A Paper

A (Vicarious) Portrait of the Artist: Virtual space, somatic experience & connecting with a Sondheim revival

By Ben Macpherson

> *In the simultaneous use of the living actor and the talking picture [...] lies a wholly new theatrical art, whose possibilities are as infinite as those of speech itself*
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> (Robert Edmond Jones (1941) 17)

This paper was presented at the 'Representing the Human' Symposium, hosted by Royal Holloway (University of London) on 19ᵗʰ March 2011. It represents my initial exploration into the intersection between embodied space and virtual space; a concern which has grown out of my doctoral research. I intend to fully develop this paper into a longer piece of research on this subject.

Introduction

As is often the way, this paper has somewhat morphed from the original seed of an idea, but I think that's a good thing. The main reason for this is that I kept coming back to the stimuli presented in the call for papers, and tried to decipher just what terms like 'human' and 'post-human' might mean, specifically in light of my own post-graduate research into musical theatre performance analysis. If we speak of the 'human', are we exploring ideas of self, of philosophical ideas of pluralities of consciousness, or somatics, or various political or socio-cultural ideologies or hegemonies? With terms like 'post-human', are we thinking of humans without humanity in the 21ˢᵗ Century? A progressive or philosophical experience which might constitute post-humanism or post-new-humanism? Perhaps, to focus on theatre, the idea of the post-human in theatrical terms might have something to do with an alternative or expanded means of engaging with and experiencing the live

event of contemporary theatrical performance; and it was this aspect of reception and the human in the 21ˢᵗ Century that proved the springboard for my ideas.

In considering this idea, and the above questions among others, a theoretical dialectic that proved useful in my doctoral research kept on playing out in my mind, between a theory of contemporary reception which celebrates the 'reassuring intimacy' of the human being in performance in live exchange with the audience – Jill Dolan's *Utopia in Performance*; and one which champions the mediated nature of theatrical experience based on a culture of technological mediation and simulation, in Philip Auslander's *Liveness*. These two arguments kept resonating with me: because placed side by side, they seemed to represent a provocative set of questions, which are the basis for this paper today. Let's consider the two perspectives.

Dolan and the 'reassuring intimacy' of embodiment
In her book, Dolan explicitly celebrates what she terms the 'intimacy' and invasive reassurance of co-presence between actors and audiences in live theatre – experienced through what she calls the 'event exchange' of performance (27). For Dolan, this exchange is specifically and inherently *human*, corporeal and somatic, focussed on the co-presence of bodies in space: the bodies of those performers – the flesh, blood, mind and voice that embodies and activates characters before our eyes; and the bodies of the audience, that engage in this 'exchange', sensing the 'energy' of the performers and reciprocating through heightening their own awareness, spatial engagement and sensory capacity (Dolan). Such an exchange has also been discussed by Elinor Fuchs as the 'circle of heightened awareness' (117) and by Erika Fischer-Lichte as the 'feedback loop' of bodily co-presence (39), so the idea of 'liveness' in theatre performance as constituted by ideas of bodily or corporeal presence and embodiment are not new.

Auslander however bemoans these ideas as abstract philosophizing: a 'recourse to clichés and mystifications concerning aura, presence, the 'magic of live theatre'' (55). Well, yes? Live theatre, aside from any technological enhancements, begins and ends with the actors and the audience. If you take the actors away – no amount of technological mediatization will substitute for the lack of live performing bodies. If you take the audience away, whilst a film might play on regardless, the actors would simply be going through the motions – the performance would be reduced to a mere rehearsal. So there is something more than that in performance. 'Aura', 'presence', the 'magic' of live performance: terms which may be debated and bandied about in theories of performance and reception, but ones which perhaps articulate a fundamental essence of live performance as specifically, uniquely, a human rather than technological, affair. As feminist critic Peggy Phelan has remarked, it seems that the living human body is the 'ethic of theatre [...] where aesthetics and opportunity collide, where mutual transformation [between the actors and the

audience] can take place' (576). Performance then might be termed an 'embodied space': an explicitly human experience.

Auslander and the 'hyperreal' of 'liveness'

As for Auslander, his mistrust of the recourse to 'presence' leads him to claim that '[l]ive performance now often incorporates mediatization such that the live event itself is a product of media technologies...' (24), and that therefore '[i]n the theatre [...] audiences now expect live performances to resemble mediatized ones', and in particular 'mediatized' here represents a process of engagement similar to that one might have with a television programme or a film at the cinema (25). Notably, this isn't a simple case of anecdotal evidence, or a perspective based on conjectural opinion; Auslander specifically conceptualises the use of video walls, CGI imaging, TV screens, and electronic amplification and sound design in theatre as rendering the live event as the equivalent to Jean Baudrillard's 'hyperreal' (Baudrillard in Nicol 31). In his essay 'The Precession of Simulacra' (2002), Baudrillard consistently uses the term 'hyperreal' with reference to ideas of presence and direct experience being consistently simulated through technology – negating the real, hiding the real, in order to save what Baudrillard calls the 'reality principle'.

Now, we'll revisit a few specifics from Auslander throughout this discussion, but really the question that we might pose from his use of Baudrillard is a fairly basic if fundamental one: if live performance is now somehow equivalent to, or at least, understood through a similar lens, as cinematic or televisual media, and if live performance is thus 'hyperreal', a simulacrum of the immediacy of presence and experience inherent in 'liveness', then does this render that sense of corporeality – that sense of the embodied performer exhibiting themselves in communion and co-presence with the audience, as a 'post-'? If live performance has become another form of technologically mediated simulacra, and 'liveness' is nothing more than a version of Baudrillard's 'hyperreal', has it become *post*-human in its conventions with mediation as its cultural dominant within the audience's 'horizon of expectation' (to borrow from Hans-Robert Jauss)? We'll return to these questions in moment, but to sum up, we might think of Auslander's perspective as being that performance has transmogrified into a 'virtual space'; a post-human event through its ever growing reliance on technology, or the contemporary frame of reference he believes audiences bring to the experience.

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So we have two sides: one that suggests live performance is now *post*-human, understood as being at one remove from itself through the mediatization of the human performer; and one which suggests no matter what happens, the baseline for all live performance experience is the human intimacy shared between the bodily presence of performers and audience. So, who do we think

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we are in the reception of live performance? Have the ideals and conventions of live performance remained embodied, or been escalated through the lens of the virtual? Which is more accurate in the 21st Century, and what comments might be made? Well, drawing on the principle arguments developed throughout my doctoral thesis, I would suggest that things are – perhaps predictably – not as straightforward as to delineate a binary. I would however suggest that perhaps there exists the potential for a dialogue and a discourse between the two ideals. How might such a discourse be negotiated, reconciled or conceptualised? In order to explore this, I would like to examine Stephen Sondheim's and James Lapine's musical *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984).

Sunday in the Park with George: **Why appropriate for representing the human?**

'Sunday', written in 1984, is a non-linear musical in two-acts, which explores the problems of art and 'the artist'. The first act takes place in 1884, and focuses on the pointillist artist George Seurat, and the development of his landmark painting 'A Sunday Afternoon on The Island of Le Grand Jatte', over a 'series of Sundays' in vignette form. The obsessive, reclusive and idealistic nature of Seurat is explored throughout the first act of Sondheim's musical; repeatedly, we see George uttering what becomes a mantra of the show – 'Connect George, connect'. This longing for connection refers to a number of struggles the artist has: to connect with his work – as he says, 'I am what I do'; his emotional connection (or lack thereof) with his mistress Dot, for whom his expressions of affection extend to retorts such as 'I care about this painting, you will be in this painting'; with the wider artistic community at large, along with his mother, and those people he observes, sketches and paints. In short, as Dot sings in the title song 'Artists are bizarre'. The second act jumps forward a century and mirrors these struggles for connection through a focus on Seurat's great-grandson, also named George, also an artist. In this act, George's struggle is not the development of a painting or an ideology of the artist, but the need to 'Move on' artistically in a world of relentless commerce and economics. As he cynically if pragmatically remarks in the main production number from the second act (which we'll explore a little further on):

> GEORGE: WHAT'S A LITTLE COCKTAIL CONVERSATION
> IF IT'S GOING TO GET YOU YOUR FOUNDATION,
> LEADING TO A PROMINENT COMMISSION
> AND AN EXHIBITION IN ADDITION?

Yet, despite this very public struggle compared to those of Seurat, George's difficulties are similar to those of his great-greatfather's: he has an uneasy relationship with his grandmother; he has evident marital difficulties; and exhibits a resentful cynicism about the need to network and fund his art in such way in the manner described above. Therefore, even within this public arena of

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sponsorship, exhibitions and public admiration, the George of act two is still found uttering the mantra of his great-grandfather 'Connect, George, connect'.

It is this scene – where George struggles with himself in an arena of sponsors, critics and benefactors – that I would like to focus on (and 'Putting it Together'). The way Buntrock staged the scene in conjunction with Farley and Bird is provocative. A very tense George is seen – through the medium of animation and projection – dividing himself up and 'working the room' virtually; whilst the real-life George cynically vents to the audience about the intricacies of funding, networking, working up commissions. How might the audience connect with this intersection of the embodied and the virtual, with reference to a discourse between Dolan and Auslander?

Let's briefly look at the scene and then discuss it. To qualify my source material, I was unable to see the original 2006 staging at the Menier Chocolate Factory, so I draw on my experience and notes taken having seen the 2007 transfer to the Wyndham's Theatre in the West End, and the 2008 mounting in New York. In addition, several Youtube videos of another mounting of the same production proved helpful, although obviously in setting out to explore the intersection of the live performance and the mediated, then Youtube does somewhat complicate matters analytically. Nevertheless, acknowledging that slight wrinkle, let's briefly watch George 'working the room', in both a literal – and mediated – fashion, 'putting it together'. [SHOW CLIP OF 'PUTTING IT TOGETHER' FROM YOUTUBE]

How can we conceptualise what's happening, between the live George and the multitudes of virtual Georges? Well, in exploring the relationship between the embodied space of live performance, the virtual space that resides within the performance, and the four facets of embodied reception as outlined above, would suggest that the audience focus on the live George, for as Antonio Damasio says, we react bodily to what we see onstage. Neuro-scientific research has also demonstrated that we respond to music *bodily*, our heart rate increases, we vicariously 'move' to the rhythms, and chemicals including dopamine and adrenaline surge through our bodies. Through the 'feedback loop', our feelings and senses are engaged primarily through the specular field of vision; which initiates the mirror neuron system to produce motor-reflexes in the bodies of spectators. Notably, if we were to consider mirror-neurons in this instance, machines cannot reciprocate body-rhythms, motor-simulation or 'feedback' (after Fischer-Lichte 39). So in this way, Auslander's suggestion of the primacy of the virtual is problematic anyway. Interestingly, CBT would suggest that the two spaces blend into one; but with such vastly different ontologies: is this the case? Well, yes, it could be argued that it is. In his book *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre* (2008), Bruce McConachie borrows from George Lakoff's discussion of 'conceptual blending', which suggests audiences might cognitively blend two

distinct input types together in their head, recognising the differences, but negotiating them with each other, blending them in reception.

In this sense then, the embodied space and the virtual space operate together whilst retaining their identity. Importantly, says McConachie, this blending can be selective, prioritising one particular element over another. This allows a very specific reading of George's mantra about connection, particularly when exploring live performance as a primarily corporeal phenomenon. We have already established that in this scene, George's lack of identity as an artist is frustrating him, due to the time consuming process of networking and public relations. At the end of the musical, George admits, in the disconnected third person, that 'George is alone'. What better way to demonstrate George's struggles with connection, than by his means of networking becoming vicarious, virtual, at one remove from the embodied reality of the artist struggling to find his inspiration. To borrow from Baudrillard, George's networking is at one remove: achieved through the simulated, the mediated.

In the drama, George is lost in a wilderness of commerce when all he wants to do is create. No-one, corporeally, can relate to his character as animated, portrayed on screens or panels around the virtual space. In the embodied space of the performance, however, George *does* connect – with the audience, and it is him the audience connect with through the embodied 'feedback loop' and the reactions outlined above. His embodied presence is thrown into sharp relief in this scene precisely because of the negotiation of embodied (human) and virtual (*post*-human) spaces.

But what does this brief exploration suggest about who we think we are in the reception of live performance today? Well, as conceptualised through a somatic perspective on live performance, the 'magic of live theatre', as Auslander terms it, still exists. If it did not, then the draw and demand of live performances would have withered a long time ago – and not merely shifted ground through economic pressures or other more culturally dominant forms. Dolan, Fischer-Lichte and other theorists – along with neuro-scientific research – all demonstrate one fundamental fact: that live performance is a vital, embodied experience shared between humans. However, what Auslander's position may suggest is the need to consider the way in which frames alter or expectations modify through the influence of technology or other forms. Even if the means by which we process or talk about performance assumes the suffix 'post-'; live performance, it seems to me, must always be – at base – human; a place where, through bodily experience, we can 'Connect, George, connect'.

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