media/rep/

Repositorium für die Medienwissenschaft

DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

Philipps Universität Marburg

Kaleidoscopic Encounters.
The Actor, Character and Spectator in
Intermedial Performances

Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink

»I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.« Let us take a brief look at these famous opening lines of Peter Brook's *The empty space* (1968). The implicit image evoked here is that of someone looking at another presented as the distinctive feature of theatre. Looking at the actor is the way one usually ›enters‹ a performance. However, when the actor on stage is filmed by a video camera and this video image is at the same moment projected on a screen, the actor is no longer the only focal point. Live video interferes with the *live* presence of the actor on stage. The spectator is offered a multi-perspective view. This article explores the intermedial relationship between an actor, live video and the spectator, and will address the question of whether a ›character‹ is still an adequate concept when analysing these relationships.

Actor in manifold

A fine example of the use of live video in theatre is seen in the performance STUKGOED – A BEAU MENTIR QUI VIENT DE LOIN (1996), presented by the Flemish theatre company TgSTAN. In this performance a girl is in search of her identity, which translates as a longing to travel. She is reluctant to leave her home however, which is reflected in the way the actress presents herself in front of three different video cameras surrounding the scene. She carefully moves in and out of the ›gaze‹ of the cameras. On screen alternate views of her face are seen, including a partial profile, her back, a close or a distant view. The way the actress approaches the cameras serves as a metaphor for the question if the girl wants to travel, but is scared to do so. It also reflects the way the story is told, through subjective and objective perspectives. As a spectator, all of these different images must be combined to produce meaning.

In performances like this, the physical presence of the actor is confronted by his or her ›absent double‹. His or her presence is no longer taken for granted, but is questioned. Because the actor is no longer the only one responsible for his or her presentation, it could now be argued that his or her authority is questioned as well. This authority is partly replaced by technology and the spectator. It is the spectator who is invited to combine the different, and often contradicting, images and qualities of the actor and his or her double (or triple, etc.) and to compare them in order to produce meaning. The combination of the terms »presence« and »authority« has been used by Philip Auslander, to substantiate that American postmodern perfor-

mance is much more political than many theoreticians thought (Auslander 1992). Stripped of the political aspect, these concepts are very useful tools in analysing the changed position of the actor in a ›mediatised‹ performance. Moreover, they draw attention to the role of the spectator, in particular to his or her awareness of perceiving and constructing meaning (see also Groot Nibbelink). The absence of a clear authority reveals various and unexpected ways of ›entering‹ a performance. Therefore Auslander, quoting Josette Féral, speaks of »an authorless, actorless, directorless infratheatricality« (Auslander 1992: 45). Nowadays this »infratheatricality« would be replaced by »intermediality« but this word should be retained, as it is associated with notions of infrastructure, the penetrating infrared light and the fusion of formerly separated domains. I understand ›intermediality‹ similarly: one medium interferes with or penetrates into other media. It is this interference that evokes meaning or experience.

In search of characters

An interesting dramaturgical issue is the concept of character in this type of intermedial performance. For traditional representation, an actor plays a role: thus, he creates a character, either disappearing behind that character or not. However, what happens with the concept of character when the actor is no longer the only party responsible for creating a character, for example when part of this presence and authority is replaced by or at least confronted with, technology? In Guy Cassiers' opera THE WOMAN WHO WALKED INTO DOORS (2001) the main ›character‹ is represented by an actress, video projections of this actress, and an opera singer. During this intermingling of sights and sounds a hint of a character emerges. But more important, this opera is not necessarily aiming at creating an ›entire‹ character. The autonomous images, texts, sounds and music reveal a story about a woman who is struggling with a husband who beats her, but does so by showing a landscape where all these autonomous parts interfere with each other and not by presenting a linear dramatic world evoked by characters. In short, it is problematic to speak of a character here.

The 20th century has given many examples in which the relationship between actor and character has been discussed, including the observation of film theorist André Bazin, who believed that in theatre, the actor, because of his physical presence, never totally disappears behind a character, Gordon Craig's vision of the actor as »Übermarionette«, and the acting style of Brecht, which lives on in the ›transparent acting‹ of several contemporary Dutch and Flemish theatre companies. Elinor Fuchs, in *The death of character*, argues that in the early 20th century, a character was already replaced by a more dominant dramaturgical pattern (47). A pattern that naturally changed again and again throughout that century: »Each epoch of character representation [...] constitutes at the same time the manifestation of a change in the larger culture concerning the perception of self and the relations of self and world« (8). Today's concept of self or the construction of subjectivity has been fundamentally changed by the way individuals move through and live in a mediatised culture.

Which concepts should be used then, after ›the death of a character‹? One possible answer is given by the Flemish dramaturg Erwin Jans, who for many years cooperated with Guy Cassiers. In his writings about new ways of acting in intermedial performances, Jans states that ›character‹ is a notion belonging to the dramatic

theatre, whereas in postdramatic theatre the actor (re-)appears as both a performer and body (20). In this case the actor as a performer should not be interpreted in the traditional sense of acting, but as an actor who is not pretending to be someone else and whose primary concern is being ›himself‹ on stage. Jans' approach could be further extended. It could be proposed that in intermedial performances the concept of character is substituted by the actor as a performer, by the actor as a body, by technology and by ›the performativity‹ of the spectator (i.e. his physical and/or perceptual activity). This article is restricted to two arguments: the substitution of the concept of character by ›the actor as a performer‹ and by ›the performativity of the spectator‹. In order to do so a performance by the Dutch theatre company Space will be described. In this performance the use of technology and aspects of presence and authority are realised rather differently than in the aforementioned example of TgSTAN. However it sheds an interesting light on aspects of performativity.

A(n) (anti-)televisual performance

In 2005 Space presented a performance called THE PLACE WHERE WE BELONG. The audience was situated in a room on the fourth floor of a former office building behind a glass window, overlooking the streets below. One of the two members of Space, Petra Ardaí, was positioned down on the street. Petra Ardaí is a Hungarian artist who has been living in the Netherlands for the past 17 years. Because of growing animosities against foreigners – reflected in stringent immigration policies and a fierce debate about Dutch identity in which radical statements were magnified by the media –, she has begun to feel more and more a foreigner herself, although she has a Dutch passport and is married to a Dutchman (who is in fact the other member of Space). During the performance she walked around the streets below, equipped with a video camera and a microphone, asking people whether she should go back to Hungary or resist this dominant political attitude. From behind the window, the audience followed her quest and observed these interviews via small video screens positioned in front of them. Interviews were heard through headphones alternating with fragments from her diary and instructions from her husband, a white, Dutch male, who was with the audience in the room. He was instructing Petra to behave »more Dutch« and to act casual when approaching passers-by. The people interviewed were unaware of the observing audience. (In the performance attended by the author, there was not a single person who advised Petra to go back to Hungary.)

This performance reflects upon a mediatised society and public opinions that are strongly influenced by media, but the means to do so also strongly depend on the use of these media forms. The interaction between the live and on-screen images is explored using an intriguing method. On the small screen the audience sees ›the common man in the street‹ recognized from television. However this time the ›common man‹ is personally approached and gives a less narrow-minded reaction than is expected. The audience looking through and at the window is a metaphor for watching television. Because they can see from where the screened image originates, the usual distance between source and screened image disappears. The screen doesn't guide the audience's attention ›elsewhere‹, but stresses the ›here and now‹. The screen can be compared with the source. The ›screened live‹ and the ›physical live‹ are both similar and full of contrasts. The distance between the audience and the performer outside induces reflection, while the close-up images on the

small screen and the pre-recorded diary fragments on the headphones bring about an experience of intimacy. Another contrast is the safe position of being inside versus the rather vulnerable position of the performer outside. This physical opposition corresponds with other contrasts, such as the cultural insider/outsider, Dutch/non-Dutch and observing/acting. Altogether, these different sensations strongly address the spectator on a personal level. This address is intensified by the use of headphones, which emphasizes the impression that the story is told to each spectator personally.

Although portrayed somewhat differently, once again we see a deconstruction of presence and authority. Petra Ardaí is in fact absent; she is not with the audience in the same room, but is present by means of camera and screen, microphone and headset. The authority of the actor is questioned because she takes up herself different roles, as will be shown in the following.

Persona

The actress in this performance is a very clear example of the actor as a performer. Actress Petra Ardaí presents herself using her own name. Her personal questions are the main input for the performance and the interviews. Of course, she transforms herself into something resembling a character; she is becoming ›Petra Ardaí, the foreigner – as she is perceived by the Dutch people‹. But in this instance, it seems problematic to speak of ›character‹. She is merely adopting a certain role. Ironically, on the level of the dramatic narrative, this is the role she doesn't want to play. This process of taking over a certain role could be described as the adoption of a role strongly embedded in the personal biography of the performer or »persona«. This is again a concept taken from Philip Auslander, who introduced the concept of »performance persona« (1997: 39). He particularly refers to Willem Dafoe, who has become a well known film actor. The perception of his appearance on stage is influenced by the audience's knowledge of Dafoe as a performer. Their awareness of the act of performing is further emphasized by Dafoe's self-referential style of ›acting‹. He does not disappear behind a character, even if he wants to (which he doesn't). A similar situation exists in Dutch theatre as a lot of theatre actors are primarily known by the larger public through appearances in commercials, soaps operas, television plays and films. However, Petra Ardaí is not famous. »Performance persona« is not an adequate term for this situation, but ›persona‹ may be. The word ›persona‹ is etymologically connected with a ›mask‹ and ›giving voice to‹. ›Persona‹ is thus firmly rooted in the theatre. Auslander's »performance persona« also reveals its close connection with the personal or social life of the performer, in this case, Dafoe's profession as a film actor (which intensifies the blending of the personal and the performative). »Persona« thus refers to the way individuals present themselves in daily life, including the different masks used, in order to ›give voice‹ to the way they like to perceive themselves and be perceived by others. In THE PLACE WHERE WE BELONG, Petra Ardaí blurs the boundaries between private and performative personae and thus displays and deconstructs the performative self. For interviews on the street, she presents herself as a foreigner; in the pre-recorded diary fragments, she appears as an ordinary human being and a mother; in the live dialogue with her husband, she is a quarrelling partner and, at the same time, the co-creator of the theatrical event. These different personae, together with the interference of different media, question the authority of the actor/performer.

The performativity of the spectator

Dutch theatre and film theorist Chiel Kattenbelt distinguishes two ways of the performativity of the spectator. In some cases the spectator enters the theatrical or performance space. The physical barrier between the performer and spectator disappears, as the spectator becomes a participant. The second way of performativity occurs when during a performance the role and activity of the spectator becomes the central theme. The act of perceiving, experiencing, and creating meaning then becomes the performance's main content. These performances try to induce »the audience to watch themselves as subjects which perceive, acquire knowledge and partly create the objects of their recognition« (Malgorzata Sugiera, quoted in Lehmann: 6). In the performance by Space both ways are recognized, where the second is the most important. The first is present because the performance and audience space are mixed. The second category is present because of the firm responsibility of the spectator to compare the on-screen images with the live performance, to (dis)assemble different personae, to personally connect with questions asked and to become aware of his position behind the window. The spectator is not sitting in the dark, but is being exposed. Through all those different aspects the spectator becomes very much aware of himself as a subject who perceives. On a personal note, this awareness was accompanied by an almost *physical* experience of shock when I realised I often take my own nationality for granted. By inviting the spectator to experience and reflect upon his own perception, Space moves the theatrical communication into the realm of reality. Instead of relating to a fictional character, the spectator is confronted with himself as a perceptive subject.

The Flemish dramaturg Marianne van Kerkhoven once raised the question of how contemporary performance artists relate to the expansion of performativity in modern society (19). THE PLACE WHERE WE BELONG presents a possible answer to that question. By presenting different personae, the performance invites the spectator to become aware of oneself as a subject who perceives; it opens up modes of perception and actually discloses different personae within the spectator as well. Surprisingly, while society is taking its *performative turn*, this everyday performativity is brought back to and explored on the stage. Beginning with a more theoretical point-of-view, Kattenbelt arrives at a similar observation: in a culture where signs are more real than the objects to which they refer, society becomes a hyper reality, in which theatre is one of the few places where the staging of reality is being exposed and deconstructed. One method would be to present the actor as performer and tap into the performativity of the spectator. Through the absence of characters, theatre becomes, as Umberto Eco once stated, an act of showing (Eco, quoted in Chapple/Kattenbelt: 22) and – my addition – a place of sensory perception, reflection and experience.

Literature

Auslander, Philip (1992): *Presence and Resistance. Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Auslander, Philip (1997): *From Acting to Performance. Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism.* London/New York: Routledge.

Brook, Peter (1968): *The empty space*. London: MacGibbon & Kee.

Chapple, Freda/Chiel Kattenbelt (2006): »Key Issues in Intermediality in theatre and performance«. In: Freda Chapple/Chiel Kattenbelt (eds.): *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance.* Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 11-25.

Fuchs, Elinor (1996): *The Death of Character. Perspectives on Theatre after Modernism.* Bloomington etc.: Indiana UP.

Groot Nibbelink, Liesbeth (1999): »Verhevigde werkelijkheid« In*: E-view* 99 (1). http://comcom.uvt.nl/e-view/99-1/groot.htm (01.03.2007).

Jans, Erwin (2005): »De speler weggecijferd. Acteren in een tijdperk van technische reproduceerbaarheid«. In: *Etcetera,* 96, 17-21.

Kattenbelt, Chiel (2006): »Theater en de ontmaskering van de werkelijkheid als enscenering«, In: Chiel Kattenbelt et al. (eds.): *Theater en openbaarheid*. Maastricht/Amsterdam: Toneelacademie Maastricht/Theater Instituut Nederland, 26-48.

Kerkhoven, Marianne van (2006): »Statements«, In: Maaike Bleeker et al (eds.): *Theatre Topics 2. De maker als onderzoeker*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 18-19.

Lehmann, Hans-Thies (2006): *Postdramatic theatre*. Transl. Karen Jürs-Munby. London/New York: Routledge.