

The Magic of Presence

Moments, Memories, Methods

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ABSTRACT

Every habitual visitor remembers some magic moments of theatrical events: a striking feeling of immediate presence. What are these experiences of presence about? What triggers them, under which circumstances do they take place? This text is an attempt to point out some decisive parameters that facilitate strong experiences of performative situations. On the basis of a new rhombic model, I will show how these parameters coordinate the senses of the beholder and create magic moments of presence. Then, presence remains as future memories of the past.

KEYWORDS

presence, parameters of presence, aesthetic experience, Robert Wilson, A Dream Play

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As an emeritus professor it may be allowed to talk about memories. However, even strong memories of great moments of theatrical experiences easily get a bit blurred. Like the blurred image I have of a scene in a greenhouse, open towards the audience and populated by some singing gardeners. The scene belongs to a production of *A Dream Play* by August Strindberg. Of course, there is no greenhouse in Strindberg's play. But there was a greenhouse in Robert Wilson's staging of *A Dream Play* at Stockholm City Theatre back in 1998. The question is: why do I so vividly remember this production and in particular the scene in the greenhouse?

This question is the topic of the following reflections. To speak at the opening of a conference is a privilege and a challenge. Recently, I had published a book with the title *Aesthetics of Presence*,¹ a very personal book about aesthetic experiences. In my talk I wanted to share some of the thoughts I had developed in the book without repeating the examples I refer to there.² That is how Wilson's *A Dream Play* came to my mind. The book's subtitle reads *Philosophical and Practical Reconsiderations* and the aim of the book can be described as an attempt to understand the circumstances that create aesthetic experiences. How and when do these "remarkable moments" occur, as Joakim Stenshäll called them, leaning towards Jens Roselt's phenomenological view of theatre.³ My aim was nothing less than the establishment of a broader concept of presence – and maybe of theatre – than those we traditionally adhere to. In earlier writings, I have myself contributed to describe the simultaneous presence of performer and spectator as the *sine qua non* of theatre. Now, I know that even theatre performances in which *no* actors were present on stage have triggered strong experiences of presence. In other words: the mere physical co-presence of actor and spectator guarantees no aesthetic experiences. In the book I deal mainly with aesthetic experiences outside traditional theatre. In the following text, based on the inaugural lecture at the Association of Nordic Theatre Scholars conference in Stockholm, I will discuss some theoretical openings towards a wider understanding of theatrical experiences in the theatre.

Presence and Aesthetics

The terms presence and aesthetics need some preliminary distinctions. Obviously, presence is an experience and therefore presence has a time dimension. The feeling of being absolutely present takes place under certain circumstances, whether it concerns aesthetic or non-aesthetic experiences. However, not even in a theatre performance can presence guarantee aesthetic experiences. Probably all theatre scholars – as well as regular theatre visitors – have sat in a

1 Sauter 2021a.

2 This is why I, in the following, frequently refer to my own book. One of the peer-reviewers of this article expressed it like this: "the text is mainly about harvesting from a long career as a theatre researcher and a theatre visitor."

3 Stenshäll 2010.

dull performance, lost interest in the action, began thinking of other matters, and maybe even dozed off. They are still present, however; the co-presence of actors and spectators continues, but has no aesthetic effect.

Likewise, the experience of something going wrong in a performance is also common. A spectator falls ill, an actor gets hurt or a set piece falls down – then, all of a sudden, the audience is alerted and very present, but not in an aesthetic sense. Obviously, presence as aesthetic experience requires more consideration.

Distinctions have also to be made concerning aesthetics. In the book, I suggest a division between production aesthetics and perception aesthetics. The former relates to normative, prescriptive instructions of how to create the perfect work of art. Production aesthetics describes genres and styles and purposes for the *artist*, such as the Futurist manifesto by Filippo Tomaso Marinetti, or the proclamation of epic theatre by Bertolt Brecht. In contrast, perception aesthetics deals with actual aesthetic experiences and the circumstances that may lead up to suchlike experiences. Here, the response of the *beholder* is in focus. Of course, there is a relationship between the artist's work – or any other object – and the beholder's experience, but this constitutes no straight line. Having conducted audience and reception research over several decades, I am fully aware of the intricate patterns of perception.

Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* from 1750 established aesthetics as a philosophical discipline. For him, aesthetics was all about sensory perception as a means of cognition. For Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's friend, Moses Mendelssohn, the beholder and only the beholder has the privilege of aesthetic experiences. For them, the object of aesthetic attention did not need to be art. For Baumgarten and Mendelssohn, a real tree was an aesthetic object just as much as the painting of a tree. I will come back to the discourses of the eighteenth century, but first I will give more space to *A Dream Play* and a variety of memories from the last half century.

My Dream Plays

The Swedish tax authorities allowed me to deduct the costs of theatre tickets from my income, admitting that for a professor of theatre studies, going to the theatre was not just fun but a necessary professional business. From my annually collected tickets, I know that I usually visited between seventy to one hundred performances every year. I have never calculated the total number of theatre visits during my academic years, but I could count up to ten productions of *A Dream Play*. Here are some of my fragmentary memories, incomplete, and un-researched.

The series of Dream Plays began in 1970 when I saw Ingmar Bergman's production at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm. I remember that Indra's Daughter and her earthly incarnation Agnes were performed by two actresses, Kristina Adolfsen and Malin Ek and, in my mind, I can still see the coils of lights in the background, created by the set designer Lennart Mörk. Fifteen years later, Bergman staged *A Dream Play* once more and the only memory that comes to my mind is the actress Lena Olin as Indra's daughter. In 1989, Strindberg's play was performed by the free group Orienteatern in the South of Stockholm. Director Lars Rudolfsson had included the murdered and dismembered prostitute Catrine da Costa as a dark shadow of Agnes. The Canadian director Robert Lepage was invited to Stockholm and he presented his version of *A Dream Play* in the painter's studio of the Royal Dramatic Theatre. Again, it is the visual impression that comes to mind. Lepage had created a three-walled cube, the corner of which was attached to a shaft-coupling and could thus be turned around. The actors crept into the dipping, revolving cube through various openings, never touching the floor of the stage. In 1998 Robert Wilson's production followed and I will return to this very visual performance later on.

The Belgian theatre scholar Roger Deldime carried out several studies of how and what people remember of theatre performances they had seen many years ago. His recurrent conclusion was that the story and the characters fade away while visual elements and the actors remain in our memories.⁴ In other words: fiction disappears and the material impressions remain. This is true also of more recent Dream Plays I have seen. In 2007, the choreographer Mats Ek brought the play on stage. I came to love his version of Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata*,

4 Deldime & Pigeon 2012.

but from his *Dream Play* I only remember a grey stage setting inhabited by grey costumes. An original opening scene characterized Pontus Stenshäll's production: Indra's Daughter arrived by subway and walked from the station Gubbängen to the theatre where the performance continued. Mattias Andersson interfoliated his production at Klarateater in 2012 with interviews he had made with citizens of Stockholm about their own dreams. Finally, in 2019, *A Dream Play* returned to Strindberg's own Intimate Theatre under the direction of Anna Pettersson. In her modernized production, a minimal ensemble, including the 88-year-old Gunnel Lindblom, executed all the characters as well as a threefold Officer.

I had the privilege of supervising a dissertation about *A Dream Play*, written by the young South Korean student Jay-Ung Hong: *Creating Theatrical Dreams*.⁵ Hong applied a rather complicated Chinese methodology, called *I Ching*, to analyse the characters of the play and also to distinguish the dreamer in various historical and contemporary productions. This analysis located Strindberg as the dreamer in Olof Molander's production from 1935, in which the director had placed the fiction in Strindberg's own Stockholm environment. For the Poet, Molander used a make-up that transformed the actor Ingvar Kåge into a portrait of Strindberg. Originally, the director had intended to use the same mask also for the Officer and the Lawyer, but eventually abstained from this option. Concerning Ingmar Bergman's production from 1970, Hong arrived at the conclusion that it was the director himself who was the dreamer. He also extended his methodological approach to Robert Wilson's production of 1998. The result was quite surprising: in Wilson's creation it was the spectators who were dreaming. The question arises how Wilson's performance became *my* dream.

Parameters of Aesthetic Experiences

During my engagement with the research group Performing Premodernity and my studies of the Drottningholm Court Theatre, I had frequently come across the aesthetic discourses of the eighteenth century. I investigated some of the main aspects that philosophers and dramatists of the time were discussing and arrived at four basic parameters that are activated in magic moments of aesthetic experiences. In the following I will summarize these parameters from the viewpoint of the eighteenth century.

An inescapable name in the history of aesthetics is Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. His *Aesthetica* from 1750, written in Latin, became the very basis of a new philosophical discipline. He writes: "Aesthetica ... est scientia cognitionis sensitivae" – aesthetics is the science of sensory cognition.⁶ Sensory cognition means the knowledge we gain through our senses. In other words: the beholder translates impressions that we perceive through seeing and hearing, touching and tasting, into tangible knowledge. For Baumgarten, this kind of knowledge was to be understood on the same level as intellectual knowledge. Aesthetics is an experience, not an object; the beholder is engaged in the temporal process of *Perceiving* something.

Moses Mendelssohn described aesthetic experiences as pleasure: "Every imagination that we want to have rather than not have, we call a *pleasing sensation* and on a higher-level *pleasure*."⁷ Although beauty was a central concept in eighteenth-century philosophy, Mendelssohn realized that not only beautiful things can evoke aesthetic pleasure. He spoke of mixed experiences or double sensations. As an example he mentions a wonderful painting of a ship about to be wrecked against a rock. We can admire the excellence of the painting despite its horrible content. He could also have pointed to the many master pieces in art history depicting the terrible pain of Christian martyrs; or to the modernists painting a hundred years after him. In this way, Mendelssohn liberated aesthetics from beauty and made any appearance a possible object of aesthetic experiences. Nevertheless, such an appearance needs to make a strong impression on the beholder; it needs to be *Performing* something worthwhile of the beholder's attention.

However, there is no straight line between the beholder and an appearance, as often shown in simplified communication models. Something more is at stake. As an example, I can mention all the beautiful buildings we pass on our way to work without paying any attention to them; we

5 Hong 2003.

6 Baumgarten in Sauter 2021a, 22.

7 Mendelssohn in Sauter 2021a, 26.

have to become active and curious before we can perceive an aesthetic impression of a building. In eighteenth-century literature I found a discussion about this kind of attention in Friedrich von Schiller's letters "On the aesthetic education of man" from 1794. Schiller distinguishes between two kinds of desires. The *sensory* desire, expressing our repetitive material needs, is satisfied by eating food, sleeping, or building houses, but remains chaotic. The *formal* desire searches for order beyond the limitations of time to gain stability. Between the sensory and the formal desire, Schiller places the *playing* desire. Playing is distinct from our everyday needs, but stays more flexible than formal order. At the same time, *Playing* is a necessary element of aesthetic perception. One could say that it is the mental condition of aesthetic experiences.⁸

All experiences need to take place somewhere. This point has rarely been discussed in the eighteenth century; obviously it was considered evident. One could mention Jean-Jacques Rousseau who fiercely fought against theatres as places of aesthetic pleasure. In contrast, he suggested that the citizens of Geneva should, instead, gather around the shores of Lake Geneva play games, dance, arrange boat competitions, etc. Anyway, aesthetic experiences are *Placing* the beholder so vividly somewhere.⁹ Here, one can speak of the physical condition of aesthetic experience.

Symbolically, I order these parameters in the shape of a rhomb:

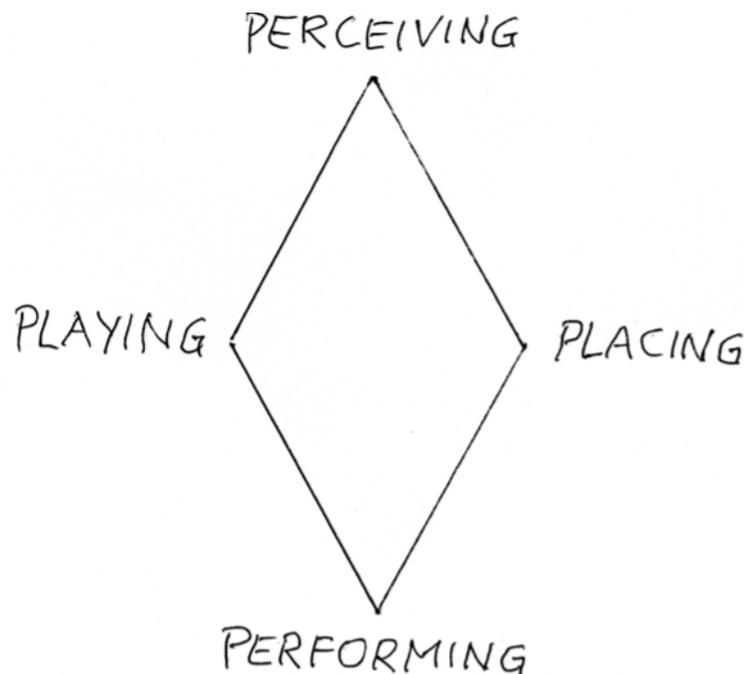


Figure 1: The basic parameters of aesthetic presence

8 Expanded in Sauter 2021a, 44f.

9 Expanded in Sauter 2021a, 40f.

Each corner asks questions:

Perceiving: Were you in some way prepared for an aesthetic experience or did it come as a total surprise? In what mood were you in when you made this unusual experience? Was the encounter something entirely new or did it tie in with earlier experiences? Did you find it beautiful or just pleasant or maybe it evoked mixed feelings?

Performing: What exactly was it that provoked this experience? Was it an object, a thing, or rather an event or maybe a landscape or cityscape? People and/or circumstances? If you found "it" beautiful or ugly, how would you describe the appearance in aesthetic terms?

Playing: In which way was this experience different from everyday experiences? Could you sense an element of game or play in this situation, something that distinguished the encounter in question from the quotidian? What gave it an aesthetic dimension?

Placing: Finally: where did it all happen? Was the place itself part of the experience? Even if the experience you think of could have happened anywhere, it did happen somewhere – what did the specific place add to the sensory perception of the thing, the person, or the event?

Perceiving Wilson's A Dream Play

Returning to the first set of questions, I had to ask myself: how did I prepare for this theatrical experience? In what mood was I in? and so forth. The answers to these kinds of inquiries can only be personal, but since I cannot provide an entire autobiography, I must choose some relevant instances that might have affected my perception of Wilson's production.

Let me begin with my relationship to Strindberg. I had read *Ein Traumspiel* in Peter Weiss' translation at school, but in my younger years I preferred Brecht to Strindberg. When I became the – then only – professor of Theatre Studies in Sweden in 1992, I felt obliged to acquire some deeper knowledge about Sweden's national dramatist.

I began with a performance analysis of Staffan Waldemar Holm's production of *Miss Julie* in Copenhagen (a trio of articles, together with Jacqueline Martin and Knut-Ove Arntzen). I wrote about Strindberg's own Intimate Theatre as a *Verschrumpfte Avantgarde* (a shrunken avant-garde) in one of Erika Fischer-Lichte's anthologies. I became a member of the Strindberg Society and attended their conferences, so I felt that I gradually developed a closer relationship to Strindberg, both scholarly and aesthetically.

In 1998, Stockholm became the Cultural Capital of Europe. Among the many guest appearances in the field of theatre, there was Robert Wilson's production of *A Dream Play*. While I felt reasonably well prepared, I was also curious. I had seen some of Wilson's earlier, quite abstract productions in Germany, with or without spoken text, but now he would be dealing with a regular, albeit unusual, drama. Some days before the premiere I listened to Robert Wilson's (since world-famous) lecture about his own production aesthetics.

Mentioning that I was accompanied by my wife and who else I met in the theatre might be too private to be included into the circumstances of this theatre visit, although such-like circumstances might affect an aesthetic experience. Although difficult, the distinction between the personal and the private should be maintained. In certain situations, the accompanying person is a strictly private affair, at another occasion the influence of the same person might be decisive for the development of an aesthetic experience. Only the analysis of the experience can distinguish the one from the other.

Performing – Remembering the Performance

What did I see, what did I hear – and what do I remember? It turned out that I remembered the wrong scene. I thought that the Greenhouse represented Fairhaven in Strindberg's play. In reality, the Greenhouse belonged to the scene after Fairhaven, which is the scene with the coal heavers.

The coal heavers' scene is the socially most engaged scene in Strindberg's play. The coal heavers not only complain about their position in society, they also demand social change through political change. They phrase their opinion in sharp sentences. But in Wilson's

production the coal heavers say nothing at all. Indra's Daughter and the Lawyer who, in the original text, ask a number of questions were not even on stage.

Instead, I saw four gardeners attending to fern plants on three tables. One of them I remember clearly: Åke Lundquist, rector of the Stockholm Acting School while I was teaching there, who died quite recently, in August 2021, at the age of eighty-five. The four gardeners, dressed in white working coats, were singing a Swedish drinking song that is much favoured around Christmas time: "Hej tomtegubbar" – in English approximately "Hi goblins", or brownies, or trolls, or whatever mystical creatures there might be around during those dark months. The Swedish text runs like this:

Hej tomtegubbar slå i glaset och låt oss lustiga vara (2 times)
En liten tid vi leva här,
Med mycket möda och stort besvär
Hej tomtegubbar slå i glaset och låt oss lustiga vara.
Hej!

In my own translation the song might turn out like this:

Hi goblins, now fill your glasses and let us ever be merry
So short a time we are making
Not much labour but much aching
Hi goblins, now fill your glasses and let us ever be merry!!

A merry song, indeed, in the original, but Wilson changed the melody into a minor key, slowed down the tempo, and gave it a new rhythm, approximately like this:

Hej 'tom te 'gubbar, 'slå-å i 'glaset ...

This slow waltz was repeated many times and I do not remember that the figures on stage said anything else. For Swedish spectators this was a very strange, almost shocking experience. The song had been removed so far from the happy Christmas carol, expressing nothing but nostalgia and sorrow.

The Mediterranean coast had become a greenhouse, the coal-heavers turned out to be gardeners, the socially engaged dialogue was reduced to a well-known song, but the song was transposed into a sad melody in a minor key. At this moment I realized that Robert Wilson was playing with Strindberg's text and images – and I was immersed into Wilson's playing. What does it mean to be immersed?

I am not referring to what lately has been called immersive theatre, as described and commented on by Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen,¹⁰ but to the immersive behaviour of spectators. In a recent article, I have argued for a distinction between cognitive, sensory, and reflective immersion,¹¹ which briefly can be described like this:

Cognitive immersion designates the traditional disposition of spectators in regular, story-telling performances, in which the viewer follows the fictional actions in a state of "suspension of disbelief". This kind of immersion is well-known and needs no further explanation. *Sensory* immersion means literally that the spectator's senses dominate the perception. What we see and hear and sometimes also what we smell stands in the foreground of the experience. Terms like beauty and ugliness, pleasure or disgust in relation to the sounds, colours, and movements on stage describe the feeling of being physically involved in the performance. Last but not least, there is also a *reflective* immersion, the thoughts and emotions that are immediately triggered by the impressions we perceive. This could also be called pre-analytical reflections because we experience these thoughts as spontaneous reactions rather than purposeful meditations.

What I think happened in the greenhouse scene was that I gave up my cognitive attempts to "understand" and opened myself to sensory perception. Wilson had produced a sense

¹⁰ Skjoldager-Nielsen 2021.

¹¹ Sauter 2021b.

of playfulness, which was especially effective for a person who knew Strindberg's play well enough to realize the differences. This playfulness had been developed from the very beginning of the performance. The Growing Castle was a house in the American South, at the Opera Door appeared a realistic, natural-size plastic horse, the Graduation Scene was populated by equally life-sized cows, who were milked by maids and accompanied by four dancing jockeys. Likewise, the Greenhouse did not make sense in relation to Strindberg's text, but made a strong impression on the sensory level of experience. It was me as spectator who had to take the step from cognitive to sensory immersion and thereby accept the playing aspect of the performance. This gave free space to reflective immersion, actually provoking alternative interpretations in which these scenic impulses could be settled. I certainly have forgotten what these interpretations might have been twenty-five years ago, but the memory of the provocation remains.

Placing – Facts and Fiction

The fourth parameter of presence, *placing*, can sometimes be extremely important, namely when a room, a building, or a landscape are the source of an aesthetic experience. I have described such encounters in the book *Aesthetics of Presence*. In the case of Robert Wilson's production of *A Dream Play* at the City Theatre of Stockholm, placing was not especially important. The City Theatre is an ordinary theatre space where I have attended performances for decades, so there was nothing that distinguished this occasion from any other visit. Concerning the physical aspect of placing, nothing remarkable happened.

Maybe the mental aspect of placing was of greater importance: the placing of *A Dream Play* that Wilson presented. The drawing of a massive country house from the South of the United States that substituted the Growing Castle has been mentioned above. The furniture for the Lawyer's Office were designed by Wilson himself in a fashion that lacked any resemblance to what one would have expected in a lawyer's office – they are still available for purchase from Wilson's Watermill Center. The cows, the greenhouse, the secret door of the opera – all pointed to places that could be anywhere. Wilson had definitely removed *A Dream Play* from its Stockholm environment, offering a continent of fantasy.

Magic as Method

Where did these deliberations about a magic moment in the theatre bring me? I could say that a moment of Presence that took place in the Past was preserved for the Future. I gained some insights into my own experience by observing the interplay between performing and perceiving, on the one hand, and the effects of playing and placing, on the other hand. The question is whether these insights are limited to my personal experiences.

At this point I would claim that my strategy of bringing together the four parameters of perceiving, performing, playing, and placing can very well be applied to other people's experiences. These parameters are not only a conceptual vision of aesthetic experiences but serve as a research method for the analysis of contemporary or historical productions and audiences. In my book, I present the application of a number of methodological techniques that are familiar to theatre scholars: from reception studies to performance analysis, from theories of playing to theories of space, from the study of historical documents to recordings of Theatre Talks. My conclusion is that it is possible to describe and analyse our own as well as other people's great moments of presence in the theatre and elsewhere. I would say that the four parameters might even illuminate the absence of presence that I and many others have experienced during the Corona pandemic.

Absent presence

The closing down of public institutions, including theatres, opera houses, and other establishments of performing arts created a shock for artists and audiences alike. Doomed to inactivity, artists worried for the future of their profession. To keep them in action and offer their audiences a minimum of compensation, existing as well as new productions were "televised", i.e. recorded and made available through the internet. Some advances became manifest: the shows could reach everybody, even those far away from the metropolitan cities where the theatres operate during regular times. Concerning opera: the subtitles were wonderful because

for once one could understand the text. Close ups of famous performers – you never saw their faces so clearly from a seat in a regular theatre auditorium. Politicians were clapping their hands: they saw a new way of justifying the budget for cultural politics – just televise the shows and everybody is happy. In principle, televised or digital performances can be just as enjoyable as live performances. It really happened that the computer screen showed a fascinating show or that a digital festival performance caught my attention. But there were also terrible setbacks. The televised shows only rarely lived up to an experience equivalent to a live performance. I have thought about this personal disappointment and used the four parameters of presence to shed some light upon my – and many other people's – frustration.

Being restricted to a square screen in our own homes very much narrowed the situation of *perceiving*. We were sitting in front of a television set, on our own or possibly with a partner, but absolutely with no audience. The collectivity of theatrical experiences was missing. Of course, there are collective experiences of screened events that can create absolute moments of presence: football games in a large square in the middle of Berlin, opera screenings in the park of Drottningholm and other suchlike events prove that a screen can very well transfer memorable moments, but during the Corona pandemic's solitary experiences, such moments were rare.

What were the screens *performing*? Television series and films enjoyed great popularity, but one should not forget that film as a medium could count on more than a hundred years of technical and aesthetic development, including cutting, animation, colour, music, etc. Television has learned from film and extended its own mediality beyond talking heads as for instance sports events and music videos. Theatre made attempts to televise stage performances on a regular basis in the 1960s and 70s, but these experiments were soon given up to make room for drama and crime series. When the Metropolitan Opera began to disseminate screened opera performances, they had learned from sports television, using 20-30 cameras, highly skilled personnel and advanced technology to manage the transfer from three to two dimensions. They certainly succeeded (sometimes) and, *nota bene*, they originally sent out their performances to cinemas, not to private living rooms. To put two cameras in front of a stage – as many theatres did during the pandemic – mostly failed to achieve an aesthetic effect.

The television set rarely offers opportunities that trigger a *playing* attitude with the viewer. There is no sense of participation. What we see is prefabricated and distant. Interaction with the viewer is restricted to occasional voting procedures, of which one cannot be sure that the votes are actually counted. Politicians are eager to demand that more productions of national theatres should be televised in order to grant public subsidies. For me, suchlike suggestions could be compared to a proposal that the national art museum should print picture postcards of their classical masterpieces to be sent to every household.

I have mentioned the viewing situation in one's living room. In this environment, *placing* contributes very little to the experience of great moments, no matter how many inches the television screen on the wall measures. Many of the screenings from various theatres were desperate attempts to engage artists and to offer at least something to their audiences. While I respect these efforts of keeping up a relationship between producers and their spectators, the results were far too often dissatisfying for me; hopefully, other people could more wholeheartedly appreciate these screenings.

However, I am not arguing against the use of screens and digital media altogether in combination with live theatrical productions. I have to admit that I am rather tired, like many of my friends, of video projections on theatre stages. But I would like to briefly mention some inspiring experiments, just to show that digital media belongs very well to today's theatre and performances.

RATS Theatre, operating in a suburb of Stockholm, has carried out a number of performances, in which various media were involved. In one production, Rebecca Örtman, director of RATS, used two separate stages for one performance, connected by a fibre cable and green-screen technique, connecting two contradictory environments. In another production, the audience was watching a televised live performance in various auditoria around town. An absolute highlight of this series of productions was *Antigone's Diary*, performed between 2010 and 2013. The audience gathered in a square in a well-known immigrant suburb of Stockholm, put on earphones, and moved collectively to the first performance space. The actors addressed

the spectators just like in old-fashioned radio drama. Antigone had disappeared. The director of the local school condemned her action and she was searched for by the police. At the end of the scene, Antigone asked the spectators: “What is freedom for you?” Every participant could now answer this question by means of text messages, while walking along to the next performance space. Having submitted one’s answer, the spectator had immediate access to all the answers of the other spectators, thus expanding the dramaturgy of the performance. After twelve performance stations around the suburb, each followed up by a new question, the audience returned to the square from where it all started. This combination of old-fashioned radio drama with a mobile audience, supported by interactive devices that affected the dramaturgical narrative, produced an original and inspiring performance.¹² Mediation was no longer concealed but actively brought into play. Indeed, even without actors on stage – they could only be heard in the ear phones – many of the participants shared a strong sense of presence. Maybe the co-presence of actor and spectator in the same room has never been a sufficient foundation of theatre theory.

Habitual theatre visitors, such as theatre and performance scholars, attend endless numbers of productions, always hoping that a magic moment might occur. At the same time, we know that these memorable experiences are rare. They cannot be predicted nor can they be arranged or constructed. They happen. Encounters of aesthetic presence constitute personal experiences. They do not occur universally, but very often we can sense that other members in the auditorium share our responses to remarkable moments. Experiences of this kind stay with us, just as the greenhouse in Wilson’s *A Dream Play* became a lasting memory for me. Memories of the magic of presence save those moments of the past for pleasant recollections in the future and frame our thoughts about theories of theatre and performance.

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Willmar Sauter, Professor Emeritus in Theatre Studies at Stockholm University, has written on theatre history in Sweden and outside Sweden, from rock carvings to digital performances. A long-standing interest of audience and reception research has resulted in numerous publications in various languages. This includes empirical and theoretical studies of contemporary as well as historical performances and audiences. His theories of theatre as event are presented in *The Theatrical Event* (2000) and summarized in *Eventness* (2008). Together with David Wiles, he published *The Theatre of Drottningholm Then and Now – Performance from the 18th to the 21st Centuries* (2014). Performance aesthetics, seen as reception strategy, with historical roots in the eighteenth century, is the focus of recent publications, among them, the book *Aesthetics of Presence: Philosophical and Practical Reconsiderations* (2021). His present project concerns Yiddish Theatre – in Sweden, and in the World.

12 One chapter of Sauter 2021a offers longer descriptions and reflections, as well as other references. See also Sauter 2021b, as well as *Nordic Theatre Studies* vol 24 (2012), and *Nordic Theatre Studies* 27:1 (2015).

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