

**CROSSING PLACES AND AFFECTIVE MOMENTS:
DISCLOSING THE POSSIBILITIES OF BEING THERE**

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Abstract:

This paper will use a phenomenological lens to explore audience experience in contemporary performance through an examination of two recent (and very different) productions – Romantika Theatre’s *The Crossing Place* (2017) and Ridiculusmus’ *Beautiful People* (2022). I will use these two productions as case-studies to explore the phenomenological experience of *being there*.

Building on extant Performance Studies scholarship that has worked over the past decades to situate spectators as co-creators of meaning, I will explore how audiences within these productions find themselves emerging out of the cracks and disorientations of theatrical spaces. This follows Hans-Thies Lehmann’s ground-breaking concept of postdramatic theatre as a form of performance which moves beyond the conceit of mimetic representation,

organised by coherence, to a space where ‘spectators encounter the theatre as just that – theatre’ (Boyle et al. 2019: 2).

In this presentation I will explore the imbrication of the spectator relationship in terms of the openness of these two performance encounters. This will enable me to develop an understanding of contemporary theatre practice as a specific form of mediation in its dual sense: as both a procedure of affective operations and a process of continual re-creation.

References:

Boyle, Michael Shane et al., *Postdramatic Theatre and Form*. (London: Methuen Drama: 2019).

Miguel T. Santos is a Masters by Research student in English at the University of Kent. His main research centres around 20th century British and American experimental poetry, considering the readerly relationship in relation to the disruptive aesthetics of modernist and contemporary writing. More broadly, Miguel is interested in the affective experience of engaging with experimental texts and theatre, drawing on his background in Theatre Studies.

Crossing Places and Affective Moments:

Disclosing the Possibilities of Being There

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Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Miguel. Firstly, thank you all for listening to my presentation on the audience's phenomenal experience in experimental performance. I would like to thank the convenors, Kirsty and Kate¹, for allowing me the opportunity to speak today.

Outline

1. Experimental theatre offering spaces that facilitate moments of intimacy with audience experience
2. 'The Crossing Place' (2017) by Romantika as a nondiscursive engagement with language
3. 'Beautiful People' (2022) by Ridiculusmus as an engagement with materiality of the body
4. Conclusion

¹ Dr Kirsty Sedgman and Dr Kate Holmes

This paper focuses on two performances: *The Crossing Place* (2017) by *Romantika* and *Beautiful People* (2022)² by *Ridiculusmus*. My presentation is about how experimental theatre, more broadly, facilitates intimacy between audience and performance. I argue that *The Crossing Place* and *Beautiful People* create spaces that are germane to co-creating the audience experience. Because I am approaching this from my background in Literature, I am interested in how the experience is intimate through the materiality of language, in the cracks and disorientations of these performances. However, as I will discuss with my second case study, *Beautiful People*, we may unpack what happens when the audience experience becomes *too* intimate to the performance.

The first production I have chosen, *The Crossing Place*, discloses spaces by which we as audience members may actively engage with the performance in a process of co-creation through language. Premiering at the 2017 Edinburgh Fringe, this is an abstract physical theatre piece exploring loneliness and anxiety using the poetry of the Swedish Nobel Prize winner Tomas Tranströmer.³ Drawing from his poems, the performance naturally takes on an ekphrastic nature. There also seemed to me a sense in which this performance negotiated the dialectics between the audience and the production in a way that *disclosed* the affective phenomenological experience of ‘being’ as a form of connection. The intricately imagistic nature of the production opens up interstices by which we as audience members may actively engage with the performance through acts of imagination.

² The performance was originally titled ‘Die! Die! Die! Old People Die!’ when it premiered in 2019. Its title was changed to ‘Beautiful People’ in 2022.

³ Romantika Theatre, ‘*The Crossing Place*’ Interview – *Edinburgh Fringe Festival* (November, 2017) *YouTube* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlFAvQ8QoZM>> [accessed 13 June 2023].

‘THE CROSSING PLACE’, Romantika (2017) Based on poetry of Tomas Tranströmer



Johan Bark, *Interview with online news channel TV021 about 'The Crossing Place'*, YouTube, 26 November 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKST_TWLqmc> [accessed 12 June 2023].

The unborn forest quietly waits.

I get the idea that this street can see me.
Its sight is so dim that the sun itself
Is a grey ball in a black space.
But right now I am shining. The street sees
me.

Tomas Tranströmer, 'The Crossing Place', trans. by Robin
Fulton, *InwardBound Poetry*
<<http://inwardboundpoetry.blogspot.com/2008/04/640-crossing-place-tomas-transtrmer.html>> [accessed 13
June 2023].


To illustrate, take this brief scene from the production, with Tranströmer's text alongside.⁴ Turning to the poem here, the poem's speaker is carried to the boundaries of being seen, an act that is at once illuminating and liminal – 'But right now I am shining.' Significantly, the following line 'the street sees me' is rendered as a passive, rather than active, action, where the speaker is 'seen by' the street. I would suggest this action of being seen captures the objective of the performance. We as audience members find ourselves at once entranced by the elusiveness of the language and the imagery in performance and yet simultaneously drawn into the imaginative space that the subjectivity of experience discloses for us.

⁴ 'The Crossing Place', *InwardBound Poetry*, Trans. by Robin Fulton
<<http://inwardboundpoetry.blogspot.com/2008/04/640-crossing-place-tomas-transtrmer.html>>
[accessed 13 June 2023].

Tranströmer's Ars Poetica

1. 'My poems are meeting-places of antinomies [...where] human beings are the prism between aspects of reality that conventional language ordinarily keeps apart' (quoted in Flood and Lea 2011).

2. Two truths approach each other. One comes from inside, the other from outside, and where they meet we have a chance to catch *sight* of ourselves' (Tranströmer 1978: 38).



This subjectivity is what Tomas Tranströmer refers to, as he conceived of his poems as 'meeting-places of antinomies [...where] human beings are the prism between aspects of reality that conventional language ordinarily keeps apart'.⁵ This sounds obscurant, but there is something crucial at stake here: That is, the sense of uncovering, or disclosing, a subjective consciousness beyond the confines of linguistic structures.

Above all, it is this turn *inwards* into the imagery of oneiric dreams, vast spaces, and the self unfettered by ties to the modern world of structures, through Tomas Tranströmer's poetry, that fascinated me most. Rather than shunning language completely, I posit that *The Crossing Place* offers a space where the shocks of language and experience can occur and reverberate, in the minds of the audience. Tranströmer himself articulates this point beautifully: 'Two truths approach each other. One comes from inside, the other from outside, and where they

⁵ Alison Flood and Richard Lea, 'Nobel Prize for Literature Goes to Tomas Tranströmer', *The Guardian* (October, 2011) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/06/nobel-prize-literature-tomas-transtromer>> [accessed 15 June 2023].

meet we have a chance to catch *sight* of ourselves'.⁶ As these words convey, it is at this liminal space – this crossing place, if I may – between language and experience, where we can see ourselves more clearly.⁷ As a threshold, it is a space where the essence of language is manifest, not with communication and verbal expression, but with imaginative and perceptive reflection.

'The Crossing Place' (2017)



Martin Bohm Photography,
Romantika's The Crossing Place,
2017, online photograph, Facebook
<<https://www.facebook.com/RomantikaTheatre/photos/pb.100063560023132.-2207520000./1721773884780117/?type=3>> [accessed 14 June 2023].

With the performance's scenography portraying a blank, indeterminate space scattered with bin bags, the space, devoid of any particularised signs that would infer a defined locus, emerges as a limbo – resonating with Samuel Beckett's 'Endgame'.⁸ Devoid of signs, there is a deliberate *absence* in reading the space. The empty scenography makes recourse to the materiality of the language as a meaning-making mechanism. Without any narrative to the poems that may solicit a defined plot or characters, there is, I would suggest, a turn from

⁶ 'Truth Barriers', repr. in *The Half-Finished Heaven: The Best Poems of Tomas Tranströmer*, Trans. By Robert Bly (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1978), p. 38.

⁷ This has further resonances with the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the method of phenomenological 'reduction'; that is, in a more immediate disclosure of 'being in the world' that aims at this experience of catching sight of ourselves. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', in *Sense and Non-Sense* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

⁸ Beckett, Samuel, *Endgame* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 5. *Endgame* is similarly set in a bare interior, with only windows and dustbins around the stage.

making sense of the performance presented before us – a seemingly random physical realm of broken gestures and relations – to the materiality of the language *in extremis*. The focus lies not to language’s ability to communicate or proffer any meaning, but to express the vicissitudes of the self and being. Articulating this view, the materiality of language proves to be a fundamental threshold where we are, in Tranströmer’s words, ‘carried upward into the depths’, provoked by the performance world.⁹

For the audience on this working group on audience experience, I imagine the question naturally arises when the act of connection becomes too intimate to the audience’s experiences. Certainly, while *The Crossing Place* benefited from a lack of signifiers that determined any significant relationality with the characters, my second case study, *Beautiful People* complicates the notion of a collective shared experience.

‘BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE’, *Ridiculusmus* (2022)



Originally titled much more provocatively:
‘Die! Die! Die! Old People Die!’

British Council Arts, Edinburgh Showcase 2019: ‘Die! Die! Die! Old People Die!’ by *Ridiculusmus*, YouTube, 16 July 2019
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-Spz3P_3jg> [accessed 14 June 2023].

Originally titled the much more provocative ‘Die! Die! Die! Old People Die!’, the play is described by theatre makers, *Ridiculusmus*, as a ‘supernaturalistic theatre’, featuring an

⁹ ‘Truth Barriers’, p. 78.

elderly couple in their 120s.¹⁰ A cross between Beckettian absurdism and physical farce, the play is an exploration of the senescence of age and grief. In as much the same way as *The Crossing Place*, *Beautiful People* operates on this phenomenological experience of affect to resist the discourses structuring reality. For instance, we may examine the opening scene.

The elderly couple decrepity shuffle across the stage to sit down on an antique chair and table at the centre stage with the relentless sound of the clock ticking looming over them. In an after-show discussion with the artistic directors, this crossing across the stage to the table can take from five to ten minutes depending on the size of the stage, and a further five minutes to sit down. As they approach sitting down, the performers contort, suspending themselves in excruciating positions before addressing the audience.

'BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE'



Ibid.

The man, Norman, faces the audience to welcome us as guests for an apparent event before the woman, Violet, croaks, 'Lovely, all beautiful talented people. Lovely.' This moment sets the tone as an invitation to the audience, in my view, facilitating a sense of intimacy and community, placing the audience close to the characters. The collective shared experience I


¹⁰ British Council Arts, *Edinburgh Showcase 2019: 'Die! Die! Die! Old People Die!' by Ridiculusmus* (July, 2019) *YouTube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-Spz3P_3jg> [accessed 14 June 2023].

had as an audience in *Beautiful People* included an uncertain laughter, as the defamiliarising effect of slow motion accentuated the smallest movement. While the actions themselves, such as sitting down in a chair, are mundane, the interpretative gaze afforded by the slow motion rendered them absurd. In this instance, laughter acts as a collective manifestation of experience to reflect on the shared invitation to destigmatise the negative attitudes around the ageing body and death itself.

However, it would be reductive and simplistic not to interrogate the power relations involved in thinking about audience experience. Drawing on my experience of the play, I will note that the vast majority of the audience was composed of an older age group in their 60s upwards. Before the play began, the older couple beside me remarked that they were excited, as they felt this play was for them and a tribute to their experiences with ageing and grief; after the play, they, along with several others, complained that they felt uncomfortable. Despite the production intending to be a celebration of death, age, and grief as normal parts of life, the older audience members felt the performance was instead mocking them. I would say that this was due to the proximity with which the performance was intimate with their personal experiences. For instance, the play began with the male performer in character from the moment we entered the theatre, before the production properly began, blurring the boundaries that separated real life from the locus of the stage world. Invoking too much intimacy in the audience, this enjoined the audience's interpretative gaze to empathy and identification with the characters as real people, rather than seeing the characters as exaggerated personae.

Conclusions

- Emergence of the subjective consciousness out of the cracks and disorientations enables an interpretative rebirth
- Act of interpretation in performance affords moments of co-creation



This paper argues that this was a case in which the performance was *too* intimate with the audience's experience. Perhaps, then, identification restricted the means that encouraged the collaborative effort between audience and performance. Rather than this performance celebrating age and showcasing subjects like sex in older adults, the identification provoked by the performance limited the interstices between the real world and the locus of the stage world.

Like *The Crossing Place*, then *Beautiful People* maintains a view that all participants give form to this world. By this means, the act of perceiving performance and engaging in performance is in itself a radical act, one that rewrites the text and experience mediated through the performance. In this collaborative effort between audience and performance, participants are plunged and hailed into the phenomenal experience – the folds and the flows, the cracks and the cogs, the interstices and the disclosures, in the subjective perception of theatre.

Word Count (Excluding Footnotes): 1508

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