

# History of sensory theatre



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## **What does sensory theatre mean to the modern audience?**

As one of the oldest art forms and as one of the primeval kinds of human expression, the nature of theatre is as varied across the continents as painting, pottery, sculpture or any of the classic art-forms. Each civilization, each society, each gathering of humankind has had its personal form of theatrical performance from street artists to court jesters to nomadic players. Many would say that this variety at the very core of theatrical achievement is what has permitted theatre to take such a respected and crucial part of our modern societies. Too often it is claimed that our present day lifestyles leave little time for abstract thinking and artistic appreciation or achievement. This is lamentable but thankfully not usually true. One need only observe the continuation of events such as the Welsh National Eisteddfod for hundreds of years to realize that the human desire and need for theatre will never diminish.

However, this is not to say that modern society has not changed theatre. It is only natural that artistic output should be modeled by the lifestyle surrounding it. After all, warlike civilizations such as the Vikings delighted in the narrating of age-old sagas whereas more enlightened peoples like the Ancient Greeks would draw inspiration from mythical dramas which detailed the flaws at the heart of humanity and their relationships with their gods, representing a search for elements greater than themselves.

However, we can take it as certain that the theatrical productions of the last fifty years have overwhelmingly been part of a resurgence of theatrical diversity. As the free market has made nations more accessible to each

other, a rise in interest for all sorts of artistic expression has been felt around the world. Herein, we shall focus on the analysis and comprehension of one of these. Sensory theatre, or at least the old meaning of the term, is not a new concept. At its very core, much of what constitutes theatre relies heavily on the senses, both those of the audience and that of the actors.

Nevertheless, at a time when our fast-paced lifestyle seems to reject anything out of the ordinary or which can be labeled as different, it is refreshing to feel that this resurgence has regenerated one of the truly great aspects of theatre, oft labeled as post-modernist but one which links so much of relatively recent artistic output across the boundaries of different art forms:

*' Post-modernity, in attacking the perceived elitist approach of Modernism, sought greater connection with broader audiences. This is often labelled ' accessibility' and is a central point of dispute in the question of the value of postmodern art. It has also embraced the mixing of words with art, collage and other movements in modernity, in an attempt to create more multiplicity of medium and message. Much of this centers on a shift of basic subject matter: postmodern artists regard the mass media as a fundamental subject for art, and use forms, tropes, and materials - such as banks of video monitors, found art, and depictions of media objects - as focal points for their art. Postmodernism's critical stance is interlinked with presenting new appraisals of previous works. As implied above the works of the " Dada" movement received greater attention, as did collagists such as Robert Rauschenberg, whose works were initially considered unimportant in the context of the modernism of the 1950s, but who, by the 1980s, began to be*

*seen as seminal. Post-modernism also elevated the importance of cinema in artistic discussions, placing it on a peer level with the other fine arts. This is both because of the blurring of distinctions between "high" and "low" forms, and because of the recognition that cinema represented the creation of simulacra which was later duplicated in the other arts.'* (Wikipedia, 2005)

In this dissertation, we shall be analyzing aspects of sensory theatre as has been explored and toyed with by some great artisans of the craft. Despite any problems we have with wholesale rejection of this type of theatre, in the interest of fair-minded and complete research, we shall pay due attention to the Aristotelian school of thought. That which claims that theatre is a particular type of experience, one from which the audience member should feel cleansed and have learnt a lesson. This is a valid point of view, one which we shall thoroughly explore in order to see if it is indeed more artistically justifiable than sensory theatre.

After exploring Aristotle's opinions, we shall look in further depth at the nature of sensory theatre. What does this term mean? How is each sense tapped? Can the melding of experiences of several senses which are simultaneously stimulated provide an elevating experience? For this exploration, we shall use the case study of *Dwr* (water in Welsh), a sensory piece of theatre put on in 2003, using water, light and various materials to explore reactions amongst its audience. The reasons for using this play are that it was an audiovisual experience as well as a mere theatrical one as projections and cameras were an integral part of the performance.

Furthermore, the sensory effect of the audience can be better analyzed as

members of the audience were also used in the play, their reactions helping to define the type of sensory experience.

However, *Dwr* also gives us a good example of Brechtian theatre for the number of levels the play takes on. The actors themselves act as facilitators for the audience to receive personal sensory experiences. With only a minority of audience members taking part in the play, we can gain two further levels of emotional depth and complexity. The general background of the audience will see their emotions and senses assailed by the movements, gestures and decisions of those taking part while this minority will be subjected to sensory input and emit feedback with no room for forethought or planning ahead.

Thus, we shall provide a very definite and interesting example to back up any clear defining of sensory theatre we come to. We shall also look at how *Dwr* fits into the patterns of sensory theatre created by Brecht and Artaud and how its attitude towards its audience defines this multi-tiered theatre as one of the crucial points of sensory theatre.

However, no analysis of sensory theatre without detailed research into the works of pioneers of the genre. Here, we have chosen to look at Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud, each for specific reasons. Brecht's attitude, utterly in conflict with the age-old Aristotelian views of theatre, helped build his reputation as an *agitateur* who decided to stamp his own distinctive mark upon an art form he viewed as static. Thus, the habits of Brechtian theatre of total acknowledgement of the audience caused as much mirth as it did anger. On the other hand, Artaud provided his audience with a completely

integrated experience. By using sensory theatre to deny audience members their usual right to involve themselves in a performance to a degree of their choice, Artaud made sure his plays would deeply shock his audiences. We will be exploring Artaud's techniques as well as his reasons for providing this kind of theatre.

It is the goal of this dissertation to highlight the differences that make sensory theatre an integral genre of its own, containing so many outlets for creativity, expression and emotional impact as to make it not only an interesting part of theatre but an essential one. Its recent resurgence will thus provide us with an ideal platform from which to assess its meaning to a modern audience.

#### The Aristotelian view of theatrical norms

Good oratory can blow the walls off brick buildings. Not just in the real world of political speeches or rallies but in the arts as well. As one of the only forms of human expression where no point of view is unheard, no eventuality unconsidered, no leaf left unturned, theatre has throughout its history naturally overthrown and shrugged off any shackles or conventions attached to it. This idea could give rise to an impression of mayhem and anarchy in an art form that had runaway with its own importance. As one of the leading figures in the history of literature, Aristotle's views on the nature and importance of theatre are well-documented and naturally thought of as still relevant today.

*' Aristotle had the very human characteristic of harking back to the good old days, and thinking them much better than the days in which he lived. Taking*

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*scant account of Aeschylus, he regarded Sophocles and Euripides as models in tragedy. His chief complaints were that the poets of his own time spoiled their work by rhetorical display; that the actor was often of more importance than the play; and that the poets tampered with the plot in order to give a favorite actor an opportunity of displaying his special talent. He said that the poets were deficient in the power of portraying character, and that it was not even fair to compare them with the giants of the former era.'*

(Fletcher Bellinger, pp. 61, 1967)

However, in the matter of sensory theatre, we run into an area of some problems. Being of a conservative mind-set which appreciated theatre for the moral lessons contained within the narrative, Aristotle worshipped Sophocles with his straight and narrow approach to theatrical drama whilst eschewing the work of his contemporaries as being too popular, too watered down to meet the needs of a public desirous of less preaching and more fun within the theatre.

Aristotle possessed perhaps what could be interpreted as a rather narrow view in that he saw tragedy as the greatest form of dramatic expression, almost utterly passing off on comedy as mere fluff as compared to tragedy with the great lessons contained within it. Furthermore, Aristotle also considered tragedy to be magnificent when it also contained a clear and well constructed narrative framework and mythological references to the deeds of greater men and gods in a nobler past. Although Aristotle's writings on these topics did make a lot of sense, they are considered somewhat restrictive and far too imbued with their own authority to be seen as of much use today.

After all, in a society where the possibilities of theatre are slowly catching up

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with those of television or cinema as directors, playwrights and stage designers are always exploring new avenues of performance, Aristotle's three unities of time, place and action seem ready to be retired. Their far-too stringent requirements of both cast and crew make them almost impossible to operate in the modern world of free theatre.

This is no longer a society where the writings of one man, whoever he may be, carry enough influence to truly make as significant an impact as in Ancient Greece. It is not to say that Aristotle should be disregarded but concerning sensory theatre, rules relating how plot should be more important than character and how all the action in a tragedy should be centered around a personage of importance to better capture the attention of a fickle audience seem slightly moot. Its relevance is in the fact that much of what is known of theatrical conventions among a lay audience is heavily based on Ancient Greek theatrical philosophy, particularly Aristotle. It is precisely this philosophy that sensory theatre will have to overcome in order to claim its place as a rightful and deserving genre of theatrical achievement across the globe.

Visual, auditory, tactile *Dwr*

Choosing an example to illustrate the nature of sensory theatre is a tricky balancing act as one must therefore, in some way at least, pre-define one's understanding of the genre. How do we choose between the senses? After all, since the name of sensory theatre does not make any kind of distinction, do we consider the senses of sight and hearing more important than the other three since they are overwhelmingly the most stimulated in matters of



theatre? A distinction such as this would make sense certainly but since sensory theatre is often seen as standing alone from usual theatre, perhaps it would be unfair to appraise it thanks to assumptions based on more conventional modes of theatre. Instead, the best way to gain a true idea of sensory theatre's range of potential impacts would be to base an example upon several criteria. Firstly, although it would be somewhat over-expectant to try and find a play which could tap all five of our senses, several attempts at sensory theatre have successfully engaged audiences on three senses, if not four. Herein has been chosen *Dwr*, a Welsh piece put on in 2003 in Aberystwyth and then broadcast on S4C on the arts programme, *Croma*.

This set-up of the piece was simple. The audience were seated on one side of the stage on a raised-up area, overlooking a long perpendicular dinner table. The inside of the table, rather than being an ordinary flat surface, had been hollowed in order to form a shallow pool about six inches deep along the table's entire length. The pool was filled with a level amount of clear water at the bottom of which a table had been set ready for dinner, complete with plates, cutlery, glasses and napkins. Above the audience, shining down upon the table was a strong projector which reflected the pool of water onto a back projection screen in a way which magnified and increased the shadows cast by any ripples in the water. Six audience members were asked to be seated at the table, as if for dinner before being submitted to a range of experiences by the actors whilst cameras recorded their reactions. These sensory experiments all involved stimulation of an audience member in matters of sight, sound, taste or feeling. We shall look at the manner in which each of these senses was tapped as well as *Dwr*'s technical set-up.

First of all, if one were to ask any theatre-goers, it would be certain that even the most intermittent of these would claim the two most stimulated senses in the theatre are that of sight and hearing. Whilst conventional thinking would allow this to be true, a cynical perspective would add that since our backs are to the stage, depending on posture, contribute much to the enjoyment of a theatrical performance three senses, not two, must all be satisfied for a performance to be considered praise-worthy. After all, although stage design is an oft-forgotten art among those who are not privileged to the inner workings of theatre, the choice of venue often signifies how an audience will feel during the performance. Stage design is often considered only in terms of sets, props and technical apparatus whilst the idea of crowd comfort is often overlooked.

In the case of *Dwr*, the crowd comfort was adequate but the truly interesting phenomenon for the audience of this play was that their peers were submitted to the action contained within it. The stage design was such that the light poured onto the water was bright enough to cause the right amount of shadow reflection whilst not blinding either the audience or the actors. This careful use of projection in order to achieve the desired effect was a technique made famous by Josef Svoboda who pioneered the use of audiovisual projection in theatre to enhance the general experience. The stimulation capabilities of a performance, when combined with camera and sound equipment, is vastly heightened thus cementing Svoboda as one of the great names of sensory theatre.

As far as the audience members who became a part of the performance itself, the senses stimulated were done so in a way which gave every sense

the time to fully absorb the impact of its experience. First of all, each audience member was seated at the table in the guise of a dinner guest but asked not to talk to each other or carry out any action except if indicated to do so by one of the surrounding cast. First of all, each dinner guest was asked to remove their shoes and socks before climbing onto the table into the water. The stage itself was kept at a warm temperature in contrast to the cold water, making the change in surroundings quite drastic. Then, the audience member was asked to burst a plastic bag full of water with a long hooked pole. The water would thus drop onto the audience member along with a fake plaster egg.

The audience member would then be led back to their seat, given a towel to dry off before being given two chopsticks. After breaking the egg on the side of the table, the contents would then be spilt onto the plate just below the surface of the water. Each egg contained some food coloring, spreading across the table along with the ripples, along with a small piece of paper. Each piece of paper showed the face of a man, wearing different emotions, whilst a brief poem on the back seemed to explain the expression, a poem that would be read by one of the surrounding cast to the relevant audience member. The relationship between the pictures and the poems may not have been immediately obvious but the reactions of the audience members were still assured to be both personal, if not natural due to unusual surroundings and odd experiences.

These reactions were filmed by the technical crew on video cameras, adding another level of complexity to the performance as the traditional boundaries between cast and crew become blurred. Furthermore, *Dwr*'s entire

performance was played out under a constantly shifting pattern of music which although always instrumental would speed up in tone or gently slow down in function of events happening in the play.

The purpose of using *Dwr* as an illustration of the modern applications of sensory theatre and its meaning to a present-day audience is threefold. First of all, the timing of the piece and its broadcasting on a national channel along with subsequent interviews with the chosen audience members proves the interest placed in it by a major broadcaster as the BBC has major impact upon S4C scheduling. Secondly, the sensual experience of the show provided a fascinating outlet for the audience members, both for those who took an active part or a passive part, to find out more about what constitutes modern sensory theatre.

Although the audience numbers for this show were relatively small and thus can only provide us with a minor cross-section of theatre-goers, the positive feedback gained at the end during the interviews can give a lot of hope as to the future of sensory theatre. Finally, to use an example such as *Dwr* gives us a view as to what kind of reaction this genre of theatre would meet with. *Dwr* covers a broad base of sensory theatre as its performance, not only stimulating several of the senses themselves, dealt with a range of theatrical theories and ideologies which we shall look at in further detail. By separating audience members from each other, creating many layers of reality between crew and cast, audience and cast and audience and crew, *Dwr* rejected many traditional aspects of theatrical performance.

However, by engaging its audience/cast members with an individual experience through the messages contained within the eggshells and filming their response, *Dwr* could be said to have engaged with a more conservative Aristotelian version of theatre. Each audience member not involved with the show directly as a dinner guest will have experience the play as a visual and auditive experience but it is for the six members of the audience at each performance that *Dwr* transcended the limits of ordinary theatre and became a emotional and sensory journey felt by each in their own individual way.

Below, we will be casting an eye at the ways in which theatrical pioneers such as Brecht and Artaud tackled the rigours and the conventions of an art form that they viewed as being a free form, lacking in any structural restrictions. Before doing so, we can still observe that even if *Dwr* did pander even the slightest bit towards an Aristotelian theatre, the main body of its performance was firmly in the territory of Artaud as we can see when applying this passage to precisely the type of theatre *Dwr* tries to avoid.

*' If people are out of the habit of going to the theater, if we have all finally come to think of theater as an inferior art, a means of popular distraction, and to use it as an outlet for our worst instincts, it is because we have learned too well what the theater has been, namely, falsehood and illusion. It is because we have been accustomed for four hundred years, that is since the Renaissance, to a purely descriptive and narrative theater - storytelling psychology; it is because every possible ingenuity has been exerted in bringing to life on the stage plausible but detached beings, with the spectacle on one side, the public on the other - and because the public is no longer shown anything but the mirror of itself. Shakespeare himself is responsible*

*for this aberration and decline, this disinterested idea of the theater which wishes a theatrical performance to leave the public intact, without setting off one image that will shake the organism to its foundations and leave an ineffaceable scar. If, in Shakespeare, man is sometimes preoccupied with what transcends him, it is always in order to determine the ultimate consequences of this preoccupation within him, i. e., psychology.' (Artaud, No More Masterpieces, 1976)*

Even such divides as between audience and actors, theatrical conventions that are so habitual as to often be altogether forgotten, were not sacrosanct enough for directors, playwrights and actors such as Brecht, Artaud and Svoboda.

The Brechtian impact or the alienation of theatrical tradition

Earlier in this dissertation, it was suggested that Aristotle's views on theatre and subsequent impact thereon had diminished somewhat with the dawn of a time where the philosophies of the Ancient Greeks mattered little. However, the centuries that his views transcended have signified that they could not dissipate so quickly. Many modern opinions on theatre, however avant-garde or post-modernist they wish or claim to be, are still formed largely on the back of the opinions of men such as Aristotle. However, this obstacle would be taken to piece by men and women like Brecht, who wished not to merely co-exist with existing views but confront their defenders and destroy the ideological entrenchment that many theatre critics had resorted to in the face of the changes sweeping through their beloved art form.

*'In his early plays, Brecht experimented with dada and expressionism, but in his later work, he developed a style more suited his own unique vision. He detested the "Aristotelian" drama and its attempts to lure the spectator into a kind of trance-like state, a total identification with the hero to the point of complete self-oblivion, resulting in feelings of terror and pity and, ultimately, an emotional catharsis. He didn't want his audience to feel emotions—he wanted them to think—and towards this end, he determined to destroy the theatrical illusion, and, thus, that dull trance-like state he so despised. The result of Brecht's research was a technique known as "verfremdungseffekt" or the "alienation effect". It was designed to encourage the audience to retain their critical detachment.'* (Imagination, 2003)

This is not to say though that to achieve such an accomplishment was possible formerly any theatrical commentator. It took men of special gumption, gravitas and guts to dare attack such a powerful establishment as that of traditional theatre. Bertolt Brecht was one of these. Blessed with the ability to fight battles on several fronts whilst still maintaining a clear head, Brecht began to cause controversy early on in his career. Looking to fulfill a desire for more relevant and modern theatre amongst German theatre-going audiences, Brecht, through plays such as *Drums in the Night* and with the recognition of director Erich Engel, flirted with an expressionistic style that befitted his rising status but left Brecht himself feeling uncomfortable. Although his style was becoming fashionable and it would undoubtedly have brought him his time in the spotlight, Brecht felt that he should discover a playwriting identity which was his own and not borrowed from anybody else. If we consider that at this time Brecht was writing in post World War I

Germany, we can observe the bravery it must have taken for him to make this type of decision.

During the turbulent years of the socialist rise in Germany and the Weimar Republic, Brecht knew a modest amount of success in both theatre and literature thanks to plays such as *In the Jungle of the Cities* and his partnership with Engel and Hans Eisler but he was only just beginning to find his feet in a style all of his own. The final step in this direction would be his years with his own collective of writers, the most famous fruit of which would be the *Lehrstücke* which would form the root of the theatrical changes and theories we think of as Brechtian today. *Lehrstücke* propounded that passive audiences were a thing of the past in matters of theatre and that it was necessary for audiences to become more actively involved in a performance whilst keeping a strong level of emotional distance in order to remain capable of rational thought and criticism. This collection of thoughts would slowly pass into common practice in theatrical troupes and communities around the world, a practice known as 'epic theatre'.

Epic theatre today may seem as historical and passé as Aristotle's views did for Brecht but the truth is that the numerous and varied adaptations of epic theatre have formed much of today's common theatrical practices. Before Brecht, the demarcation between the audience and the actors was sacrosanct. Since Aristotle, the status of the star actor had risen so much that now actors would merely be cast in a role that was known to be in their repertoire, a fact which could lead to truly spectacular levels of diva treatment or ridiculous castings. Take for example Sarah Bernhardt whose notoriety had reached such proportions that she cast herself as Hamlet. This

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is not to say there is anything wrong with female actors playing traditionally male Shakespearean parts but it is the manner in which Bernhardt carried out this casting that made the situation ridiculous. Aristotle lamented this type of situation as being one of the great plagues striking tragedy theatre whilst Brecht merely laughed at it and lambasted it in his own style.

His patented *Verfremdungseffekt* (or estrangement effect) was a sweepingly original style which not only acknowledged the audience as a part of a theatrical production and encouraged them to change their own attitudes to theatre. Instead of allowing traditional suspension of disbelief and letting audiences feel as if they were watching a truthful event, Brecht went out of his way to remind them that what they saw was a representation, a mirror onto reality and never reality itself. This was carried out by having actors suddenly break character and address the audience to explain the plot, grossly over-exaggerated props or sets in the middle of an otherwise serious play or great placards on the stage asking the audience to behave in a certain way by ignoring a particular happening or to stare less romantically. These unusual situations for an audience confused them and alienated them from the play, hence the name alienation or estrangement effect. This separation from conventional theatrical theory became very fashionable after the war in both America where he lived until being pestered by HUAC and in communist East Germany where he resided until his death in 1953. The appeal of Brecht's type of theatre across the globe speaks volumes about how the traditions of theatre were rejected by a large section of theatre-going audiences.

The sensory feel of the *Verfremdungseffekt* were indirect but by creating this new separation of audience and stage in an allegorical as well as in a physical sense, Brechtian theatre enabled its audiences and directors to experiment with new sensations. The greatest example of this is in some of Brecht's later plays such as *The Good Person of Szechwan* and *Galileo*. For example, in *Galileo*, the portrait he paints of the astronomer is of a tortured soul wracked between his scientific duty to tell the truth to an unsuspecting world and the threat of vengeance from the dark figure of the Grand Inquisitor. This moral dilemma was planned by Brecht as a way to get his audience to think rationally about the situation and contemplate what they would do in such a situation rather than feeling sorry for Galileo.

However, if Brecht had one failing, it was that despite his ability to meld together a myriad of sources into a convincing single narrative, he did not understand the human nature of his public. Persuaded that with the right play, he could force his audience into abandoning their emotional side, whether he realized it or not Brecht was asking people to set aside the precise reason most of them came to the theatre.

*His theories resulted in a number of " epic" dramas, among them Mother Courage and Her Children which tells the story of a travelling merchant who earns her living by following the Swedish and Imperial armies with her covered wagon and selling them supplies: clothing, food, brandy, etc... As the war grows heated, Mother Courage finds that this profession has put her and her children in danger, but the old woman doggedly refuses to give up her wagon. Mother Courage and Her Children was both a triumph and a failure for Brecht. Although the play was a great success, he never managed*

*to achieve in his audience the unemotional, analytical response he desired. Audiences never fail to be moved by the plight of the stubborn old woman.*  
(Imagi-nation, 2003)

An emotional journey where characters could and should be empathized with or condemned was much of what has always constituted theatre's engagement. Even the averagely smart and aware audience member does not need the moral absolutes of right and wrong as claimed by Aristotle but the desire to identify with one or more of the central characters instead of merely rationalizing about their fates without feeling was too strong in the vast majority of theatre-goers.

Brecht is claimed doubly to be both a modernist or one of the first post-modernists. Although some claims have been made that a taste for his kind of theatre quickly inspires in the face of so much cynicism, his importance and the size of his impact upon world theatre cannot be underplayed. Today, many of his conventions are so common as to be taken for granted whilst a collective of ' Brechtians' still operates and remains as long-standing proof to the glory of his genius.

Conventional relief in theatre and Artaud's rejection of it

Every generation is locked in a perpetual struggle with those that come both before and after to break free from the shackles of their ancestral traditions, carve their own identity and thus prepare the way for a similar fight with the generations that are to follow. Although social mores may seem to remain still and constant, this is only an illusion, one that can only too easily be pierced by artistic expression. Artists have often been marginalized as

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second-rate members of society, ones that are not indispensable to the everyday running of our lives. Seen as not producing useful since all their efforts did not feed, clothe or warm anybody, it became a painful reality that if actors or musicians wanted to survive, they were required to curtail any creativity and pander to precisely what their audiences desired.

While this unfortunate turn of events could be passed off as a mere passage in the history of theatre, it left behind some highly tell-tale signs. The simplest of these is that from the Renaissance onward through the Classical period, theatre had become significant with escapism. The majority of plays, and here one cannot deny Aristotle's continuing influence, harked back to former days lamenting a fallen age of glory, honour and noble deeds. Whilst this fond reminiscing was unimpeachable in its desire to awaken a better side of humanity in audiences, it often met with boredom and