DESPOILED SHORE AND LANDSCAPE WITH ARGONAUTS:
A PERFORMANCE STUDY ON AUDIENCE IMMERSIVE AND INTERACTIVE MUSIC THEATRE

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Abstract:

Processes and methods employed for the development and presentation of an audience immersive and interactive music theatre performance/experiment. The performance in question was devised specifically as a study on immersive and interactive music theatre and it was based on Despoiled Shore and Landscape with Argonauts, two of the three scenes from Heiner Müller's play: Despoiled Shore/Medea Material/ Landscape with Argonauts.

This presentation aims to canvass the challenges faced during tmaking and delivering processes as well as to scribe the roles of the performance's components. The overall aim of this experiment was to observe the relationship between audience, performers, technology, dramaturgy, and the transcending role of sound, in an event that bore qualities of both music theatre performance and interactive sound installation. Both the making process and the performance took place during an artist residency at Blast Theory in November 2015. This project is part of a larger scale research on the development of audience immersive and interactive music theatre performances.

Research background:

Theatre –and performance in general– has been constantly changing throughout the centuries. It has been always borrowing methods and processes from its technoscience context. In the more recent years, Theatre has been incorporating undercurrent techniques and technologies such as pervasive media, ubiquitous computing, processes of immersion and methods of direct or mediated interaction between audience and performers. Performance invites other disciplines to inspire it, inform it and shape it becoming ever more interdisciplinary (or transdisciplinary). Although mostly the same seems to happen in the area of music theatre, there are evidences of lack of research and production in the area of audeience interactive immersive musc theatre. Hence the purpose of this research.

Initial challenges:

- Operatic singing and scenic behaviour
- Theatricality in close distant (between audience and performers)
- Stylisation
- Linearity of narrative
- Structure: open vs closed form
- Determinate material vs indetermina·tion (text and music)
- The possibilities and challenges of structured improvisation
- The possibilities and challenges of "game" (rule based) and conditional structures
- Challenge of "fourth wall"
- The role of technology (should it be apparent or descrete)
- The space and how to organize it to allow enthuse the audience to explore it
- Modes of interaction (Technological and human to human)
- Music and sound
- The use of the text

Strategies employed:

1. The performance offered two performance spaces/environments:

A. One that behaves as an instrument: it reacts (through multiple sensors) to the coexistence of the performers and the audience and processes the live electronic sound Based on the principle of Transparent immediacy (Bolter & Grusin), a term referring to the goal of media designers to devise an interface the processes and the medium of which remain inmpersivable from the users.

B. One where the use of a joystick by the spectator manipulates both the singer's amplified voice and the projection of her image. Based on the principle of Hypermediacy (Bolter & Grusin), a term that describes an interface that makes its presence and its mechanisms become obvious to the users. Such kind of interfaces quite often have very strong cultural significances.

2. In both cases, technology, sound and space mediated between audience and performers, acting as the platform for interaction.

3. The performance had an installation structure, both in the way the audience experienced the space and because of the kaleidoscopic occurrences of the events that had neither beginning nor end.

4. The performance events were occurring based on a conditional system that included parameters such as the audience presence in the space and the music/sound generated by them.

5. Three personages appeared, having Heiner Müller's Despoiled Shore and Landscape with Argonauts text as departure point:

A. A dancer [the Argonaut] that attempts to move but not dance
B. A musician/actor [Jason] that attempts to play/speak/sing but not to act
C. A singer [Medea] that immerses in voice improvisation without entering the realm of interpretation

Performance components' roles:

- **Audience:** welcomed to discover/explore/indulge in the space. It was also enthused to interact with the environment (joystick), the space (props and plastic sheets). They could rest or they could explore.
- **Costumes:** both for audience and performers.
- **Props for audience:** A coin that would initiate a technologically aided interactive and solo performance; an interactive peep show performance (material generated by Heiner Müller's introductory notes).
- **Performers:** Reacting (under pre-determined instructions) to audience presence and to sound generated (through technologic/interactive media) by the audience
- **Technology/Media:** Hypermediation (joystick) and Transparent immediacy (IR sensors)
- **Text:** Despoiled Shore/Landscape with Argonauts (scattered/fragmented/visual/referential)
- **Music:** Generated both by audience (interactive media) and performers (structured improvisation)
- **Scene/stage:** Space fragmentation (with plastic sheets) enthused space exploration. Challenged fourth wall notion.
- **Voice:** medium specific treatment of the voice (abandon of techniques that reference operatic stylistic and aesthetic practices)
- **Solo performance:** a one to one interactive singing performance with strong elements of eye contact between audience and performers

Conclusions:

- **This study evidenced that interactive/immersive Music Theatre performance can be possible when the performance incorporate processesand techniques of other art fors (i.e. interactive art and immersiveInstallations).**

- **Two different approaches to media and technology can have equally successful yet different results (Hypermediation vs transparent immediacy) in audience interactive performances.**

- **Different interactive media and modes of interaction bear different significances and cultural semantics that can be appropriated in the development of a performance.**

- **The role of the singing voice: any composition for voice in such performances should take in consideration the medium specificity, the space and the distance between audience and performers before the use of operatic stylisation and aesthetics.**

- **Music theatre making based on conditional "game-like" rules that consider the role of the audience is proven to be possible and effective. More experiments required**

- **A strategy to enthuse the audience to discover the events that happen in the performance space is to fragment/divide the space, introducing the elements of surprise and exploration.**

- **The positive aspect of the use of costumes for the audience in order to feel part of the performance's " world".**

- **A one to one solo singing performance can be very successful when it comes to approaches towards audience immersion and interaction.**