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"Possessed": The Phenomenology of Immersive Theatre

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"POSSESSED"

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF IMMERSIVE THEATRE

by

SHANNON FLYNN

B.A., Theatre, University of New Mexico, 2009

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

Using phenomenology as a lens of analysis, I investigate how immersive theatre engages audiences in a more direct and sensory way than traditional theatre. In a proscenium theatre the action is seen from the same angle. The theatre itself becomes a phenomenon in audience's minds, each performance subtly influencing how the audience perceives the next. I investigate how relationships between audience and performers are altered in immersive experiences with no delineation between the space audience and actors occupy. The phenomenological idea of frontality places immersed audiences in positions where they are able to explore a constantly changing perspective of the performance, unable to focus their senses on anything not considered part of the experience. I explore this

relationship between phenomenology and immersive
performance through examples of contemporary immersive
performance, historical accounts of exorcism which closely
mirrors immersive performance relationships, and in writing
and staging my thesis performance, *The Bat.*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In performance, the performer works collaboratively with the audience to create meaning. The phenomenon of live performance can be viewed through the lens of phenomenology, as put forth by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Bert. O. States, and other theorists as a moment of reframing. This is a moment when prior experiences that normally influence and affect current experiences are set aside. In the theatre, we quickly assign new meanings to everyday sights. A well-known friend becomes a new character onstage, a piece of jewelry becomes a symbol of love, a set change in low blue light is not recognized as part of the story unfolding in the scenes before and after it. By merely seeing something onstage or framed as a performance, an audience is primed to know what they see is a box of reality with a different set of rules and expectations than everyday life. Using a phenomenological model, I explore how immersive theatre has the potential to help the audience separate their past experiences in ways that traditional theatre and arts cannot.

The term immersive encompasses a broad range of theatrical styles, but the styles this paper is most

concerned with are productions that orient the audience to the performer in a nontraditional way. This can range from simple repositioning, such as having the audience standing instead of sitting, to site specific pieces performed outside of a venue designated for performance, to actively engaging the audience in interactions with actors turning the activity into something closer to play and gaming, rather than passive spectatorship. Utilizing these types of immersive theatre models, I propose artists can communicate the intentions of their art more effectively from a phenomenological perspective.

Statement of the Problem

In this dissertation, I present, discuss, and analyze phenomenology and how it relates to immersive theatre practices. By looking at some specific examples of immersive productions that reposition the audience, I investigate how these theories intersect with immersive performance in practice.

Through writing, revising, and staging my thesis production *The Bat*, I will actively investigate the relationship between what I will argue is one of the oldest forms of immersive performance throughout history, ritual

exorcism. This essay analyzes exorcism as immersive performance, while my thesis production of *The Bat* is an immersive performance about exorcism as ritual. There are two questions that guide this dissertation:

1) From a phenomenological perspective, how does relocating the audience into the world of the performance change their experience of it? Does the act of bracketing conventions of traditional theatre practices and offering some degree of choice or change to the audience alter the essential experience of the play?

2) What are convergences and divergences between immersive performance and ritual exorcism throughout its history? Is exorcism a form of immersive performance?

Methodology

My primary methodology is a theoretical analysis that deploys performance theories and specifically applies them to immersive performance. In Chapter 2, I introduce the theory of phenomenology and the concept of essence and *frontality* to argue that immersive performance has the potential to provide an audience experience closer to the essence of the artist's intention than traditional theatre models. I will give specific examples of these theories by

analyzing four case studies of immersive performances: Darkfield's *Coma,* Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More,* and Third Rail's *Then She Fell*.[1] Through these specific examples, I will analyze the audience's response to being put in an immersive environment with which they are unfamiliar. How does the audience's perception work to frame the action when the proscenium or their architecturally directed sense of *frontality* is removed by being placed inside the performance rather than outside looking in? When there is freedom of movement for the audience, do they feel the need to move off to the side out of traditional conventions, or is there a more instinctual need to engage closer to the action once they realize this convention does not need to apply in this new space? I explore these questions in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 focuses on analyzing the specific ritual of exorcism historically as an immersive performance and its functions in society. I show how exorcism is more like immersive theatre than traditional theatre. Exorcism is also a core theme and device of my thesis play *The Bat.*

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[1] In addition to using reviews of these performances, I experienced all of these performances live, and will draw from my own notes and observations. I saw a production of *Sleep No More* in New York City on 8 July 2018, a production of *Then She Fell* in New York City on 10 July 2018, and a production of *Coma* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival on 5 August 2019.

Crafting an experience that considers the experience of the audience is key for me, and I am interested in gaining more insight into the ideal level of immersion for both audiences and performers alike with the 2021 production of this piece. In Chapter 5, I analyze the elements of the production that specifically relate to phenomenology and ritual exorcism as immersive theatre. *The Bat* tells the story of two con-artist exorcists and their own relationship to the act as both ritual and performance. The production actively and kinesthetically attempts to explore the same phenomenological theories that this paper analyzes. By deploying these methods and the key example of exorcism, I detail the intimate relationship shared by phenomenology and immersive performance.

<u>Limitations</u>

There are multiple definitions of the term "immersive performance," and a comprehensive analysis of the broad range of meanings that the term immersive theatre can encompass is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I examine some specific examples that both reposition the audience in a nontraditional way, and self-label as immersive experiences. I will conduct a more thorough

analysis of these few examples and focus on the specific relationship of phenomenology and ritual theory and its influence on these productions. Thus, the findings of this dissertation are not generalizable to all immersive experiences, but more specifically those that embrace some sort of repositioning of the audience.

Exorcism similarly has a long and complicated history, and is not so easily summed up in a single category. Acts of healing, performance, religious ceremony, deception, and more have all been associated with the word exorcism, and this dissertation will not attempt to analyze the multitude of different varieties of exorcism across hundreds of cultures, but rather focus on a select few historical examples that best highlight the intersections of this ritual and immersive performance.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework of this thesis is based primarily in theories of phenomenology first introduced by Edmund Husserl. His book, *General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, serves as the groundwork for my discussion of this theatre and the expansion of the concept into the realm of immersive theatre. The subsequent developments of phenomenology by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *What is Phenomenology*, Bert O. States' "The Phenomenological Attitude," and Bruce Wilshire's *Role Playing and Identity: The limits of Theatre as Metaphor* are also fundamental to my research. In this dissertation, I continue the analytical work of these and other theorists and apply the concepts to the specific conditions of immersive theatre that has some degree of resituating the audience in a nontraditional way.

An Overview of Phenomenology

Husserl developed the psychological dimension of phenomenology, which he understood as the "science of

experience,"[2] in contrast to an empirical line of thinking

that is mainly concerned with the discovery and archiving

of facts and knowledge. He proposed that what we call the

world is the total of anything we can experience

phenomenologically. Any observable physical object or

characteristic is considered a phenomenon, as well as any

thought, emotion, or impulse. An apple, the color red, and

the concept of Newton's Laws are all phenomena. Our initial

experience of any given phenomenon, be it a tangible object

or a thought, is called our primordial experience of that

phenomenon. This first experience will create a memory that

will be referenced consciously or subconsciously anytime

that we experience the same phenomenon again. Every

repeated experience of this phenomenon is influenced by

what came before, meaning that only our initial experience

is unaltered by what happened in the past. Husserl calls

this the *essence* of a phenomenon. Reality is then the

conclusions we draw from these essences, phenomenological

experiences are *irreal* and not part of our reality

constructed of facts.[3]

Facts, according to Husserl, are not the concern of

phenomenology. A fact is a conclusion of an empirical

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[2] Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, 43.
[3] Ibid., 45-52.

system, and a fact can never have essence since it is based

on previous phenomena. Instead it is the essential

qualities of phenomena that phenomenology deals with and

attempts to recreate. If the world is the total of all

phenomenological experiences possible, the different

combinations of stimuli we experience from our senses in

the world can be considered units of different phenomena.

All phenomena that are not the original, essential

experience are biased by the memories and emotions created

from the essence. Husserl calls these biases intuitions,

and explains that they guide our interpretations of

experiences consciously or unconsciously.[4] Merleau-Ponty

elaborates on this idea of our perception of a current

phenomenon becoming influenced by similar past experiences

with the example of seeing the color red:

> That a quality, an area of red should signify
> something, that it should be, for example, seen as a
> patch on a background, means that the red is not this
> warm colour which I feel and live in and lose myself
> in, but that it announces something else which it does
> not include, that it exercises a cognitive function,
> and that its parts together make up a whole to which
> each is related without leaving its place. Henceforth
> the red is no longer merely there, it represents
> something for me, and what it represents is not
> possessed as a "real part" of my perception, but only
> aimed at as an "intentional part."[5]

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[4] Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology,* 44.
[5] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 14-15.

The "warm" quality associated with red is not indicative of other experiences of red, but Merleau-Ponty describes an intuition he has about the color red being warm, one which he lives and loses himself in. Thus, his other experiences of red are not an essential experience like the repeated, compounding experiences that led to the complex memories and feelings of warmth and liveness now intertwined with his experience of the reality of the color red. The meaning of the present is influenced by the lessons and conclusions drawn from the past.[6] Perception then, is greatly influenced by memory. Eating a red apple brings up memories and other experiences, and the current apple we are eating is unconsciously affected by all apples before it, all eating before it, and all red before it.

Observe figure 1, then look over to figure 2, both

Figure 1
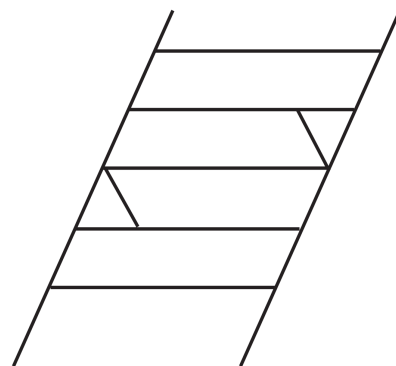
Figure 2

Figure 1 and **Figure 2**: similarity and repetition, from Merleau-Ponty's
Phenomenology of Perception, 1962, pg. 22.

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[6] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 17.

referenced from the introduction of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception.* These figures demonstrate repetition and similarity. The shape in figure 1 is contained within figure 2. Once you have seen figure 1, it is difficult not to notice its presence in figure 2. Seeing figure 1 inside figure 2 causes our brain to notice similarity and repetition, and to categorize the two together. Without having figure 1 as reference, we might not as readily notice the outline of it inside figure 2. Noticing similarity and repetition results in categorization of phenomena together, which require descriptions for categories and subcategories we could call facts. The aggregate of these facts create an index of knowledge that grows ever more elaborate with each experience, suggesting our present reality is grounded more and more in the past the more experiences we have.[7] This is a philosophy for understanding human thought, but also interactions between humans, documentation of these thoughts, and archives of these documents, which values knowledge built upon knowledge that came before it.

This process turns into a series of connections of meaning in the mind, or extending out into conversation, or

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[7] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 22-26.

documented in the archive. These connections are all built on experiences of past phenomena as an indexing tool to contextualize meaning out of various experiences. A melody to remember a list of items, a library catalogue, or a series superstitious lucky numbers are various examples of mnemonic devices and indexing systems all based on compounding knowledge from experiences of the past. The known "truths" of these systems are facts, and in empirical modes of thinking facts are valued above essences.[8] Unlike phenomenology which values the first essential experience as unbiased, empirical systems view the same first experience as naïve, without the benefit of knowledge of the past to give proper context. Empiricism ends up favoring the analysis of the phenomenon more than the phenomenon itself. Husserl referred to experiencing phenomena and through this indexed system of knowledge as "the natural attitude."[9]

Phenomenology seeks to identify and disconnect these preconceived interpretations from the direct experience itself. It does not eliminate or discount them, but attempts to see beyond them in a way that is not influenced by past experiences of similar phenomena. The

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[8] Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, 43-44.
[9] Ibid, 51.

phenomenological attitude attempts to disconnect the warm feeling that may be associated with the experience of the color red. Husserl calls this process bracketing, and postulates that seeing previously identified connections and removing them from our gaze of the current phenomenon can help us see its true nature, or essence, once again. Husserl called this "the phenomenological attitude,"[10] in contrast to the natural attitude of perceiving reality. The phenomenological attitude does not make use of science or empiricism however it does not discount them. Empiricism is a concept, a non-material phenomenon itself, which is a collection of thoughts, an indexing system of logic that a phenomenological perspective attempts to mute in the bracketing process.[11] To identify and list all past biases from previous phenomena, then decouple them from the current one is the goal of a phenomenologist.

Phenomenology in Theatre and *Frontality*

Bruce Wilshire looks at the theatre through a phenomenological lens to describe actors making connections in the rehearsal process with each other and in performance

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[10] Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, 112.
[11] Ibid, 108-111.

with the audience. Bodies performing is a phenomenological experience outside the realm of thought. Both performer and audience are in each other's physical presence and experimenting with space, location, expression, and interpretation. They are exploring the characteristics and tendencies of human experience and attempting to invoke or understand this empathetically in others. Where the philosopher would read, think, write or converse to bracket in search of phenomenological understanding, the actor uses the body, imagining kinesthetically to arrive at a more essential understanding.[12] The theatre-goer encounters the world of the play ready to bracket away any indexed facts from their own life and is invited by the performance to reconnect phenomena in a new way.[13] Wilshire describes a boundary in theatre that, as I will argue in Chapter 3, does not necessarily apply to immersive theatre. He describes an "aesthetic distance" that must exist between audience and performer, for he says without their anonymity and privacy respected it is impossible for the audience to enter the world of the performance.[14]

Bert O. States also uses a phenomenological model in the context of his analysis of theatre to illuminate how it

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[12] Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity*, 16-18.
[13] Ibid., 22-23.
[14] Ibid., 23.

already serves as a physical space for the audience to reconstruct essential experiences of phenomena.[15] In the theatre, we temporarily suspend the index of knowledge of reality, freeing previously established connections so that someone we know in reality to be an acquaintance can become the King in a performance. Time and place can change or jump around, sometimes the very rules of the universe can be altered, but the audience accepts them in this act of bracketing that is regularly asked of a theatre audience. The perception of the audience is altered in the theatre, the world onstage is operating under a different reality than the world just offstage.[16] In addition to showing how theatrical performance can be a phenomenological exercise, States also uses the theatre as a metaphor for phenomenology itself and the phenomenological concept of *frontality*. If the world is understood as the total of all the experiences of possible phenomena, then *frontality* is what separates personal experience from being the world itself.[17] Merleau-Ponty explains that the individual is both an object in the world, but also the receiving and processing center for all the sensory information. This makes the human body both a phenomenon and experiencer of

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[15] States, "The Phenomenological Attitude," 371-372.
[16] Ibid., 371-372.
[17] Ibid., 372-373.

phenomena. The perspective of the individual that the various senses of sight, hearing, and others take in as sensory information is what defines *frontality*. Your physical location, orientation, and ultimate relationship to other phenomena in the world is limited.[18]

As States explains, we cannot see all sides of anything at once, we are limited to our current field of vision, range of hearing, and other factors determined by our location in the world. We "know" the back of an object we are looking at exists even when we cannot see it because that is part of the reality of facts we have learned from an index of past knowledge.[19] Our experience of other objects in the past is that they remain in their location when out of sight, however the fact that the back of the object exists cannot be phenomenologically observed. *Frontality* is the view of the world that our sensory information can show us at any given moment, similar to the view of the stage that an audience sees. Even though an audience can only see what is presented onstage in front of them, they perceive a world that extends beyond the wings and backstage.[20] The site of perception then, is very important, as the meaning we ascribe to our reality is

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[18] Merleau-Ponty, "What is Phenomenology?" 66-67.
[19] States, "The Phenomenological Attitude," 372-373.
[20] Ibid., 371-373.

constructed from what our individual senses inform us combined with our past experiences. The location of the human body in relation to a given phenomenon we are sensing is very much at the core of the idea of *frontality*. I apply this concept of the changing location of the body and its sensory inputs specifically to immersive theatre in the next chapter. I will argue that because of the relocation of the audience typical in many immersive theatre productions, audiences have the potential to experience something closer to the essence of the artist's work than in traditional theatre forms.

Exploring the "Essence of Art and Theatre"

What is the essence of the theatre, if the meaning of the work emerges from a collaboration between performer and spectator? As proposed by phenomenologists, interaction with phenomena for the perception of their *eidos*, or essence. Before I talk about the essence of art in immersive theatre forms, we must first consider possibilities of what the essence of art is in collaborative performance. Working within a phenomenological understanding of the word essence, it could indicate art that is experienced by the audience free

of preconceptions based on previously experienced phenomena. Since the experience of a performance is a phenomenon, it is also subject to being biased by previous performances. An audience member that bracketed prior similar related experiences, could theoretically experience essence, as Husserl puts forth, from that performance experienced with a phenomenological attitude. To go back to Merleau-Ponty's example of red, perhaps getting the audience to experience red plainly, again as if for the first time, without the warm and lively feelings or any other biases they may have developed around it is a way for audience to experience the "essence" of art rather than preconceptions from previously experienced art. Like any other phenomenon, theatre might have an essence as any other art form. Because of the need for direct connection between audience member and performer, at its essence theatre is an empathetic means of communication, but it too is buried under a body of indexed knowledge. Wilshire argues that theatre is an essence of human connection. In attempting to understand and interpret the language of bodies onstage, the watching audience empathizes. The empathy experienced in theatre informs the audience later in their encounters with people in reality, and it might be

this influence on people's ability to connect that is the essence of theatre.[21]

If we step outside of the phenomenological view of essence, there are other artists and theorists who have speculated on what the essence of art, or the essence of theatre, could be. In *Theatre of Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio,* Italian theatre director, the company's cofounder, Romeo Castellucci talks about primal means of communication called *forms* similar to primordial essences in phenomenology.[22] Unlike essences, which are drawn from an initial, new experience, Castellucci does not trace forms to a specific experience, rather the form itself is described as something so primal its connection is simpler than symbol or the most basic modes of communication. Castellucci states:

> Form is something I can share with an animal. This is impossible with a symbol, but with the form it is possible. The combination of light and gold, this is a form, or marble. Hunger, thirst, these are forms. Darkness is a form, or hardness. The circle, the cube, these are forms. They are things that make up part of our life every day.[23]

Castellucci describes the realm of conception as a place between audience and performers that is produced by

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[21] Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity*, 14.
[22] Castellucci, Romeo, *The Theatre of Socìetas*, 207.
[23] Ibid., 207.

suspending reality as if a test were being carried out.[24]

This realm of primal connection between audience and

performers, Castellucci speculates, is the location of

catharsis. Not in the spectators or the performers but

rather the unseen connection that might be similar to

empathy that is holding them together as they inform one

another in the performance.[25]

In *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Jerzy Grotowski focuses on

the encounter. Whether between artist transmitting to

audience, artist to artist, or text to artist, it is the

encounter and transmission itself that is at the heart of

performance. [26] The encounter implies "something so similar

in depth that there is an identity between those taking

part in the encounter [...]. This is both a biological and

spiritual act."[27] In *Performer*, Grotowski elaborates the

important role of the performer as a transmitter or

"bridge" to the witness. Essence, as Grotowski describes

it, was not learned from society or outside forces in any

way but came from within the body. The performer is able to

perceive and reflect on essence, and also enact and mirror

it. The encounter exists between witnesses observing the

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[24] Castellucci, Romeo, *The Theatre of Socìetas*, 32-35.
[25] Ibid., 44.
[26] Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 55-56.
[27] Ibid., 58.

reflective and active performer transmitting perceived essence.[28] In *Grotowski's Bridge Made of Memory*, Dominika Laster explains that in Grotowski's work, "memory functioned, at least in part, as a mode of inquiry, an instrument of rediscovery of essence."[29] In contrast to the phenomenological concept of bracketing, which tries to shed memories and past phenomena to experience essence, Laster illuminates that in Grotowski's methods, reminiscence about one's past is a practice in returning to essence.[30]

Grotowski's concept of essence is different than the phenomenological experience I focus on in this paper, but it has some important intersections with the connections made between text, performer, and audience member. Grotowski likens the text to a scalpel, able to cut and mold the artist, but the core of performance lies in the encounter itself.[31] Perhaps this encounter is a kind of collaboration between author, artist, and audience.

The essence of theatre differs among theorists and may not be a definable concept, but it seems to lie in the action of the moments of both actor connection with other actors, and connection with audience in live performance.

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[28] Grotowski, *Performer,* 377-378.
[29] Laster, *Grotowski's Bridge Made of Memory*, 49.
[30] Ibid, 49-50.
[31] Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 57.

Essence as identified by Husserl and other phenomenologists comes from novel experiences free of previous bias, or experiences that have their bias bracketed. Castellucci and his collaborators elucidate how meaning is created between artists and spectators in a space between the two entities, informed by one another. Grotowski postulates that this connection could be performers perceiving and channeling essence to one another and an audience, and that unlocking memory through practice could be a path to experiencing essence. As the audience witnesses the performer channeling their essence, they are invited to experience their own essence. I propose that Castellucci's emphasis on the creation of meaning, Wilshire's emphasis on empathy, and Grotowski's emphasis on the encounter are all equally important arguments about the essence of theatre, but that it is all three working together that constitute performance's essence. Perhaps it is this encounter that puts audience in a state where they are primed to bracket away past phenomena, and as they try to understand the meaning of the performance, they empathize with the perceived other.

CHAPTER 3

PHENOMENOLOGY IN IMMERSIVE PERFORMANCE

Josephine Machon's *Immersive Theatres* offers an overview of contemporary immersive performance, describing the methodology and productions of some of the leading artists in the field. Machon looks at the models of several companies who have created immersive experiences to analyze what immersive theatre means, how it differs from other forms of theatre, and what its implications and strengths are in production. Looking at models from Punchdrunk, Back to Back Theatre, and Nimble Fish among other notable theatre makers, Machon distinguishes immersive theatre as a separate genre of performance, rather than a subcategory of theatre or an adjective used to describe any show that has some interactive elements or is staged in a location other than a traditional theatre venue. An immersive experience is not just one that might have you on your feet. Machon relates immersive theatre to being immersed in water, and having all senses covered by the experience without being able to look away or check out of the performance under the audience's usual cover of darkness.[32]

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[32] Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, 21-25.

Frontality and Location

From the perspective of phenomenology, immersive theatre puts even more emphasis on the importance on the location of the place of perception. In a proscenium theatre venue, State's concept of *frontality* encompasses the onstage and backstage dimension of the theatre as part of the same world that physically extends beyond the proscenium. The audience also psychologically extends their perception of the world of the performance beyond what their senses reveal should actors leave the stage to rooms or locations never seen. This constructed reality by the audience is one where they might assume a second floor in the house exists even if onstage the set ends just before the top of the stairs. What if, as Wilshire proposed earlier, the audience walked onto the stage, but as a planned part of the performance rather than an unfortunate accident?

Suddenly, they might be able to see that the top of the stairs never actually reaches a second floor, and in fact there is a dimly lit backstage area instead of a back-door actors keep indicating they are entering and exiting. The spectator's physical location would change, and as a

result, the view of *frontality* would be altered. What once framed their vision no longer does, they have now experienced a monumental shift in their perception of reality.

Let us imagine the active theatre-goer, an audience member who routinely sees live performance at a local theatre venue. Before each performance they see throughout the year, they show up early to get a good seat and buy their favorite candy bar. After being seated in the house the music will always fade and they will always see a short curtain speech down-center stage that reminds them to turn off their cell phones and see the next show. They will always wait in line to use the restroom at intermission, always start to doze off during the end of the second act, and always leave and take the same path home, the mirror image of the path they took to get to the theatre in the first place. If they are season ticketholders, they will see every performance of the year from the exact same perspective. These small repetitions might seem slight or even insignificant, but subconsciously they contribute to an environment that provides the audience with familiar and habitual experiences. The "natural attitude" can creep in and subtly influence the audience, even as they prepare to

experience something new, repetition may begin to inform audience preconceptions.

The theatre may be an ideal environment for the audience to bracket past phenomena, but it is the phenomenon itself that can be indexed just like any other past experience. Phenomenological theory implies that the audience's experience of the performance will become informed by each experience of a new, similar performance. Audience members will see the backs of heads framing a new performance, but memories of other performances framed by the backs of heads will consciously or unconsciously affect each audience member's experience of the show. In this way, the more theatre one sees and hears from similar vantage points and positions throughout the house, the more is added to an unintended index of facts and knowledge surrounding what constitutes a performance. Unintended remnants and artifacts of ideas and notions formed from previous performances will make their way into the current production, in a way that is beyond control of the theatre artists. Performances that combat the repetitive nature of a similar experience by altering the perspective of the audience and any unnecessary repetitive phenomena they may experience create an experience that is new and unique, from a phenomenological understanding, than a more common

theatre-going experience. In other words, the repetitive format of theatre can still create an index of what is to be expected from the content of the performance. Performances that break this repetition by offering a new perspective or activating the audience's senses in new ways might allow for less bias from past performances.

I would offer a counter to Wilshire's earlier set boundary that the audience walking onstage would render it impossible for them to enter the world of the play, that perhaps if they did walk onstage it would allow them to enter the world of the play more fully, if the rest of the production was also ready for the audience to walk onstage. Many immersive theatre productions, and all of those that I will focus on here, reposition the audience on their feet, or situate them in configurations that are drastically different from an experience in a proscenium theatre, or other forms of theatre where there is a clear delineation between audience member and performer. This simple change in location drastically changes not only the field of view of the audience experience, but also changes the way the audience perceives themselves, inside the experience alongside performers rather than outside looking in. It serves as a tool to bracket the phenomenon of the theatre experience itself.

External Stimuli and Memory

Let us turn back to the perception of the world. We perceive direct sensory input from external stimuli in the form of images, sounds, smells, tastes, textures, and more. The shaping of these stimuli into our reality is the function of perception, which is influenced by personal biases based on past experiences and memories. The knowledge of the inside of your house exists even while you are at work. Your perception of the reality that your house continues to exist while you cannot see it is based on the knowledge of how you left your house earlier, and the experience you have of places in the past that do not disappear into thin air, even those you cannot currently see.[33] External stimuli play a huge part in our perception of reality, but sometimes stimuli have nothing to do with perception as in the example of the reality of your house while you are at work.

Physical experiences and thoughts can be classified as phenomena, however only those solely brought on by perception from external stimuli have the potential to be

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[33] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 26-29

experiences of essence, as thoughts are formed based on other phenomena. Whether because it is the first, naïve experience, or because it is a bracketed experience, an essential experience would be a direct, raw connection with external stimuli as a phenomenon experienced through bodily senses. The human body is an interesting paradox in phenomenology. It is both the center for experiencing phenomena and a phenomenon perceived in the world.[34] In the modes of immersive theatre performance that position audiences on their feet with a range of motion, this perception center is constantly changing along with the location of the audience. The sensory information is arranged in a different way moment to moment, that will not be categorized in the index of the mind as similar to other theatrical experiences behind the backs of heads. A changed, or ever-changing perspective during the show serves a purpose of helping the audience not to reference past unconscious intuitions and biases formed during previous experiences of performances.

    We can also apply Wilshire's notions to immersive theatre. In the rehearsal room and in performance, actors are experiencing phenomena through the physical presence

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[34] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 170

and reactions to one another. Wilshire contends that audiences observing these impulses share an emotional connection with perceived experience of the performance, deepening audience's understanding of humanity.[35] Though physical proximity will not necessarily reveal a deeper level of connection, a changing or unique perspective reveals a different set of impulses to be observed, especially if the audience member has seen a majority of performances from a fixed perspective. Wilshire mentions that a connection exists between performers and audience members in the form of awareness, laughter and other reactions, but it would seem the next step in empathizing would be for the audience to follow some of the same primal reactions that the actor follows and move throughout the space.[36] In many immersive theatre productions, to make eye contact or to look away, to approach or retreat, to spy or to openly stare are all other connections an audience may make and are encouraged to make with actors. This invites the audience into the same kind of phenomenological experimentation in theatre is that leads to empathizing. Wilshire's describes a theatrical process where "time, world, audience, and actor must intersect."[37] Performers

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[35] Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity*, 13-14.
[36] Ibid, 24.
[37] Ibid, 22.

stand before audience to characterize humanity, and as the audience connects they allow the performer to symbolically stand in for themselves in a process Wilshire calls enactment. This process of enactment is a tool for performers and audience to create meaning together, this happens not when something is completed in the performance, but when something has transpired between audience and performer.[38]

    This is not to say that all theatre, or all immersive theatre is better served when the audience is on their feet, only that it offers them a different framing of the performance that will drastically affect how it is perceived in the senses of the audience members. A potential counterargument to what I propose could be that an immersive experience is still being perceived through a natural attitude because audience are referencing slightly different theatrical experiences from varying perspectives, but that the new perspective and proximity to the performers is not enough to render it a totally new experience. An art patron could see a realistic painting from the across the room in its frame and recognize it as a painting. If they walked close enough to the painting that

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[38] Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity*, 21-22.

they could no longer see the frame, it would still be recognizable as a painting. I argue that it is not simply the perspective and proximity that is affected by placing an audience member onstage. Erasing the boundary between audience and performers places the audience inside the performance. Immersive experience is less like the art patron being so close to a painting they cannot see the frame, it is more like an arcade painting, with a hole cut out for the head, inviting the art patron to become part of the artwork. In *Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race*, Robin Bernstein uses the example of arcade paintings as a way of providing "negative space" for traditional observers to insert themselves into the artwork, one that has been scripted by the artists but requires the presence of the audience for completion.[39] In a similar way, immersive experience employs negative space that must be filled by audience in subtle ways.

Anette Arlander uses the concept of agential cuts to discuss a similar line between observer and observed that can be blurred. By taking a photograph of the landscape, an agential cut now exist between what is in frame and what is not in the frame.[40] The very existence of the frame implies

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[39] Bernstein, "Dances with Things," 87.
[40] Arlander, "Agential Cuts and Performance as Research," 142.

a different meaning for what is caught inside of it and what is excluded. The proscenium, a raised stage, a darker seated area for audience are all examples of a hard frame in performance positioning the audience on the outside. Arlander points out that other agential cuts exist when she herself steps into frame of her own camera. Now, as both observer and observed, a cut exists in her as well, changing her relationship to the performance and how it is perceived by both her and others.[41] It is not simply the perspective and proximity that is different in immersive performances, the relationship between audience and performers is different because of the framing that includes them both simultaneously. Machon distinguishes immersive theatre as a separate art form, and most performances in proscenium theatres with permanent areas for audience and performers are not written as immersive or in a way that can invite audiences to move around the world of the play.

In immersive theatre performances, sensory perception plays a big role in the audience's experience of the event. In the immersive experience *Coma*, by Darkfield, which takes place in a storage container rather than a theatre, members

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[41] Arlander, "Agential Cuts and Performance as Research," 143.

Figure 3: The audience positioned on their backs in beds in Darkfield's *Coma* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, 14 August 2019.

Photo by Mihaela Bodlovic, "Coma @ Summerhall," *Skinny: Independent Cultural Journalism.* Online Publication, United Kingdom.

of the audience are positioned on their backs in individual bunk beds and given headphones to wear throughout the performance (figure 3). After the experience begins, the lights fade to black and the audience is deprived of their sense of sight. The audience experience the show without sight, primarily perceived through hearing in the form a slow and unfolding story and soundscape played over headphones. The deprivation of light intensified the audience's perception of these sounds, some participants in my group had to remove the headphones at times or leave the experience early. In addition to intense and constant sounds over the headphones, correlating smells of coffee and perfume, among others, wafted from nearby vents at appropriate times in the story. Other senses were engaged such as taste—or the expectation of it-in the form of a pill offered to each audience member before the start, and the feel of the bed against their backs, as well as a spatial feeling of claustrophobia. This performance

prepares the audience for an experience of essence through their senses by bracketing much of traditional theatre strategies. Audiences are less likely to unconsciously reference other theatre experiences because they are in a unique location, in an uncommon position, and deprived of sight, traditionally the main sense for experiencing theatre. From a phenomenological perspective, *Coma* brackets much more of the world of indexed knowledge than most performances seen in traditional theatre venues. This suggests that the audience would have something closer to an essential and unbiased experience of the performance than if they were in the more familiar setting of a theatre. One review of the experience at the 2019 Edinburgh Fringe Festival reads:

> This show really plays with your own senses, reactions and paranoia, so each audience member will have an entirely different perspective [...]. A brief descent into an unusual and scary state. *Coma*'s definitely an experience you won't be forgetting in a hurry and you'll be wondering if it all really happened in the first place.[42]

My own experience of the performance is a similar disconnected feeling, along with a sense of more time passing than had actually elapsed. This performance is a prime example of how, through their very design, immersive

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[42] Wilson, Coma @ Summerhall, 1.

theatre modes can help the audience bracket past experiences. The drastic location change, positioning of the audience, and unique presentation all allow the event to be considered without previous experiences of theatrical performances being subconsciously referenced. The experience of the theatre itself has been bracketed, and so Darkfield presents *Coma* as a raw and unique immersive performance, with its meaning to be interpreted by an audience based more on their direct sensory experiences of the performance than on preconceptions that have been informed by past performances.

Where does the creation of meaning take place in collaborative art such as music, dance, theatre and immersive theatre? The performance exists both in the perceptions of the artists and the audience, is it ultimately the work of the artists or the interpretation of the audience that creates the meaning of the performance? Essence, as understood in phenomenological terms, is different than meaning. But a raw, essential experience of performance may influence meaning as it is constructed. Performance is a physical phenomenon in the world only while it is happening, in the rehearsal process leading up to the show connections between actors are being made, but it is only a performance when an audience member is there

to witness what has been rehearsed. The moment after the performance ends it exists only in memory and remaining artifacts. Meaning could be understood in phenomenological terms of perception of the world of the play. Neither the audience, nor the performers will have the same perception, so meaning will have to be a negotiation as past memories and previous phenomena are different in each person. Actors may speak words and perform actions while referencing one thing while audience are interpreting it as something else, this does not deter the connection between audience and performer. The same slippage occurs with any form of communication, performance is merely a different form to communicate. Performers and audience have different internal stimuli that will play a role in this negotiation of meaning. I propose that, theoretically, theatre modes such as immersive theatre that bracket as much of previous phenomena and memories as possible put more emphasis on the external stimuli and thus the work of the artists, and leaves less to internal stimuli. Internal and external stimuli work together and are both necessary to have an empathetic theatrical experience. New stimuli affirm or challenge old preconceptions and memories as an audience member applies what they know of their own life experience to the performance unfolding before them. Though these

memories and preconceptions that make up internal stimuli are not a deterrent in the negotiation of meaning, their presence in the audience is both inevitable and often unknowable to the artist attempting to enact a small aspect of humanity and inspire empathy. In this negotiation, immersive theatre modes may put more of an emphasis on external stimuli of the experience, the actual sights, sounds, tastes, and textures of the performance. If the phenomenological concept of essence is inspired by a unique and novel experience, then a performance with an emphasis on external stimuli might be more efficacious in achieving this experience of essence.

Theory in Contemporary Immersive Performance

Erick Neher explores a few instances of some recent immersive theatre models such as Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, and Third Rail's *Then She Fell*, both New York-based immersive experiences that I saw in the summer of 2018. Neher's main argument is that the notion of audience participation has come to be dreaded under that guise, both by audiences and performers as an intrusion from one side of the performance into the other. Instead, Neher suggests a reframing of the experience not as an intrusion but as an

erasing of a boundary between the two, what might terrify
even the most enthusiastic theatre-goers, instead becomes a
less intimidating, and a more personal and intimate
experience of a performance.[43] Neher uses these New York-
based immersive performances to examine the shift in
attitude towards participation as being linked to two main
points. The first is the elimination of the boundary
between stage and audience, and thus the elimination of any
expectation of the audience to "perform." Unlike being
pulled up onstage and thrust onto the other side of the
performance equation, in this immersive experience the
audience and performers share a space, one that demands no
expectation of performance the way a stage does. The second
is the fairly controlled nature of these experiences that
create an environment where the audience remains fairly
passive despite their presence in the world of the
performance.

 Sleep No More is a theatrical experience in New York
City that depicts a wordless, dance-based adaptation of
Macbeth. Performers move about five floors of the
McKittrick Hotel as the playing space, and audience are
free to explore most, but not all, of the same space and

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[43] Neher, "The New Immersive Theater," 107-110.

follow the action they choose to watch. Though there are

some areas off-limits to audience, this offers a near open

world experience where the audience has a great deal of

control over what they witness and for how long. Audience

are masked to deter speaking and conceal identity, and some

cross between docents, guards, and characters in black

masks sometimes block or guide audience movements. These

are the rules and codes of conduct for the performance, but

like any performance, some audience have and may continue

to challenge these rules, though not in the performance I

experienced. In *Sleep No More*, audience members are free to

wander wherever they like, however they may not speak or

touch the actors. While the action takes place in numerous

places, which implies endless possibilities, I found that

most audience members, myself included, were drawn to

actors moving throughout the space. As Neher points out,

the audience interaction was specific, and dictated by the

rules of the performance. Figure 4 shows the close, but

strictly observational position the audience takes. The

Figure 4: The audience is close and free to move wherever they please, however their role is primarily observational.

From a review, "Sleep No More" on becomeimmersed.com 2020, uncredited photo.

possibility of a constant change in perspective offered by the performance allows the audience to travel deeper into the world of the performance, giving the audience the option to follow their own intuitions and observe the action that most interests them. The open possibilities and constantly changing frame offered by the immersive world keeps the audience actively invested and searching for answers more in the external stimuli of the play than in the internal connections in their minds, though both are happening. In their review of *Sleep No More,* Myrto Koumarianos and Cassandra Silver write, "It is an experience akin to the spatial, temporal, and ontological liminality of dreams, hauntings, and the altered perception of insanity-states that resonate well with the literary Macbeth."[44]

Then She Fell was an immersive experience in New York City that ran from October 2012 to March 2020 and focused on the life and the works of Lewis Carol, mixing facts of his life experiences with the fiction he wrote into a dark and fantastic guided journey. Unlike *Sleep No More,* audience movement is highly scripted and guided, however the audience is being constantly relocated and paired with

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[44] Koumarianos and Silver, "Dashing at a Nightmare," 2.

different sets of actors and other audience members. I was
ushered throughout a network of misleading halls, secret
doors, and many rooms in a precisely timed and
choreographed manner. In my experience of *Then She Fell*,
there were several instances where there was no distance
between myself and the performers. In one scene, I was
asked to brush the hair of one of the actresses. For
several minutes I brushed her hair, and we had a
conversation about our love lives. I presume hers was
character driven but I was honest. Both physically and
emotionally, there was little if any distance between us in
this moment as performer and audience member. Later in the
performance, I found myself behind a two-way mirror,
watching another audience member brush the same actress'
hair, watching them soundlessly and intimately talk about
what I assumed from my past experience was their love
lives. But my new vantage point behind the secret mirror,
while another actor brooded behind me, offered a new out-
of-body experience.

I could not hear, but with the knowledge of what came
before, this phenomenon referenced an immediate memory, but
the change in perception gave new context to the same
phenomenon, that this moment I had regarded as highly
intimate was actually one where we were being watched

without my knowledge. Seeing another audience member brush her hair with a similar awkwardness I had just an hour before blurred the lines between audience and performer. Though I was not aware of it in the moment, I was empathizing both with the actor and the audience member I did not know but now observed. It is likely that someone else was empathizing with me an hour before through the same hidden two-way mirror. This layered and complex audience and performer relationship was far removed from the conventions of traditional theatre, bracketed thoroughly from any past performance with the audience watching from afar in a strictly designated area.

These specific examples of contemporary immersive performance allow for a few observations about the nature of immersive theatre and what distinguishes it from traditional theatre. The analogy of being immersed in water offered by Machon can be understood as not watching the performance from the outside, but the inside. In proscenium theatre with a delineated audience and stage, every show is unique, but the perspective of the audience remains unchanged, or changed very little, increasing the chance each new performance to be influenced by past ones as well. However in immersive experiences, each performance is unique and also offers a different and sometimes changing

perspective for the audience not set up with the duality of onstage and offstage, performer side and audience side. Rather, a more organic negotiation of space and perspective is offered.

CHAPTER 4

EXORCISM AS IMMERSIVE PERFORMANCE

With this understanding of immersive performance, I
will look at three historical examples of exorcism through
the lens of immersive performance and phenomenology.
Looking at exorcisms through this lens can elucidate how
immersive performance can locate the audience inside the
performance to drastically alter the meaning created by
performer and audience. When not recognized as a
performance, but instead a religious or magical exorcism,
the meaning created by those engaged in and watching the
performance could have significant social implications and
consequences for those involved in the exorcism,
psychologically and sociologically. I will look at these
effects case by case. Exorcism in theological and magical
contexts strongly persisted in many instances and into the
modern era primarily in premodern Europe, where all three
examples taken up in this dissertation are situated. Brian
Levack argues the longevity of the tradition of exorcism is
due largely to biblical exorcisms.[45] I will add that the
theatrical nature and public visibility of many of these

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[45] Levack, "Possession and Exorcism in Christian Antiquity," 33.

practices also affected its prevalence throughout history.

Campbell Bonner notes that specific ritual techniques can

be observed and define the practice of exorcism, most

universally a set of words and actions that expels an

unwanted spiritual presence.[46] In what follows, I examine

some key examples of exorcism as both ritual and immersive

performance. Stanley Tambiah defines ritual as "constituted

of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often

expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement

are characterized in varying degree by formality

(conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation

(fusion), and redundancy (repetition)."[47] These patterns

result in change that can be social, psychological, or a

perceived change in the physical world as direct result

from the language.[48] "Performative utterances" as described

by J. L. Austin is language that directly activates such

ritual changes. Austin uses the example of saying "I do"

during a wedding and its direct change in status on those

involved in the ceremony.[49] This also accurately describes

such active—or performative—language as "I exorcise you,"

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[46] Bonner, "The Technique of Exorcism," 40-41. In analyzing a collection of material regarding demonic possession by Julius Tambornino, De antiquorum daemonismo, 1909 (RGVV VII, 3).
[47] Tambiah, "A Performative Approach to Ritual," 130.
[48] Ibid., 123-66.
[49] Austin, "How to do things with words," 177.

in incantations such as those in *The Munich Handbook*, a 15ᵗʰ century book of spells and home medical remedies.[50]

Jesus Christ the Exorcist

Jesus Christ is perhaps the most famous documented exorcist, until the King James Version of the Bible, many instances of the word "heal" were translated as "exorcise." Brian Levack examines Christ as an exorcist performing a ritual, and attributes around 50 cases of exorcism to Christ, or one of his disciples, as described in the *New Testament*.[51] At least five of Christ's specific exorcisms are quite detailed and appear in multiple books of the *New Testament.*[52] The line between Christ as a healer and as an exorcist are somewhat blurred, as the symptoms of the possessed in Christian Antiquity seem to be closer to illness than the descriptions of premodern possession that involve altered states of mind and uncommon or immoral behavior.[53] Still, the performative nature of the exorcism remains critical—its interpretation beyond that of a simple healing. Christ, through ritual actions such as prayer and

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[50] Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites,* 132. This example is taken from a conjuration incantation in *Book of Consecrations*.
[51] Levack, Possession and Exorcism in Christian Antiquity," 33.
[52] Ibid., 33-36.
[53] Ibid., 38.

touch, sets the stage for a more elaborate show. This is evidenced in one particular exorcism that may not have gone quite as planned for Christ, at least in the crowd's reception of the exorcism. Depending on the biblical source, the Pharacies, or an onlooker in the crowd, or the scribes initially misinterpreted Christ's actions as using the powers of the demon Beelzebub to expel the demon, rather than by divine exorcism.[54] This case shows how exorcism rituals relied not so much on the clarity of action as much as the performative effect on the crowd. The same act that Christ is praised for in other instances is called into question in this instance because of the reception of the performance of exorcism by skeptics in the crowd.

Richard Horsley excludes one of Christ's biblical exorcisms and focuses on the similarities of the remaining four. Despite his rejection of magical influence on these events, Horsley's regrouping of what constitutes Christ's biblical exorcisms offers new consistencies between the four instances to dispute Levack's claim that what Christ performed lacked consistent ritual practice could instead be labeled as healing.[55] In Horsley's grouping of Christ's

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[54] Levack, Possession and Exorcism in Christian Antiquity," 35-36.
[55] Horsley, "Illness and Possession, Healing and Exorcism," 94-104.

exorcisms, Christ always makes a gesture and pronounces a final performative utterance that completes the performance. The source of the healing is in the phenomenon of the actions and words of Christ.[56] Horsley admits the power of these events also lay in the public reception of them. Word had spread of Christ's prior exorcisms, and so later biblical instances of these events left Christ in front of a crowd with expectations. Past phenomena the crowd had either seen or heard about informed the current exorcism. The ritual of exorcism is seen as a performance that is definitely taking place outside the theatre, but is this truly a specific example of immersive performance? If the possessed individual was not part of any planning of this ritual, I would argue that the performance was immersive for the person being exorcised. For them, it is a performance that they are very much inside. The next example helps illuminate the immersive nature of exorcism.

The Judaizers in 4th Century Antioch

In the 4th century in Antioch, a number of Christians were participating in the Jewish High Holidays instead of

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[56] Horsley, "Illness and Possession, Healing and Exorcism," 105.

listening to Christian sermons. John Chrysostom's writings reflect the harsh reaction among 4th century Christian church leaders and more strict and devout followers to these offenders, called *Judaizers,* who were participating in these ceremonies. In this context, the influence of Judaism on Christians beliefs was seen as a demonic influence. Dayna Kalleres shows how Judaizers were seen as possessed Christians in need of exorcism.[57] Judaizers are a prime example that illustrates some of the immersive performance aspects of exorcism. Christians were encouraged to confront Judaizers in public battle or exorcism to deal with the mounting problem.[58] Chrysostom called for these confrontations specifically to be in full view, and for Christians to use aggressive ritual actions to bring offenders back to the church, and away from the seductive demons in the bodies of Jews that were causing this kind of behavior. Chrysostom prompts Christian believers to wield powers of exorcism to regain lost followers as a public performance that might have a wider effect on an audience in the streets of Antioch.[59] Dayna Kalleres asserts:

> Christians must continually seek proximity to
> diabolized Jews and Judaizers so that they can
> participate in public ritual confrontation; they

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[57] Kalleres, "The Spectacle of Exorcism," 87-88.
[58] Ibid., 88-89.
[59] Ibid., 93.

should perform an impromptu exorcism of sorts that dramatically marks and verbally displays an irrevocable boundary in Antioch between a divine Christianity and a demonic and diabolic Judaism. Only the closest of ritual contacts, preferably in public and with an avid audience in attendance, will succeed in marking this boundary.[60]

The performance is a dramatic struggle between the possessed and the exorcist, with growing tension back and forth between protagonist and antagonist, ultimately ending with the triumph of Christianity over evil demons. Not only is exorcism used as a carefully calibrated performance tool of the church for swaying the opinions of the public, it is done in a way that immerses the Judaizer unwillingly in a performance, one where the Judaizer is cast as possessed and in need of help. After a night of celebrating, a citizen of Antioch is on their way to work when suddenly, they are relocated into the center of a performance in a way they cannot escape. Regardless of the reaction of the one being exorcised, the performance will have the desired effect of positioning the Christian as holy and the Judaizer as demonically possessed, now restored to sanity and piousness. If they try to escape the performance, they may succeed physically, but metaphorically they will not.

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[60] Kalleres, "The Spectacle of Exorcism," 94.

They will be seen as demonically possessed and turning away from the church. We can see more clearly how exorcism is like immersive theatre in how it treats its audience. The audience is inside the world of this performance, in an unexpected space, with a drastically new perspective now being cast as demonically possessed in a performance that is inescapable in their Christian community until they complete it by being exorcised. In is a very unexpected position for the accused Judaizer. While the exorcists perform a very scripted ritual, both the onlookers and the Judaizer are an audience immersed in a performance world where they are situated to observe the performance of the exorcists from their respective perspectives as possessed and devout.

16th and 17th Century European Exorcism

Hobbes and Woolsten argue for a more metaphorical interpretation of biblical possession and exorcism during the reformation, while Catholics saw exorcism as one of many continued miracles Saints performed upon real demons invading the body.[61] John Darrel, in 1562, claims there is

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[61] Levack, "Possession and Exorcism in Christian Antiquity," 40-45.

no such thing as demonic possession, and calls for the Catholic church to cease recognizing possession as an affliction, and end the practice of exorcisms and other practices labeled as miracles.[62] "It is a shame to rehearse your fooleries," he says of priests preparing for exorcisms, specifically likening their preparations to that of a staged performance.[63]

An anonymous account of the trial over the possession of William Sommers gives further insight into the specific symptoms Sommers supposedly faked in order to give a believable performance of possession. This reveals some of the ideas concerning possession in late 16th century exorcisms, as well as some of the rituals and procedures used to expel the demon. Sommers admits that some of his actions were directed by Darrell, who defended Sommers during his trial, to include gnashing teeth, convulsions, strange postures, and drastic changes in voice quality, among others. However, the defense argues many of the phenomena described by the scribe in Sommers' possession would not be possible to plan out, such as Sommers' eyes changing colors, a large growth moving from his stomach up

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[62] Darrel, *The Replie of Iohn Darrell,* 1-20.
[63] Ibid., 17.

to his throat, and his eyes becoming completely black.[64] If Sommers is indeed a fake, then how is it possible the scribe noted the change in eye color, and the moving growth on the body?

Perhaps the scribe really did see these things, and Sommers was possessed by something supernatural, in which case it is an immersive performance positioning the demon as the spectator, but with consequences of exile for the demon at the end of the exorcism. It is possible that their perception projected these supernatural details because their past experiences primed them to see evil eyes of a demon turning completely black, though they were really only shadows and convincing acting on the part of Sommers. Or is it Sommers that is the audience, suffering some actual condition or not, and the performance itself has further convinced him he was possessed? We can see in this instance, that there can be multiple audiences and characters that are all immersed in the world of the phenomenon of possession and exorcism. It is difficult to derive "facts" from this account, because it is one of experience of the phenomenon. Neither side is sure if they are the performer or the audience.

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[64] *A Breife Narration of the Possession, Dispossession, and, Repossession of William Sommers*

Figure 5 "Illustration of a Demon being Cast Out of a Man by a Priest at an Altar"

Unknown artist, 17th Century Woodcut from England.

Figure 5 shows an anonymous 17th century illustration, which captures how exorcism inhabited the realms of magic, religion, and also immersive performance. Written incantations, candles, and presumably other ceremonial items adorn an altar. The priest approaches the possessed with holy water and the host. Onlookers flee, pray, and watch the exorcism. It takes two people to physically restrain the possessed individual. An inhuman, completely black demon with a tail is expelled from the mouth of the possessed. The reactions of the crowd to the exorcism are varied but each onlooker in the background is very affected by the performance. Who is the audience? Is it the fleeing onlookers frightened of the enactment of the battle of power between the good priest and the evil possessed subject? Or is it the confused man who is the audience, while the rest of the characters play the part of frightened Christians and the good priest? I would argue

that both are true in this event when viewed through the lens of immersive performance.

In her notable study, Hilaire Kallendorf analyzes the rhetoric used in exorcism incantations and argues that, as a linguistic tool, it effectively uses all the tools of classical rhetoric. Kallendorf identifies up to "five separate audiences in any given exorcism, three supernatural and two human, and each of these requires specific rhetorical strategies."[65] These are: the possessed, the witness, the demon, possibly the benevolent god, and possibly the malevolent god. In other words, exorcism is a set of dialogues and actions between performers and audiences that are said to heal problems of the supernatural. Looking at these examples of exorcism through a lens of immersive performance offers a different view of the effects of exorcism on its audience, and who its audience really is.

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[65] Kallendorf, "The Rhetoric of Exorcism," 209.

CHAPTER 5

THE BAT

My thesis production, *The Bat*, is an immersive performance that explores the ritual of exorcism. Beatriz a healer, is desperate to get to Toledo to seek out an important book. With no money and no way to travel respectably as a single woman in 17th century Spain, she has no choice but to team up with a business partner of questionable motives, Kameron Cruickson. She must use her knowledge of exorcism incantations and rituals as part of a con to pull the wool over the eyes of rich hypochondriac nobility who are convinced they are possessed. During one encounter, Beatriz becomes convinced that this particular lady of nobility, Doña Aimar, really is possessed, and Beatriz sets out to follow through with an authentic exorcism. Several failed attempts by Beatriz and Kameron to rid Doña Aimar of her demons leads to the discovery that they are con artists. Locked in the dungeon, Beatriz is able to reflect on the toxic nature of the relationship she has with Kameron and Doña Aimar. The manipulation and control they exert over her have all but possessed Beatriz as well. To get herself and Kameron out, she will have to exorcise more than just the demons inside Doña Aimar.

The Bat is an immersive performance, however due to unforeseen public gathering restrictions imposed because of the COVID-19 outbreak, the 2021 UNM production has been altered as direct audience interaction is not possible at this time. In the 2021 filmed production of *The Bat*, actors look directly into the camera to simulate the moments of connection with the audience. A fully immersive version of *The Bat* will be created by Quarantine Productions in Albuquerque at a later time to be determined based on the easing of public gathering restrictions.

Phenomenology in *The Bat*

In the fully immersive version to be produced, *The Bat* positions the audience on their feet, occupying the same space as the performers. The performance is removed from the space of the theatre and its conventions that might lead to unforeseen associations and connections with previous performances. There is no clear designation of space for the audience to sit or stand, though some furniture is present and they certainly could sit or stand almost anywhere. The performance encloses the audience within painted, set-like walls made of flats, the night sky is visible as the backdrop above. The audience is mostly

ignored by the actors who cross in between and around them, leaving them to observe. But throughout the play, a small amount of interaction between the performers and the spectators develops, and they slowly discover they are also a character in the performance, immersed in the same world as the performers. These moments start out as small moments of eye contact and direct address that is quickly interrupted by the action of the play. However as the play develops, audience might be directed to picking up or interacting with objects to play their role as demons in possessing the house, directed moments of the audience creating organic sounds like whistling or humming, finally building to moments where the audience is directed to chant to haunt Doña Aimar to leave.

Unlike some of the other immersive performances discussed above, the action is singularly focused in *The Bat*. Audience members have a free range of motion, but will watch the same scenes together. The story is linear, with action and dialogue between characters just like a traditional stage performance. Though the scenes are not all in chronological order, in between scene breaks the action is always forward moving. The free range of motion and perspective of the audience is similar to being able to walk around a play or a movie and view it from whatever

angle they prefer. Through some audience invitation and interaction, the actors will lead them around the space early on to help demonstrate the rules of play. Audience interaction is minimal, but at the end the performers become more acutely aware of the audience and the spectators become a much larger character in the story until the end. The actors test the "reality" of the audience occupying their space, inviting them to move around the space early on, while they are still experiencing the new rules of world of *The Bat*. To help the audience bracket past theatre experiences, they will be lightly guided to move around the space themselves early on, while also given freedom of choice as to where they stand or sit to observe the action. *Sleep No More* and *Quarantine: Phantasmagoria*, the audience are also aware of one another occupying the space. Masks will be given to the audience to help establish their presence in the world. The masks mark them as invisible and neutral *daimones*, Greek for "divine being" defining demons less as evil spirits and more as neutral beings with capacity for good and evil.

Upon entering the world of the play, the audience is not primed for a theatrical experience by the location or their relative positions to the actors. Their own masks physically alter their perception by restricting their

sight to a more focused area in front of them, as well as alter the perception of the rest of the audience. Actors will be masked as well, further blurring the distinction between the actors and spectators than in a traditional performance. Their constant movement throughout the space helps the audience experience the performance from a different perspective, and to have less influence from the moment before it as well. Changing the perspective shifts the frame and activates various external stimuli differently in the audience. The first experience of the performance is from the main door, but moments later everyone will crowd around the bed, then observe a secret conversation that might be missed if they did not change location. In these ways, immersive devices deployed in *The Bat* help the audience bracket past phenomena to have an experience of the performance less influenced by previous performances, and less influenced by an unchanging perspective imposed by the fixed frame of the proscenium.

Exorcism and Possession in *The Bat*

The Bat explores the concepts of duality, possession, and exorcism as performance. Beatriz and her unexpected business partner, Kameron Cruickson, are essentially

running an exorcism con for money. Beatriz needs money to get to Toledo, and Cruickson, a travelling con man, concocts this sort of deception for a living. Rich nobility suffering from difficult to cure medical conditions are their target. The performance of the exorcism they create has all the same markings of ritual as discussed in the examples in Chapter 4. Specific incantations are spoken, in conjunction with specific actions that complete the ritual. A specific book, bottle, and incantation are needed, not just any words or objects will do. They also add tricks of spectacle, banging shutters from outside, causing Doña Aimar to perceive it as supernatural activity. Beatriz releases a bat near the end of the ceremony, which in the dark room, is perceived as a demon flying throughout the space. Beatriz captures the "demon" bat, giving visual proof to the perception that the sickness is out of the possessed, and caught safely inside the bottle. Though their ritual is an invented one based on their past experiences and ideas about exorcism, with a bit of dramatic flair added, it has a placebo effect on one particular possessed lady of nobility who pays the pair of con exorcists, Doña Aimar. Books of magic, medical astrology, and demonic lore fill her chamber. The ritual does what it is supposed to do, either because of Doña

Aimar's superstitious beliefs, luck, or a bit of both, it is effective in temporarily curing her.

Doña Aimar's perception is that the ritual worked as planned. In the first scene, books of magic, medical astrology, and demonic lore fill Doña Aimar's chamber, her consciousness has primed her to accept and readily believe the actions the con exorcists perform based on her experience of past phenomena that have created a network of ideas and knowledge in her mind. The ritual of the fake exorcism works because it fits the world of facts Doña Aimar has created, her reality supports the phenomena she experienced to be efficacious in—at least temporarily— ridding her of demons because of her prior assumptions about the nature of demons, magic, and possession.

Conclusions

Phenomenology, and the concept of *frontality* in particular, are intimately related to the perceptions of the audience and actors in immersive theatre practices. Not every production demands a pure, essential experience completely free of preconceived notions. If the production is better served with audience recalling memories and their own experiences, repetition and similarity can be an

intentional and useful tool. The empirical world is one concerned with facts, while the world of phenomenological experiences is one concerned with essences. When performers and audience make a connection so primal that it brackets past experiences, the performer can channel the essence of what they are perceiving and enacting.

Audience and actors can benefit from changing their perceptions of each other by engaging in new practices that challenge repetition and similarity, to examine the way past experiences directly influence the present. Essential experience does not equate to more effective theatre or higher quality immersive performances, but immersive performance has unique potential when it repositions the audience inside of the world of the performance. If performance can be used as an instrument to help an audience bracket past experiences, immersive performance can be used as a tool to help bracket performance itself. Immersive performance creates an environment that helps audiences bracket their past experiences through the simple yet radical act of changing their point of view to one of the immersed inside, rather than from the outside looking in. What might seem like a simple shift in location or a change in appearance is actually a major act of controlling how something is perceived and framed. The frame, whether

it is the proscenium, the boundary where audience ends and performance begins, or line of darkness separating the stage from the house, is inseparable from the performance it frames. Changing the frame changes the performance, and subconsciously frees it from memory of performances that have shared similar frames.

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