

**Postdramatic Performance and Audience
Participation in Thornton Wilders
selected Plays**

By

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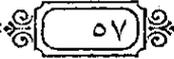
It is no secret that printed plays have been a part of the literary tradition and that the text has been the backbone of all plays and masterpieces throughout history. Theatre, over the ages, was mainly based on the written text. Performers were just loud-voice- readers; they focused only on how to read and transmit the text to the audience.

The emancipation of the performance from the text is the central interest of the postdramatic. Regarding performance, Craig assured that the term "postdramatic" could be applied to performances that "are created without any pre-existing text".¹ One of the central aspects of the postdramatic theater is to integrate the postdramatic with the theatrical deconstruction of the classic texts. When it is said that the postdramatic theater excludes itself from the traditional classic texts, this doesn't mean that they don't have a text, but they have a performative text.² This kind of text is created during the performance. The involvement and participation of the audience is a significant feature of this theatre. Lehmann indicates that postdramatic theater is called postdramatic not because it ignores mimesis and literary text, but because "it challenges the audience-performer relationship that has been an accepted part of the dramatic theater."³ In the postdramatic theater, the audience is invited to participate, to come up onto the stage, and to share the performance.

From Aristotle onward, mimesis was one of the main aspects of any theatrical work. Traditionally, the actor's body and the physical surrounding are interpreted mimetically. But, the postdramatic theater freed the body of the actor from the constraints of the mimetic character resulting from the dramatic text. Thus, the actor' movement shall be purely performative. As a contemporary form of theater, the postdramatic theater incorporates material,

human and nonhuman instruments from real life into the process of performance. The body of the actor is a distinct feature of this theater as the living body is used instead of the mimetic body as the mimetic body is cast away. With regard to the living body, Eco has a famous example especially when there is a need for a drunken man to appear on the stage; this can be dealt with as a pure example of postdramatic theater as "The drunken man is what he is, so mimesis is done away with, and there is certainly no narrative or text."⁴

The postdramatic performance represents "an unprecedented invasion of the real into the theatrical space".⁵ So, the contemporary postdramatic theater succeeded to replace the traditional mimesis, representation, and textuality with the direct physical performance. In the twenty-first century, most of the performances were "based on non-dramatic material drawn from the surrounding real world."⁶ Moreover, the directors began to place on the stage people, who are not actors, from outside the theater. Thus, directors used such figures, who were normal people, to represent actual characters from real life; they also draw attention to the experiences of the performers. In this respect, the performance was not dependent on the physical feature of the postdramatic, but it depended on the simple representation of the living body as the mimesis is the real enemy of the postdramatic theatre. Speaking of using normal people on the stage such as a drunken or a disabled man, the directors selected real disabled people to represent the real disability of that person. They don't need a normal person to act and pretend as if he had a real disability. But they cut the long story short and use people with disabilities as to serve the performance. Speaking of disabled actors, Pawelke said: "they don't try to be anything, they are."⁷ They will go beyond the representation and the mimetic actions. Subsequently, this helps in the appearance of the disabled theater thereafter.

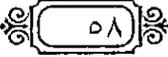


Lehmann comments that the Postdramatic Theatre does not offer a mere representation but an intentionally unmediated experience of the real (time, space, body).⁸ So the performance comes to elaborate on the visual and auditive structures through media and technology. In the postdramatic theatre, the actor is no longer the model-actor who just plays a role but a performer who offers his/her experience on stage. The actor tries to offer the presence of human being rather than the embodiment of a figure on stage. Performance cannot be measured with respect to some set criteria but with respect to its communicative success. In this case, the audience becomes a participating partner. Thus, the audience will be the criterion that determines the communicative success.

Thus, the theatre became an act of communication. Moreover, performers try to depict reality through theatrical props, materials, and signs. Lehmann sees that the ideal performance should be "a process and moment that is real, emotionally compulsory, and happening in the here and now".⁹ In the traditional performances, players used to pretend that they don't notice the audience, but with respect to the post-dramatic performance they interact with the audience and the audience became the hidden performer whose participation may affect the whole play.

Since the dawn of theater, theater can't do without performers and the same goes for the audience. So the audience and performers are the two historical main elements of theater. Theater without the audience loses its existence. Therefore, playwrights and theatrical producers sought to find a link between the play and the audience. According to its artistic nature, theatre can't do without the audience, so the audience must have been a crucial element of the theatrical work and it completes the atmosphere of the theater. It has been so since the emergence of the theater, but it took different forms that suit the

Audience Participation in Thornton Wilder's Selected Plays



requirements of theater development. Subsequently, playwrights and directors sought to present significant presentations. These presentations- with respect to each stage of the theater's history and the style of each director- required the involvement of the audience at different levels that determine the role of the audience in the play.

The audience receives the actions and the speech of the actors in order to decode the meaning using the aid props such as signs, setting, language, and other factors. The audience not only receives what the actors transmit but also interacts with and responds to this transmission. Before the audience-performer interactions and the audience participation, Gareth White explained what was happening instead of this participation in the past times as "...audience would socialize openly in the auditorium, buy and sell, and venture opinions about the play itself, to the extent of exercising a right to 'cry down' or 'damn' a play."¹⁰ But, the new forms of theater encourage the audience to speak and act in a line with the performance or its environment. Moreover, modern performances invite the audience to participate actively in a way suitable for performance type.

Thus, the aspect of audience-performers interactions, which is one of the basic features of Postdramatic Theatre, opened the door to live interactions between the audience and the performers. Post-dramatic theatre lets us see performers asking, addressing, and directing questions to the audience; subsequently, we see and hear direct answers from the audience. Once, we can see a performer interrupting to apologize to the audience for committing a mistake or forgetting a sentence; another performer explains something we do not see on the stage, and a third performer plays the role of a stage manager and directs the other performers.

Simply, audience participation is the participation of an audience member in the action of the performance. So there is a significant difference between audience behavior and audience participation. Audience participation is not an intended or previously arranged action; thus, if the audience attended theater as participants so it is not audience participation. Audience members should perform themselves; an audience member should participate as an individual, he/she represents himself/herself.

During the performance, audience members are allowed to participate and contribute to the performance by sharing their thoughts, opinions, and other ideas. They could contribute to the performance using two ways: physical movements and linguistic expressions. So this form of communication establishes a good relationship between the performer and the audience. Thus, McAuley finds that theater and performance are built on this relationship:

"The specificity of theater is not to be found in its relationship to the dramatic, as film and television have shown through their appropriation and massive exploitation of the latter but in that it consists essentially of the interaction between the performers and spectators in a given space. Theatre is a social event, occurring in the auditorium as well as on the stage, and the primary signifiers are physical and even spatial in nature." ¹¹

The audience can be classified into active and passive audience members. It is crystal clear that participation should be made by the active audience members. The relationship between the performer and the audience depends on the interpretation of the actors' actions. The audience focuses on the presentation so many processes such as perception and sensation occur; these processes are the outcome of the general atmosphere of the play; as they



may be affected by the language and actions of the performers. In this regard, actors play a significant role as they evoke the audience to think about the meaning and then to interpret it; therefore, the role of transmission depends largely on the actors. The audience plays a minor role through their reactions during the play.

At the beginning, the audience role was limited to receiving the presentation and the actors' actions without the possibility to intervene in the events taking place on the stage. Then, they were free to participate emotionally. With the advent of the avant-garde theater that came into existence in the late 20th century, playwrights and directors intended to create a direct participatory relationship between the audience and the performers provided that the presentation should be simple and free of complexity regardless of its form, style, or period. Moreover, playwrights intended to present "some facts and issues that stimulate the audience to criticize such issues in order to participate with the performers through commenting on these facts and issues."¹²

Regarding the relationship between the audience and the performers, Samir Sarhan indicates that playwrights "seek to achieve the direct contact; so there should not be any restraints between the performers and the audience as long as the primary purpose of the theater is to achieve this direct contact between them."¹³ Thus, the audience will be a part of the scene. In this case, the audience can play the role of the Chorus to comment on the event, interrupt an actor, or explain what happened before. The presentation could be interrupted to know the audience opinion on the issue, the purpose of such interruption, according to Augusto Boal, is to involve the audience in changing the reality and to discuss possible solutions according to the personal experience of the audience.¹⁴

Recently, postdramatic theater has witnessed a prearranged participation of the audience. As the participating audience is chosen to participate in the performance before the curtain goes up. This means that there is an arrangement between the participating audience and the director of the play. Thus, the participant should have sufficient knowledge concerning the play. Nick Kaye states that "the participant's knowledge of the scenario and the duties he has to perform make the participant a real and necessary part as if the work won't be achieved without that participation." ¹⁵ On the other hand, the passive audience members merely observe the action rather than actively respond to or interact with it. Sometimes they express their emotional state concerning the play, but they mostly accept the play as it is. They feel as if there were an imaginary barrier between them and the performers. Thus, the postdramatic theater does not welcome a passive audience; postdramatic plays are written with the intention of providing the audience with a chance to participate in their scenes. In this regard, Matthew Reasons states that audience participation is "an integral aesthetic and structural feature of the performances, often motivated by the artists' and companies' desire to reformulate the performer-spectator relationship and to invite a different, explicitly more active, kind of audience engagement". ¹⁶

The participant's role is determined by the presentation technique. Therefore, the audience respects the privacy of the presentation and do not impose a kind of participation that does not fit into the play. This means that there shall be an invitation for the audience participation. Thus, the invitation starts from the presentation first, either directly or indirectly. This invitation shall suggest the space and type of participant's role in the presentation.

According to Garthe White are different kinds of invitations: overt, implicit, and covert.¹⁷ The overt invitation is when the performer asks the audience about what he wants them to do. The performer gives direct and clear directions to the audience; thus, the audience shall follow those directions. Implicit invitation happens when there is nothing described to the audience. It shall be spontaneous. It also happens when the chorus or a performer sings a song and the audience is familiar with that song; so the audience, subsequently, joins the performer or the chorus in a spontaneous way. Moreover, the implicit invitation could be "ambiguous, creating moments where spectators don't know whether the invitation is intended or not."¹⁸ The covert invitation happens when the audience is led to participation without letting them know that this is happening. Sometimes, the performer hides from the audience that they are involved in the presentation. Thus, covert invitation relies mainly on deception where the performer convinces that audience that the action will not be a part of the presentation. These kinds of invitations should not make anyone disregard the fact that there is a pre-arranged participation or a pre-selected participant.

Sometimes, the participants add something new to the play as they may invent a scene through their spontaneous and voluntary participation. The cultural resources or background of the participants will affect the presentation; their skills and abilities should be included in the resources used. For example, if the participant knows how to play a musical instrument, the participant can then play it on the stage. The experience of simple participation provides the participant with not only confidence but also the experience and language he needs for the later presentations.

If the participant fails to make the audience understand the performance as it was intended, such failure will be more damaging to the participation and

if the audience members don't understand that they are invited to participate or they don't have the resources and the skills that qualify them to participate, the interaction and participation will fail. In this regard, in order to let the participation succeed, Kaprow stresses that the participation should be focused on routines and daily life matters that have been known to all rather than focusing on innovation and new ideas.

Audience participation shows have evolved as popular art genres along with political rallies, demonstrations, holiday celebrations, and social dancing. Parts of the common culture, they are known and accepted, the moves individuals must make are familiar, and their goals or uses are assumed to be clear. [...] The complex question of familiarity never arises in vernacular communal performances, [...] Everyone knows what's going on and what to do.¹⁹

There are many plays that could be considered postdramatic since their features come as a response to the primary changes in theatre practice that have emerged since the 1960s. Lehmann maps out significant features of postdramatic theatre and provides the guidelines of the postdramatic form. In his book, Lehmann discusses many postdramatic features such as the use of sings, time, body, media, and audience participation.

Thornton Wilder's plays represent a slice of real and daily life. The events of the plays could be easily seen as moments of real life. Wilder didn't abandon the feature of the audience participation and interaction as he develops a simple daily life routine in his plays. Wilder presents in *Our Town*: a man who delivers milk, family members who have their breakfast, and two young people who fall in love.²⁰ Such events open the door before the audience to participate and interact with the performers. Wilder opens the door before the

performer-audience relationship by making the characters direct questions to the audience. This participation and interaction with the performer force the audience to know the characters and events in a good manner. The Stage Manager, in the first act, addresses the audience directly as they are unfamiliar with Grover's Corners and its inhabitants. So the Stage Manager asks the audience if they have any question about the town and some audience members begins to ask Mr. Webb. This leads to the long conversation among the Stage Manager, Mr. Webb, and different audience members as follows:

STAGE MANAGER: Now, is there anyone in the audience who would like to ask Editor Webb anything about the town?

WOMAN IN THE BALCONY: Is there much drinking in Grover's Corners?

(He withdraws without waiting for an answer.)

MR. WEBB: Well, I dunno. Are there any other questions?

LADY IN A BOX: is there any culture or love of beauty in Grover's Corners?

MR. WEBB: Well, ma'am, there ain't much not in the sense you mean....

LADY IN A BOX: So I thought. Thank you, Mr. Webb.

STAGE MANAGER: Thank you, Mr. Webb. (MR. WEBB retires).²¹

Wilder departs from the old conventions and stresses the interaction between the audience and the performers through the Stage Manager at the end of the first act of *Our Town* where the Stage Manager addresses the audience requesting them to go and smoke, then get back for the next act "That's the end of the First Act, friends. You can go and smoke now, those that smoke".²² In the second act, The Stage Manager interrupts the presentation to address the

audience, explain the upcoming events, and reveal how the actions and Emily's wedding begins:

STAGE MANAGER: Thank you very much, Mr. and Mrs. Webb. Now I have to interrupt again here. You see, we want to know how all this began... You know how it is: you're twenty-one or twenty-two and you make some decisions; then whisssh! you're seventy: you've been a lawyer for fifty years, and that white-haired lady at your side has eaten over fifty thousand meals with you. How do such things begin?²³

In *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Wilder used Sabina's voice to prepare the audience via providing information about the play so that the audience will discover that the Ice Age is one of three disasters through which the audience will participate. In the very beginning of Act I and offstage, the Stage Manager, asks Sabina to invent and tell something, after that he addresses her as Miss Somerset, the real name of the actress; subsequently, she shakily continues her monologue as Sabina and complains about the play as Miss Somerset.

SABINA: Now that you audience are listening to this, too, I understand it a little better. I wish eleven o'clock were here; I don't want to be dragged through this whole play again.²⁴

Sabina continues the play complaining about everything, but Wilder makes the Stage Manager play a different role than *Our Town's* Stage Manager. The Stage Manager is the problem solver as he was trying to solve Sabina's problems in front of the audience. It is clear when Sabina stops the action to complain about a scene and actors fall sick of food poisoning, the Stage Manager appeared to handle the situation as follows:

FITZPATRICK: Miss Somerset, we have to stop a moment.

SABINA: They may be hiding out in the back.

Audience Participation in Thornton Wilder's Selected Plays

FITZPATRICK: Miss Somerset! We have to stop a moment....

SABINA: Disagreed with them!!! They have ptomaine poisoning. They're in Bellevue Hospital this very minute in agony. They're having their stomachs pumped out this very minute, in perfect agony.²⁵

Sabina argues with the Stage Manager and refuses to perform scenes she doesn't like. Many events and scenes witnessed such an argument, but in the last act, Sabina in her own person had an argument with Henry and the Stage Manager to stop the scene. At the same time, she is calling the audience to intervene to stop the scene as follows:

SABINA: Stop! Stop! Don't play this scene. You know what happened last night. Stop the play. Ladies and gentlemen, I forbid these men to play this scene. Last night you almost strangled him. You became a regular savage. Stop it!²⁶

Wilder employs a unique aspect in the play, this aspect focuses on making the audience get confused by the repeated actions. The play's plot doesn't always make sense as the world gets destroyed at the end of each act and the following act shows the world starting over again. This aspect affects the audience so they get confused because the play doesn't follow a sound order of actions; subsequently, Sabina appears to calm them down and clear the situation as follows:

SABINA: (Energetically, to the audience) Ladies and Gentlemen! Don't take this play serious. The world's not coming to an end. You know it's not. People exaggerate!

ANTROBUS AND STAGE MANAGER: Miss Somerset!

SABINA: All right. I'll say the lines, but I won't think about the play...
And I advise you not to think about the play, either.²⁷

Wilder's *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth* make the audience lose the convention of "I'm an audience member, and I'm going to just watch you doing this." The actors participate and interact with the audience on many occasions. Moreover, the actors advise the audience on the scenes of the play. For example, in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Sabina refuses to play a scene, but she tells the audience what happened during that scene as follows:

SABINA: Just a moment. I have something I wish to say to the audience. - Ladies and gentlemen. I'm not going to play this particular scene tonight. It's just a short scene and we're going to skip it. But I'll tell you what takes place and then we can continue with the play from there on. Now in this scene-²⁸

Thus, Anna Pieri, an acting student playing the maid in the play, says: "the audience will likely have rolled on the floor laughing, shed a few tears and will leave the theatre extremely confused."²⁹ This acknowledgment concludes that Wilder succeeds in employing the aspects of the audience-performer interactions and audience participation. Wilder continues to provide such interaction till the end of the play; it is even evident at the end of the final act of *The Skin of Our Teeth* when Sabina asks the audience to go home and leave the theatre because the play is not written yet:

SABINA: You go home. The end of this play isn't written yet. Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus! Their heads are full of plans and they're as confident as the first day they began, - and they told me to tell you: good night.³⁰

Thus, the inclusion of the audience participation in the play adds more excitement and makes the audience enjoy their participation. The invitation to

participate manipulates the audience physically, but it can't reveal how the audience will experience the act of participation. This participation can also manipulate the audience emotionally or physiologically, but it should allow them to determine what to do or choose after the participation. As this participation can re-shape the audience's social being and allow them to perceive themselves in a different way.

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¹ Edward Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*. (Chicago: Heinemann, 1911) 145

² Marvin Carlson, "Postdramatic Theatre and Postdramatic Performance." *Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies*. v. 5, n. 3, 2005, p. 577-595, www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca.

³ Marvin Carlson, 577-595.



⁴ Umberto Eco. "*The Semiotics of Theatrical Performance.*" *The Drama Review*, New York, v. 20, n. 1, 1977, p. 107-117.

⁵ Marvin Carlson, 577-595

⁶ Florian Malzacher and Miriam Dreysse, *Experts of the Everyday*. (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2008).

⁷ Jérôme Bel, "*The Humanity of Man.*" Interview by Gudrun Pawelke. Goethe-Institut. 2012, <http://www.goethe.de/en/kul/tut/gen/tan/20364054.html>.

⁸ Lehmann, 134.

⁹ Lehmann, 138.

¹⁰ Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation*. (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 5.

¹¹ Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000) 5.

¹² Samy Abdel Hamid, *Towards a Living Theater*. (Baghdad: The General House of Cultural Affairs, 2006) 26. (My Translation)

¹³ Samir Sarhan, *New Trends in Theatre*. (Giza: Hala Publishing & Distribution, 2006) 18. (My Translation)

¹⁴ Atheer Al-sada, "*Introduction to the Theatre of the Oppressed.*" startimes.com Web. 11 October 2010. (My Translation)

¹⁵ Nick Kaye, *Postmodernism and performance*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994) 59.

¹⁶ Matthew Reasons. *Participations on Participation: Researching the 'active' theatre audience*. (York: York St. John University, 2015) 271.

¹⁷ White, 40.

¹⁸ White, 41.

¹⁹ Alan Kaprow, *Essays on the blurring Art and Life*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 185.

Audience Participation in Thornton Wilder's Selected Plays

²⁰ Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*. (New York: Harper, 1957) 11.

All subsequent references are to this edition and indicated in parentheses.

²¹ *Our Town*, 24-26.

²² *Our Town*, 45.

²³ *Our Town*, 60.

²⁴ *Collected Plays & Writings on Theater*, 133.

²⁵ *Collected Plays & Writings on Theater*, 216-217.

²⁶ *Collected Plays & Writings on Theater*, 237

²⁷ *Collected Plays & Writings on Theater*, 152-153.

²⁸ *Collected Plays & Writings on Theater*, 195.

²⁹ Casey McDonald, "*University Theatre to present 'The Skin of Our Teeth'.*"

Redandblack.com. Web. October 3, 2011.

³⁰ *Collected Plays & Writings on Theater*, 247.