* p 562

⁶ DAVID CROUCH (2010). Flirting with space: thinking landscape relationally. *Cultural Geographies*, 17 (1), pp 5-18.

⁷ *Ibid.* p 10

⁸ *Ibid* p 9

⁹ PETER MERRIMAN (2010). Architecture/dance: choreographing and inhabiting spaces with Anna and Lawrence Halprin. *Cultural Geographies*, 17 (4), pp 427-449.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p 430

¹¹ *Ibid* p 431-432

¹² JUDITH WASSERMAN (2012). A World in Motion. The Creative Synergy of Lawrence and Anna Halprin. *Landscape Journal* 31 (1-2), pp 33-52.

¹³ RICHARD SCHECHNER and JULIE TAYMOR (1998). Julie Taymor: From Jacques Lecoq to "The Lion King": an Interview. *TDR* 43 (3) p 36-55.

¹⁴ *Ibid* p45-50

¹⁵ GARETH WHITE (2012). On Immersive Theatre. *Theatre Research International*, 37, pp 221-235 doi:10.1017/S0307883312000880 .

¹⁶ *Ibid* p 225-228

¹⁷ *ibid* p 233