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From Site to Self: Immersion, Audience Research, and Polyvocality

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Utilizing multiple audience research methods, the authors of this article offer an analysis of audience research that expands notions of immersion across theatrical dramaturgies. We posit that a polyvocal audience research approach can challenge conventional understandings of theatrical immersion as primarily a material condition. Building on previous research into immersion and audience experience, we relocate the primary site of immersion from the physical conditions of performance to the internal meaning-making structures of unique audience members. We collaboratively build our analysis on a variety of performance styles. This demonstrates how attending to the multiplicity of audience experience can productively support new insights in the field of theatre and performance studies.

Keywords: *audience, immersion, immersive theatre, polyvocal, spectatorship studies*

“Immersive” reflects a valorisation of cultural forms that offer the chance to do more than “just” observe or study; they offer the chance to interact with, even to become, the object of attention.

— James Frieze, *Reframing Immersive Theatre*¹

While not always explicitly named as such, the notion of audience immersion (broadly understood as a spectator’s notable absorption into a theatrical experience) is a valued tenant in a range of theatrical genres and performance forms, from musical theatre² to theme parks³ to virtual reality⁴ and simulation.⁵ In the introduction to his edited volume, *Reframing Immersive Theatre*, James Frieze suggests that the experience and promise of immersion has increasingly come to represent a spectatorial encounter that offers “more,” and it has consequently become a successful lure for adventure-seeking cultural participants and researchers. Arguably

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the most popular manifestation of the immersion trend has been the valorization of immersive theatre and its particular understanding of the nature of the immersive phenomenon, which foregrounds a tangible, artistically curated, material world in which individual spectators physically participate. In recent scholarship, researchers have examined how theatre-makers utilize external stimuli such as space design, performer-audience interaction, and sensorial encounters to prompt immersive states for spectators.⁶ Less attention, however, has been devoted to the internal experience of audience members. To this end, Matthew Reason argues that what is needed is “a serious focus on reception processes, and an analysis of the manners in which actual audiences engage with different kinds of audience-performer relationships to produce different kinds of experience.”⁷ This article takes up Reason’s provocation and wonders how our understanding of immersion might be enhanced and deepened by the polyvocal expressions of “actual audiences” under a variety of theatrical conditions. How might multiple research methods and perspectives better facilitate an expression of complex internal processes?

Utilizing a variety of audience research methods, we advance a twofold argument. First, we argue that a polyvocal audience research approach has the potential to challenge understandings of theatrical immersion as primarily a material condition. This attends to a research gap in which there is a general lack of engagement with empirical audience research and multiple spectator voices, including around immersion.⁸ To address a pervasive conflation between immersion and materiality, we begin with the genre of immersive theatre to consider how these performances are likely to produce, or fail to produce, experiences of immersion. Second, we intervene in the scholarly discourse of immersion by relocating the primary site of production from the physical, tangible conditions of performance to internal meaning-making structures of audience members or, as Kirsty Sedgman encourages, away from intention toward reception.⁹ Weaving together these two arguments, our analysis moves from conventional immersive theatre, through black box theatre, to online performance, in order to demonstrate how audience data confront the conventional link between physical and mental immersion across theatrical forms.

A Polyvocal Audience Approach

In her 2017 survey of audience expertise, Kirsty Sedgman advocates for a turn toward audience research and calls for researchers to actively partner with a variety of audience members about their sense-making processes in the theatre.¹⁰ Part of the benefit of audience research is the collaborative and polyvocal impulses that inflect several of its key methodologies. Such research frequently utilizes empirical methods like qualitative interviews or surveys that involve direct or indirect interfacing between researchers and spectators. The interactive dimension of these methods infuses much audience research with a collaborative ethos wherein initial meaning-making or analysis of a show occurs in conversation with spectators. These

methods also frequently surface a multitude of perspectives by foregrounding the experiences of concrete—and necessarily unique—audience members. Factors include: the recognition that each spectator carries within themselves their own unique “horizon of expectation,”¹¹ or frame;¹² the spectators’ self-perception as an art-engager and overall human being;¹³ their orientation toward the material and social conditions of the theatre space;¹⁴ their synthesis of the individual contributions of a company of artists; and their individual response to the circulations of energy within the theatre.¹⁵ Collectively, these factors contribute to spectators having distinct experiences within a performance.

We consider audiences to be inherently *polyvocal*, a term we use that stems from the fields of music and literature and, more specifically, from the broader term *polyphony*. In Western music theory, *polyphony* refers to music where several distinct melodies are played simultaneously. Drawing from the musical notion of polyphony, Mikhail Bakhtin uses the term to describe narratives that include multiple points of view or multiple voices. It is from Bakhtin’s usage of polyphony that *polyvocal* literature—writing that utilizes multiple, distinct, voices—first emerges.¹⁶ One of the key tenets of Bakhtin’s notion of polyphony is an emphasis on the dialogic: the production of knowledge (what Bakhtin referred to as “truth”) from the point of contact of multiple points of view.¹⁷ For Bakhtin, the inclusion of multiple perspectives in a narrative offers dialogic modes of knowledge creation that challenge monologic notions of truth.¹⁸ Extending from this resistant impulse of polyphony, the related notion of polyvocality has been utilized in a range of fields from literature to anthropology to drama.¹⁹ Writing of polyvocal methods in playwriting, Paul Castagno notes that polyvocality has the potential “to resist the notion of the single authorial and character voice in favor of disparate voices, language strategies, media and dramaturgies” and, in so doing, can “break down hegemonies that privilege the single playwright’s voice.”²⁰ Similarly, we suggest that a polyvocal audience research method has the potential to foreground distinct spectatorial perspectives, thereby unsettling the single scholar perspective. If the gift and the challenge of participatory—and immersive—theatre is, as Frieze writes, “that it entreats us to appreciate the value of thinking of experiential, expressive, and critical faculties as inseparable, calling on us to experience from first- and third-person, insider and outsider perspectives, often in the same instant,”²¹ then a polyvocal methodology capable of capturing these multiple facets of experience seems necessary to understand this theatrical phenomenon.

Each of the four authors of this article realized the limits of our epistemological and methodological strategies and capacities while working alone on our datasets. An individual researcher is necessarily limited by their interpretive frameworks, much as a single spectator only contributes one voice to the polyphony of audience perspectives. In bringing together multiple researchers, we widen the horizon of listening perspectives, and in featuring a variety of spectator voices, we amplify the already existing, but potentially unheard, chorus of spectator experience. Our

approach consisted of three different components that foregrounded multiple voices across phases and types of research.

First, we used a mixed method approach, an umbrella term that encloses a variety of research methods with a special interest in combining qualitative and quantitative methods.²² Specifically, we brought together audience data from previous research projects that focused on questions and experiences of immersion, absorption, material conditions, and cognitive experiences as related to theatre performances in Toronto. We used qualitative interview data collected by two different researchers that examined productions by the immersive theatre company Outside the March. The first of these shows took place in 2016 and was an in-person production called *TomorrowLove*TM, while the second show was the online performance *The Stream You Step In*, which took place in 2020. We also included quantitative survey data from four additional productions by Toronto theatre companies: Mixed Theatre Company's Boalian production *Shelf Life* (2016); feminist theatre company Nightwood's exploration of religion in the debate-style piece *Unholy* (2017); Theatre Gargantua's experimental and devised performance about memory, *Reflector* (2017); and Volcano Theatre's postdramatic *Century Song* (2017), a Black woman's embodied engagement with twentieth-century art. None of these shows were formally immersive theatre, but each imagined an absorbed audience.²³ Bringing together this variety of datasets from stylistically distinct performances was a deliberate attempt to dislodge theories of immersion that are problematically fixed by form-centric interpretation.

Second, we undertook collaborative analysis and writing. The four authors of this article, the current co-directors of the Centre for Spectatorship and Audience Research, are each trained in different research methods and approaches. Prior to this project, we had worked together for several years in seminars, conferences, and editorial work; this laid the foundation for rigorous exchange and an environment of intellectual trust. In the process of exchange, we became aware of the research gaps around a general theory of immersion. To begin our work for this project, we started by exchanging datasets. We also shared our initial findings and analysis. We then worked dialogically and collaboratively to combine methods and undertake multimodal analyses that are further explained in this article. Practically, this involved bimonthly virtual discussion and co-writing sessions over a period of a year. To highlight audience perspectives and increase clarity of presentation in text, we harmonized our voices. Both our communal and individual perspectives, nevertheless, remain present through the aforementioned procedural elements.

Finally, throughout the writing process we integrated multiple audience voices into the text itself. As Sedgman argues, "To fail to listen to how audiences themselves articulate their own experiences is to shirk the urgent responsibility of understanding the ways differing individuals imagine and make sense of our shared social world."²⁴ Sometimes, audience voices are featured through lengthy interview quotations or written reactions. Other times, spectator perspectives are represented

through the presentation of survey results or data visualization charts. In each case, however, spectators' voices are explicitly featured alongside the researchers'. In utilizing this approach, we aim to demonstrate how polyvocal audience research that combines not only mixed methods but also mixed researcher perspectives, distinct productions, and different contexts might not only unsettle a single authorial voice but also renew or otherwise intervene in theatrical conversations about immersion.

It is important to note the limitations of this dialogical method; these data exist from prior research projects and span different shows, contexts, audience members, and researchers. Our interest was in bringing these datasets together and putting them into conversation with each other to explore the potential of a polyvocal method that combines such disparate information: What might Jacobson's qualitative interview data have to say to Mealey's quantitative survey data? What patterns and contradictions might we find across data? Such dialogic questions are particularly pertinent to the examination of theatrical immersion wherein research has tended to extrapolate experiences of immersion from individual researcher's personal experiences, overheard anecdotal evidence, and/or observable audience behaviors.²⁵ These approaches offer important insights about immersive experience but may also risk generalizing spectator experiences, thereby eliding important areas of difference. Studies that do engage audience voices have tended to be limited by narrow sample sizes and specificity on one production or one company.²⁶ As Reason writes, "Such is simply the nature of empirical research."²⁷ However, by analyzing across datasets, contexts, and researcher backgrounds, a strong "meta-understanding of how audiences engage" and understand immersion is possible.²⁸ Further, as our collaboration across datasets and data types suggests, there is insight to be gained not in synthesizing difference, but attending to different experiences of theatrical immersion in different theatrical forms and research conducted through different methods by different researchers.

From Speculation to Spectator: The Paradox of Immersive Theatre

Our examination of immersion in theatre begins with the genre of immersive theatre. As noted earlier, in the twenty-first century, immersion has most frequently received attention vis-à-vis the emergent genre of immersive theatre, which hinges on the full incorporation of spectators into a fictional playworld. A variety of scholars have investigated immersive theatre through a wide array of lenses, but it is generally agreed that immersive theatre is a performance form that emphasizes the importance of space and design; curates tangible, sensual environments; and focuses on personal, individual audience experience.²⁹ Despite its fringe beginnings, immersive theatre quickly gained popularity, in part due to the success of the theatre company Punchdrunk. Established in London in 1999, Punchdrunk has had huge commercial success with large-scale immersive projects like *Sleep No More* (2011–present), *The Drowned Man* (2013–2014), and *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007–2008). Such productions have made Punchdrunk, to quote the

Telegraph, “The game-changing company who’ve done more to catapult this kind of work into the heart of our culture than any other.”³⁰ Much of the appeal of immersive theatre is its promise of a more autonomous, more active spectator: an audience member who, rather than sitting quietly and presumably passively in a theatre, might independently explore a fully designed space; in so doing, they might have a deeply personal and individualized experience in which they can be touch, hear, see, smell, and even taste the world they find themselves in. To this end, Gareth White fittingly defines immersive theatre as “a trend for performances which use installations and expansive environments, which have mobile audiences, and which invite audience participation.”³¹ The notion, in particular, of an enclosed world separate from reality and available for spectator exploration is reflected in the words of Punchdrunk’s artistic director Felix Barrett, who describes how his shows aim to “keep the lid closed so no light from the real world enters in, figuratively or literally!”³² The notion of audience members becoming immersed within the fiction is key: Barrett goes on to say that if “ever an audience becomes aware of themselves as audience, then we’ve probably slightly failed.”³³ This, as Andrew Filmer argues, means that the “encouragement of reflexive awareness sits at odds with immersive theatre that valorizes immediacy, sensuality.”³⁴

Filmer’s suspicion of immersive theatre’s spectatorial folk wisdom echoes other calls for reexaminations of “immersion” and has prompted scholars to reconsider how immersion is understood in theatre and performance studies. For instance, Rose Biggin advocates for a distinction between immersive theatre and immersive experience, the latter of which, she argues, can be produced in situations beyond so-called immersive theatre: “A new way of looking at audience experience in a form of theatre that is often characterized by certain aesthetic signifiers or audience configurations.”³⁵ To this end, in his introduction to his 2016 edited collection, Frieze begins to answer the call to “interrogate both the term ‘immersive’ and the claims that have been made about various kinds of performance that the term ‘immersive’...might be used to describe.”³⁶ One of the most useful ideas that Frieze offers is the concept of “resistant immersion,” which “acknowledges the dichotomous nature of maintaining the critical distance needed to make sense of a new and disorienting experience whilst surrendering to intimate engagement.”³⁷ Frieze is writing specifically about the challenges of scholar audience members who try to both maintain critical distance and engage in sensory immediacy, as they simultaneously have the experience and process its implications. This duality of awareness not only seems to be in direct contradiction with the goals articulated by Punchdrunk’s Felix Barrett, but we argue may be even more representative of typical audiencing than Frieze imagines.

Our own research provides empirical evidence of resistant immersion as a paradoxical hallmark of immersive theatre. In examining our qualitative audience data from *TomorrowLove*TM—an immersive experience staged in Toronto in December 2016 by the production company Outside the March—an awareness

of self was pervasive in the audience experience.³⁸ In this performance, audience members gathered in a transformed funeral home and were guided around the building in small groups by actors who performed a variety of short, independent vignettes about the future of dating, relationships, and love in a digitized world. As the audience member Sara articulates below, it was possible to be physically “inside” the sensory and immediate world of the immersive theatre experience while still also feeling “outside” its conceptual and linear restraints:

SARA: It’s funny that you asked how we define reality...I didn’t get a connection so deep that I forgot that I was here. It was all the time very clear that I was not inserted in that story—I was watching.

INTERVIEWER: You were still in the real world.

SARA: I was watching people in a scene. So, I think that was very clear. Even though we were crossing the actors’ spaces, I didn’t feel inside anything.

Sara, contrary to most ideas of immersion, did not feel “inside” anything. This would typically be seen as “resistant” or even “failed” immersion. However, notions of being either “inside” or “outside” the immersive playworld were further complicated by the words of another audience member, Adam, who described in a lengthy reflection how being “inside” the performance also encouraged him to consider his life “outside” the performance. He thus experiences being *both* inside and outside the world of the play. Further, he began to consider other possibilities in other imagined possible worlds. He was experiencing, therefore, not just one immersive playworld he was inside or outside of, but multiple real and imagined projections of other worlds occurring simultaneously.

ADAM: For me, I could relate to almost everything that I saw so far, like I would be thinking back to oh would I—if I were watching me and like the person that I was involved with doing this, is this how it would sound, is this how it would play out? And then also thinking because this was like multiple people, multiple roles, like if this was a guy and girl how would it play out?... It was a lot to process because I felt it was very real because also just the fact that it was kind of like—I found it like a choose your own adventure book.

Part of Adam’s described experience was invited by the show’s unique form, in which two of the eight actors learned each of the thirty possible roles across the fifteen vignettes. Actors might play different roles in the vignettes on different nights, or play them in a different sequence. Audience members were also able to

choose which actor to follow after each vignette (an example of the independent exploration featured in most immersive theatre experiences) but could only watch a total of four of the fifteen vignettes on any given night. An awareness of the many possible permutations of the performance in this case deepened audience members' experiences of polyvocality; by imagining the many possible responses of his fellow spectators, audience member Josef was able to consider the myriad empathic potentials of theatre-going.

JOSEF: I think there was a moment when I was watching the third scene and I sat down and I realized that everyone else in the theatre had watched two other scenes beforehand. Or maybe they had or they hadn't. Maybe they'd seen a combination of two. And I realized sort of that these people are coming into the scene with maybe completely different emotions. Maybe they saw a happy ending, maybe they saw a sad ending. Could be a different context. Maybe they followed the same actor all the way through, maybe they feel like it's the same character, maybe they feel like it's different characters. And that really just highlighted the fact that you're telling this one story, but everyone is going to see it in a completely different way. Everyone will project whatever they want onto it, whatever they feel onto it, and that, that made it feel really real. That made it feel alive. Whereas when you're looking at a photo it's the same, it's the same photo. When you're looking at this play, how your day is or whether you're cold or hot could change—could completely change how you feel about the characters.

These audience remarks suggest that rather than “keeping the lid on tight,” spectators are prone to moments of self-awareness and reflection that pull them out of the fiction. Sara, Josef, and Adam, however, are not merely engaging in transgressive responses to immersive theatre through their reflexivity. They are demonstrating that spectator awareness of self can actually foster intimate engagement and immersion that is not dependent on material or physical proximity. The turn toward self-reflection may create distance from the artistic product but it is not necessarily affectively distancing; in fact, self-reflection is what Josef suggests generates a felt sense of realness and aliveness. Such responses thus prompt us to reconsider what the experience of immersion actually is for spectators. While in immersive theatre the invocation of immersion is predominantly determined by the production style—in all of the materiality of the set and environment that the audience member is dropped into—as Ramos, Dunne-Howrie, Maravala, and Simon declare in their post-immersive manifesto, “We should not care about WHAT is immersive, as

much as we must care about HOW is immersive, WHO is immersive BY and who is it FOR?”³⁹ The audience members quoted earlier suggest the need to move beyond the “what” of immersion towards the “how” and the “who,” to explore the processes of immersion rather than immersive products.

From Immersive Theatre to Immersion: Decentering Physical Materiality

To help reorient our understanding of immersion, we undertook a literature review of scholarship that examines precisely this “how” and “who” of theatrical immersion. We identified three core facets of immersion that suggest the necessity of understanding immersion as patently *not* tied to physical materiality. First, “immersion” typically describes experiences where the spectator is drawn into a different world; namely, the storyworld. This may provide the ontological foundation for the term *transportation*, which has been an ongoing dramaturgical process assumed by theorists,⁴⁰ educators,⁴¹ and even cultural economists.⁴² However, the world need not necessarily be the fully realized physical sensory environment encountered in immersive theatre. Second, a spectator’s perception of immersion hinges on their perceived ability to actively engage with or participate in the storyworld. Various theorists have characterized immersed audiences as visitors to a foreign world,⁴³ tandem co-players,⁴⁴ or even the major performers.⁴⁵ Again, this participation may take a variety of forms aside from physical engagement including “merely” attending the performance from a static, darkened theatre seat. Third, and perhaps most critically, there is a perceived cognitive proximity, or closeness, on the part of the spectator between the storyworld and their own personal lives.⁴⁶ As with the previous immersive facets, this proximity can be psychological rather than necessarily physical.

In order to examine how spectators might understand immersion and cognate ideas of absorption, intimacy, and engagement across theatrical forms, we move from the aforementioned consideration of audience experience in immersive theatre to audience experience in nonimmersive theatre productions. To do, so we use the survey responses of 173 spectators who participated in the *Recollections of an Audience* (RoAA) project. This project collected data at four shows staged in Toronto: *Shelf Life* (2016),⁴⁷ *Century Song* (2017),⁴⁸ *Reflector* (2017),⁴⁹ and *Unholy* (2017).⁵⁰ *Shelf Life* was a forum theatre piece by the Boalian artists Mixed Company Theatre that explored intergenerational family conflicts and solicited counternarratives from volunteers in the audience in its second act. *Century Song*, produced by the avant-garde Volcano Theatre, invited spectators to thoughtfully witness a Black woman’s danced, sung, and costumed response to major epochs in the twentieth century. In *Reflector*, intermedial artists Theatre Gargantua asked its audiences, sometimes in direct address, to challenge their certainties about memories and social images through a mélange of magical electronic images, dance, rap, and brief narrative scenes. *Unholy* was a classic “well-made” narrative play

made by the influential feminist company Nightwood Theatre, featuring an all-female religious debate between religious and nonreligious pairs in which audience members were positioned as judges who would vote for an eventual winner. Unlike *TomorrowLove*TM, none of these shows were marketed or advertised as immersive. Interestingly, however, as seen in figure 1, nearly 95 percent of the 173 survey responses from audience members attending these shows reported feeling at least sometimes immersed in the world of the play. Given that all four of the plays were staged in a traditional proscenium-like environment, with the vast majority of the audience seated separately from the performance space,⁵¹ it can be safely assumed that these spectators understood both immersion and the playworld to be imaginative constructs. While their imaginations travelled and co-labored in the affect of transportation (identified earlier as a facet of immersion), their physical bodies did not need to move or even sit in the midst of the artistic creation in order to feel embedded within the play.

Fig. 1. Degree to which spectators felt immersed in the world of the play.

It is also clear that while it was rare to report less than some sense of immersion, there was still important variance in the degree to which they each felt immersed. There was never an instant in which a single group of audience members reported exactly the same level of immersion,⁵² despite watching the same performance from relatively similar physical positions. This would seem to suggest that internal conditions may best account for the polyvocal evaluation of one’s immersive encounter—more so than the sensory artistic objects or material environment to which the spectators are jointly exposed. At the very least, it lends credibility to Sedgman’s permission-based model, in which immersion “can be usefully seen not as something done to audiences, nor even as something that performances enable audiences to experience, but rather as something that audiences allow a performance to do to them.”⁵³

Following on from this idea, it is worth considering what type of internal conditions are most likely to increase the level of permission and therefore the degree of immersion felt by a given audience member. Using a statistical technique known as multiple regression, we used the same RoaA data to examine whether these spectators’ identity markers (e.g., gender, education level), their past artistic experiences (e.g., how many shows they attended in the past year), their preference for particular artist elements (e.g., relatable characters, strong sensory elements, helps make practical choices), or their other in-show experiences (e.g., felt they learned something new) might partially predict the level of immersion they felt they had experienced. Given this information, the most generalizable and predictive model suggests that four factors influence over half (52.1 percent) of the likely response to the statement “I felt immersed in the world of the play.” By far the strongest predictor, representing more than half of the total influence, was the degree to which they felt “watching this show was a positive experience for [themselves].” Their level of immersion depended next most on their assessment of how often they felt “this show [had] forced [them] to think.” This was followed by the degree to which spectators had previously conceptualized theatre as a place that reflected and informed the actualities of their life (*the mirror-centric disposition*), which unlike the other factors had a negative impact on immersion: the more spectators felt the show should reflect, or mirror, their everyday reality, the less likely they were to feel immersed. Finally, the least powerful predictor was the spectator’s highest level of completed education, which given its low impact and questionable categories,⁵⁴ will not be addressed in this article.

Fig. 2. Major forces predicting degree of immersion [MC = mirror-centric].

As depicted in figure 2, the degree to which a spectator felt their encounter was a positive experience was three times more predictive of immersion than the next largest factor. Indeed, in receptive studies spanning from childhood media

sense-making⁵⁵ up to critical evaluations of visual arts among adults,⁵⁶ positive evaluation is most associated with the perception that the audience member has successfully and skillfully interpreted a somewhat challenging performance and/or art object—a state of mind that often seems to be colloquially indicated by the phrase “I got it” or more often negatively phrased “I didn’t get it.” This corresponds with the trends in the RoaA responses that emphasize how successful processing of genuinely new information subsequently increased levels of positivity, and therefore immersion. For instance, audience member H. A., who reported the highest possible degree of positivity, immersion, and learning, described that he felt “immersed,” “challenged,” “rewarded” and “delighted.”⁵⁷ He also noted excitedly that he had been challenged by *new* ideas about “identity, personhood, race relations, gender relations and purpose of art!” The important nuance is that this newness is connected to the *ideas* in the play, rather than an evaluation of the technical artistry or artistic skill in the performance.

Moving to the second predictive factor, perceived immersion was meaningfully influenced by the degree to which spectators were actively encouraged to engage in meaningful cognition assessment throughout the play (“forced to think”). This is more than a simple perusal of the artistic offering; in fact, spectators who shared that their first memories of the show were focused on aesthetic elements (e.g., lighting, projections, design) also felt they had been “forced to think” less frequently. Something within the diegesis of the production had to draw the spectator into deep engagement with the subject matter; a featured idea or situation from the show becomes pressing. This is bolstered by the association between increases in feeling “forced to think” and reported changes in opinions or attitudes as a consequence of the show, each of which we see as being related to feeling deeply moved by a performance. The act of taking up a performance’s invitation to reconsider larger issues or ideas is connected to an affective and cognitive state that feels like, and perhaps requires, deeper immersion in the world of the play. Recalling the qualitative data in the previous section, it is perhaps why Sara seems to indicate what might be perceived as a negative experience of immersion. For Sara, the failure to “feel anything” about the performance or to feel “connected” to the deeper ideas the artists were presenting may have been an attempt to convey that she was “not inserted into the story” and was merely “crossing the actors’ spaces.” This would seem to suggest that a state of psychological immersion into the world of the play must be created before one moves into a state of self-reflection.

Immersion, then, needs to be a consequence of an audience member first attending to the feelings and thinking within an artistically generated world, which may then lead them to consider their own memories and circumstances. This suggests that the immersive state depends on a theatrical offering that acts as a prompt for meaningful engagement of the self in relation to the world of the show. This might, for instance, happen when an audience member imaginatively inserts themselves into the diegesis of the scene.⁵⁸ Importantly, the data suggest that this

is a specific relationality between the playworld and the self. When a spectator expects to see their own life experience reflected in the performance (mirror-centric disposition) it appears to diminish their experience of immersion. Similarly, when a spectator finds themselves outside the playworld (e.g., contemplating the aesthetic choices made by the artists), this also seems to dampen their state of immersion. The latter is the distinction between Sara and Josef from the earlier *TomorrowLove™* interviews. Josef's self-reflection is predicated on an understanding of the show's core ideas about relationships and empathy; his consideration of the other audience members reflects the thematic core of the show. He says, "Everyone will project whatever they want onto it, whatever they feel onto it, and that, that made it feel really real. That made it feel alive." He thus remains immersed perceptually. Alternatively, Sara's self-awareness is focused on the artistic structures of the play and her inability to be engaged within it: "I was watching people in a scene. So I think that was very clear. Even though we were crossing the actors' spaces, I didn't feel inside anything." She uses the language of theatrical machinery—actors and spaces—rather than the content of the play in her descriptions, marking herself as psychologically outside of the playworld even as she was physically immersed within it.

From Co-Presence to Imaginative Partnerships: Polyvocal Immersion in a Digital Moment

Having now examined data from both immersive and nonimmersive productions, we wish to make one final turn and consider the possibilities of immersion in theatre streamed online. Recently, there has been a surge of work that examines livestreaming theatrical performance (often taking particular interest in large-scale UK productions).⁵⁹ These online offerings have led theorists to wonder if the digital medium might displace the necessity for co-presence in the theatre-going experience⁶⁰ and debate whether streamed productions limit the agency of the spectator⁶¹ or emancipate them.⁶² Erin Sullivan's recent empirical work on absorbed spectators who attend streaming theatre performances—eerily prescient of the COVID-19 era in which we write—would seem to suggest that immersion is produced in a wide variety of theatrical experiences if we move beyond the concept of physical immersion.⁶³ In a survey of her work and other major UK studies streaming performances in the last decade,⁶⁴ Sullivan found that between 69 percent and 88 percent of spectators who watched live-streamed theatre agreed or strongly agreed that they felt "totally absorbed by the streaming performance."⁶⁵ This is a finding that disrupts important assumptions that have been held not only about immersion but theatre itself. Co-presence has long been held to be a fundamental and differentiating trait of theatre relative to digital performances.⁶⁶ Sullivan's work, however, suggests that in multiple instances digital theatre-goers felt no ill effects when their bodies were not physically present with the bodies of the performers. Even more surprising, one of these studies offered a direct comparison of the response

of live and digital spectators and both groups reported similar levels of emotional engagement and transportation.⁶⁷

These findings further trouble immersive theatre's assumptions that immersive experiences depend on bodies that engage in direct haptic encounters with an affectively tactile world, and perhaps broader assumptions about theatre's dependence on physical architectures designed to promote liminality. There are additional disruptions in current studies investigating COVID-19-era streaming theatre. An interesting example comes from *The Stream You Step*, a series of Zoom-based plays from November 2020 co-produced by Outside the March and the University of Windsor.⁶⁸ Audience member Madison, referencing Karen Hine's *The River of Forgetfulness* (the second in the series), explained her immersive experience relative to past encounters with television and in-person theatre.⁶⁹

I definitely felt more immersed in these performances than I would TV. It felt like the whole area around me was just these plays, which is something I've never felt with watching a TV show or movie or anything, which was really, really cool. And then with theater. I almost...I really love live theatre. Don't get me wrong, but I almost like this experience better because it was like, again, I was, it was by myself and everything surrounding me was the play. So it was, it was definitely different. But it was not worse.

Madison realizes she is stepping into a type of receptive heresy ("I really love live theatre. Don't get me wrong"), but she feels she must concede the Zoom play was perhaps more immersive than her typical in-person experience. This was particularly surprising to her, she would go on to share, because it all took place in a terribly quotidian space ("which makes it even more crazy that I was so in with the place [depicted by the show]"). She watched the production on a regular-sized laptop in her own bedroom with the lights all on and not in conditions that might be associated with in-person theatre, virtual reality technologies (e.g., a VR headset, surround sound), or even a darkened movie theatre. Unlike immersive theatre, then, she was not surrounded by an actual tactile playworld, nor was she engaged in physically moving through the performance. And yet, her immersive encounter seemed to be intertwined with inner perceptions that she had previously affiliated with first-person physical engagements and presence. When asked to explain her experience, she adopted strongly personalized and embodied language: she describes seeing and walking with the characters in their world—"We, not just them"—which she "swear[s] I could hear all around me outside my headphones." The fully dimensionalized journey she describes is at odds with the actual constrained, two-dimensional images the artists could offer on Zoom. This suggests she is strongly and personally engaged in an imaginative projection of a physical world, affording

her a strong sense of her own simulated movement through it. When the conditions are right, it would seem that spectators partner in their own immersive state; this includes building a joint world with the artists that in turn produces not just reflections on the thematic content of the show but also, potentially, sensations that affectively mirror embodied perception and action. As with the audience members featured earlier—across a variety of theatrical productions—this suggests that experiences of immersion are at least moderately connected to a cognitive state. The mind is at least semi-exclusively focused on processing the meaning of the play or relating it to one's previous experiences, rather than becoming entirely consumed within the sensory machine of the immersive environment. Immersion, then, appears not to be limited to an audience member's experiences of physical, material, or haptic engagement with a playworld, but may also be provoked by one's individuated, personal response to a show during one's experience of that show.

Notably, this understanding of immersion also, by its nature, invites a polyvocal understanding: audience members each, in their own minds, may have immersive experiences that are unique and formed by their own dispositions, identities, backgrounds, etc. Indeed, to return to Josef's description of imagining the empathic potential of his fellow audience members at *TomorrowLove*TM. He imagined others

coming into the scene with maybe completely different emotions. Maybe they saw a happy ending, maybe they saw a sad ending. Could be a different context...And that really just highlighted the fact that you're telling this one story, but everyone is going to see it in a completely different way. Everyone will project whatever they want onto it, whatever they feel onto it, and that, that made it feel really real.

Audience member Julian similarly imagined multiple other possibilities of audience interpretation:

It just makes me start thinking that this is how these people are experiencing it and how they're interpreting it but that's not the only way this storyline can be told and the only way it can affect people...Like afterwards you start thinking about how it could affect other people but me I'm like I just happened to walk into the room with this performer, instead of that performer and that shifted how like that story's being told to me right now.

While Frieze and others may identify this as resistant immersion or nonimmersion, an understanding of immersion as a reflective internal state suggests that his experience actually was immersive—just not in the way we might typically understand it to be.

Coda: Polyvocal Futures

As we have suggested throughout, audiences are complicated collections of individuals, and it is this complexity that invites a methodological polyphony composed of many investigative melodies and voices. The interventions offered by a polyvocal research approach emphasize the importance of a collaborative ethos in audience research that parallels the imaginative co-creation between artist and spectator: foregrounding multiple perspectives across distinct phases of research necessitates querying, consulting, and working with the words and responses of a range of individuals. By venturing across seemingly disparate theatrical forms and using a range of emic investigative tools, including vocalized, written, and quantified receptions, we productively trouble misunderstanding of the artist-audience relationship, such as idealizing materiality, that have been maintained through siloed and researcher-centric analysis.

While the work presented in this piece is preliminary, it offers a glimpse into the potential insight that might be achieved through such polyvocal approaches. Theories of theatrical immersion have tended to locate immersive experiences in the external world of the scenography. The initial data presented in this paper suggests that this is not the case; the interior meaning-making frames of audience members appear to play a key role in experiences of immersion. This signals the importance of attending to concrete spectatorial experience: such experiences might confirm or complicate previous understandings of key terms. Such attention, in turn, reminds us how attending to the multiplicity of audience experience can productively support new insights in the field of theatre and performance studies. A reoriented conceptualization of immersion, drawn from a collaborative application of discrete audience research methods, can help reinvigorate discussion of this, and perhaps other still-important terms.

Notes

1. James Frieze, "Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance," in *Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance*, ed. James Frieze (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1.
2. Stacy Ellen Wolf, *Beyond Broadway: The Pleasure and Promise of Musical Theatre across America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
3. Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson, "You're in the Parade! Disney as Immersive Theatre and the Tourist as Actor," in *Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience*, ed. Jennifer Kokai and Tom Robinson (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 3–20; Maurya Wickstrom, *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and its Theatrical Seductions* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Scott A. Lukas, ed., *A Reader in Themed and Immersive Spaces*. (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2016).
4. Steve Dixon, "A History of Virtual Reality in Performance," *International Journal of Performance Arts & Digital Media* 2, no. 1 (2006): 23–54; Mark Reaney, "Virtual Reality and the Theatre: Immersion in Virtual Worlds," *Digital Creativity* 10, no. 3 (1999): 183–88.
5. Natalie Alvarez, *Immersion in Cultural Difference: Tourism, War, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018); Scott Magelssen, *Simming: Participatory Performance and the Making of Meaning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).
6. Frieze, *Reframing Immersive Theatre*; Caroline Heim, *Actors and Audiences: Conversations in the Electric Air* (Routledge, 2020); Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

7. Matthew Reason, "Introduction to Part 2: *Participations* on Participation: Researching the 'Active' Theatre Audience," *Participations* 12, no. 1 (2015): 275.

8. For a general discussion on the lack of audience research in theatre studies, see Janelle Reinelt, "What UK Spectators Know: Understanding How We Come to Value Theatre," *Theatre Journal* 66, no. 3 (2014): 261–337; Linda M. Park-Fuller, "Audienicing the Audience: Playback Theatre, Performative Writing, and Social Activism," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2003): 288–310; Helen Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Notable exceptions to this paucity of audience research into immersive theatre include the journal issue *Participations* 12, no. 1, edited by Matthew Reason and Kirsty Sedgman. Within this issue, articles use various forms of data such as audience comments submitted to a company website. See Rose Biggin, "Reading Fan Mail: Communicating Immersive Experience in Punchdrunk's *Faust* and *The Masque of Red Death*," *Participations* 12, no. 1 (2015): 301–17; and written reflective student responses: Jan Wozniak, "The Value of Being Together? Audiences in Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man*," *Participations* 12, no. 1 (2015): 318–32. Rose Biggin, *Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience: Space, Game and Story in the Work of Punchdrunk* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) should also be noted for its investigation into audience response to immersive theatre.

9. Kirsty Sedgman, "Ladies and Gentlemen Follow Me, Please Put on Your Beards: Risk, Rules, and Audience Reception in National Theatre Wales," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 27, no. 2 (2017): 160.

10. Kirsty Sedgman, "Audience Experience in an Anti-Expert Age: A Survey of Theatre Audience Research," *Theatre Research International* 42, no. 3 (2017): 307–22.

11. Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

12. See, for example, Susan Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past* (London: Routledge, 2013); Henri Schoenmakers, "The Spectator in the Leading Role," in *New Directions in Theatre Research*, ed. Willmar Sauter (Munksgaard, Denmark: Nordic Theatre Studies, 1990), 93–106; John Tulloch, *Performing Culture: Stories of Expertise and the Everyday* (London: Sage Publications, 1999).

13. See, for example, Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience*.

14. See, for example, Richard Knowles, *How Theatre Means* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 1990).

15. See, for example, Caroline Heim, *Audience as Performer: The Changing Role of Theatre Audiences in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2015); and Nicholas Ridout, "Welcome to the Vibratorium," *Senses and Society* 3, no. 2 (2008): 221–32.

16. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 8 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

17. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 60–61.

18. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 83–85.

19. See, for example, Cath Arnold and Carmel Brennan, "Polyvocal Ethnography as a Means of Developing Inter-Cultural Understanding of Pedagogy and Practice," *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 21, no. 3 (2013): 353–69; Joseph Tobin and Dana Davidson, "The Ethics of Polyvocal Ethnography: Empowering vs. Textualizing Children and Teachers," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 3, no. 3 (1990): 271–83; Paul Castagno, ed., *Collaborative Playwriting: Polyvocal Approaches from the EU Collective Plays Project* (London: Routledge, 2020).

20. Castagno, *Collaborative Playwriting*, 12.

21. Frieze, *Reframing Immersive Theatre*, 4.

22. See, for example, Daphne Watkins and Deborah Gioia, *Mixed Methods Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

23. This conclusion is based on interviews between the researcher (Mealey) and the theatre artists.

24. Kirsty Sedgman, "On Rigour in Theatre Audience Research," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 29, no. 4 (2019): 465.

25. See, for example, Machon, *Immersive Theatres*; Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Keren Zaiontz, "Ambulatory Audiences and Animate Sites: Staging the Spectator in Site-Specific Performance," in *Performing Site-Specific Theatre: Politics, Place, Practice*, ed. Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 167–81; Keren Zaiontz, "Narcissistic Spectatorship in Immersive and One-on-One Performance," *Theatre Journal* 66, no. 3 (2014): 405–25.

26. Such as Biggin, *Immersive Theatre and Audience*; Sedgman, "Ladies and Gentlemen"; Wozniak, "The Value of Being."
27. Reason, "Introduction to Part 2," 276.
28. Reason, "Introduction to Part 2," 276.
29. See Adam Alston *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Carina E. I. Westling, *Immersion and Participation in Punchdrunk's Theatrical Worlds* (London: Methuen Drama, 2020); Emi Hamana, "A Cognitive Approach to Shakespeare Plays in Immersive Theatre: With a Special Focus on Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* in New York (2011–) and Shanghai (2016–)," *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance* 21, no. 36 (2020): 13–26; Gareth White, "On Immersive Theatre," *Theatre Research International* 37, no. 3 (2012): 221–35; Doris Kolesch, Theresa Schütz, and Sophie Nikoleit, eds., *Staging Spectators in Immersive Performances: Commit Yourself!* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Machon, *Immersive Theatres*; Marvin Carlson, "Immersive theatre and the reception process," *Forum Modernes Theater* 27, no. 1 (2012): 17–25; Stephen M. Eckert, "What is Immersive Theater?" *Contemporary Performance*, December 9, 2017, <https://contemporaryperformance.com/2017/12/09/immersive-theater/>.
30. Dominic Cavendish, "Punchdrunk: Plunge into a World of Extraordinary Theatre," *Telegraph*, June 20, 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-features/10127892/Punchdrunk-plunge-into-a-world-of-extraordinary-theatre.html>.
31. Gareth White, "On Immersive Theatre," *Theatre Research International* 37, no. 3 (2012): 221.
32. Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, 161.
33. Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, 161.
34. Frieze, *Reframing Immersive Theatre*, 4.
35. Biggin, *Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience*, 1.
36. Frieze, *Reframing Immersive Theatre*, 3.
37. Frieze, *Reframing Immersive Theatre*, 5.
38. Interviews with audience members of *TomorrowLove™* were conducted December 2–4, 2016, in Toronto. All interview subjects are represented by a pseudonym.
39. Jorge Lopes Ramos, Joseph Dunne-Howrie, Persis Jadé Maravala and Bart Simon, "The Post-Immersive Manifesto," *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 16, no. 2 (2020): 196.
40. August Wilhelm von Schlegel, "Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature," in *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*, ed. Bernard Dukore (New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston, 1974), 493–515.
41. Elinor Fuchs, "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play," *Theater* 34, no. 2 (2004): 4–9.
42. The authors use the term *escape* in place of *transportation*, but engage with similar notions of immersion as movement. See Joseph B. Pine and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theater & Every Business a Stage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), 34–55.
43. Rose Biggin, *Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience*.
44. Julia M. Ritter, *Tandem Dances: Choreographing Immersive Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
45. Kirsty Sedgman, *Locating the Audience: How People Found Value in National Theatre Wales* (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2016).
46. See Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Adam J. Ledger, "Caravania!: Intimacy and Immersion for Family Audiences," in *Reframing Immersive Theatre*, ed. James Frieze (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 145–50.
47. Mixed Company Theatre, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://mixedcompanytheatre.com>.
48. "Century Song," Volcano Non-Profit Productions Inc., accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.volcano.ca/centurysong>.
49. "Reflector," Theatre Gargantua, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://theatregargantua.ca/reflector/>.
50. "Unholy," JTM Unholy Inc., accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.unholyshow.com>.
51. The one exception would be the handful of people who performed alternative scenes in the second act of the Forum production *Shelf Life*.
52. The highest two instances of agreement about a single level of immersion were 85.7 percent and 72.7 percent, and these were an unusually high amount in the sixteen performances examined.
53. Sedgman, *Locating the Audience*, 139.

54. As Scott Mealey argues in his doctoral dissertation, the tradition of asking about a spectator's highest level of education is probably much less helpful than it is to ask the type of education they have received. See Scott Mealey, "Recollections of an Audience: Style, and Change in the Study of Theatre Spectatorship" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2020).

55. Daniel R. Anderson, Jennings Bryant, Alice Wilder, Angela Santomero, Marsha Williams, and Alisha M. Crawley, "Researching Blue's Clues: Viewing Behavior and Impact," *Media Psychology* vol 2, no. 2 (2000): 179–94.

56. Keith Millis, "Making Meaning Brings Pleasure: The Influence of Titles on Aesthetic Experiences," *Emotion* 1, no. 3 (2001): 320–9.

57. HA (pseudonym) was interviewed in Toronto, Canada, in November 2017.

58. See Adam's (pseudonym) comment above.

59. Examples include Martin Barker, *Live to Your Local Cinema: The Remarkable Rise of Livecasting* (New York: Springer, 2012), and Michael D. Friedman, "The Shakespeare Cinemacast: *Coriolanus*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (2016): 457–80.

60. Alison Stone, "Not Making a Movie: The Livecasting of Shakespeare Stage Productions by the Royal National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company," *Shakespeare Bulletin* 34, no. 4 (2016): 627–43.

61. Daniel Schulze, "The Passive Gaze and Hyper-Immunised Spectators: The Politics of Theatrical Live-Broadcasting," *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 3, no. 2 (2015): 315–26.

62. Heidi Liedke, "Emancipating the Spectator? Livecasting, Liveness, and the Feeling I," *Performance Matters* 5, no. 2 (2019): 6–23.

63. Erin Sullivan, "Live to Your Living Room: Streamed Theatre, Audience Experience, and the Globe's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Participations Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 17, no. 1 (2020): 92–119.

64. Sullivan specifically compares her survey of spectators who watched the Globe Theatre's 2016 livestream of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to two other significant UK-based audience surveys, the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts' investigation of the 2009 National Theatre's livecast of *Phèdre* and *All's Well That Ends Well*. See Hasan Bakhshi, Juan Mateos-Garcia, and David Throsby, "Beyond Live: Digital Innovation in the Performing Arts," NESTA, February 2010, https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/beyond_live.pdf; and AEA Consulting's study of audience reception to live-to-digital productions from six important UK theatre companies (including Belarus Free Theatre and Complicite) in 2015. See AEA Consulting for Arts Council England, "From Live-to-Digital: Understanding the Impact of Digital Developments in Theatre on Audiences, Production, and Distribution," 2016, https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/From_Live_to_Digital_OCT2016.pdf.

65. Sullivan, "Live to Your Living Room," 110–111.

66. Lindsay Brandon Hunter, "The Miracle of Electronovision: Mediatizing the Live Stage/Enlivening the Screen," in *Playing Real: Mimesis, Media, and Mischief* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021), 1–24.

67. Bakhshi, Mateos-Garcia, and Throsby, "Beyond Live."

68. *The Stream You Step In* was an anthology of original Zoom plays commissioned for the University of Windsor's graduating BFA students and presented November 5–8 and 19–22, 2020. The four plays were: *The Jubilant* by Elena Eli Belyea, *The River of Forgetfulness* by Karen Hines, *good white men* by David Yee, and *Thank You for Your Labour* by Marcus Youssef.

69. This interview with audience member Madison (pseudonym) was conducted on November 8, 2020.