Chapter 8

Experimental Theatre

Defining ‘Experimental Theatre’

Experimental theatre, often meaning avant-garde (as Oxford AELD explains the term=new and very modern ideas in art, music or literature that are sometimes surprising or shocking), has been widely used since the middle of the 20th century and is known by many other names such as, ‘event’, ‘multi-media’, ‘visual theatre’, performance art, or live art. Often when a work is not based in text it is seen as an ‘experiment.’

The history of world theatre illustrates the dramatic play as a comparatively recent trend. There is another, ancient tradition at work in the great theatres of the world; in Commedia Dell’Arte, Music Hall, and Musical Theatre; in the combined artistry of kabuki; and in Greek theatre. It is in this other tradition that theatre now defined as ‘experimental’ has its roots, a tradition which seeks to combine various skills, such as dance, music, etc.

The making of a play can be the most authoritarian theatre process: in the beginning of rehearsals is the text; the director is the power that interprets the text, and guides all others in service of it. Performance however, at the beginning of rehearsals, has no word – there is nothing but the artists and the potential work which they will uniquely create together.

By the end, the music may overwhelm the text, the performers may be reduced to nothingness, the demands of the choreography may impact all other aspects of the work. It is by virtue of the unpredictability of the creative process that such theatre is most appropriately dubbed ‘experimental’. And the most successful experiment is likely to allow equal significance to design, music, performance, choreography and text.

The process of experimental theatre differs from playmaking, so does the product. A play’s performance (most often) aims at creating meaning. It seeks to control all the
theatrical elements in an accurately repeatable form, proposing an interpretation of the writer’s meaning with the greatest precision and clarity. The text remains open-ended and open to several interpretations. This conscious multiplicity of meaning creates work which is poetic, allusive, ambiguous, contradictory, constantly asking its audiences to trust their own perceptions as to its truth for them.

One has to note that the final performance is likely to be very different from the first. Thus each performance is a development of the work as product. By comparison, a play is fixed. In an age dominated by the recorded media of film and television with canned laughter, performance art keeps live theatre at its liveliest. Experimental theatre largely represents itself as “alienated” from the established order, where the primary aim is to shock the audience, and interrogate the complacence of the bourgeois culture.

Many of those who might once have advanced experimental theatre now work in the innovative and collaborative fields of opera, video, television or film. Those few who continue to experiment do so increasingly intermittently, or as solos or duos.

**Theatre of Cruelty**

This derives from the theories of Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) who published *Le Theatre et son double* in which he formulated its principles. According to Artaud, the theatre must disturb the spectators profoundly and force men to view themselves as they really are. Artaud had produced *Le Cenci* (1935), based on the versions of Shelley as well as Stendahl. The theatre of Adamov, Genet, and Camus has been influenced by the Theatre of Cruelty.

**QUIZ**

1. Answer in one-two sentences:
i. What are the chief features of a performance?
ii. How is a performance different from a play?

**Assignment**

Trace the growth and highlights of Commedia Dell’Arte, Music Hall, and Musical Theatre.

**Britain and Experimental Theatre**

In Britain, as elsewhere, the collapsing of old world order from the 1950s onwards resulted in an eclectic history.

Much of the work was connected to fine art; yet dance-theatre companies such as DV8 or Second Stride also categorize as the experimental theatre umbrella, as could the company Gloria and its director Neil Bartlett. Annabel Arden, Simon McBurney and Marcello Magni developed *Theatre De Complicite* in Britain. This style makes use of the techniques of commedia dell’arte, acrobatics, and also No. A leader in the field was Lumiere and son who performed in a range of spaces, including from a Tent for *Circus Lumiere* (1980) to Kew Gardens for *Deadwood* (1986), and paved the way for Site-Specific theatrical events and Installation projects. For more details, see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Installation_art](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Installation_art).

Feminism and sexual politics have played a vital role in this innovatory work, whether in a collective, like the women’s touring ensemble Blood Group founded by Anna Furze, or in solo performance, e.g. Rose English or Annie Griffin.

Still, Britain was not very receptive to such challenges, and many artists were forced to perform abroad. Without more support from funding bodies, it was not surprising that the major theatre players such as, Robert LePage, Robert Wilson, and the Wooster Group had their roots abroad.
Assignment

Gather information about Site-Specific theatrical events and Installation projects using internet sources.

USA and Experimental Theatre

In the United States, ‘experimental theatre’ encompasses a large, slightly disorganized but vibrant body of work. The artists, including directors, performers and designers traversed boundaries of genre and form and discipline, whether working in Alternative Theatre, Environmental Theatre, Dance Theatre, Street Theatre, performance art, Agitprop or Improvisational theatre, to ‘experiment’ with a perceived ‘norm’ that remains elusive.

In the 1960s, Mime Troupe, a group dedicated to agitprop performance in a Commedia Dell’Arte and melodramatic style, rose to prominence, and generally targeted capitalism, sexism and war.

Allan Kaprow’s initiated a phase which finds resonance in much contemporary performance experimentation, including the use of simultaneous but seemingly unrelated action and movement; the audience as participant/performer; and a fragmented, non-linear structure using intertextual elements from dance, live and recorded sound and multimedia technology. Soon after, other artists experimented with art environments, often using their bodies as canvas. For more on Kaprow: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allan_Kaprow

The documentary theatre is a form of drama which is propagandist and didactic, and employs relatively recent history and documentary evidence as provided by newspapers, archives, official histories, and similar sources. Peter Morgan’s Frost/Nixon (2006) is one
such example where the subject is a series of television interviews Nixon granted to the television interviewer David Frost.

QUIZ I

1. Fill in the blanks:

a. Some of the kinds of experimental theatre included, environmental theatre, dance theatre, street theatre, agitprop and ................. art.

b. The Mime Troupe of the 60s targeted ......., sexism and war.

c. Allen Karpow used a .................. and non-linear structure in his experimentation.

Assignment

What is improvisational theatre? Discuss the highlights of this kind of art in 250 words.

Suggested links

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Francisco_Mime_Troupe

• http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-theatre-de-complicite-1184764.html

• http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andy_Kaufman