

Expanding the Concept of “Theatricality” in Site-Specific Theatre: From Spatial Definition and Temporal Perception to Transformations in Performance Forms

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Abstract. The term ‘theatricality’ is in fact a versatile concept, not confined to the realm of drama alone. It constitutes a multifaceted academic lexicon spanning diverse disciplines. At its core lies the capacity within artistic works or actions to evoke an experience akin to theatre, encompassing performative artistry, a sense of setting, visual presentation, and the interactive relationship with the audience. In the realms of theatrical performance and drama, the core attributes of art converge. For instance, the atmospheric setting of stage scenery, the striking visual impact of costumes, the expressive performances of actors, and the immediate emotional resonance between performers and audience collectively shape the unique allure of the theatrical experience. In the visual arts, painters employ skilful composition and colour schemes to transform their canvases into condensed theatrical scenes. Installation artists utilise spatial design to immerse audiences within their works, allowing them to experience the narrative and tension inherent in the pieces. These are manifestations of theatricality. Even in everyday life, theatricality frequently emerges. Grand ceremonies such as weddings, alongside high-profile public events involving celebrities or societal figures, inherently possess a performative quality of deliberate display. These can be interpreted through a theatrical lens, offering a distinctive perspective through which people observe and comprehend the world.

Keywords: Theatricality; Performativity; Audience Interaction; Visual Presentation; Staging; Interdisciplinarity; Everyday Theatricality; Immersive Experience.

1. Introduction

When people think of the theatre, they often first envision actors moving with ease upon the stage, meticulously constructed sets, intricately designed costumes, and audiences entering the theatre to watch performances. However, they seldom notice the deeper quality of ‘theatricality’. This quality is quietly permeating numerous corners of artistic creation and daily life. It is not an exclusive label confined to the realm of theatre, but rather a significant concept that transcends disciplinary boundaries, possessing both academic depth and practical relevance. The core of theatricality lies in evoking immersive experiences akin to theatre through performative presentation, contextualised creation, visual expression, and interaction with the audience (Frieze, 2017). When people think of the theatre, they often first envision actors moving with ease upon the stage, meticulously constructed sets, intricately designed costumes, and audiences entering the theatre to watch performances (Newman et al., 2024). This paper will explore theatricality across multiple domains. Within theatre and performance, it will examine how theatricality constructs a complete spectator experience. In the realm of visual arts, it will investigate how theatricality infuses works with narrative vitality. In everyday life, it will uncover how theatricality endows ordinary events with transcendent value. Through this analysis, we aim to redefine theatricality and foster a fresh perspective on the interplay between art and life.

2. The Construction and Innovation of the Complete Spectator Experience through 'Theatricality'

In the realms of theatre and performance, theatricality is indispensable. It serves as the central pillar in constructing a play's complete viewing experience, its essence evolving alongside the continuous transformation of dramatic forms, progressing from the fixed conventions of traditional theatre towards the dynamic innovation of site-specific theatre (Ferdman, 2013). In traditional theatre, theatricality finds expression within the physical confines of conventional, fixed venues and established aesthetic frameworks. Through the synergy of set design, costumes, performance, and audience-performer interaction, it constructs a viewing experience uniquely tailored to each production. Stage design, as the visual medium of theatricality, creates contextually appropriate atmospheres through the arrangement of props, lighting techniques, and spatial divisions (Smith, 2018). Such as Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, where the open stage relies on minimal props to suggest scene transitions, relying on audience imagination to convey situational immersion. Whereas 19th-century realist theatre pursued the creation of the 'fourth wall,' using hyper-realistic sets to recreate everyday scenes, immersing audiences in a voyeuristic experience. Costume design visually accentuates character traits. From ancient Greek masks to Peking Opera's elaborate headdresses, attire serves not only as identity markers but also delivers powerful visual impact through exaggerated colours, patterns, and silhouettes, becoming indispensable theatrical symbols. Actors' performances remain central to conveying theatricality, where the cadence of dialogue, physical tension, and emotional expression directly determine the depth of audience resonance. Moreover, the dualistic structure of 'stage-audience' in traditional theatre, while physically separating performers and spectators, fosters a unique interaction through fixed viewing dynamics. Audience applause, sighs, or even silence become implicit components of the theatrical performance. This immediate feedback imbues theatricality with dynamic tension.

The rise of site-specific theatre in recent years—encompassing immersive theatre, environmental theatre, and outdoor site-specific performances has radically expanded the concept of theatricality. By transcending the spatial, temporal, and performative boundaries of traditional theatre, it has cultivated a more participatory viewing experience. In terms of spatial definition, site-specific theatre has shed the constraints of fixed theatres, extending performance spaces into diverse settings such as art galleries, disused factories, and natural landscapes. For instance, the immersive theatre production *A Night Without Sleep* transformed hotel spaces into performance venues. Audience members are no longer confined to fixed seats but can freely move between different rooms, gaining unique narrative experiences through their chosen viewing perspectives. The role of space evolves from a passive backdrop to an active participant in the narrative, significantly broadening the theatrical dimensions of spatial experience. In terms of temporal perception, the linear narrative of traditional theatre is disrupted (Aebischer, 2021). Site-specific theatre often employs parallel, cyclical storytelling, allowing audiences to witness different plot fragments at distinct temporal points. For instance, in *A Night Without Sleep*, spectators may select varied timelines and follow different characters' perspectives to explore the unfolding narrative. Audiences are no longer 'bystanders of time' but become 'experiencers of temporal flow,' shifting the theatrical dimension of time from 'controlled linear narration' to 'open multidimensional perception.' In performance form, the boundary between actors and audience gradually blurs. Spectators cease being passive viewers and may instead become participants or even drivers of the plot. In June 2025, I contributed to producing a site-specific children's shadow puppet theatre piece, *Ah-wu* and the *Cuckoo*. Set within a natural forest. Guided by an interpreter, the audience traversed various scenes, functioning both as observers and participants. While witnessing the interplay of light and shadow in the shadow puppetry and the interaction between performers and puppets, they simultaneously contributed to the performance. During the show, spectators used their mobile phone torches to gather energy for the Sacred Egg, engaged in games like Pass the Flower and Little Fish, Little Fish, Swim Swiftly—reminiscent of childhood pastimes. This transforms the 'unidirectional output of performers' into a 'bidirectional co-creation between audience and performance.' Such innovation not only renders theatricality more dynamic

and inclusive but also imbues the integrity of the viewing experience with new meaning—shifting from ‘passive reception’ to ‘active construction,’ and from a ‘single perspective’ to ‘multiple interpretations.’

3. The Path by Which “Theatricality” Infuses Narrative Vitality into Works

Within the realm of visual arts, ‘theatricality’ does not equate to direct dramatic performance. Rather, through composition, spatial design, and audience engagement, it transforms static artworks into micro-theatres imbued with narrative tension and vitality, infusing the pieces with rich storytelling energy. Through the ‘staging’ of composition and the ‘contextualisation’ of colour, painting achieves a dramatic narrative tension within a two-dimensional plane, endowing the work with an ‘interpretable story’. Artists frequently employ a ‘stage composition’ mindset in their creation, simulating theatrical ‘scene direction’ through spatial division and the arrangement of figures, as exemplified by Leonardo da Vinci's Renaissance masterpiece *The Last Supper*. Here, the table serves as the ‘stage centre’, with Jesus and the twelve disciples arranged in four distinct groups. The figures' postures, gestures, and expressions create striking contrasts and echoes, resembling a ‘frozen frame’ at a dramatic climax. Viewers naturally infer the conflict and tension of the narrative by observing the interplay between the characters. Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* employs a minimalist background to emphasise the subject. *Mona Lisa*'s subtle smile functions like a dramatic ‘close-up shot’. Though devoid of complex scenery or plot, the figure's expression conveys rich emotional undertones, prompting viewers to ponder ‘why is she smiling faintly?’ and ‘whom is she gazing at?’ Thus, the painting acquires the quality of ‘open-ended narrative’. Within painting's theatricality, colour serves to craft atmosphere. In contrast, it constructs specific moods—as in *Van Gogh's Bedroom in Arles*, where clashing hues create a potent visual impact, immersing the viewer in a surreal ‘dream theatre’. Through the fusion of ‘staged composition’ and ‘contextualised colour’, painting animates static scenes, transforming the viewer's act of ‘observing the work’ into ‘interpreting the narrative’. Thus, theatricality emerges as a vital source of vitality within pictorial storytelling.

Mathias (2022) illustrated installation art employs space as its stage, constructing immersive narrative fields through material combinations, spatial design, and audience participation, extending ‘theatricality’ from the ‘picture plane’ into the “spatial realm”. Unlike the two-dimensional plane of painting, the three-dimensional space of installation art inherently possesses theatrical qualities. Artists reshape and utilise this space to guide audience movement and perspective, thereby conveying narrative—as exemplified by the stage design for *Rhinoceros*. Throughout the performance, the *Rhinoceros* never physically materialises. Instead, the arrival is suggested through curtains within the stage set, agitated by a blower. This ‘non-object’ installation nonetheless immerses the audience in the drama, with the narrative's vitality stemming from the audience's autonomous perception of the space. Crucially, installation art emphasises audience ‘participation’. Where spectators no longer observe from a distance but may enter the work itself. Through touch, sound, or even manipulation, they interact with the piece. This engagement transforms narrative from the artist's unidirectional expression into a co-creation between audience and artwork. By narrativising space, dramatising materials, and involving the audience, installation art makes theatricality the bridge connecting art and spectator, opening entirely new dimensions for the narrative vitality of visual art.

4. Theatricality Endows Ordinary Events with Value Beyond the Everyday

Theatricality is not confined to the realm of art; it has long permeated numerous scenes of daily life. Through the “performative shaping”, “contextualised creation”, and “interactive enhancement” of ordinary events, it endows them with a sense of ritual, meaning, and social value that transcends the mundane. Theatricality transforms ordinary life scenes into “interpretable” ‘theatres of life’, offering a unique perspective through which people understand themselves and society (Nellhaus, 2010).

Ritualistic events within private life, when packaged through theatricality, evolve from functional acts into emotionally resonant life ceremonies, amplifying their commemorative value and emotional bonds. Weddings exemplify this transformation most vividly. While fundamentally a functional event establishing marital bonds, theatrical design elevates it into an emotionally charged ceremonial feast. From venue staging (set design, lighting) and attire (the bride's gown, the groom's suit) to ritualised sequences (vows, ring exchange—unfolding like a theatrical script), every detail undergoes deliberate “performative shaping”. This transforms the wedding from a “private covenant” into a “public witness”, elevating its significance beyond the legal implications of “marriage registration” to become an emotional symbol embodying love, kinship, and friendship. Beyond weddings, private events like birthday parties and graduation ceremonies are frequently imbued with theatricality. At birthday celebrations, the cake, candles, and rendition of “Happy Birthday” form a fixed “ritual sequence”, with the moment of blowing out the candles becoming the “dramatic climax”, transforming the ordinary act of “ageing” into something filled with anticipation. At graduation ceremonies, donning academic robes and taking commemorative photographs with teachers and classmates transform the ‘conclusion of studies’ into a ‘rite of passage marking a new life stage.’ Through standardised ‘performance formats,’ this reinforces individuals' sense of identity with their own growth. By introducing theatricality, these private events transcend everyday banality, becoming commemorative ‘life milestones’ whose value shifts from the functional to the emotional.

5. Conclusion

This paper systematically analyses the multidimensional manifestations and value connotations of ‘theatricality’ across three domains: drama and theatre, visual arts, and everyday life. It reveals that this concept transcends disciplinary boundaries, emerging not merely as a specialised term confined to a single field, but as an aesthetic and cultural phenomenon of universal significance that bridges the divide between art and life.

Within theatre and performance, theatricality has evolved from the traditional dichotomy of ‘stage-audience’, linear temporal narratives, and unidirectional actor-spectator dynamics, towards the innovations of site-specific theatre: spatial diversification, multidimensional temporal perception, and co-creation between performers and audience. This transformation not only dismantles the constraints and aesthetic boundaries of conventional theatre but also shifts ‘theatricality’ from ‘fixed ritualism’ towards ‘dynamic participation’. It endows the integrity of the spectator-performance experience with fresh connotations while offering new avenues for innovation in spatial, temporal, and performative forms within theatrical creation. Within visual arts, painting employs ‘staged composition’ and ‘contextualised colour’ to imbue two-dimensional canvases with narrative tension; Installation art, meanwhile, uses space as its stage, constructing immersive narrative environments through the arrangement of installations and audience participation. Here, theatricality becomes the key to visual art breaking free from static constraints, transforming works from passive objects of observation into participatory narrative vessels, thereby enriching the expressive dimensions of visual art (Christoffersen, 2025). In daily life, theatricality elevates ordinary events beyond functional utility through the ‘emotional packaging’ of private rituals and the ‘social presentation’ of public occurrences. This endows them with ritualistic significance, emotional resonance, and societal impact, serving as a bridge between individual sentiment and collective consensus.

In the future, as artificial intelligence technology advances, dramatic expression will undergo further expansion. Its interdisciplinary value will be more fully realised. Nevertheless, drama's capacity to evoke human emotional resonance, connect the individual with the collective, and enrich aesthetic experience will remain an indispensable force in artistic creation and everyday life.

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