

Young Audiences & Live Theatre

an investigation into perceptions of live performance

- What does live theatre mean to young audiences?
- What catches their eye during a performance?
- How do they respond to all those old people in the audience?
- Why is the chandelier remembered so vividly?
- Why is there so much talk about farting, coughing and sneezing?
- What is meant by realness?
- Why do they feel responsible for the actors?

The question

Theatre is frequently defined by its 'liveness': that is by how it is performed by live actors appearing on stage before a live audience. This concept of liveness has also become a factor in how theatre is often promoted as a *live* experience; recent theatre advertisements have included the slogans 'experience the thrill of a live performance' and 'watch the magic come alive on stage'.

Yet while the idea of liveness is fairly common, particularly when making contrasts with non-live performances experienced on film or television, exactly what the implications of the concept are in everyday life is far less apparent. Little empirical research exists into the perception and understanding of liveness among actual theatre audiences. Is it possible, for example, to identify a distinct character to audiences' experience of theatre that is determined by the live nature of the performance?

Of course this question is impossibly large, and needs to be reduced to specific contexts and specific audiences in order to provide any sensible kind of answer. This report presents the approach and some of the findings of a research project exploring experiences and understandings of live theatre in terms of one specific audience – teenage school students – in one specific context – a school visit to a production of Shakespeare's *Othello*.

Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, this research project asked groups of young people to explore their memories of attending a theatre performance, to talk about their experiences and reflect upon their own responses. What does *live* theatre mean to them? What are their strongest memories of the experience? What were their responses to their being part of the larger theatre audience? This report presents some of the themes that emerged in response to these questions, revealing the perceptions and kinds of memories that young audience members have of the experience of a school visit to a live theatre performance.

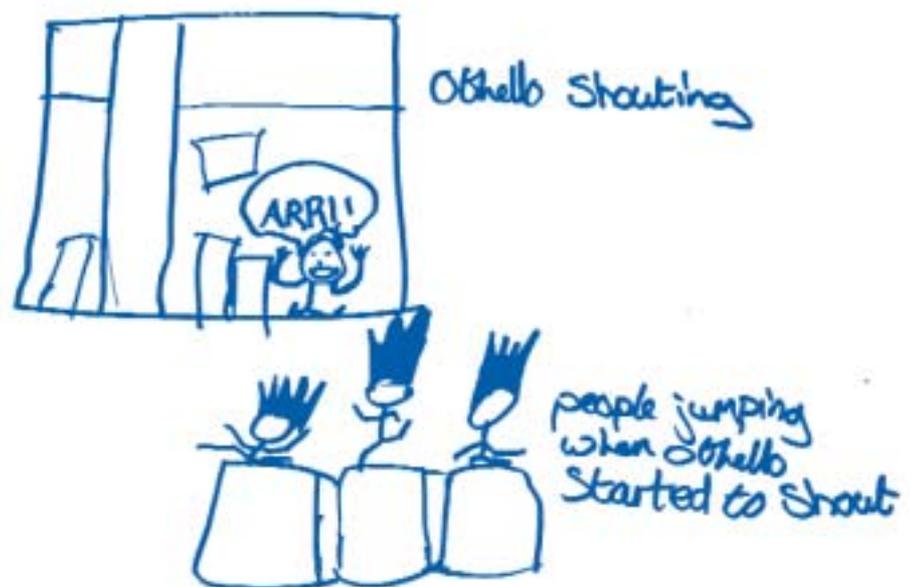
The participants

The primary audience for this report are the young people who participated in the project, who contributed their experiences and memories in an extremely honest and generous manner and who made the research such fun to conduct.

Although all names have been changed here, to ensure their anonymity and as a condition of their taking part, these participants should still be recognised as co-authors of this report and the ideas, comments and observations contained within it.

The intention with this investigation was to work in a participatory manner, asking the young audience members to think about their own experiences and perceptions of live theatre in a conscious and self-interrogative manner. In sending this report first to the actual participants their centrality is affirmed and recognised.

If they, or indeed anybody else, wish to provide any feedback or enter into a dialogue about any of the ideas discussed here they are welcome to do so by email to Matthew Reason at: m.reason@yorks.ac.uk



Othello

In order to explore the experiences and perceptions that young audiences have of live theatre performances, a series of research workshops were set up with secondary school groups from Edinburgh and central Scotland.

These workshops were organised and run in collaboration with the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, with groups attending the workshops shortly after having seen the Lyceum's own production of *Othello*. The workshops focused around the young audience members' recent experience of this production of *Othello*, a specific and concrete backdrop that could then be widened out to explore perceptions of live theatre more generally.

Memory

While we all may have the experience of being in the audience for a live theatre performance, exactly what that experience is like is something much more difficult to consciously remember or put into words. Finding out about somebody else's experience is therefore a doubly tricky problem that this project had to overcome.

To do so it first recognised that all our experiences, even if from only yesterday, are filtered through our less than perfect memory. Starting from this point the workshops included a series of memory exercises designed to help the young audience members think back into their experience of watching *Othello*.

This began with non-verbal visualisation exercises before moving on to sharing memories through speech and writing. For example, the participants were asked to write short recollections on large sheets of paper as prompted by various titles, such as 'something you heard', 'the actors' or 'something that caught your eye'.

The format of this exercise (the posters were laid out on the floor, with the title at both ends and fat marker pens to write with) invited the participants to add their comments where and how they saw fit. The informality that this encouraged was part of a deliberate strategy, running throughout the workshops, to help the participants feel confident in releasing their personal experiences and recollections, rather than responding in a more formal or educationally 'correct' manner.



Responses to the prompt 'something that caught your eye' were extremely varied, ranging from recollections of the performance to things and people in the auditorium; and covering both the broad and the very specific.

Frequently noted things included the chandelier, the set and costumes and the number of old people in the audience.

Indeed, that in the poster above 'hardly any young people' – in other words an absence – was something actively seen is very telling. Similarly, another poster records receiving 'dirty looks' from other people as something that caught the eye.

These are all things that were picked up and explored by the participants themselves as the workshops progressed.

Detailed recollections

The act of thinking back into the experience of watching *Othello* revealed details and deepened the recollection of particular moments. To help with this process the young audience members were asked to structure their memories in the form of spider diagrams.

Here a central moment, thought or recollection was written in the centre of the diagram with the outer circles filled in with more details to flesh out the memory. The resulting diagrams provide an opportunity to almost occupy the shoes of the individual audience members, or at least understand what they were focusing on at any one moment. They reveal the 'critical memories' or strongest recollections of each individual, communicating detailed responses to the experience of being in the audience at one particular moment.

Perhaps it is our strongest recollections that reveal most about what a live theatre performance means to us. In the workshops the young audience members were asked to think about what these recollections said about their experience of attending a live theatre performance.

The spider diagram on the right, for example, is one of several dealing with the distractions caused by other people in the audience, here a girl behind sneezing. This distraction is then placed into a specific moment in the production – a particularly tense and dramatic moment – and against the noises and actions of other members of the audience. This level of annoyance, continual awareness and a kind of fascination with other people in the audience emerged as a prominent theme in the workshops, here communicated through a specific example and a specific memory.



Another spider diagram presents the dual engagement of the young audience members: partly with the stage performances; partly with various social performances within the audience. This time the young audience member is actively looking for distractions, her mind wandering to concerns outside the auditorium, with the performance itself reduced to a 'nippy' distraction in the background. As the forlorn question 'when will it end' implies, however, the performance is not something that can ever be fast-forwarded, switched off or totally ignored.



The honesty and detail in the compound recollections presented by the young audience members in their spider diagrams is often striking, providing a real sense of each individual's feelings and focus at a particular point in the performance. Each time we have the privilege of being placed vividly in the memory of another individual.

Themes and analysis

Inevitably, of course, not everyone agreed with each other – either in terms of their memories or the importance that they placed on their recollections. For different participants the experience of attending a live theatre performance meant many very different and sometimes contradictory things. There is therefore no single answer to what attending a live theatre performance means to a young person, just as there is no single, typical, young person.

Nonetheless, having conducted all the workshops it was then possible to see what prominent themes and points emerged. The diagram above shows one attempt to understand, or more simply to map, the points raised in the workshops. This is just one example of many possibly ways of showing and linking the material, with other labels and other interconnections clearly possible.

In looking at this diagram it is worth thinking of all the labels included on it as equal, without a hierarchy or centre point. Individually the young audience members might locate the centrality of their experience at different points on the diagram: certainly for some the most important point might be 'old people', some at 'can't be oneself', some at 'edge of your seat' and some perhaps at 'realness'. Equally, there is clearly a multitude of possible ways of understanding this material. This report will explore some of the themes that emerged particularly strongly during the workshops – many of which can be seen as starting from the point labelled 'other people'.



Public experience

For the young audience members theatre-going was seen as a much more public experience than many other forms of entertainment – even when compared to cinema, which is also experienced in public and in a communal audience. The difference is that the people in the

cinema audience are perceived as being familiar, as being comprised of peers – in terms of age, expectations and behaviour. In contrast the theatre audience was explicitly constructed as comprised of different people and defined by unfamiliarity and otherness.

The spider diagram here successfully communicates this experience of being in 'a live audience', full of 'rustling, clearing of throats etc'. Indeed, unintentionally, it almost seems to suggest that the primary purpose of the light coming from the stage was to allow the members of the audience to watch each other more easily.



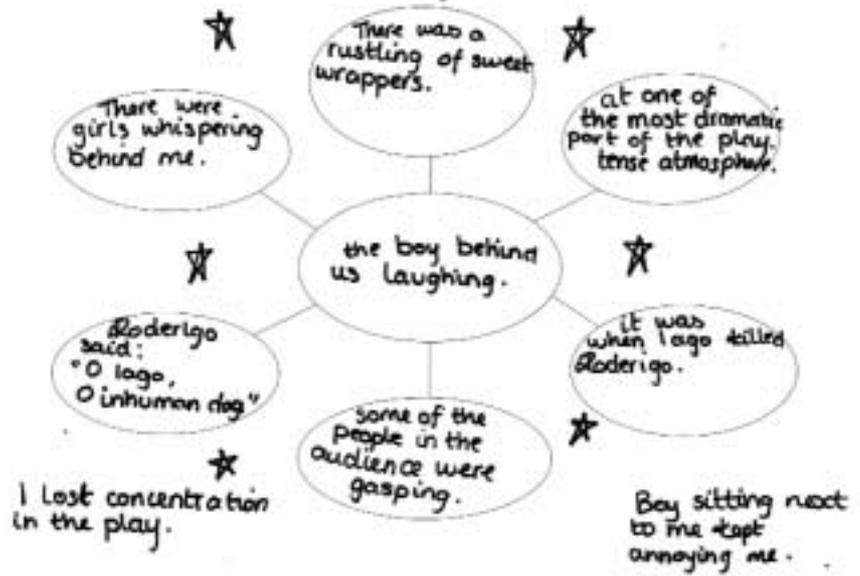
Other people

This public nature of the experience was something that simultaneously both enthralled and almost irretrievably annoyed the young audience members. Their accounts tell of a series of levels of attention and inattention to what was happening on stage, as instead their primary focus seemed to be on the various kinds of social performances going on in the audience. This was something that was recognised by the participants themselves when asked to analyse their theatre-going experience and respond to the comments they had written down in the memory exercises. For them the experience of theatre-going was clearly about more than the production:

FIONA. It's the audience and that, and not just the play. And noticing people/
REBECCA [interrupts]. Aye, not just concentrating on the play, but everything else as well.

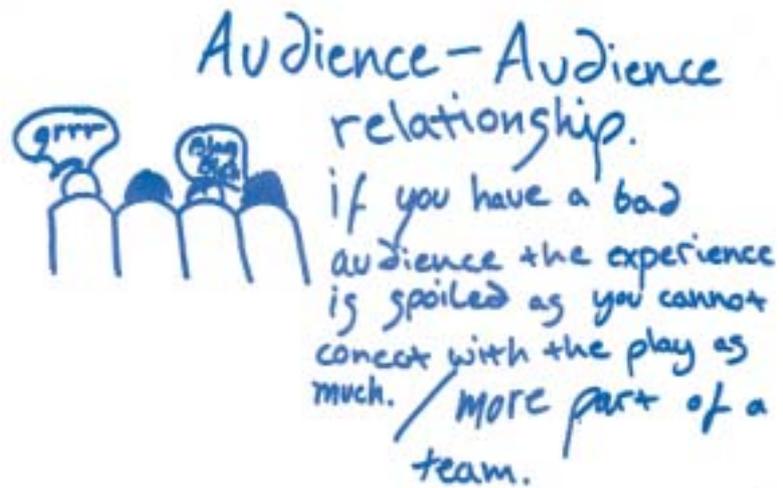
Indeed, often it seems that everything else going on in the auditorium distracts attention away from the play completely. The spider diagram on this page, for example, demonstrates the distracting nature of other people laughing, particularly laughter which you yourself do not join in – here it is other people laughing 'inappropriately' to staged violence, elsewhere it was older people laughing 'knowingly' at inherently unfunny jokes.

At the same time, however, the young people clearly enjoyed their own laughter, much of which – at sneezes, gossip and casual remarks made to each other during the performance – would clearly be inappropriate and unfunny to other people. Indeed, as the young people themselves were very well aware, while there is nothing more distracting than other people, we rarely condemn the same behaviour in ourselves.



PAUL. It's the whole thing, oh, you know, if we do something it's ok, but if other people do it's damn irritating.

KATIE. Cos we could just be sitting having a wee kind of chat, but like when people in front of you are sitting talking for ages, you're kind of like, oh shut up, but you didnae realise you're doing it as well. Cos you're like moaning about them talking but you're doing it as well.



Bodily noises

The number of times that bodily noises within the audience were mentioned – sneezing, coughing, farting, stomach rumbling and so on – meant that these seemingly minor recollections soon gained an odd degree of prominence. Partly this is a consequence of a natural 'toilet' humour; partly a giggle-provoking response to the need for quiet in the auditorium. It is also, however, another indication of an acute sensitivity to other people within the audience, and of their very close, physical, bodily proximity.

Old people

The most straightforward way in which the other people in the theatre audience were *other* to these young audience members is in terms of age:

HANNAH. There's totally different people in a theatre, than if you go to the cinema.

KAREN. Yes, they seem to be older.

Although it is perhaps to be expected that young people will notice the presence of a large number of old people in any shared space, the levels of comment about this were still surprising. One workshop even included the following exchange:

MICHAEL. It was like when you looked down from the top it was all old folk and that.

ED. There was a sea of grey hair.

Responses to the presence of large numbers of old people in the audience were mixed – for some their presence demanded respect and was seen as something that would help keep the rest of the audience quiet. On the whole, however, most responses were more negative, with one typical reaction being to think that 'if there's like older people there and you're young, you'll think this isnae one for me.' Generally it was felt that the old people were disapproving of the young people in the audience, possibly automatically so, condemnatory even before the young people had done anything wrong. Frequently the young people referred to old women turning round and moaning at them, being 'tutted at' and receiving dirty looks:

CAROL. Also cos there's all these old women, and they'd all be looking at you thinking, she didn't/

JOEL [interrupts]. You feel out of place. [CAROL. Aye.]

KIRSTY. You feel out of place and you feel self-conscious. And some of the looks you get [laughter].

This perception of other people looking at and judging you makes the theatre auditorium a fairly exposed and intimidating space. For some young people the result was a sense that the Lyceum Theatre was not a place for them and that they didn't belong there. For others it provoked a level of self-consciousness that prevented them from relaxing and meant that their focus was on the social experience of being in the audience rather than on watching the performance on the stage.

Self-consciousness

The spider diagram on the right shows some of the memories of a member of the youngest group of participants that took part in the workshops. Comments from this group were generally fairly brief and less developed than older participants.

As well as being the youngest participants, this group were also the least experienced theatre-goers. For them in particular, memories of *Othello* were dominated by recollection of other people in the audience and by reactions to the Lyceum Theatre, which none of them had ever been to before.

The memories presented here suggest largely negative reactions to the experience, starkly phrased in terms of feeling 'unwelcome'. At the same time, however, members of this group talked about their great initial enthusiasm and excitement at walking in the 'classy' front entrance of the theatre. This excitement turned more negative for a whole range of reasons, but significant among them would be a sense of self-consciousness produced by both physical discomfort and social and emotional awkwardness. For this group simply being in the auditorium was by far the most powerful aspect of the experience.



Whose space is it anyway?

To an extent the dirty looks exchanged between old and young people in the auditorium – such as 'the wee old woman who kept turning round and moanin at people whispering' – are prompted by questions of behaviour: the older people are simply expressing their desire for the younger people to shut up and behave as they should. However, in this very idea that there is a right way to behave there is also a hint of something deeper concerning who 'owns' the Lyceum auditorium as a public space.

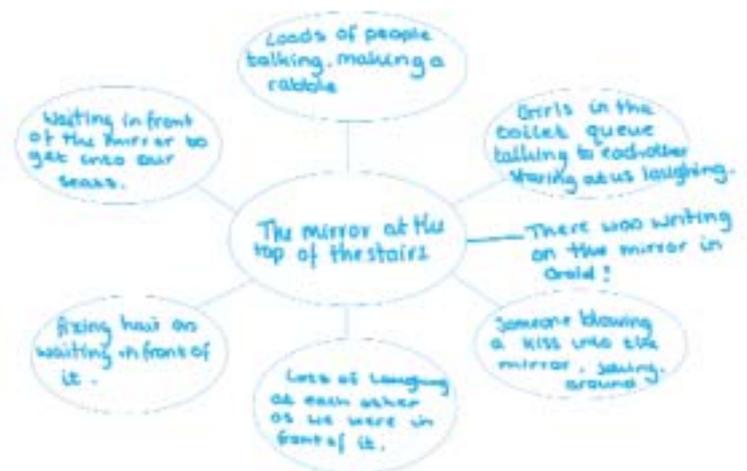
Central to this is a kind of conflict or negotiation between two large generational groups – old people and school pupils – who are being forced to share the same space for a fairly lengthy period of time. Indeed, it is striking to think about how rarely different generations do occupy the same space in public. Something that the young people in the workshops recognised themselves:

PAUL. Err. Because we're not normally surrounded by old people. Because we're with people our own age at school, so when we see lots of old people we get kind of scared. [laughter. **KATIE.** Scared?] Just because we're not used to it, and because they have powers [laughter].

The reference to 'powers' here is clearly partly in jest and partly self-consciously ironic. However, it also astutely articulates the very different power relationships between young people and old people. Here it is the old people who control the space and the young people who are told how to behave.

Of course it is true that sometimes a quiet environment is the only way in which it is possible to concentrate on a play and that noise can distract and annoy the actors – tellingly the young people were self-aware of this, and could be critical of not just their peers but also of their own behaviour. In contrast perhaps the older people in the audience were not quite as aware of how distracting and unwelcoming their own unconscious behaviour is – the silent glare and the persistent tutting as annoying, discomforting and distracting as constant chatting and rustling. It would be wrong to suggest that people should behave exactly as they wish in the theatre auditorium, but perhaps worth suggesting that just as young and new audiences are 'taught' how to behave, so too might older audiences be encouraged to be more welcoming, forgiving and understanding.

The physical nature of the Lyceum Theatre as a building was something else that recurred during the workshops. The spider diagram on the right recalls one girl's strong memory of the large, ornate mirror at the top of the stairs in the foyer. This recollection may seem fairly incidental, nothing to do with the play or responses to the production. However, what this memory also shows are responses to the architectural feel of the theatre, and particularly its grandness – a formality that the young people found glamorously attractive and at the same time rather alien, off-putting and stifling. Also evident in this memory is the importance of the group experience – of joking and talking with peers. Perhaps in posing and playacting in front of the mirror the young audience members could make a claim to the space as their own.



FINLAY. Aye, once I saw that chandelier I thought, I says is this for people of the upper class? [laughter]

SARAH. But there was also people in front who were, they were dressed, we felt, well I felt, that I wasn't smartly dressed.

Respect for the actors

The need for good behaviour in the auditorium (both from other people and by oneself) was one recurring theme in the workshops. The reasons put forward for this were varied, including the desire to avoid attracting 'dirty looks' from other members of the audience and the need to concentrate in order to understand the Shakespearian dialogue. Additionally, however, the participants talked about the need to be quiet to allow the actors to concentrate on their performances – for many of the young audience members this demonstration of respect for the actors was a far more persuasive and important motivation for good behaviour than respect for other members of the audience.

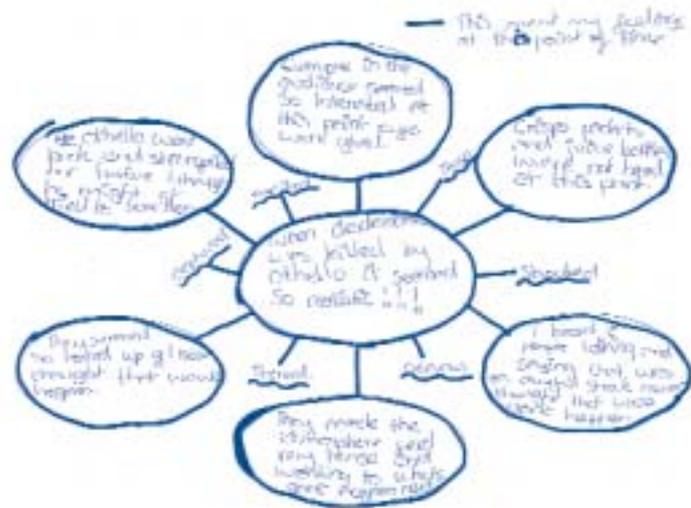
Happening in front of you

Significant here is the young audience members' awareness that the actors are performing 'in front of you' and 'as you watch'. Noises from the audience would distract the actors, perhaps causing them to make a mistake in their performance.

This possibility of mistakes was something that intrigued many of the young people. While not actively wishing for their occurrence, mistakes – including dropped props and forgotten lines – were something that were joyfully noted as proof of the fact that the performance was happening live in front of them. This potential for mistakes, the requirement for the actors to be perfect every night and the possible need for improvisation were seen as markers of the skill of the actors, respected and admired by almost all the participants.

The young audience members were very well aware that any mistake by the actors would be irretrievable – they could not be corrected or erased. Similarly, they were aware that their own relationship with the performance was a one-off experience. If they missed something, if their concentration wavered, they would not be able to rewind and replay that moment.

This awareness of a kind of danger in a live performance existed whether or not mistakes actually happened. Indeed, two participants talked separately about how being part of the audience made them feel 'responsible' for the actors, powerfully uniting their presence to the performance of the actors.



SHONA. I think it does kind of give more of a kind of thrill. Because it's harder to act on stage, well I think it's harder to act on stage than it is on camera. Because if you do it in a film you can scrap that shot and do it again. Whereas on stage you've only got that one chance, so it's more kind of suspense.



Sex and violence

A play, therefore, has to compete for attention with the innumerable distractions produced by its audience.

Some elements of *Othello*, however, were more successful in grasping the attention of the young audience members than others: particularly any scenes containing sex – ranging from kissing, to innuendo, to bawdy slapstick – or violence. As one participant commented, 'It's weird but I like, this sounds weird, but I like seeing people die on stage because [laughs] It's just really interesting to see'. This is perhaps unsurprising, as these scenes – particularly the numerous deaths at the end of the play – carry the greatest significance in terms of plot and characterisation, delivering the greatest emotional punch. They are also inherently action filled:

CAROL. The bits that were erm like really intense, like murders and stuff like that, you get more impact from them because they're like happening in front of you, like for real. Not really for real, but you know what I mean. Instead of/

GEORGE [interrupts]. And you can experience it more. [CAROL. Aye, instead of on screen.]

HOLLY. You get the emotions coming over as well. [CAROL. Aye, that's what I meant.]

These scenes also invite the audience to judge how convincingly the events are staged, an area that, as the exchange above suggests, raises complex and sometimes contradictory ideas of reality and illusion.

The spider diagram to the right presents the various – genuine, self-conscious and deliberately ironic – responses to 'Iago & Emilia's rudely rude scene' in *Othello* (when Iago pulls down Emilia's knickers and simulates intercourse). Experienced in public and 'live' this scene provoked a far greater reaction than it would have done if seen on television or in cinema.



Iago

Another prominent memory of *Othello* was Liam Brennan's performance as Iago, played in a very direct and teasing relationship with the audience – full of knowing looks and winks. In contrast one participant noted that the other actors had, more conventionally, ignored the audience, commenting on how strange it felt in a way that they were in front of you but ignoring you. Another exchange indicated a similar response:

CAROL. You'd think it would be just between them on the stage, and then it's like he actually spoke to everybody in the audience.

HOLLY. You felt like it was you he was speaking to you as well [CAROL. Aye. And everyone went suddenly, oh, this is strange] the way he was saying it an all. It was like, ow-hoh!

GEORGE. Yes, you had to listen to him because he was like, he was talking to you.

This shock at being addressed directly by the performer was clearly powerful, shaking the young audience members out of their inattention. While all the performers were live it is clear that some were more live – and 'realer' – than others.

Realness

This perception of a live theatre performance as 'real' is clearly problematic — and recognised as so by the young audience members. On one hand there are 'real live people' up on the stage, but at the same time everything is clearly made up, previously rehearsed and extremely contrived:

REBECCA. Well I ken that the play isnae real, but when your there and it's happening right in front of you and there's people doing it right in front of you it's different. It's more real.

This realness of the performers adds a particular piquancy to the portrayal of sex on the stage — as one individual commented 'but it's, because it's like, it's weird but it's real people doing it up there'. These are people kissing and touching each other for real, as we watch and in some sense explicitly *for us to watch*. That we watch in public, while surrounded by other people, makes this feeling of voyeurism even more provocative, often prompting the search for some form of release — whether wolf-whistling by teenage boys or ostentatious tutting by older people. The situation is more layered in terms of stage violence. While two actors may be undoubtedly and really kissing, it is equally undoubtedly, however good the portrayal, that they are not really killing each other. Indeed, the theatricality of the performance is sometimes extremely transparent, with some respondents gleefully commenting on being able to see the packets of fake blood before they exploded. Yet these remain real actors and oddly 'real' deaths. Such demonstrably theatrical elements as stage deaths — with the visibility of the actors' spit and the mechanics of the set changes also commented upon — are clearly artificial and yet real at the same time. For many of the young audience members this transparency of the illusion heightened rather than lessened their awareness of the realness of the stage actors.

Cinema

Finally it is worth noting one last theme — cinema, and more broadly film and video watching — that underwrote a vast amount the young audience members' discussion of their theatre-going experience. Cinema and video formed a constant point of comparison for almost all the other ideas discussed: so the need to be quiet during a live performance was contrasted with the ability to talk during a film; or the possibility of something going wrong during a play was compared to the pre-recorded and thereby 'perfect' nature of film performances; the ability to pause and rewind a video, or to re-watch a film on DVD, was compared to the possibility of missing something during a play; while the different character of cinema audiences to theatre audience was talked about at length. Films were also talked about as a contrasting measure of realness: less so in terms of the realness of the actors, but more so in the ability to present real locations and portray violence more convincingly.

Partly these contrasts were a made as a point of easy comparison, as invariably the participants were far more familiar with cinema and video than they were with theatre. To an extent, therefore, live theatre was defined by the manner in which it was different from film, and although for some there was a clear preference for one or the other, for most it was a matter of identifying how the experience of one differed from the other.

Dictionary re-definition: real

Adj. synonym for good. (See also realism, realistic.)

When talking about *Othello* the young audience members frequently use the words real, realism and realistic as qualitative judgements — and as virtually interchangeable with 'good'. In contrast descriptions of the production as unrealistic (or alternatively unconvincing or unbelievable) were synonyms for bad. This belief that real = good was invariably unconscious and unquestioned, perceived as an entirely natural relationship rather than a matter of taste or opinion.

Half an eye on the performance

Many of the perceptions of live theatre communicated by these young audience members are probably not surprising to anybody who has their own experience of theatre, although (as suggested earlier in this report) these are often experiences that may be known but which are difficult to put into words. Indeed, our experience of live theatre is governed by a complex set of cultural values and social codes, often implied, unconscious and unspoken. What the evidence presented in this report shows is a group of new, young audience members learning these codes and locating their responses against a set of established cultural norms.

For one thing that was noticeable in workshops was how even a slight variation in theatre-going experience dictated the kinds of discussion produced. Those groups who went to the theatre more regularly talked more about the actual performance; while those who went less frequently (or on occasion never) were much more firmly rooted in their responses to the broader experience of being in the theatre. Even so, for all the participants at most half an eye was directed towards the performance, while most of the time they were much more conscious of themselves, and who was next to them and what they were eating and what other people were doing and so on and so forth.

Clearly theatre-going is a learned activity; something that each individual needs to internalise in order to be able to concentrate on the performance and become less and less self conscious. For all these reasons the experience of being in a theatre audience is always going to be largely about something very different than simply sitting down and watching a play. The young audience members' responses to *Othello* were therefore directed by the social context of live theatre in our culture – that is, *Othello* was equally about the social experience of being in an audience as it was about the production.

Importantly, however, the acuteness of this social experience is heightened by the live nature of the theatre performance – the real presence of the actors, the danger of something going wrong, the risk of missing something all provide an urgency to the situation, increasing levels of tension and potential discord within the audience. Like the complex realness of the live actors, so is the theatre audience a heightened, intense and peculiarly real environment.

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