香港戲劇概述

Hong Kong Drama Overview

2017
2018

Towards a Distribution of Local Sensibility

An Overview of Immersive Theatre in Hong Kong, 2017 & 2018

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Text
Tang Ching-kin

Immersive theatre is the most contemporary response to theatre reforms in Europe and the US since Bertolt Brecht. With his formulation of the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), Brecht revamped the essence of theatre. He denounced the passivity of an audience enjoying theatre in the dark and in silence, advocating that it should engage actively instead. In Brecht's own practices, however, "audience participation" is only a kind of intellectual engagement. The alienation and mental challenges created by the playwrights, directors and actors on stage force the audience, now awakened from the illusion of the Fourth Wall, to not only emotionally engage with the drama, but to reflect on what they see from a distant and critical vantage point. Contemporary immersive theatre can be regarded as a step forward in the realisation of Brecht's theoretical ideal. After the rampage of post-dramatic theatre in the 20th century and the intense applications of information technology in technical arts, aesthetics built upon separating the audience and performers by the physical theatre space have endured only in classical works and commercial performances. In some of the most idiosyncratic aesthetic explorations in contemporary theatre, reshaping the line between the stage and auditorium, and between the performers and audience has become a norm, to the extent that theatre is being redefined. In the second half of the 20th century, genres such as environmental theatre, site-specific theatre and happenings demonstrated the possible ways in which an audience could engage in a performance. In the 21st century, immersive theatre epitomises the spirit of these aesthetic practices.

As for the definition of immersive theatre, we tend to approach the form in three different aspects: the disappearance of the separation between audience and performers; the positioning of the audience into the narrative world of the work; and the breakdown of social structure in between realities. In order to achieve the above, immersive theatre works are usually performed in spaces like public walkways or interiors—which often feature in environmental or site-specific theatre—rather than in conventional performance spaces. Audience members have to walk around the site during the performance, and decide their course of action according to different prompts set by the performers or objects around the space. Sometimes we call it "promenade theatre". In some cases in which the work is performed in a conventional theatre, the interaction between the audience and the narrative is enhanced accordingly. For example, an audience member may be able to choose to play a certain character, or to change the narrative. This could be regarded as "choose-your-own-adventure theatre". The majority of immersive theatre works are not limited to a single format. Informed by different themes that the creators want to explore, immersive theatre invites multifarious creations in terms of the use of space, the design of audience participation, and the approach to narrative.

However, at the core of the aesthetics of immersive theatre is not its form of expression, but the challenges it poses to the audience's perceptions. In whatever ways audience members participate in the narrative, they can no longer hide themselves in the dark auditorium like the conventional audience does. Rather, they have to open up their physical senses so as to experience the atmosphere in the space. It is important to note that when we understand what the audience goes through in an immersive theatre work in terms of the aspects of "experiencing" and "atmosphere", the assumption is that the audience is not only intellectually provoked, as it is in Brecht's theory of *Verfremdungseffekt*. The audience is brought to experience something that cannot be reduced to rational explanations: the visual, aural, and tactile, as well as a person's sensory integration, emotions, feelings, or even psychic and imaginative realms. In reviewing a work of immersive theatre, it seems futile for either the audience or the critics to approach it through rational reading or analysis. Rather, they are compelled to grasp the work's theatricality and artistic values through their sensory perceptions.

The reception and development of immersive theatre in Hong Kong can be divided into the two phases of "pre-discursive practices" and "discursive practices". In fact, such a form of theatre has been seen in Hong Kong for a while, dating as far back as the 1990s when "alternative theatre" inspired by the postmodern theatre from Europe and the US appeared in the city. At that time it was not rare to see environmental theatre, site-specific theatre, happenings and performance arts. In terms of discourse, discussions largely focused on aesthetic presentations of the works. Given their distance from traditional dramatic forms, they were generalised as "alternative theatre" or "avant-garde theatre". After 2000, the changing theatre ecology has also brought about at least two aspects of development: thematic environmental theatre about "community", and small-scale performances staged in industrial buildings.

Framed by the mode of resources distribution that the government employs for subsidising local theatre development, a number of small- to medium-sized theatre companies and independent

Remote Hong Kong (2018) — Photo: Thomas Lin Photo courtesy: Tai Kwun

practitioners have chosen to work with district organisations, in ways such as venue partnership programmes of district venues, and activities jointly organised with community services organisations. This has brought about environmental theatre works that grew from the vicinity of the district areas. Also, the past two decades have seen the conversion of industrial buildings into performance spaces, a survival tactic employed by many small-scale theatre companies. Considering the cost control and degree of convenience, sometimes companies choose to perform directly at the industrial buildings (such as on the rooftops), or along the streets of the industrial districts (such as San Po Kong), where the space becomes a "specific site" or "promenade". There have been a considerable number of such performances, although they are small-scale and lesser known. The works are also more often used as examples in discussions on theatre ecology rather than being considered as an aesthetic form.

It may be fair to say that before immersive theatre was introduced to Hong Kong's theatre scene as a normative kind of theatre aesthetics, we had already acquired a certain degree of understanding about it, although there was not yet any systematic discursive construction of it. It was when the works of Rimini Protokoll from Germany were introduced to Hong Kong that we began to take in the aesthetics of immersive theatre more substantially. In 2015, the performing arts team of the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) organised the International Workshop Festival, where Rimini Protokoll hosted one of the workshops that was themed around "documentary theatre". One of the booklets in the WKCD's publication about the festival, *Encountering Practice* (2017), is dedicated to Rimini Protokoll's documentary theatre. In July 2018, Tai Kwun invited Rimini Protokoll to create *Remote Hong Kong*, the Hong Kong version of that group's iconic *Remote X*. For some of the local theatre practitioners and audiences, it was their second Rimini Protokoll experience after *Remote Macau*, which the group created for the Macau Arts Festival in May 2017. As is noted in many reviews from Hong Kong and Macau, both versions of *Remote X* fell short of offering a deep spatial and historical investigation into the cities, which might have been a result of cultural differences between the German creators and the host cities. In other words, as a work of "documentary theatre", it perhaps failed to "theatricalise the documentation of history" to a certain extent. Still, the form itself caused a stir in the local theatre scene. Not only did it kindle our interest in contemporary immersive theatre, but it also induced the localisation and alteration of the form by local artists who were directly or indirectly inspired.

Between 2017 and 2018 the impact Rimini Protokoll brought to Hong Kong theatre began to take shape. This can be examined in two aspects: firstly, how their form and craft were taken as

references and translated; and secondly, how their works expanded the imaginations of local practitioners, as well as discourse and practices concerning immersive theatre. In *Remote X*, two major forms were employed: promenade theatre conducted in the urban space, and the use of communications technology like mobile phones as audio guides. These forms had already been used in some local productions. As mentioned, promenade theatre was not foreign to Hong Kong theatre. The extensive applications of technology also made the design of a mobile app as an audio guide relatively accessible. In fact, it was no later than in 2015 that local theatre companies started to design their own apps for use in their promenade theatre. In 2015, *The Beautiful Ones* by Rooftop Productions asked the audience to install an audio guide app, an original creation by the company, on their mobile phones. Guided by the audio tracks, the audience took a walk along the streets of San Po Kong in the first half of the performance. In 2017, the company employed a similar format to create *Lost Shoreline*, which was set in Yau Ma Tei.

Considering the timeline, these two productions might not have been inspired directly by Rimini Protokoll. To put it more precisely, the widespread popularity of mobile phones has stimulated the use of mobile phone apps in theatre making as a means to open up more possibilities for audience participation, and it has undoubtedly become a trend in the mobile phone era. Looking at both established European theatre makers like Rimini Protokoll, and less resource-rich Hong Kong groups like Rooftop, one can see how much potential this form of creation possesses. *Lost Shoreline* can be regarded as a work of "community theatre". Its objective was to "promote the renewal plan for the old Yau Ma Tei district", and the app they developed was named "HK5D". Similar to GPS, the app allowed the audience to select their own walking routes. According to the company's promotional materials, the design "breaks the linear rules of an audio guided tour", allowing the audience (participants) to "freely choose their walk according to the map and annotations on the map in the app". Needless to say, the work highlighted the attempt to heighten the audience's active participation, turning the performance into a kind of "orienteering activity in the city".

The audio guide provided information about the participants' locations as well as delivering speeches about controversies around urban renewal, such as the official policy formulation of the government and the opposition from the public. The participants were asked to take up the role of assessors evaluating urban renewal plans. Conceptually, the design has a certain degree of publicness, provoking the participants to consider different viewpoints after perceiving and experiencing the locality themselves. Nevertheless, some reviewers expressed reservations

Lost Shoreline (2017) — Photo: Fung Wai Sun Photo courtesy: Rooftop Productions

about how the performance was executed, stating that the routes were too arbitrary and the audio instructions were not clear enough, thus throwing the participants into confusion during their community adventure.[1]

Relying heavily on audience participation, creators of immersive theatre often find themselves caught between "the audience's autonomy" and "the director's manipulation". On the one hand, a work should allow a certain degree of freedom for the participants; for instance, in *Lost Shoreline*, participants designed their own routes. On the other hand, to effectively communicate a work's intended messages and experiences, the creator needs to consider meticulously every detail of the performance. Perhaps we could call this way of thinking a director's "blocking" for immersive theatre, blocking which is of course completely different from the mise-en-scène on stage. To a certain extent, *Lost Shoreline* has its flaws in terms of director's blocking. In comparison, Rimini Protokoll demonstrated a high degree of domination in *Remote X* in terms of how participant experience was plotted. Participants were able to enjoy some choosing of their routes, but only within the frame of options offered by the creators; the participants were not given full liberty. In other words, participants were immersed in the performance according to a structure set by the creators, who exercised total control of the whole journey. The creators also attempted to shape how the participants perceived specific sites through the audio guide; for example, the audio guide delivered very clear instructions for the participants to imagine the environment and its history, or it asked them to perform certain gestures or actions.

HerStory Polygon created two pieces of immersive theatre, in 2017 and in 2018. *Regarding O* was presented by Pants Theatre Production in its Documentary Theatre Festival in 2017. The creative team recruited and interviewed a number of transgender people, with whom they collaborated. The work attempted to present the life experiences of transgender people and investigate cultural topics such as gender stereotypes. *Regarding O* was a controversial piece, not because of its subject matter, but its form. Like Rooftop's *The Beautiful Ones*, *Regarding O* invited the participants to first enjoy a city walk (set in a public housing estate in Ngau Chi Wan), led by an audio guide. After that, the performance continued in a theatre space. The considerable controversies around the work centred on two aspects: Firstly, the second half of the show was mainly performed by

1 *Arts Critique*, Radio Television Hong Kong, 20 May 2017. https://podcast.rthk.hk/podcast/item.php?pid=519&eid=93258&lang=zh-CN

the transgender people—who were "amateur" performers that the creative team recruited for the production. There were reviews criticising how the transgender people were stigmatised further in this way, as the performance aroused a sense of exoticism in the audience.[2] Another debate concerned the audio guide in the first half of the performance, for which the creative team referred to the format of *Remote X* to a large extent—the route design, the content and style of the audio guide, and the music design bore much resemblance to the German work. This cast doubt on whether the creative team "referenced" or "plagiarised" the work of others, and it sparked off even further reflections regarding "translating" and "localising" the aesthetics of contemporary European theatre. Even if plagiarism was not involved in this case, it brings to light the question of whether directly putting local issues into an imported art form is a fitting way to "localise".[3]

How I learned to do BAD drifting, a piece of immersive theatre put on by HerStory Polygon in 2018, offered a different picture. The work itself was relatively less political and controversial, and made some new attempts in terms of the use of technology. Wearing a virtual reality (VR) headset and guided by a mobile phone app, participants made constant switches between walking and riding in a private vehicle, which resulted in an experience that was akin to that of augmented reality (AR). Investigating the topics of speed and space, this work offered stronger and more diverse forms of sensory experiences (like the senses of smell and touch), than their previous work *Regarding O*. That said, *How I learned to do BAD drifting* felt somewhat flat and flawed in the delivery of its intended messages.[4] This brings us to another question about immersive theatre making: How should we handle the tension between "sensory experience" and "subject matter"? To take this question further: How can we politicise sensory experience so that immersive theatre can fulfil its role as political theatre?

Another theatre company that actively created immersive theatre in 2017 and 2018 is Reframe Theatre, which produced *Flow of Time* (2017) and *Stream of Consciousness* (2018). Compared with the aforementioned titles, these two works have two unique features. Firstly, the works were

2 *Arts Critique*, Radio Television Hong Kong, 23 September 2017. https://podcast.rthk.hk/podcast/item.php?pid=519&eid=100031&year=2017&lang=zh-CN

3 Tang Ching-kin. 2018. "Content of Form for a Transgender Reality Show", Bernice Chan ed. *When Documentation Becomes Theatre*, pp.111-119. Hong Kong: Pants Theatre Production, IATC(HK).

4 Ng Chun-on. 2018. "On *How I learned to do BAD drifting*: Unfinished Experiment of Form", *Delta Zhi*, issue 88, December 2018, pp.22-23.

collaborations between Reframe Theatre and Hong Kong Fringe Club, whose building was lent to the team as the performance site. Guided by an audio track, participants walked in specific routes within the premises, and encountered different "events" specifically designed for the architecture and amenities (such as the rooftop, theatre, restaurant, pub, and gallery). Here, promenade theatre, site-specific theatre and happenings all came together organically, and were placed within a wider aesthetic framework of immersive theatre. Secondly, there was no strong intention to discuss cultural issues in the works. Instead, a love story set in the building of the Fringe Club was told. The participants listened to the love story as they watched the on-site live performance. However, the audio narration and the live performance were not completely in sync. The two layers sometimes drifted apart, clashed with or complemented one another, mixing the real and the imaginary to create a complete sensory experience. This is a style commonly seen in the works of the creator, Ryan Yan: placing personal sentiments/love stories against bigger historical/social backgrounds, which are deliberately effaced to highlight the personal dimension. The grand narrative is only to be found in the subtle currents of emotions flowing through the work. In fact, the form of immersive theatre is quite conducive to articulating Yan's typical subject matter. The Fringe Club is an iconic historical building in Hong Kong, with atmospheric architecture that helps heighten the experience of personal sentiments, memories and historical projections. In other words, the two works effectively created a kind of experience that was about sensibility instead of the sensory. In turn, the works seemed less vocal in cultural or public critique.

Immersive theatre is a borrowed discourse, but its aesthetics has long been addressed in Hong Kong theatre. More and more attempts in immersive theatre are expected to be seen in Hong Kong in the next few years. As we look at the aforementioned works from 2017 and 2018, we can see that how to handle the distribution[5] of the live experiences of participants—including rational thinking, sensory experience, emotional experience, or even imagination—is an aesthetic question that awaits further investigation. Another dimension to ponder is that if we are to localise immersive theatre—a theatre form that originated from Europe—should we also explore a mode of perception that we shall call a "local sensibility"? Would it help to avoid the misplacement of immersive experience, if we do not simply borrow from the Europeans their mode of perception? This was also the greatest doubt among the critics when *Remote X* underwent its transposition to Macau and Hong Kong.

(Translated by Vee Leong)

5 This borrows from the discussion of "le partage du sensible" by French philosopher Jacques Rancière.

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