

Critical Essay

Dramatic Theory: The Impact of Ephemerality in Theatre

by Faith Hart

I lie in bed wide awake, trembling in fear, more nights than I'd like to admit. Body weakening and longing for respite, my mind often rages with panic about the unstoppable passing of time. My chest feels heavy under the weighted reality that my time on this planet is ever-dwindling, so I fear sleep and any other use of time I perceive as wasteful. The reality of being alive on this planet is that time is intrinsically linked to death. I fear death, especially in quiet moments where I can hear its countdown in my chest. Every moment of my waking days I feel a cold hand at my neck and still I choose, over and over, to commit my time to theatre. Theatre is a response, a refusal, a reclamation, and a resting place for the raging spirit of death inside each of us.

In his book *Being and Time*, Philosopher Martin Heidegger describes this reality of the human condition as “Sein-zum-Tode”, or being-towards-death (277). However, Heidegger frames the idea as full of potential, instead of the burden I have always regarded it as. For Heidegger, the looming reality of death— the imminent future and its inescapable end— creates endless possibilities for living. He suggests that confronting one's own finitude allows for a person to make real meaning in their life, exercising a more informed sense of judgment for what is important and worthwhile. Additionally, this acknowledgment of the lingering death inside every human body creates the potential for people to step outside of themselves— knowing the limits of one's own existence intimately encourages them to seek perspectives outside their own.

Theatre is the ultimate confrontation of life's finitude and human smallness. At the same time, it is a fervent bargaining for the cause of human significance and ageless, universal truth. Theatre addresses the deepest, most probing need of my humanity, which is to know that I am significant. It platforms the stories of all kinds of people, from queens to working-class mothers to peasants, and

makes a case for their importance, thus making a case for the significance of all people. At the same time, theatre reveals my smallness in the larger context of humanity. The contradiction grows deeper, and the best theatre dances the line between the two. A single play can reveal both the specificity of a story and the timeless, endless nature of stories like it, occurring over and over again throughout human history. Theatre is constantly making a case both for and against individual human significance. It is revealing both the preciousness of time and the meaninglessness of the construct, complicating our individual places within its passing. It is painting an intricate, contradictory landscape of human reality— an intersection we can only identify as truth.

I make theatre as a defiance of death and fear, for I cannot be afraid when I am faced with truth and understand my place in a larger portrait of humankind. Truth is not the same as factuality. It is instead a kind of shared knowledge or understanding between souls that says “I understand you” or “I see you”. Accessing truth happens in a multitude of ways but in my life, I sense it most potently in the theatre. As I sit on the edge of my seat in wrapped attention and sense the same energy in those around me, or burst into laughter at the same time as a room full of strangers, I feel a collective understanding with humanity I can not always see. Theatre is constantly making the strange familiar and the unknowable known, lifting and suspending my relation to mankind every time I choose to engage with a theatre-going or theatre-making experience.

To defy death is to suspend the limitations of time. Theatre unravels the human conception of time by transporting audiences and theatre-makers into worlds unlike their own, illuminating realities and frequencies not otherwise accessible. Additionally, theatre changes the way people interact with time by mandating true presence, which defies fear by highlighting the fullness of one’s place

within a current moment. Theatre is one of the only remaining social structures that demands its patrons and participants to put phones aside, sit in a room together, and engage with one another. In practice, theatre subverts, extends, and transcends time, allowing those who engage with it to approach their imminent end, death, with a new sense of possibility.

Theatre is an ephemeral art form that operates under the same logic as Heidegger's notion of being-towards-death. Just like a human being, theatre derives its greatest meaning from the inevitability of its end. In his book *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Allan Kaprow emphasizes the idea of ephemeral production in his work, accepting and celebrating the elusive, uncontainable nature of performance. Kaprow's "happenings" were not necessarily more ephemeral than many other performance traditions, but they were more consciously embracing ephemerality than other forms. While the constructs of scripts and production photos will certainly not go away, theatre should not work to immortalize itself and instead, should work to do the opposite. Theatre-makers must lean in to the ephemeral present of every performance, structuring creative processes with flexibility to allow artists to respond to the impermanent, ripe energy of each day, each audience, and each moment. In practice, this means that no production should be choreographed or designed to be repeatable and that no two performances should ever strive to be identical. It is the richness of the present and the knowledge of its fleeting nature that provides the true inspiration to act. If either a human or a play were immortal, there would be no urgency, no decisiveness, and no true meaning in the present.

Through its suspension of human relationships and time, theatre makes the strange familiar. But theatre also functions to make the familiar strange, and these two forces' divine intersection is what makes possible an arrival at the complexity of truth. I believe in theatre that investigates living

through a full range of human experiences. I believe in a theatre that is startlingly alive, striving to illuminate the contradictions, possibilities, and curiosities of humanity. This kind of theatre flourishes in the in-between of meaninglessness and significance. It strays from the practice of communicating one overarching message or morality, but instead works to explore multiplicities of meaning. It avoids the structure of pitting two forces against one another, allowing for more dynamic, representational, and nuanced realities to be portrayed.

The theatre I theorize explores humanity with reckless curiosity, attaching a kind of reverence to both the mundane and the traditionally climactic, exploring each of these with the same amount of ferocity. For example, watching an actor stub their toe or eat a piece of pie in slow motion is a thorough and relatable investigation of humanity which can allow audiences to come into a deeper understanding of their collective, shared experience. Moments of reflection on the traditionally unexplored aspects of existence should accompany, not replace the traditionally favored elements of plot and climactic structure. This concept defies the Aristotelian notion of scale in every way, for it demands that an audience be able to see both the mundane and the fantastic elements of a character's life. Only this structure of plot unlocks the working dual realities within each human life—significance vs smallness, death vs life, timelessness vs mortality.

To make theatre is to step outside of one's body, understand realities of time and humanity larger than oneself, and then to actively choose to step back into the body, celebrating and engaging with its mortality. Theatre is a lifted reality, where time and human connection function strangely. It is a divine present, with an ephemerality that derives its meaning. Theatrical catharsis lies in one's ability to sense their own humanity through the humanity of those around them, seeing fully the

contradictions and truthful complexity of existence. It is an arrival at these contradictions, and is most startlingly lively and engaging when it confronts divine confusion with no fear.

Works Cited

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Stellar Books, 2013.

Kaprow, Allan, and Jeff Kelley. *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. University of California Press, 2003.