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Immersive Theatre: Learning, Performance, and Countering the Diffusion of Responsibility

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the impact of transforming immersive experiences into a process that can facilitate social behavioural learning. Learning can occur by observing a behaviour and by observing the consequences of the behaviour. This qualitative research study investigates the impact of vicarious reinforcement in the form of immersive theatre on promoting active bystander intervention in incidents of violence against women. By investigating the relationship between performance, interactivity, and learning, the research examines the active involvement of audiences, emphasising the use of instinctive emotions to create introspective experiences within a dynamic immersive environment. This research investigates how immersive experiences can empower audiences to intervene and prevent violence against women, highlighting the role of collective responsibility in creating a safer and more proactive society.

Keywords: behavioral learning, bystander intervention, immersive theatre

Introduction

Performance arts and their relationship with social construction other than aesthetic expression, have been explored extensively. Theatre allows individuals to dwell on social realities. It is in these liminal environments that people can encounter themselves and others differently, exploring empathy, accountability, and agency. Art should focus more on people, cultures, lifestyles, values, and attitudes. It should be rational, future-oriented, motivating, educational, and highly informational so that women in our society can be empowered and inspired. Art is ubiquitous in human life in the present era, and its role in the ideological development of audiences is significant. As different forms of oppression are ever-present in the daily life of most women, they are also reflected in a great deal of art, which represents human society. This study looks at immersive theatre with reference to feminism and violence against women, and it is important to pause and have an overview of global feminist discourse before approaching the research objectives.

Patriarchy, Violence, and the Feminist Imperative

Patriarchy has been one of the major conflicts of earlier eras and continues to persist today. Violence against women is a major problem worldwide. The American Psychological Association defines violence as an extreme form of aggression, such as assault, rape, or murder. Rape and domestic violence are associated with physical and emotional abuse that go far beyond the victim, affecting their lives and society at large. WHO (2010) describes the impact of sexual violence as a complex trauma that shocks all aspects of a survivor's health. The oppressed may resort to silence to survive in a patriarchal society. They choose silence over rebellion because they cannot take up battles that would eventually drain their energy, and they bear oppression and violence silently to avoid further repercussions. Carol Hanisch in "The Personal Is Political" explains this response to violence, "Women are sometimes smart not to

struggle alone when they can't win and repercussions are worse than the oppression" (2006). However, this does not necessarily imply a guarantee to their safety, especially in cases of violence. Violation of women's rights through violence against women is a recognised tool to control the sexuality of women and to exercise gendered power relations in patriarchal societies (Tarar & Pulla, 2014). Bell Hooks (2004), in her book, *Men, masculinity, and love*, elucidates the need for men to reject violence and patriarchy, and to choose to live fully and well through knowing love. It also acknowledges the reality that many women experience violence and abuse at the hands of men, and that this is a serious problem that needs to be addressed. She focuses on the relationship between men and masculinity. Hooks (2004) shares her experiences and insights to explore the relationship between men and masculinity, and to challenge traditional notions of male power and dominance. She discusses the harmful effects of patriarchy on both men and women and argues, "Men cannot change if there are no blueprints for change. Men cannot love if they are not taught the art of loving. It is not true that men are unwilling to change. It is true that many men are afraid to change. It is true that masses of men have not even begun to look at the ways that patriarchy keeps them from knowing themselves, from being in touch with their feelings, from loving. To know love, men must be able to let go of the will to dominate. They must be able to choose life over death. They must be willing to change" (p. 4).

Many feminists, including Carol Hanisch, have criticised the trivialisation of gender discrimination and the belittling of their attempt to bring women's issues to light. The slogan "personal is political", coined by her in 1968, was a criticism of the division of personal and professional life. Ruth Rosen (2000) notes in *The world splits open*, "By this she [Hanisch] meant to convey the then-shocking idea that there were political dimensions to private life, and that power relations shaped life in marriage, in the kitchen, the bedroom, the nursery, and the workplace". By highlighting the political dimensions of private life, feminists sought to challenge the traditional gender roles and power structures that had been deeply embedded in society for centuries. The aim was to bring about significant social change, including increased gender equality.

Correspondingly, women's experiences are also to be validated because if a woman is an unrecognised entity, then her right to social equality could be brushed off. This links the socio-cultural structures of women's identity to the nature of womanhood. Virginia Woolf (1929) coaxes us to think back on women's domestic nurture in *A Room of One's Own* and to use it as evidence of patriarchy and hindrance to creative growth. This is significant because until the personal is known, it cannot be discussed politically.

Theatre as a Pedagogy for Social Change

Theatre and politics have been tied for centuries now, specifically soon after the American Revolution, with a radical shift in artistic demands (Kosc & Majer, 2009). Audiences grew in number, and more public performances were presented to serve these audiences. American economic stability also supported the rising demand for dramatic performances in the eighteenth century. This was the origin of the word "audience". Before this period, theatrical performances had audio texts in Latin but not visual representations. Many critics considered this form of art as a two-way communication that involves not just the performer but also the audience. They believed that there is much more to a performance than words. Gestures, expressions, and movements are very important to get desired responses from the audience and to make the two-way communication efficacious.

Theatre, hence, can be used as a pedagogy for social change to empower children and youth. It would also provide a meditative ground for them to change traditional academic practices that treat students in a conservative style that lacks a sense of belonging, leaving students with gaps between what they have learned and their culture and life. Their identity crisis can lead to other social issues, such as bullying, as a means to ensure power over diverse and unfamiliar cultures, as well as gender-based discrimination.

A similar form of imitative art comes from television series, but these series are more focused on financial outcomes rather than social concerns. These series often appear to be romanticising the miseries of women, their suffering, and glorifying their patience. "Portrayal of women throughout drama has been controlled by their appearances; generally, women are presented as commodities, objects of physical beauty, and a source of attraction and enjoyment for men. Women's representation

in media has been constrained throughout media history" (Babul & Niaz, 2019). Women's portrayal has to be reoriented. Contemporary television emphasises building connections with stereotypes of femininity.

Similarly, the theme of suicide, an act of self-killing or self-murder, is a celebrated and notable action in many of these works of art. The suicide of a character, either resulting from depression or as an ultimate act of despair, is portrayed by the author as encompassing rebelliousness, love, despair, and honour. In some works of art, it is celebrated as an ultimate form of justice for women who have been failed by society, which urgently needs to be addressed. Immersive theatre would provide a breakthrough for men who have perceived notions of masculinity through such works of art. It would provide an alternative way of behaviour, which is an essential step for the liberation of society.

The Rise and Aesthetics of Immersive Theatre

Immersive theatre has developed through a rich lineage of participatory and site-specific practices that challenged traditional modes of spectatorship. Rooted in older forms of theatre developed in Russia and Germany, "Agit prop or agitational propaganda, as the very term implies, seeks to deliberately change people's beliefs through well-planned strategies of persuasion, transformations of spectators into actors, and their subsequent mobilization into agitating communities. Theatre is one of the channels of agit prop. The emphasis on the deliberateness of the communication involved distinguishes this form of theatre from other forms of political theatre and from mere conversation" (Pal, 2010). Later influenced by the Happenings of the 1960s and the environmental performances of the 1970s, it has continually sought to blur the boundaries between performer and audience. Practitioners such as Jerzy Grotowski, Richard Schechner, and Augusto Boal redefined performance as an active exchange and a means of social inquiry rather than passive observation.

The expression 'immersive theatre' has gained traction in the contemporary arts, with modifications continuing in performative arts. Immersive theatre is being experimented with and is developing into multiple variations of audience engagement, placing it in a constant state of change. Therefore, the definition of immersive theatre also shifts according to the artist's innovations and derivations. In *Beyond Immersive Theatre*, Alston (2016) describes immersive theatre as a 'loose term' which incorporates early traditions of immersion while extending to the evolving practitioners' experiments with audience engagement. While describing the 'shared set of broadly defined features' of immersive theatre, Adam Alston articulates that immersive theatre mobilises the productive capacities of the audience. He states, 'immersive theatre centres on the production of thrilling, enchanting, or challenging experiences, which feature as an important part of an immersive theatre "artwork" that audiences co-produce by doing more than watching, or by augmenting the productivity of watching as a prospectively participating spectator'. He posits that immersive theatre channels audiences to contribute to the performance through emotional, mental, and physical resources via their responses, actions, and engagements. Hence, 'productive participation' is characterised as a feature of immersive theatre aesthetics. "Immersive theatre is not a single form but a constellation of practices that seek to collapse the distance between performer and spectator, inviting audiences to engage bodily, spatially, and emotionally with the performance" (Frieze, 2016).

Similarly, Josephine Machon (2013) has also addressed the uncertainty of the term. She explains it as being 'totally submerged in it [the event] for the length of time that the work lasts, aware of nothing other than that event itself, and only actions, feelings (both emotion and sensation), and thoughts related to that event are of consequence in that time'. Though 'immersivity in performance does expose qualities, features, and forms that enable us to know what "it" is when we are experiencing it', she claims that it cannot be expressed with a rudimentary classification, as it consists of a broad spectrum of possibilities. She states, 'I am now certain that "immersive theatre" is impossible to define as a genre, with fixed and determinate codes and conventions, because it is not one.'

The rapid evolution of immersive theatre in performing arts has challenged the conventional norm of passive observation by encouraging direct engagement with narrative and space. Its power to blur the proscenium boundary brings in the performer as a spectator. 'Immersive theatre' has become a widely adopted term to designate a trend in performances which use installations and expansive environments, which have mobile audiences, and which invite audience participation (White, 2012).

This transformation of spectatorship into participation has profound pedagogical and social implications. The present study explores how immersive experiences can operate as processes of social behavioural learning, enabling audiences to internalise moral agency and collective responsibility. "For audiences, finding immersive performance means one must learn to be productive in order to penetrate the mystery that envelopes the form…" (Bucknall, 2022). A widely employed term, immersive theatre is nevertheless largely accepted as describing a form of experiential performance in which mobile audiences are often participants as much as spectators, and physically plunged into the world of the play, itself realised in the form of an installation or through being set in an expansive environment (Turnbull, 2016).

The Pedagogical Foundation

Theatre has long been a medium through which societies rehearse values, negotiate moral tensions, and confront structures of power. In the context of immersive performance, this potential is intensified, the spectator is no longer distanced but drawn into the ethical and emotional terrain of the performance itself. Such experiences are not merely aesthetic encounters. They are pedagogical events that transform observation into moral reflection and empathy into action.

This framework builds upon an intellectual lineage that situates performance within processes of social learning and transformation. Paulo Freire's (1968) concept of conscientization, the awakening of critical consciousness through dialogue, established the pedagogical foundation for participatory theatre. Freire's insistence that education must emerge from collective inquiry and experience redefined learning as an act of liberation. Augusto Boal (1979), expanding this pedagogy into the realm of art, envisioned the "spect-actor", the audience member who crosses the threshold from observer to participant. Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* transformed performance into a democratic laboratory of social rehearsal, where participants could experiment with ethical choices and confront systems of violence without fear of real-world repercussions.

In immersive theatre, this principle acquires new depth. The form's embodied and sensory immediacy actualizes Freire and Boal's dialogic ideals by situating audiences within dynamic, responsive environments. Here, the individual is invited to feel and act rather than simply interpret. Michael Rohd's (1998) *Theatre for Community, Conflict & Dialogue* operationalizes this philosophy, translating the abstract ethics of participatory theatre into a practical manual for civic practice. Rohd conceives of theatre as "a tool for dialogue rather than persuasion," a site where ensemble and audience collaboratively explore questions of justice, empathy, and coexistence. His methodology transforms artistic engagement into social pedagogy, learning through encounter, through witnessing, and through the emotional labour of participation.

This pedagogical vision finds resonance in Albert Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which identifies observation and imitation as primary mechanisms of behavioural acquisition. Bandura argues that "most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling" (p. 22). Individuals construct new patterns of response by watching others and internalising the consequences of their actions. Immersive performance extends this psychological mechanism into an embodied social process. When audiences witness intervention, resistance, or complicity enacted before them, they engage in vicarious moral rehearsal. The emotions elicited, empathy, discomfort, guilt, courage, serve as reinforcements that shape future ethical behaviour. In this way, immersive theatre becomes not only reflective but formative, cultivating the instincts required for real-world bystander intervention.

The performative dimension of this process is clarified through Victor Turner's (1982) and Richard Schechner's (1985) theories of ritual and restored behaviour. Turner's notion of liminality, a threshold state where social hierarchies are suspended, explains how performance creates a temporary space for transformation. Within such liminal environments, participants experience communitas, a sense of shared humanity that allows moral and emotional boundaries to dissolve. Schechner's concept of restored behaviour further suggests that performance is not imitation but reactivation, a re-enactment of human conduct within a controlled setting that allows experimentation and change. In immersive theatre, restored behaviour becomes the site of ethical learning. The audience observes, embodies, and internalises the patterns of moral action rehearsed before them.

Wong and Clammer (2017) expand this discourse by conceptualising theatre as a developmental and democratising process. They assert that "development is in a very real sense performance" (p. 291), emphasising that social change is enacted, not merely envisioned. Their synthesis of Boal, Freire, Turner, and Schechner supports the idea that participatory theatre cultivates imagination, empathy, and agency, the foundations of social development. When applied to gender-based violence, this framework underscores the transformative potential of immersive experiences that simulate crisis and injustice, compelling audiences to re-evaluate their ethical positioning.

Goldfarb Wilson's (2004) claim of imitation and role-playing being two important components of theatre, as well as building blocks of society, is crucial for this discussion because familial dynamics and social roles are learned through behavioural exercises in the form of traditions and cultures. Some philosophers, including Aristotle, suggested that theatre has become a part of the human race due to its instinct to imitate. These cultures and traditions are transferred from one generation to another through another theoretical element known as storytelling, which evokes suspense, tears, laughter, or anger, and makes traditions and cultures more thematically articulated.

Ultimately, the convergence of Bandura's behavioural psychology, Freire's dialogic pedagogy, Boal's participatory praxis, Turner's ritual theory, Schechner's performative anthropology, Rohd's civic manual, and Wong and Clammer's developmental synthesis positions immersive theatre as a multidimensional pedagogy of transformation. It unites the cognitive, affective, and embodied dimensions of learning to produce what might be called ethical immediacy. A state in which reflection and action coexist. Within this space, audiences do not simply understand morality. They perform it, feel it, and rehearse its possibilities. In doing so, immersive theatre transforms spectatorship into social learning and participation into the rehearsal of justice.

Learning Through Observation and Emotion

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) claims that individuals have a self-directing power. He claims that behavioural learning is not only about reward and punishment, as claimed by the behaviourists, but also includes observational learning. He says, "Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action."

He articulates that most behavioural learning is a product of social observation. Individuals learn through 'vicarious reinforcement', implying that an event with positive or negative outcomes can influence the behaviour of the spectator. "Most of the images of reality on which we base our actions are really based on vicarious experience" (1977). Hence, the world we see around us is an imitation of learning outcomes. "Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation" (Aristotle, 1448).

Congruently, bystander intervention also operates through an analogous psychological mechanism, where witnessing an act of violence generates a response through an evaluation of observational learning. Individuals formulate behavioural patterns and judgements by assessing how others act within similar contexts and by evaluating the social and emotional consequences that follow those actions.

Immersive Theatre as a Space of Ethical Rehearsal

The intersection of learning theory and immersive practice creates fertile ground for behavioural transformation. When spectators are placed in environments that demand moral and emotional responses, they practice forms of empathy and ethical reasoning that can translate into real-life behaviour. Immersive theatre frequently constructs performative environments that simulate conditions of crisis, marginalisation, or systemic injustice, inviting participants to confront ethical and emotional dilemmas firsthand (Machon, 2013; White, 2012; Alston, 2016). Within these spaces, audience members encounter the emotional consequences of silence or intervention. The theatre becomes a

rehearsal for action, where empathy is not merely felt but embodied. Machon (2013) asserts, "[T]he audience's presence, perception and response are essential to the unfolding of the performance." In this sense, immersive theatre does not merely depict ethical dilemmas; it requires ethical participation. Furthermore, the affective intensity of immersive performance mirrors Bandura's concept of vicarious experience. Observing an act of injustice in an immersive space can produce psychological arousal similar to direct experience, reinforcing the potential for behaviour change. The combination of emotional immediacy and reflective distance creates a dual learning effect, visceral empathy and cognitive awareness.

The theatre's performances have been modified, and now audiences play a pivotal role in these performances. Over the years, performing arts have adopted changing social relations and technological advancements. Eagleton (1985) insists that the forms of literature are closely acquainted with "social ideologies" and the "assumptions by which certain social groups exercise and maintain power over others". As theatre is also a form of literature, immersive theatre can also be mapped in relation to other performative arts.

Conclusion

Violence against women remains a deeply entrenched global issue, often perpetuated by societal silence and bystander inaction. Immersive theatre offers a model for counteracting this passivity. By dramatising scenarios that invite audience intervention, it challenges participants to confront their own ethical positions. When audiences practice intervention within a simulated environment, they rehearse courage and moral agency. This aligns with Rohd's belief that theatre can empower communities to envision and enact change through dialogue and action. Immersive performance extends this principle by providing the emotional and psychological conditions for transformation, moving from dialogue to embodiment, from talk to feeling. In fostering empathy and awareness, immersive theatre does not impose didactic moral lessons but cultivates an experiential understanding of shared responsibility. The collective participation of audiences mirrors the collective accountability necessary to prevent violence in society.

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Biography

Takreema Aurooj is a theatre practitioner and dramatist. Her research focuses on unconventional performative art, impact of theatre on violence against women via practice-led methodologies, pedagogical implications of street theatre and immersive arts. She actively engages in activist theatre to explore how theatre can be tool for social change in third wold countries within contemporary performance ecologies. She has published in psychological journals.

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Deerak Minhaj is a researcher at the University of Malaysia, Sarawak. Their work examines the psychological effects of stage and theatre settings, with emphasis on the vibrancy of textiles in costumes and how visual and spatial elements in performance environments shape audience perception and emotional response within contemporary performance ecologies.