

When the Utopian Performative Encounters Beauty

DARIA SKJOLDAGER-NIELSEN

ABSTRACT

I remember the first time I came across the utopian performative: the butterflies in my stomach, the overwhelming feeling of hope and happiness it produced. Jill Dolan [2005] points to those moments during performances when the audience comes together and feels hopeful; moments that constitute inspiration for change: for the performer, the spectator, and maybe even the world – and which are often (understandably) politically or socially charged.

But my experiences were different: my feeling of hope was not emerging after watching a political vision of the future, but during and after my encounters with beauty. I began to wonder: can a profound sense of beauty that brings the feeling of hope and love, also have the potential to change the world?

In this article, I explore the aesthetics of the theatrical event and its effectiveness in bringing out utopian performatives. Theoretically, I draw on Erika Fischer-Lichte's aesthetics of the performative to show how the language of performance analysis can access a theatrical (aesthetic) experience and on the theory of affect in performance to understand my experience; also, I supplement Dolan's theory with Dorthe Jørgensen's experience of beauty to extend her thinking into non-political experiences and grasping them more fully.

As an example, I discuss Oratorium Dance Project (Lodz 2011).

KEYWORDS

utopian performative, aesthetics of the performance, the experience of beauty, dance performance, affect, Oratorium Dance Project, Teatr Chorea

ISSN 2002–3898

© Daria Skjoldager-Nielsen and Nordic Theatre Studies

PEER REVIEWED ARTICLE Open access: <https://tidsskrift.dk/nts/index>

Published with support from Nordic Board for Periodicals in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOP-HS)

DOI: 10.7146/nts.v34i2.141660

When the Utopian Performative Encounters Beauty

I remember the first time I came across the utopian performative, although I was unfamiliar with the term. Even though it happened more than ten years ago, and the memory of the event has faded, I can still vividly recall my feelings as if they are inscribed in my body. Back then, I lacked the language that could help me describe my experience. In light of that, Jill Dolan's *Utopia in Performance*¹ filled a gap in theatre studies, which was bothering me for a long time. It made the feelings that are part of my theatre experiences legitimate as a subject of academic study.

I look at utopian performatives as valid and needed experiences that theatre can offer to the public. The world today overflows us with information, troubling news, dystopian visions of the future², and accelerating reality³. I have described elsewhere theatre as an "oasis of deceleration"⁴, a place resistant to the processes of acceleration, that carries a potential for reflection, peace, and joy⁵. Dolan recognises it as a place for change: where the possibility of making a difference comes from a feeling, from how utopia could feel⁶. Possibly, this function of theatre – where we may feel more – is one of the reasons why the topic is usually placed on the periphery of theatre studies (amateur theatre, theatre for children, and migrant theatre) but is gaining more recognition. Those are places where theatre becomes more egalitarian and more easily accessible; where more people get access to its utopian potential.

While Dolan centres on performances that focus on politics, I notice a larger potential in what utopian performatives offer. With this article, I go beyond the politically and socially charged moments in performances and focus on the theatrical event's aesthetics. I ask: can a profound sense of beauty that brings the feeling of hope and love also have the potential to change the world? I hope I can suggest other uses for utopian performatives in studying the spectator's experiences.

As an example, I use a Polish dance performance *Oratorium Dance Project* (2011). My performance analysis is based on my memories and the notes I took after watching it. Yet, the most important point for this article is my memory of the feelings, or rather affects, I experienced for the first time, which I keep in a bodily memory, and which I was not able to put into words. Through observations of my reactions and performance analysis, I conclude how beauty can also be a reason for the utopian performative to occur.

1 Dolan 2005.

2 Dystopian visions of the future are seen in every media. For theatre examples see: Skjoldager Nielsen and Skjoldager-Nielsen 2020, 59-61.

3 Here, I refer to Hartmut Rosa's (2015) concept of social acceleration.

4 Rosa 2015, 83.

5 Skjoldager-Nielsen 2021, 64-8.

6 Dolan 2005, 39.

Oratorium Dance Project - My First Encounter with Utopian Performatives

*Oratorium Dance Project*⁷ was an international artistic and educational project that premiered in 2011 in Lodz, Poland. The project aimed to unite children, young people aged 13-24, and adults over 50 years of age, as well as people from disadvantaged environments and those threatened with social exclusion. It was prepared and realized by organizations located in Lodz: the independent theatre group Chorea, the dance company Physical Studio, and the over 100-year-old Lodz Philharmonic. *Oratorium Dance Project* brought together 200 artists – professionals and amateurs. The intention of the project was not only to create a work of art but also to initiate social change among the participants and in their environments.



Figure 1: Oratorium Dance Project, photo no. 1, photo by PhotoMafia

The outcome of the six-month-long workshops was a very cohesive and innovative performance based on ancient Greek texts and inspired by the issues important to the dancers. Central to the performance were children and teenagers and their stories. However, there was no linear construction of the plot, rather different episodes of action and sometimes dialogue. The eleven chapters were arranged into a contemporary music composition titled *Oratorio: Antiquity/Trans/Orchestra* and performed live as *Oratorium Dance Project* by a choir, a symphony orchestra, a jazz quartet, and a group of dancers. The effect was a production on a high artistic level, which won two of the most important regional cultural prizes: Energy of Culture (awarded by the inhabitants of Lodz) and Golden Mask (awarded by art critics of Lodz). Critics often emphasized the energy emanating from the performers.⁸ The choreography brought to mind the performances by Pina Bausch. Like in her performances, the body on stage was not objectified, but it was a subject. The artists used the magnitude of the stage (one of the largest in Lodz), the vastness of performers (in choir, orchestra and among dancers), and contrast between group scenes and placing single bodies on stage to create beautiful, memorable, and sometimes breath-taking images. *Oratorium Dance Project* echoed Pina Bausch's famous statement: "I'm not interested in how people move, but what moves them."⁹ The performance uncovered different energies and feelings through movement.

The performers had very different social backgrounds and this fact influenced who was present at the auditorium. Officials, celebrities, artists, blue- and white-collar workers, children,

7 For more information about the project see the Chorea webpage.

8 See for example Kozowicz 2011.

9 Bausch 2007.

and football fans sat next to each other. Before the performance, it was often possible to overhear that this theatre visit was the first one for some spectators. At the same time, a large part of the audience consisted of frequent theatregoers – I could recognise many theatre critics and spectators whom I knew from my own experience from within the culture scene in Lodz. It was a very unusual mix of people.



Figure 2: Oratorium Dance Project, photo no. 2, photo by PhotoMafia

As a participant in this event, I observed how the performance affected the audience. Despite their different experiences as spectators, the audience remained focused during the whole event and gave a standing ovation at the end. I could feel that the spectators belonged to the *communitas*, which was created during and for this occasion. After the performance, the audience did not immediately go home. Instead, many spectators chatted and shared their observations; in particular, families and friends of the performers. Compared to an ordinary theatre visit, this performance offered a more communal experience. And something more that back then I was not able to put into words.

This lack of ability to express one's thoughts is not unusual, especially in dance performances. As Matthew Reason notices: "To acknowledge the ineffable is to acknowledge not only that some things escape language, but also that some things are outside of language"¹⁰. Experiences of the audience, especially in dance, can be more affective than interpretative. Therefore, it is feelings and bodily experiences, not thoughts or interpretations, that lead spectators further (possibly toward the change).

Dance Performance, Affect, and Beauty

The performance moved me. But the more I tried to express my appreciation towards it, the more I understood that the importance of this event was not found in *what* I saw, but in *how* I felt while watching. I think that what inspired Jill Dolan to write *Utopia in Performance* was similar to my experience during *Oratorium Dance Project*: the warm feeling inside the body and the unexplainable connection with other spectators. This feeling seems very individual and ephemeral. I cannot be sure that other spectators felt the same, but at the same time, I can imagine that some of them did. Dolan herself stresses that there are "multiple layers of community and *communitas* that might circulate in the same production at the same moment,"¹¹

¹⁰ Reason 2017, 84.

¹¹ Dolan 2005, 133.

which means that not everybody must feel the same at the same time. Some spectators could be engaged in the event whilst others might count minutes until it ends. But even with those differences, there is a chance for interconnectedness among audiences.

Oratorium Dance Project, as a social project, had the potential for becoming politically charged – witnessing the histories of underprivileged children and youth can be a very powerful experience. Yet, the ensemble chose dance and music as its media. Due to this choice, the stories became more ephemeral, in-between, or even possibly “lost in translation”. Matthew Reason emphasises that an encounter with dance is often affective and that through the sensual, the kinesthetic, or maybe even the emotional, the spectator experiences “moments of knowing”¹². The knowledge comes from the body and doesn’t have to be motivated cognitively.

Before watching the performance, I wasn’t aware of its social goals, I only knew that I was going to see both professional performers and amateurs. I was there as an observer and spectator. Thus, I encountered a powerful dance performance that thrilled me with images that artists created and surprised me with the varied audience that it attracted. As I described above, it made me feel very strongly.

There are many different aspects of affect that researchers touch upon in their deliberations¹³, but for this article, I will bring up the most central aspect of it described by Patricia Ticineto Clough: “the self-feeling of being alive.”¹⁴ I think that this description of being alive corresponds well with what I was feeling during the analysed performance. But what does it mean to feel alive? Clough draws on other authors and brings in “aliveness and vitality”¹⁵. I would claim that it represents the range and blend of feelings that make us human: to love, to hope, to believe, and how they occur in the body. To feel alive is more than to be alive. To feel alive means wanting to live, possibly getting a glimpse of the larger reason for why we are all here in the world: a moment of knowing without necessarily being able to put it into language. Affect, according to Clough¹⁶, may motivate a person to act and to connect to others – not necessarily on a deliberative level, but through feelings. This core understanding of affect resonates with two other concepts: utopian performatives bring in what may happen after the feeling of hope occurs and beauty explains how that feeling may transform us.

In the case of utopian performatives, the community emerges out of the audience: when spectators feel like part of a whole or, in Dolan’s words, when they experience themselves as part of a congenial audience who “experience a processual, momentary feeling of affinity.”¹⁷ Spectators feel they belong together because of the affect they experience. Utopian performatives can reflect the past or present and offer prospects for the future. For Dolan, it is in live performance that utopia momentarily occurs when “people (are) coming together to share experience of meaning making and imagination”¹⁸ that could eventually inspire ideas of a better world. In other words, the initial feelings of hope and love lead to the emergence of community in the audience that could culminate in ideas for a better future and changes in the world. With Dolan’s social and political inclination, this feeling may come from the affinity towards the characters on stage, performers and their stories, or their own real recounted experiences from the past. However, there is another concept that may follow a similar path: beauty.

The Danish philosopher, Dorthe Jørgensen, describes beauty as an experience¹⁹. It is not only the feature of art that make spectators appreciate it but rather the quality that leads to delivering insights about one’s life or the world. She reconnects the beautiful with the sublime

12 Reason 2017, 84.

13 For example, as bodily and automatic responses (Clough and Halley 2007), as an attachment (Sedgwick 2003), as experience no longer framed as representation (Bennett 2005), as positive and negative sensations (Thompson 2009), or as dialectic experience (Reason 2017).

14 Clough 2007, 2, and Thompson 2009, 119-22.

15 Clough 2007, 2. The author draws on Brian Massumi’s *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987; Mark Hansen’s “The Time of Affect; or, Bearing Witness to Life,” *Critical Inquiry* 30.3 (2004), 584-626.

16 Clough 2007, 2; cf. Thompson 2009, 119.

17 Dolan 2005, 14.

18 Dolan 2005, 2.

19 Jørgensen 2021, 21–33.

and through that shows that the experience of beauty is “loaded with a surplus of meaning”²⁰. It is not only about noticing beautiful moments and objects but also reflecting on them, being touched by them, and being overwhelmed by them. As Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen aptly characterises her thinking: “The experience of beauty leaves an impact much deeper than the mere impression of external forms, whether they are natural or artificially constructed. Albeit the experience of beauty is certainly sensual and stimulating at first, it is also characterised as being reflexive and transformative; it allows one to learn that not all things in the world have their purpose outside themselves, but in themselves.”²¹ The experience of beauty is much more than the pleasure that the spectator may experience in connection with art. It is related to the senses, to the feeling it produces in the spectator. It can be elation, excitement, joy, or hope – the feelings that are often related to affect²² – that appear when the spectator encounters an object or event. And those feelings may transform us.



Figure 3: Oratorium Dance Project, photo no. 3, photo by PhotoMafia

Thompson points to another important aspect of beauty: we, humans, want to share affect²³. The experience of beauty motivates us to share it with others. To give a very simple example: when we encounter some beautiful image during a family trip, we immediately want to show it to our partner or children; we want them to see what we see so that they experience it as well. Therefore, I think that Thompson is right when he claims that “this desire to share a response ensures that an individual experience becomes communal.”²⁴ To summarise both aspects of beauty: the experience of beauty can be an affective motivation for engaging with others and one that transforms us.

I think that the social and political aspects of the *Oratorium Dance Project* were important in how I remember my experience. But I do not consider them as the only reason behind my feelings. I vividly remember scenes, or rather images, which I saved in my memory, that made me feel butterflies and interconnectedness with other spectators. In my further analysis, I will focus on the aesthetics and politics of the event and I will deliberate more on how beauty can be a reason for utopian performatives to occur.

Aesthetics of the Live Performance

Thompson describes beauty as not only being in the eye of the beholder but also as something

20 Jørgensen 2021, 25.

21 Skjoldager-Nielsen 2018, 156.

22 Cf. Thompson 2009, 143.

23 Thompson 2009, 144.

24 Thompson 2009, 144.

that at the same time belongs to the object/experience: "Beauty (...) can be understood as an intense affect generated by an object or experience that is felt by the person, but simultaneously located beyond them."²⁵ In theatre, I would claim, the setting for affect to occur is carefully staged through dramaturgical choices. In *Oratorium Dance Project*, as I already described for dance performances, experience may be more affective than interpretative. Additionally, hearing music performed by 50 musicians and 110 choir members (partly choreographed) as well as watching 60 dancers on stage created an intense experience. The felt presence and immensity of this artistic encounter may evoke strong bodily responses.

Erika Fischer-Lichte explores the argument that the realisation of art lies in its "impact upon the audience's sensations and perceptions and its prompting of affective responses,"²⁶ which primarily takes place on the corporal level. *Oratorium Dance Project*, as a dance performance, highlights the importance of the "bodily co-presence"²⁷ of performers and spectators and well exemplifies performative devices that contribute to the exchange of energies between them²⁸. Exchanges of energies along with the conduct of the present bodies create together "a self-referential and everchanging feedback loop"²⁹, which describes the connection between the performer and the spectator that emerges during the performance.

Affect emerges in the body of the spectator who reacts to the bodies and other materialities of the performance. The body on stage belongs both to the performer and the character and its presence is performative. When Fischer-Lichte discusses concepts of embodiment³⁰ and presence³¹, she focuses on casting and how chosen bodies and capacities of an actor may affect spectators. In the description of the strategies of embodiment, Fischer-Lichte undoubtedly points to the affects that the bodies on stage cause (and how they also turn into emotions): "(...) their [the bodies that deviated from the norm - DSN] decrepitude, caducity, or physical excess were presented in ways that shocked the spectators. They broke into cold sweat, their hands began to shake, their breath slowed down or accelerated; they felt frightened, disgusted, or ashamed."³² While I was focusing on pleasure, joy, and beauty when describing affects provoked by aesthetic experiences, they can of course also come from experiences of pain, fear, and despair³³. Possibly, they are even more obvious as they often come from a very noticeable situation on stage. Fisher-Lichte also turns towards affect when discussing presence. She points to the fact that affect comes before spectators may form any opinions about the character and how powerful this can be³⁴. Similarly, the experience of beauty comes before or even as unrelated to interpretation. It is not important to understand what caused it or, paradoxically, it is better if the work of mind is muted for better access to the experience. Jørgensen writes: "Beauty exists only as *potential thought*, and it requires feeling, sensation, and presentiment to actualize it as experience."³⁵ The feeling is inseparable from it and *it* leads to accessing knowledge or having insights about the world.

Those staging strategies aim at breaking down the dichotomies between life and art that leave the spectator in the liminal space in between. In the *Oratorium Dance Project*, amateurs on stage conveyed stories based on their own lives while being part of the choreographed

25 Thompson 2009, 143.

26 Skjoldager-Nielsen 2018, 107.

27 Fischer-Lichte 2008, 38.

28 Similarly, Jean-François Lyotard constructs the concept of energetic theatre which describes the theatre as a space for the free flow of energy, beyond its semiotics. In his view, the audience is not bound by an imperative to decode the meaning intended by the authors. Instead, the theatre is a space for the free flow of energy and therefore an analysis of the performance may be understood as a study of its energies. Cf. Lyotard 1976.

29 Fischer-Lichte 2008, 38.

30 Fischer-Lichte 2008, 77–93.

31 Fischer-Lichte 2008, 93-101.

32 Fischer-Lichte 2008, 86.

33 Thompson gives a very interesting argument on the relationship between beauty and pain. He explains how the experience of beauty may help deflect pain and how beauty placed next to suffering can assist in heightening awareness of it. Cf. Thompson 2009, 136-59.

34 Fischer-Lichte 2008, 95.

35 Jørgensen 2021, 24, italics by the author.

performance. During the performance, the spectator could switch between following (or cognitively constructing) the plot of the current scene and perceiving the energetic and affective impact of the real living bodies of the amateur performers. The line between the person and the character in the stories was very thin, sometimes even imperceptible. Did they follow a script? It was impossible to know and maybe not that significant. The felt presence and experienced beauty of the scenes became more important than the possible authenticity of the stories told. Furthermore, the choreography, which left a lot of space for the performers to improvise, made it possible for the performers to stay in between the characters and themselves. There were also scenes carefully choreographed that required physical strength and created beautiful images to remember. Here, one wondered: is it possible that we are looking at mere amateurs? Was it possible to train those bodies to do such spectacular movements? The spectators could feel the intensity of the performers' presence, experience the intensity and beauty coming from the choreographed scenes, and also stay in between art and life.

Putting the audience in this liminal state was also possible because of liveness, that is corporal unmediated co-presence of performers and spectators³⁶, but also something that "only exists in resonance between performance and audience"³⁷. Liveness brings in a risk that anything could happen as we watch a live performance (that is its essential property), but also an admiration for what happens on stage (the particular experience established by the relationship between spectators and performance). In *Oratorium Dance Project*, both aspects of liveness (ontological and experiential) were prevalent due to the number of artists on the stage and the fact that the authors of the spectacle could not always control the situation. Fischer-Lichte believes "live" is a fundamental aspect of the performance (like performance studies specifically do) in the sense that it brings the unique possibility of the unrepeatability of the encounter; it is through liveness and (co-)presence that the performance lives. However, I would say that liveness, (co)presence, and other features that Fischer-Lichte mentions do not guarantee this encounter. I rather agree with Matthew Reason and Anja Mølle Lindelof when they write: "The payoff of co-presence is only a *potential*, not the inevitable result of a live ontology, but rather the potential result of a live experience. Deadly performances are those that fail to produce live attention, live sociability, a live encounter with their audiences."³⁸ Just like Jørgensen's, beauty exists as a potential thought that requires a feeling to become realised, the performance also needs something beyond its dramaturgy to become a live encounter: for example, the affect. When the potential of the live performance (in opposition to deadly) gets realised, I ask: where does it lead the spectators?

Performance to Change the World

I see *Oratorium Dance Project* as a very good example of how both parties of an encounter (performers and spectators) are affected. The project aimed at social change: the underprivileged groups participating in the workshops were to experience a difference in their lives after the performance concluded, which brings to mind applied theatre. As I explained above, the performance could evoke affects and give the audience an experience of beauty; it could allow them to encounter utopian performatives. Even though it sounds very hopeful and exciting, it is also a high expectation for the theatre. Therefore, I ask: is the expectation that theatre can bring about a change reasonable?

Engagement with arts has the potential to do *something* for the participants (both on stage and in the auditorium). Sometimes it gives measurable effects, which are often the foundation for the funding of art projects. Those are especially expected from applied theatre, which works with communities in need of solving issues concerning them: "A play or process not only communicates information about issues or ideas but is also understood to *show* something of the truth of the lives of those involved."³⁹ The processes should be designed in a way that the change coming from the revelation is an outcome. By revealing the problems that the participants went through (often oppression or trauma), the measurable effects or some action

36 Fischer-Lichte 2008, 67-8.

37 Reason & Lindelof 2017, 3.

38 Reason & Lindelof 2017, 12.

39 Thompson 2009, 116, italics by the author.

should take place.

Revelatory arts programmes⁴⁰ work through processes that over time aim at change. But in some performances, instant change may also occur. Liminality described by Fischer-Lichte may lead to transformation, which she explains: “The state of betwixt and between, the experience of a crisis, is primarily realized by a physical transformation, in other words, a change to the physiological, energetic, affective, and motoric state.”⁴¹ As examples, she brings experiences of pity, fear, and horror, i.e. after watching something disturbing spectators feel strong affects that trigger them to intervene, reinvent the social rules, and end with a successful transformation. Strong negative impact does not allow for the participants to stay neutral – they need to act and it is expected of them. I can imagine that violent performance art may cause a reaction from the audience. But does it leave the theatre and enter real life after the event is over?

For Dolan, change is a crucial aspect of utopian performatives. She goes back to Brecht⁴² and the actions in the performance, which manifest social relations (those are the manifestations that allow critical contemplation); and to Augusto Boal⁴³ and his rehearsals for the revolution (explaining how the performance can grant the audience agency to act). This, from the very beginning, moves the attention to the fact that utopian performatives are (most often) political. They are the inspiration for change – for the performer, the spectator, and maybe even the world. Maybe if we can see the utopia or hear about it, we then have more determination for changing the real world for the better. What is interesting for me is that Dolan’s idea of utopia does not lie in the construction of a better future, but in how utopia could feel⁴⁴. This feeling is typically grounded in the present or the past, in the events or rules that we, as spectators, do not agree with or are discontent with. It is often instigated by the performers’ transparency, sincerity, presence, and charisma. Even if what we see is difficult, then the feelings do not have to be; they can or should be positive and bring hope to the equation. Performers bring hope for the future; they bring ideals and faith in what changes the future can bring. The feeling of hope comes from affect and knowledge. While the stress is on change, as I see it, the change may also happen within the beholder: on a level of feeling (and possibly later – thinking and action).

Internal transformation is a vital feature of beauty. During the experience of beauty, the person is not controlled by their mind but is truly present. The impression it creates leads to a deeper insight into oneself or the world. What is important, “[i]t is ‘experiencing a surplus of meaning’ that precedes interpretation. It is an intense notion of collectively being, which lets one sense connections between things in the world.”⁴⁵ The feeling is present before everything else and it has transformative potential. Experiences of beauty “distinguish themselves by the strength of the feeling of coherence and meaningfulness that accompanies them, and which results from the fact that, in such experiences, something appears as uniquely valuable and as part of a whole to which one experiences oneself as belonging, too.”⁴⁶ Through the experience, the spectator may perceive herself/himself as part of a larger whole – a community with the audience, performance or the entire world.

Taking all of that under consideration, I think that theatre can bring change. The concern is its scope. Political or social changes seem impossible without communal efforts. Applied theatre is a good example of it – those projects deal directly with issues concerning a specific community to impact and hopefully fix them⁴⁷. The expectation for the same from a performance, where the encounter lasts minutes or hours, is a large one. But the features of it that I discussed above may lead to some transformation – even if only for a moment.

The encounter of beauty understood as an affect brings in different emotions that may lead to a transformation. On the one hand, beauty leads to insights about the world, to knowledge that

40 Thompson 2009, 116-7.

41 Fisher-Lichte 2008, 177.

42 Dolan 2005, 7.

43 Dolan 2005, 7.

44 Dolan 2005, 39.

45 Skjoldager-Nielsen 2018, 156.

46 Jørgensen 2021, 23.

47 This approach, however, is being criticized. Focus on the utility of art may shift attention away from the complexity of art. See: Thompson 2009, 116-9.

does not have to be accessible through language but through feeling. Through the experience of beauty, we gain access to an understanding which otherwise could stay hidden. On the other hand, there is the communal aspect of it: we want to share it with others. Perhaps this is why it is possible to divide the focus between the stage and the auditorium: when we encounter beauty and want to share it, it makes us more eager to notice reactions from the public and check if others also see it and how they perceive it. The encounter with beauty makes the experience more communal.

In *Oratorium Dance Project*, the political or social dimensions are present. Even if they were not that explicit on stage, they were available to those who made an effort to learn about the project's background. But it was not the context, but the scenes that I saw that moved me. The performance evoked joy, hope, and the ability to be here and now with my senses. It also made me interested in other people's reactions: I remember how the auditorium reacted, their focus, and joy. When I was leaving, I was not planning for the future, I did not get the idea of how to improve the world, and I was not thinking about that. I was not thinking but feeling. It is the feeling I remember and not what I saw. I felt as if the world slowed down for a moment. I felt it was an important moment and I hoped it was not only for me. The feeling of joy, love, hope, and belonging to a larger whole was overpowering. To me, the world became a better place and I was a better person. Nothing in reality changed and yet I was able to touch something larger than myself and see it clearly. Something in me changed – for the better.

Conclusion

I know the feeling of overwhelming love and hope not only from the theatre. I have experienced it during exhibitions in museums, during concerts, or in nature. These were the times when the beauty of the objects or sounds overpowered me. These were the moments when I felt like part of a larger whole. But my experience might be amplified by the small tell-tale signs of other people who had a similar experience. This kind of confirmation would happen when other people were smiling at each other and/or looking at others with a gaze of implied understanding and knowing that they all experienced something extraordinary.

I started this article with a recollection of a very strong feeling, where it is not a reflection or call to action that I remember, but the strong affect coming from beautiful imagery on stage that impacted me. It made me feel hope and love, but also, to paraphrase earlier mentioned Pina Bausch: it made me interested if other people were moved as well. The hopeful and communal experience stayed with me for years. I recognised it in Dolan's utopian performative: this was how utopia could feel. Since my memory did not come from the political account, but from the beautiful images I saw on stage, I asked if beauty, just like political and social messages, could change the world.

In search of an answer, I looked into affect as it could help explain where utopian performatives come from. I argued that affect is the first step to feeling love and hope. With the help of Fischer-Lichte, I looked into how and why we react as we do to what we see on stage. The bodily reaction to images and messages coming from the stage is a starting point for reflection and possible future action. Where Dolan writes about politics, I look into the experience of beauty which can also transform us and become an affective motivation to engage with others.

It does not mean that I neglect the political and social aspects of theatre. *Oratorium Dance Project* created unity among the most diverse groups of citizens. A place for dialogue was created, even if only for a moment. Dolan sees that moment as something hopeful: "Performance creates ever-new publics, groups of spectators who come together for a moment and then disperse out across a wide social field, sometimes (hopefully) sharing the knowledge they gained, the emotions and insights they experienced at the theater."⁴⁸ She sees spectators as those who share the gained knowledge with others. I think that in the case of the *Oratorium Dance Project* and, in particular, other applied theatre projects it is also important to recognise the performers as those who experience change and who can perhaps take it with them into the future society they are creating. In this way, *Oratorium Dance Project* was successful in producing effects. I know that some of the children who took part in the performance stayed engaged in the artistic workshops organised by Chorea. The performance opened a new door for them. This is the

48 Dolan 2005, 90.

effect that can be measured. We don't know if the outcome for the spectators moved beyond the level of hope. But is that a problem? Not according to Dolan. She writes that "utopia can be experienced affectively, through feelings in small, incremental moments that performance provides."⁴⁹ That feeling does not have to lead directly to action (political or any other), but it may trigger thoughts about (a possibility of) a better future or it can re-enchant the world⁵⁰.

The utopian performative is about how utopia feels, how it is experienced and not how it is organised. Nonetheless, the experience of a utopian world comes from some idea of it. Even if the idea is not precise, the perfect world is beautiful; and the experience of beauty is transformative. I do not claim that every performance has the potential to change the world. I think we can even question if it is the role of theatre at all. But we know that theatre sometimes does *something* to those who participate in it. Theatre may bring transformation on an individual level – whether it is about an affect, a thought, a hope, or an idea to change. This, in turn, can come from political messages or experiences of beauty because, depending on our sensitivity, there are different paths for transformation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this article to my late husband, Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen, whose work opened new horizons for me and who inspired me to become a more sensuous, open-minded, and braver scholar.

AUTHOR

Daria Skjoldager-Nielsen, Stockholm University
Also publishes as Daria S. Nielsen. Holder of two MA degrees from the University of Lodz in marketing and theatre studies. PhD candidate in theatre studies, Stockholm University. Lecturer at the University of Lodz. Member of the IFTR working group The Theatrical Event. Vice chairwoman of Rococo Foundation researching cultural institutions' management and performance. Research interests: audience and reception research; the theatrical event; audience development, arts marketing.

49 Dolan 2005, 39.

50 Cf. Fischer-Lichte 2007, 181.

References

- Bausch, Pina. 2007. "What moves me", speech on the occasion of the Kyoto Prize award ceremony. <http://www.pinabausch.org/en/pina/what-moves-me> (1.6.2023).
- Bennett, Jill. 2005. *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Clough, Patricia Ticineto. 2007. "Introduction." In Patricia Ticineto Clough & Jean Halley (eds). *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Chorea webpage. *Oratorium Dance Project*. <https://www.chorea.com.pl/pl/projekty/oratorium-dance-project/> (1.6.2023).
- Dolan, Jill. 2005. *Utopia in Performance. Finding Hope at the Theater*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. 2008. *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*. London and New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jørgensen, Dorthe. 2021. *Imaginative Moods: Aesthetics, Religion, Philosophy*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
- Kozowicz, Alexandra. 2011. "Oratorium Dance Project - amatorzy uczą zawodowców... pasji." *E-teatr.pl* 13 December 2011. <https://e-teatr.pl/amatorzy-ucza-zawodowcow-pasji-a126998> (1.6.2023)
- Liotard, Jean-François. 1976. "The Tooth, the Palm." *SubStance* 5:15, 105-110.
- Reason, Matthew. 2017. "Affect and Experience." In Matthew Reason & Anja Mølle Lindelof (eds). *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. London and New York, NY: Routledge
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofski. 2003. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Skjoldager-Nielsen, Kim. 2018. *Over the Threshold, Into the World. Experiences of Transcendence in the Context of Staged Events*. Stockholm: STUTS.
- Reason, Matthew and Anja Mølle Lindelof (eds.). 2017. *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. London and New York, NY: Routledge.
- Rosa, Hartmut. 2015. *Social Acceleration. A New Theory of Modernity*. Translated by Jonathan Trejo-Mathys. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Skjoldager-Nielsen, Daria. 2021. "Theatre Talks: How to Accommodate Hygge in Theatre Experience." *Nordic Theatre Studies* 33:2, 58–71. <https://doi.org/10.7146/nts.v33i2.132872>.

Skjoldager-Nielsen, Kim and Daria Skjoldager-Nielsen. 2020. "Para-Anthropo(s)cene Aesthetics Between Despair and Beauty: A Matter of Response-Ability." *Nordic Theatre Studies* 32:1, 44–65. <https://doi.org/10.7146/nts.v32i1.120407>.

Thompson, James. 2009. *Performance Affects: Applied Theatre and the End of Effect*, London and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.