

The Power of Stillness in Theatre

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Abstract

This article examines the origins of blackface in European theatrical traditions, examining its ideological foundations and historical expressions from antiquity to the present. It examines how European performance cultures have historically mobilised blackness as a performative and racialised construct, going beyond the often American-centric interpretation of blackface. The study aims to reveal how the visual and embodied motifs of blackface have been used in popular entertainment, judicial spectacles, and religious rituals to articulate changing but enduring forms of racial othering. The approach emphasises the ways in which these activities influenced the creation of cultural identities, the aesthetics of exoticism, and larger systems of colonial authority. The paper concludes by arguing that blackface in Europe is a unique and deeply ingrained cultural matrix that necessitates critical historical analysis rather than being a derivation of American minstrelsy. The article reorients the discussion of race and representation in European theatre and performance studies by placing these traditions inside their respective settings.

Keywords: live performance, stillness, spectator/creator, body perception, connection, body dynamic, close-up, electric air, emotions, energy.

How to cite: Vălean, A. (2024). The Power of Stillness in Theatre. *Doctoral Horizons*, 5(1), 95-101.

Theatre performance has always been synonymous with movement, with action. Even if the actor is still we consider the delivering lines as action. In the lines below I propose to explore the power of stillness on stage. We have been drawn to stillness since childhood, just think of childhood games of statue-playing or the success of

street performers who sit still for long periods of time in positions that are hard to imagine and whose accomplishments we watch in fascination. We remain still when we meditate, pray, protest, hide, when we are sick, in pain, when we close our eyes and make a wish before blowing out the candles on the birthday cake, at the theatre or the movies when we are captivated by what we see.



Caravan of Dreams, Baia Mare, 2012

“I am therefore no lover of the theatre, and even less I am a man of the theatre. I really hated the theatre. It bored me. And yet, no. I can still remember that, as a child my mother could not get me away from the puppet shows in Luxembourg Gardens. I could have stayed there spellbound for days on end. I didn’t laugh, though. The spectacle of the guignol held me there, stupefied by the sight of those puppets who spoke, who moved, and bludgeoned each other. It was the spectacle of life itself which, strange, improbable, but truer than true itself, was being presented to me in an infinitely simplified and caricatured form, as though to underline the grotesque and brutal truth.” (Ionesco and Pronko, 1959, pp. 3-18)

The audience remains even more motionless in their seats as they are captivated by the show, as if spellbound, they don't even breathe. From stillness to transcendence, the experience of stillness on stage, for both performer and audience, augments awareness of the present moment.

The relationship between spectators and actors is kinesthetic.

When we see the body of a person, we do not see a body, but a person, because a person is not only a body, but besides a body, is a soul, a psyche, a spirit, a person. [...] Humans are by essence intimacy; unlike all other realities in the universe, the human is a secret that is revealed through corporeality. Human intimacy has no space; therefore, in order to reveal itself, it needs a matter, and it makes itself present through the body; it projects itself, imprints itself, manifests itself in it. Corporeality is the expression of interiority. We never see a human body as a mere body, but always as a human body with a spatial form containing references to intimacy. (Lucas, 2001, pp. 20-21)

The actor's movements must appear as the result of an inner analysis, as decided by his body's conscientization. The most significant scenic sign, the actor's body, becomes the primary trigger of emotion and energy exchange.

This is significant because the actors have dedicated themselves to a career in which they use their own body, and the audience observes the living body on stage before any verbal or nonverbal action, which has become the actor's main instrument of expression, the bearer of message and meaning. The human body serves as a medium and a point of convergence for the majority of the languages used in the theatrical performance.

All active means of expression on stage are subject to the actor, and the actor is mainly present through his own body. We think that no movement, whether imposed or initiated, rehearsed or improvised, should be done mechanically, but only as a product of an internalisation process founded on knowledge and awareness of one's own body. To have the most expressive dimensions, the body - scenic sign, must be able to assimilate and convey meanings, ideas, and emotions through dynamics and posture on stage.

This is essential because the actors have committed to a career in which they use their own body, and the audience recognizes their bodies in motion on stage before any verbal or nonverbal action, which has become the actor's main instrument of expression, as well as the carrier of message and meaning. The vast majority of the vocabulary used in theatrical performance uses the human body as a medium and an arena of confluence.

Actors need to train themselves to value and use stillness and silence.

To start from silence and calm. That is the first point. An actor must know how to be silent, to listen, respond, keep still, begin a gesture, develop it, return to stillness and to silence, with all the tones and halftones that those actions imply. Copeau in Rudlin and Copeau, 1986, p. 46)

Stillness and silence can also serve to set the tempo of the performance, to regroup or recover (especially after a very intense physical effort by the actors). But most importantly, to ensure the empathic kinesthetic relationship with the audience. Kinesthesia is informed by senses such as sight and hearing, as well as internal sensations of muscle tension and body position. It is embedded in the network of sensory modalities, including hearing and touch, which have also been implicated in the mirror neuron system (Keysers et al. 2004; Gazzola et al. al. 2006)

In a strong performance, such “energy” is radiated to the audience. John Gielgud gives a nonverbal example of the conveying of such energy: I have a vivid recollection of Lucien Guitry’s acting in a drama called *Jacqueline*, produced in London in 1922, in which he played an elderly roué who strangles his mistress in the final scene. It was the preparation for this denouement in the second act that impressed me the most. The scene was in a hotel bedroom where he had taken the girl for a weekend. Guitry stood over her as she lay on the bed, and she suddenly shrank from him crying, ‘Oh! You terrify me.’ For a few seconds he seemed to grow inches taller and become a towering and sadistic creature. Then, suddenly breaking the tension completely, he resumed his normally charming manner for the rest of the scene. I watched him most intently, and I am convinced that in fact he did absolutely nothing, not moving his hands, his face or his body.

His absolute stillness and the projection of his concentrated imagination, controlled and executed with a consummate technique, produced on the girl and on the audience an extraordinary and unforgettable effect. I knew I had seen a great actor.

One might be tempted to regard such energetic intensity as that which distinguishes the actor’s existential amplification from what readers or authors experience. But as important as energizing the text is, there are additional crucial differences between imagining actions and incarnating them that do not relate to intensity in general energy in particular.

Accessing these differences requires exploring further the imaginative activity that is particular to theatrical embodiment.

Theorists typically summon the notion of “energy” to account for such intensity. Acting is never simply mimetic; it appeals to us because of some other or more inclusive power. We feel an energy present in any good actor’s performance ... Diverging from the conventional cognitive theory of mind, neurocognitivism assert that the immediate and automatic understanding of observed or imagined actions' meaning arises from a simulation delineated as embodied - specifically, an 'internal representation' of the action observed. Embodied simulation does not involve deducing another's mental states (as postulated by Theory-theory) or employing imaginative substitution - a deliberate and conscious adoption of another's viewpoint (as suggested by the 'standard' mode in Simulation theory). Instead, it originates at the sensorimotor and neurophysiological level, being pre-logical and pre-reflective in nature.

The embodied-simulation hypothesis offers empirical evidence demonstrating that spectators not only witness actions represented on-screen but also internally enact and simulate intentional actions performed by film characters. The operation of mirror neurons is identified as the neurophysiological foundation for human comprehension of others' actions and states of mind, epitomised as empathy. Empathy has been extensively debated within cognitive film studies over the past two decades, often construed in terms of mindreading and perspective-taking in accordance with Simulation theory.

The 'mirror mechanism,' as the neurological counterpart for understanding a character's motives and inner condition, can rekindle discussion under a renewed and more radical (namely, embodied) interpretation of simulation within film experiences.

Cognitive neuroscience study in connection to theatre art is developing theories on the relationship between the viewer and the actor. We don't just watch each other's behaviour; we borrow it, so that the observer and the observed share the same mind-body system during their interaction, thanks to mirror neurons. Humans have the ability to create a direct connection between what one feels and what the other does or feels, which is important in acting because it determines the process by which individuals communicate through empathy.

Individual neurons are activated when someone makes a movement or when someone else acts with a specific purpose. The mirroring mechanism is influenced by visual perception. As a result, an involuntary dialogue is established between the spectator and the performer. They communicate as the theatre show unfolds. By generating an internal dynamic, the bodies of viewers and performers constantly exchange images, shaping the lines of the performance.

Depending on the nature of the theatre performance, interactive or one-way, this process occurs either between the actor-partner and the audience, or only between the partner and the actor, with the mirror neurons of the spectator involved only in getting information, not transmitting it.



Norway Today. Odeon Theatre. 2002



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