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Theatre as a Literary Lens of Life Occurrences: A Close of View the Alan Read's Theatre and Everyday Life.

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21 April 2022 This article examines theatre as a literary lens for viewing life events. The discussion is anchored on a close reading of Alan Read's Theatre and Everyday

Keywords: Life. Drawing from Alan Read, the article also underscores some key considerations in a theatrical production of Bertolt Brecht's Caucasian Chalk Circle and Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House as the theatre of everyday life. It is observed that Alan Read defines theatre as the actual production of the play on the stage. This requires a stage, actors, background, costumes, lighting, sound effects, and most importantly an audience. In fact, a space to perform, actors, and the audience are three of the most basic requirements of theatre. Theatre is a collective effort of the playwright, director, actors, technicians, and many other people. Here, there is no direct interaction between the audience and the playwright. Theatre can present another interpretation of the play. In Theatre and Everyday Life, Alan Read does not conform to the conventional theatre as echoed by the Brechtian and Ibsen theatrical experience. Further, Alan Read asserts that there is no split between the practice and theory of theatre, but a divide between the written and the unwritten. In this revealing book, he sets out to retrieve the theatre of spontaneity and tactics, which grows out of the experience of everyday life. It is a theatre that defines itself in terms of people and places rather than the idealised empty space of Avant-garde performance. Read's Theatre and Everyday Life is a theatre that reflects on people's daily engagements. Therefore, it examines the relationship between an ethics of performance, a politics of place, and a poetics of the urban environment. His theoretical approach is a persuasive demand for a critical theory of theatre, which is as mentally supple as theatre is physically versatile. In Alan Read's view, the key difference between drama and theatre is that drama refers to a printed text of a play while theatre refers to the onstage production of the play. He further distinguishes

theatre and drama in relation to the interpretation of the play. As explained above, the interpretation of the play presented by the onstage production might be different from the interpretation obtained by reading the drama. In a drama, there is a direct interaction between the audience and the creator. However, in theatre, directors, actors and designers play as intermediaries. In addition, Alan Read says that the theatre being is a physical entity, whereas the drama being drama is an abstract entity. Since theatre does not exist in a vacuum, it requires space for its performance. Both Brecht and Ibsen require theatre for them to undergo a transformation from drama to theatre. As they are in their form, *Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *A Doll's House* can be termed as scripts until they are performed. Therefore, theatre provides an avenue for the scripts to be transformed into drama hence reflecting life, views which lay the basis of Alan Read's *Theatre and Everyday Life*.

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INTRODUCTION

Theatre refers to the enactment of a written dramatic script. It also entails the spaces and the processes involved in the staging of a dramatic piece. As such, theatre is also the entire production, performance, and experience of a dramatic piece. Successful production of theatre requires both the theatre crew and the audience who are the consumers of the production. Theatre, as a form of literary performance, originates from ritual.

Brook (1968) posits that a theatre performance consists of three very basic components. According to Brook, performances are dependent on a space in which spectator and actor come together and agree on a place, which they call stage. It is in this real space that actors and the audience imagine a fictional world. Brook's quotation beautifully

encapsulates the simplicity of any theatre performance while it oversimplifies the complicated processes of bringing a play to life in the same breath. The empty space that Brook defines in his work is not realistic. It rather symbolises his personal need to liberate his artistic talent from the fixed and institutionalised British theatre venues of the 1960s.

For the majority of modern theatre performances, it is in fact, the theatre building that provides the space for all three basic parts. Although it is true that no more than an empty space is needed for staging a play, during the last centuries, most performances have been sheltered by purpose-built theatres. Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski, in his views on theatre, asserts that most theatres provide a stage in the form of a proscenium stage, thrust stage, or stage in the round. How a spectator looks at the

actors performing on this stage differs, depending on the characteristics of each theatre venue. A space in the theatre, be it empty or filled, connects the two most important parts of any theatrical event, the audience and the actors. The relationship between these two groups is important for every performance since they are always engaged in collaboration. Space in the theatre is, therefore, crucial for every performance (Carriere, 2010).

The Elizabethan times mark the most influential period for modern theatre. Closely intertwined with the world's most famous playwright, William Shakespeare, it is at this time that the first modern theatres were erected. Therefore, Bertolt Brecht and Henrik Ibsen's times and works are always closely connected with practices of contemporary theatre.

The aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between the performance space of specific theatres and the production of Brecht's Russian plays and Ibsen's Norwegian plays in the theatrical world. It examined the extent to which performance space can influence the production of both Brecht's and Ibsen's plays. Likewise, it examined how different productions make use of performance space. The question of which performance space works best for staging Ibsen's and Brecht's plays in modern theatre formed the basis of this case paper.

For the last century, there have been discussions in Britain, among scholars and theatre practitioners alike, about the importance of theatre architecture for Shakespeare's plays. This discussion is still present in the British theatre scene, as the Royal Shakespeare Companies' decision for a large-scale transformation project in May 2006 revealed. The heart of the project is the transformation of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre to a 1000 seat thrust stage auditorium. Two different aims in the discussion mentioned above could be observed from the 1960s. A need was seen for the reconstruction of Brecht's original Globe theatre and the construction of theatres that improve the relationship between actors and audience. Both of these aims could be realised in Britain from the mid-1980s to the present. It is this that lays the foundation for Brecht's Epic Theatre.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is substantial research on drama and theatre in general. As a genre of literature, theatre performances and art as a whole reflect on life in three aspects that are social, economic, and political. Since theatre does not exist in a vacuum, it requires space as a medium for its re-enactment. However, most writings have focused on the performances, history of theatre, and film, amongst others. Quite a number of scholars and literary theoreticians have approached drama and theatre differently. For instance, Hubner (1992) approached theatre from an apolitical point of view. Hubner argues that theatre was highly related to politics during Germany's political warfare. This close relationship was because theatre is a very effective medium to gain influence. According to Hubner, theatre is distinguished from the other arts in that it is institutional and social in nature (p. 5). "These characteristics closely ally to politics, since they make it possible for theatre to be used as an instrument of propaganda" (pp. 5-6). The socialists were really aware of this idea. In fact, they "believed in the idea that theatre should serve society" (Gerould, as cited in Hubner, 1992). Consequently, considering that the popular "bourgeois" realism carried the ideas of capitalism, efforts were made by "the revolutionaries" to battle such theatres.

Professor Alan Read, in his *Theatre and Everyday Life* (1992), notes thus:

...the theatre is composed of material elements – bodies in action and speech articulated in places, and a receptive audience for that action and speech. The images of other arts are constituted in quite different ways. This engagement has a metaphysical aspect in that the image between the performer and the audience adds up to more than the sum of its various parts.

Equally, Brecht's epic theatre developed in political upheaval. Elin Diamond noted that his theory was written over a 30-year period (Worthen, 1993, p. 1284), ranging from pre- to post-World War II. To understand it, we need to review its historical background before examining its theoretical foundation: the basic philosophy of epic theatre.

Roland Barthes (as cited in Worthen, 1993, p. 772) wrote, “to separate Brechtian theatre from its theoretical foundation would be ... erroneous” Examining its basic philosophy brings us to the understanding of Epic theatre’s content. We will finally see how the content finally leads to the development of its form. Therefore, this paper highlights the usefulness of theatre as a mirror of today’s life and the relationship between theatre, spaces, and society in relation to Read’s view as highlighted in his work *Theatre and Everyday Life*.

METHODOLOGY

The primary data for this paper was derived from a close reading of Alan Read’s *Theatre and Everyday Life*. Drawing from Alan Read, the article also underscores some features of everyday life in Bertolt Brecht’s *Caucasian Chalk Circle* and Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. Therefore, Alan Read’s *Theatre and Everyday Life* provided a theoretical base for examining the features of everyday life in the above two plays. Secondary data was obtained through a review of literature related to theatre production and the relationship between everyday life experiences and theatre.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theatre as Lens of Society

Drama and theatre as the genre of literature do mirror life. This is to say that it is difficult to distinguish theatre from life since all theatrical items for production do comment on various happenings within the society. Literature as a societal lens is geared towards commenting on society differently. For instance, the media theatre for Kenya’s Radio Jambo’s morning program, *Patanisho* relate to the real-life situation in that it comments on the aspect of family reunion where couples ought to have separated due to various reasons in the marriages. *Patanisho* is a breakfast show that seeks to reconcile people who have separated or had a history of protracted discord. Theatre, performance, and society are fully integrated and it is difficult to tell with specificity which one does affects the other. Alan Read’s *Theatre and Everyday Life* argues that to value theatre is to value life, not to escape from it. Every day is at once the most habitual and demanding

dimension of life to which theatre has the most responsibility.

Theatre does not tease people out of their everyday lives like other expressions of wish fulfilment. It instead reminds them who they are and what is worth living and changing in their lives every day. This is a problem given my emphasis on practices of theatre, where the traditional axes of production and consumption demand rethinking. It is not surprising when one considers the divisions driven between understandings drawn from everyday life and those considered endemic to cultural practices and intellectual pursuits. The languages available to us derived from these pursuits are ones that in discreet and subtle ways make sure that divisions between the professional and the profane endure. In other words, theoretically, it is only ‘in other words’ that theatre and everyday life can be acquainted.

This view of life in the context of creative culture is shared across the arts. Speaking on literature, Maya Angelou had this to say:

We write for the same reason that we walk, talk, climb mountains or swim the oceans- because we can... We have some impulse within us that makes us want to explain ourselves to other human beings... That’s why we paint, that’s why we dare to love someone- because we have the impulse to explain who we are. Not just how tall we are, or thin... but who we are internally... perhaps even spiritually. There’s something, which impels us to show our inner-souls. The more courageous we are, the more we succeed in explaining what we know (Mbe, 2019).

Angelou’s views regard writing as a feature of everyday life. Like many conversations or actions of everyday life, it is not necessarily planned; it is a product of impulse or environmental stimuli. By extension, her perspective may be applied to the theatre so that acting or performance on stage may be seen as an attempt to reproduce the everyday life experiences to which the audience can relate. Concerning music, Hans Zimmer also had this to say:

...If you go to any rave, or any football event, you will find people chanting in a rhythm- human beings do that. We have this sense to participate and organise- Music lets you rediscover your

humanity, and your connection to humanity. When you listen to Mozart with other people, you feel that somehow- we're all in this together... (Mbe, 2019).

Mbe echoes Angelou in the sense that he considers people's response to music as an aspect of everyday life. It is the norm to chant or tap one's foot to the rhythm. Theatre and performing arts do impact positively on society. Theatre and performing arts are hugely important to economies and communities. The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (2019) showed that 3.2 per cent of US GDP (around US\$ 504 billion) is attributable to arts and culture (compared with the entire U.S. travel and tourism industry, which accounts for 2.8 per cent of GDP). Alongside this, the arts and cultural industries support over 5.4 million jobs in the U.S. alone. This picture of economic impact and significance is the same in country after country, around the world – and does not even begin to include the intangible – the social capital brought to communities because of the existence of arts. In relation to Brecht's play, *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, the conflict on who is the rightful owner of the land is amicably addressed through theatre where the land is given to the fruit vendors who have demonstrated they can make good use of the land as compared to goat herders. The agricultural practices do improve the economic livelihood of a particular country.

Concerning Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, Ibsen was in constant conflict with the society of his time. He believed that it was the *majority* who caused people to stagnate. In *An Enemy of the People*, Doctor Stockman stood alone, far in advance of most of the people. He was persecuted and ridiculed by those he tried to serve merely because he was deemed in conflict with the established institutions of society. Ibsen saw himself as a Doctor Stockman, and through the doctor, gave the world ideas of universal significance. Ibsen's theatre resonates well with Alan Read's views of theatre since the two authors comment on societal challenges of life.

Theatre and the Performance Space

Alan Read, in his chapter on *Orientation: Space and Place* (1995), argues that to be in one's element is to be in one's preferred or accustomed

surroundings. The places where people live are therefore a pressing problem for political theory. The aura of theatre as described by Walter Benjamin appears to depend upon this unique place and time of its occurrence for its effects, and it is this that distinguishes it from mechanically and electronically reproducible media. It is this 'aura', an apparently vague and metaphysical concept, which this part of the book attempts to reveal by looking more closely at the relations between space, place and cultural practices.

The notion of performance space in this study is defined and applied differently compared to the understanding of McAuley (2000) and the school of theatre semiotics. Performance space can be identified to have a dual character. It is related to the notion of performance and space simultaneously. The aim and nature of any performance of Ibsen and Brecht's plays are to create a fictional space or place. The performance is, however, always bound to the space of the particular theatre, the physical reality where the staging is taking place. The nature of performance space is therefore always related to fictional and physical reality. Performance space reflects the immediacy of a theatre performance in a particular space, with its own significant characteristics, inhabited by actors and spectators. The taxonomy for this study is therefore built around the notion of performance space and includes both the fictional and physical characteristics of theatre.

In relation to student theatre in Kenya's Schools and Colleges' Drama and Film Festivals performance, space and production influence each other significantly. From the side of the creative team, choices are made months before the first performance. Decisions must be made, for example, which theatre to play in (if there is a choice) or what kind of scenery is to be designed. Likewise, the nature of the physical space of performance space influences the choices made by the creative team.

In this study, all performance spaces include a theatre space; they are staged within the boundaries of the three theatres. All three theatres have their own characteristics like size, architecture, relation to other buildings, and place of a theatre in an urban setting and audience space, which can be called theatre space. Theatre space is, however, not

necessarily related to the performance of a play, as theoretically, space could be used for other purposes. The coming together of audience and actor in one space is the most basic component of an act of theatre. The social merger of the actors and audience can be experienced in various ways triggered through the audience/actor space. The connection which needs to be established between actors and the audience is influenced by the physical space provided. For example, the seating arrangement may invite to establish this connection or not. On the one hand, the audience/actor space is part of our physical reality. On the other hand, as soon as the fictional component of production comes into play, it is not. Theatre space and audience/actor space are situated between fiction and reality.

Performance space for drama always includes a fictional space and a physical space. The fictional space/place created is influenced by the physical reality of the theatre including the theatre space the audience/actor space, stage space and the creation of scenic space. The division of fictional space/place introduced by McAuley (2000, p. 30) is fully applied in this taxonomy. The physical space includes the notion of stage space, which is separated from the term theatre space. The stage space differs from venue to venue in width, length, the position of exits, nature of the back wall and it can even be multiple (different stages in one performance space). The stage space can be used in different ways in any given performance. The use of the stage space is called scenic space. Although the scenery of production may not be necessary, for most productions, it offers immense creative possibilities. This notion includes the occupation of the stage by actors and the production techniques. The notion of scenic space also includes the movement by the actors and therefore the category once again slips from the physical to the fictional.

Aesthetics and Beauty in Theatre

The aesthetics and beauty of theatre are very subjective. Performance and theatre can take many forms. It may be a play on the street or – as was during the early 19th century – a form of opera where many forms of art were gathered into a single performance. The aesthetic of the elements of a performance when they are brought together

depends on the culture of the people receiving it and where the piece itself is performed. Aesthetics is subjective of the people who want to transmit and also those who receive. The aesthetic and beauty of a piece of theatre lie almost completely in the eyes of the person watching.

Theatre does not have to be beautiful. Some of the most fantastic and thought-provoking pieces are ugly. There is aesthetic and beauty of theatre do depend on the production techniques. Alan Read, in the chapter on *Accretion: Earth and Depth* (1995), asserts that the theatre speaks continually of the ‘world’, but what can the earth tell us about the theatre? It is where it occurs and its ecological deterioration has become in recent times theatre’s concern and contents. There is of course an ethical dimension to this state of the world, the traditional relationship between morals and societal behaviour now being extended to include relations with nature and the earth itself. This ethical expansion brings with it considerable problems for politics, reviving as it does romantic notions of conservation and traditionalism, of rural retreaters and Utopian perspectives. Nature is a system of which the human is a part, an element one might say. The stability of this system and its complementary nature takes on deeper relevance than these concepts provoked earlier, for, here, they are literally a cause of life and death. Care for nature implies, and is tantamount to, care for the human, as it is the value of nature for the human as a necessary condition for harmonious life that is at stake.

The Oral Performances (The Dance) in Theatre

Theatrically, it is difficult to distinguish the dance from the theatrical dancer in relation to Read’s chapter on *Inspiration: Air and Earth* (1995). Read argues that speech and bodies exist and operate in space but only in places that take on the meanings associated with being human. They therefore cannot be divorced from the preceding analysis. Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* and Charlie Chaplin, the tramp, are thwarted by but continue to live within, the everyday. There is an international difference between languages, a national distinction between dialects, and a political separation between vernacular speech and the mandarin tongue. The body is in different ways geographically rooted, and as phenomenology has shown, spatially orientated.

The word 'orientation' itself derives from the historical preoccupation with the East as a primary means of ordering space and is therefore permeated with human and cultural dynamics. The body is not only situated in the world but, through labour, forms habitual patterns which root the body to the locality in which it works. While theatre research and performance anthropology continue to seek out exotica, imported for the purposes of scrutiny, this other 'tact' is ignored. Read argues that there is no room for a nostalgic return to the dangerous and oppressive labouring patterns that are gradually superseded, but there is an imperative to transform them through theatre. There is the need for an ethics of the body and speech which traces this relationship between saying and doing in the everyday. Without this association, theatre remains in the world of make-believe

Dance, like music, is one of the most primitive art forms. From the very beginning, we have danced for the rain, we have danced for our Gods and we have sacrificed things in dance form. It seems dance is the *one* universal language, the one art-form that can be understood completely emotionally. One can, of course, intellectualise dance as much as they want, but its essence is that deep emotional connection between the audience and the artist.

Dance is an international language; one does not have to translate it to enable people to understand it. For instance, the creative cultural dances and modern dances do tell a story. Not all these performances need a script for one to understand. However, the songs could be hard for people to understand, but the body language, dance steps still do communicate a lot. Alan Read's views on regarding, seeing, watching and looking at theatre do not begin to explain what happens between an audience and a performer. Regarding theatre is both the vision of theatre and the care the body takes in the presence of theatre to understand and value what is happening, to have belief in it. However, the cultural predominance of sight as a medium of aesthetic reception hinders this ethical and political dimension of the perception of theatre. Vision has a history that profoundly affects the way theatre is witnessed. This history perpetuates the fallacy that an audience can remain aloof from performance.

Everyday Life in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*

A Doll's House is a family drama for the obvious reason that it concerns a family. It is a "drama" because it is a play – a piece of literature that is never fully realised until it is put on stage in front of an audience. It is also a modern tragedy because it is focused on the trials and tribulations that face women in a patriarchal society. The play explores not only the status of women but also how they are victims of social forces to the extent that they are left with the role of a "doll wife". In this tragedy, we do not get blood and death at the end; we get the death of a marriage and of the characters' old selves. The play can also be categorised as a realist drama. In a realist drama, the characters talk in a close approximation of everyday speech. The speeches are straightforward, conversational and concerned with normal, everyday things, which makes the play really easy for a modern audience to associate with.

As one of the most influential figures in theatre, Bertolt Brecht has stamped his legacy in world theatre. His search for a new kind of theatre made his theatre a modern avant-garde, which has left its traces in postmodern theatres. The play *Caucasian Chalk Circle* by Bertolt Brecht is a heart-warming story that grasps the attention of the audience when staged. The play has Grusha as the protagonist and Natella as the antagonist. The way this is set up is through the personalities and actions of each character. Grusha is the servant who took in and protected baby Michael when he had no one, whereas Natella is the lady who abandoned her own child for her own materialistic gain and her security. Thus, the centre of focus in this play is Michael. From being wanted and killed to the divide between who takes care of him, Michael is the centre point for the problem of the play. Additionally, the production techniques of this theatre enhance the understanding of the play hence heightening its thematic concerns. For instance, Grusha taking on the role of being the mother to Michael shows how, despite everyone wanting the baby Michael killed, she instead fought to protect him. This moment emphasises the theme of morality.

CONCLUSION

Alan Read as a writer and professor of theatre at King's College London. Read is known as a theatre theorist and cultural activist, with scholarly interests in ethics and the everyday, performed communities, event architecture, and subjectivities of capitalism. Read's work stands as a critique of modernist theatrical orthodoxy, critically contesting Peter Brook's idealism of the 'empty space' awaiting its theatre, a tabula rasa for professionals to enter and exit at will. Read counterintuitively perceives theatre to have been superseded in that populated place by the quotidian performances of everyday life, those that remain for good and ill. Read took up this provocative critique on the National Theatre stage in London in 1994 in a public dialogue with Brook's space-designer, Jean-Guy Lecat, and joins others in his scepticism of the colonial fantasy of theatre's 'empty space', including most assertively Rustom Bharucha in *Theatre and The World* (1993). Theatre being a venue to the performances reflects and embodies a number of performances both play production, mime and dances. Its platform for which audience, actors and actresses do interact with the script actively and passively.

Read, as a critic of his own works, a more recent work on theatrical 'immunity', reversing the communitarian presumption of performance, might be considered a logical inversion of the tenets of *Theatre and Everyday Life* rather than a negation of them. In this work, Read has challenged those with investments in terminologies of social theatre, community theatre and political theatre to act upon more nuanced distinctions between aesthetic, cultural and political priorities. Therefore, the views of Alan Read on theatre do conform well to the general understanding of theatre.

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