

Ritualistic Analysis of Liminality in Theatrical Performances

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Abstract. With the development of social media and stage technology, an increasing number of people are attracted by theatrical performances. Originally used to analysis human interactions in a social setting, liminality can also provide insights in examining theatrical performances. By using liminality to analyse theatrical phenomenon, the dramatic effect and attraction of performance can be further revealed based on an anthropological mindset. This article will explain three kinds of liminality under the background of theatrical performance, and compare the three liminalities with the four elements of drama. Some famous drama and musical productions, such as Wo Tou Hui Guan, Dear Evan Hansen, and Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land, will be included as examples. This paper draws links between liminality and theatrical performance in an innovative way, and provides a peculiar perception concerning the connections between theatrical performance and anthropology. From the research, close connection and correspondence between the three kinds of liminality and four elements of drama can be found, leading to the fact that liminality plays an indispensable role in the influences of theatrical performances.

Keywords: Liminality; Theatre Performance; Marginal Play.

1. Introduction

Theatrical performance is a kind of performance for artistic expression and entertainment. No matter what kind of theatrical performance it is, whether musical, drama, comedy, or tragedy, the ultimate end is always artistic expression and entertainment. Photographers use photos as a medium for artistic expression, painters use paintings to convey their inspirations, and poets write poems to reflect their thinking. Similarly, theatrical performance should be viewed as a medium, just like photos, paintings, or poems, for helping the productor express himself artistically, and to convey his ideology, such as calling attention to social problems or spreading positive energy. When coming to theatrical performances, the audiences become the people sitting in the seat areas watching the performances, and the players become the actors performing on the stage. Then, the middle ground, or the liminal zone, turns into the occasions when the identity of the actor and audience become blurred. According to Goffman, a “performance” can be defined as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence other participants” [1]. This definition is clear enough for performance, but theatrical performance is slightly different. There are four basic elements of theatrical performance, including actor, stage, plot and audience, which are the key to this research.

This article will explore the embodiment of liminality in theatrical performances, and draw some links between the two seemingly unrelated subjects Anthropology and Theatre Study. The research methods contained in the paper included observation and interview. Interviewees will include but are not limited to student actors and audiences. The drama crew studied in this paper had a history of more than 50 years and had accumulated a deep sense of professional performance and artistic atmosphere. The student actors of the crew were selected through examinations and auditions. At the same time, the teachers had rich experience in drama directing, and could also provide professional knowledge and explanation of drama phenomena, especially about a specific role. These were conducive to a more in-depth investigation and research in this paper.

2. Liminality in Theatrical Performance

Based on the categorization of Bradd Shore in his book *Culture in Mind*, three kinds of marginal play exist in liminality. The first one is empathetic engagement, the second one is normative liminality, and the third one is frame violation [2]. Each of these three kinds of marginal play will be explained in a theatrical context.

2.1 Empathetic Engagement

The term empathetic engagement refers to the resonating effect of activity. Originally used to describe sports, empathetic engagement means the “tendency to arouse powerful identifications in players” [2]. The word empathetic means the ability to share another person’s feelings as if they were their own. Therefore, to state more clearly, empathetic engagement refers to the mental reaction that the spectators, or the audiences, of an event, become mentally involved and attracted to the activity and the people conducting it, and thus feel as if they are conducting or experiencing the same thing at the meantime, which, undoubtedly, they are not.

In theatrical performances specifically, empathetic engagement can be understood as the resonating effects of the performance. The effect can be the result of highly engaging performing technics of the performer or the universal experiences attached to the plot and the encounters of the characters that easily make the audiences relate to their own life story and the difficulties they have encountered in their own life. When empathetic engagement happens, although the physical boundary between the seats and the stage is still there, audiences will experience the blurry psychological borderline between the performance and the action of watching the performance as a spectator.

Generally, empathetic engagement exists in all kinds of arts. But its embodiment in theatrical performances is especially strong because, compared to movies or art pieces, theatrical performances are happening in the same, three-dimensional, live scenario as the audiences, making the performances more realistic and appealing, as well as easier to relate to. The resonating effect and the immersive feeling provided by the elimination of distance between the performance keep the audience from getting boring. Under the influence of empathetic engagement, the spectators become “the player in a game of their own making” [2]. Audiences will picture themselves in the scenario of the performance, and related their anecdotes and feelings to the situation of the characters. Since every individual has different experiences, their resonating feelings, attach to their own unique experiences, are all different from each other, as the saying goes, “there are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand readers”. With the evoking ability of the personal relationships built with the performance by the audiences, they will feel more attracted to the performance, because the performance has its distinct value and meanings for each audience. This is what makes theatrical performances so powerful.

In December of 2021, one musical club rehearsed and performed the award-winning musical *Dear Evan Hansen*. The musical centres around a high school boy with considerable social anxiety, and how the death of another boy at the same school changed his life by forcing him to start a lie, thus building up a fake but close relationship with the dead boy’s family [3]. The musical discussed themes related to depression, teenage suicide, lies, love, and family. As the main director of the performance, some conversations and interviews were carried out with the audience after the performance, and here are some examples that is helpful to illustrate the idea of empathetic engagement.

One audience, commenting on the musical, said that: “The best thing about this musical is that everyone can find a part of themselves in it.” This expression is especially interesting because it directly relates to the point about attaching personal values and meanings to a performance mentioned above. In the musical, various kinds of characters, including those with social anxiety, those who are pretentious but lonely inside, and those who like to insult others just to protect their vulnerable inside. Moreover, set in a high school, the musical directly targets the stage of life when everyone is most conscious about their social relationships, and when everyone is relatively sensitive to feelings and emotions. Therefore, the design of the performance ensured the effectiveness of the resonating effects among audiences, especially teenagers, who have the most related and fresh experiences similar to the musical. Therefore, the musical *Dear Evan Hansen* gained its wide acceptance and popularity

largely because of the intricate design of the setting of the musical to ensure the attractiveness to its target audiences and to let people resonate with the characters, thus picturing themselves in the performance [4]. This is empathetic engagement.

Another audience also had some strong comments concerning the musical and the performance. He had the experience of fighting against depression a year before. After watching the performance, he said, with tears in his eyes: “I hope people in need in real-world like the main character Evan could be paid attention to. Life can be a lot easier with people supporting each other.” In the musical, encounters Evan and his reactions towards them realistically illustrate the dilemma and difficulties faced by people with anxiety and depression, such as overly lack of confidence and inferiority. These performances can arouse strong emotions in those with similar experiences. This example also demonstrates the effects of empathetic engagement.

Moreover, with the rise of social media in the recent decade, teenage fans of musicals had found their unique way of building up a fan cohort online through medias like Instagram and Twitter. With this development, considerable comments concerning real experience encountered by the large fan bases were posted online, including experiences of fighting against social anxiety and mental health problems. Fans-created paratexts are becoming popular as well [5]. This spontaneous sharing of personal anecdotes also illustrates the resonating effect of the musical on audiences.

Aside from the characters and the storyline, the social background and setting of the performance can also evoke empathetic engagement. *Wo Tou Hui Guan* is a drama set during China’s War of Liberation in the 1950s. The drama focused on the life of a group of ordinary people living in the same yard, especially their sufferings caused by the war and the high-pressure governing in wartime. The characters are made up of people in different careers, who suffered from poverty, famine, and oppression from local officials [6]. Eventually, the end of the war and the foundation of a new China provide these people with brand new hope and faith [7]. The drama crew had the chance to perform this drama in December 2021. During the performance at Mei Lanfang Grand Theatre, many of the audience are the parents of the student actors on stage, and some of the grandparents of the students had related experiences concerning the specific social background of the War of Liberation. During the interview, one of the parent audiences recalled her parents’ narrative about life during the war, and how the governing of CPC provide hope for every family in the neighborhood. “By watching the end of the drama, I was reminded of the contribution of CPC to our peaceful and happy life nowadays. The drama aroused my patriotism to a large extent.” From the comments of this parent, the setting of the drama can also result in strong resonating effects on the audience. More specifically, the changes provided by the ending of the war, and the realistic depiction of people’s ordinary life in the drama can help people with related experiences easily relate themselves to the drama, evoking their sense of patriotism. This is an example of how the setting and background of the theatrical performance can also contribute to empathetic engagement.

To wrap it up, empathetic engagement, as a kind of liminality, exists widely in theatrical performances. The ability to let people resonate with the characters, as a result of the realistic performances, the much-concerned social problem revealed, or the specific setting of the performance can let people relate the performance with their personal experiences, thus producing unique and distinct interpretations and meanings for among all the audiences, making the performance more engaging. This is the power of empathetic engagement.

2.2 Normative Liminality

The second kind of liminality is normative liminality. Normative liminality refers to the normal violation of some existed boundaries in behaviors, which is regarded as natural and allowed, and, in some special circumstances, even welcomed. Normative liminality can be described as “boundary violations that are built into the constitutive rules of the game”, and normative liminality is “central to the basic organization of the sport.”[2]

In the context of theatrical performance, intentionally planned normative liminality can also have unexpected dramatic effects. There are not so many constitutive rules in theatres, compared with

sports games. But one of the most important so called “rule” is that the stage has to be distinguished from the audiences’ seats. Actors are supposed to only stay on the stage, and audiences should only sit in their seats. However, in some circumstances, this constitutive rule of theatrical performances will be violated on purpose by the playwright, resulting in a different kind of watching and acting experience.

One example of normative liminality in theatrical performances is the character “the secret girl” in the drama *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land*. This drama has several parallel, distinctive drama-within-drama storylines happening at the same time, one is about the rehearsal of the drama crew “Secret Love”, and the other one is about the rehearsal of the drama crew “Peach Blossom Land”. Due to facility issues, the two drama crews have to rehearse at the same place and argued together constantly about lack of space and noise problems. However, during the rehearsal, the story of the two crew gradually entangled with each other, producing excessive entertaining and touching effects. The drama discusses all kinds of love in the world, such as love that is not being replied to, love that is lost, and love that is being overlooked [8]. In this drama, there is a special character known as “the secret girl”. Her existence is weird and abnormal, always staying outside the main storyline of the drama. Every time the secret girl appears and wanders on the stage, she will repetitively ask the same question: “Where is Liu Ziji?” [9] The name L. Z. is completely unmentioned throughout the whole story, and the other actors are always baffled by this strange girl. However, the secret girl and the unknown name represents the kind of love that is imaginative, unrealistic, and determined not to realize. This character adds to the drama’s discussion of a different kind of love in the world, serving indispensable functions.

The second kind of normative liminality is the break of the normal signal at the beginning of a performance. Normally, the open up of the curtain or the sound of the bell represents the start of the performance. However, in the circumstance of the secret girl, the actual beginning of the performance is being blurred. One can say that the secret girl walking between the seats can be viewed as the start of the performance, or that only the conventional way of opening marks the beginning. This blurry feature of the drama intentionally weakens the distinctions between the real world and the performance, so the drama can somehow fuse with reality, stressing the authenticity of the various kinds of love described in the drama and their implications in real social settings. Therefore, the secret girl in *Secret Love In Peach Blossom Land* is a perfect example of the intricate design of normative liminality in theatrical performances.

Another more widely seen example is the step during some performances that will invite some lucky audiences to go on to the stage and cooperate with the performer to finish the performance. In this scenario, the prescript identity of the audience and performer is intentionally broken, which can be seen as normative liminality. This violation, crossing the position that the audiences had automatically assigned to themselves as the watcher and spectator of the performance, can arouse considerable curiosity, adding to the dramatic effects of the performance.

In addition, normative violations are also especially common in theatrical performances targeted at children. These performances include drama designed for children, stage interpretation of children’s novels, or stage versions of cartoons. Lacking concentration and patience, children are hardly expected to sit quietly and orderly in their seats throughout the performance for several hours. Therefore, special designs in the performance to attract the attention of children audiences and to keep them focused on the performance instead of causing chaos are especially important. The most common strategy that performers use to tackle this problem, is to directly ask questions from the stage to the children.

In conclusion, normative liminality refers to the accepted or intentional violation of the constitutive boundaries. In theatrical performance, normative liminality can serve as a way to attract audiences, adding to the dramatic effects of the performance, or emphasizing the implicational meaning of the performance.

2.3 Frame Violation

The third kind of marginal play is frame violation. In a cultural setting, behaviors can come into contact with other behavioral frames. Frames here can be understood as the rules and clues of behaviors in a certain circumstance. Therefore, two basic kinds of frames in social life can be divided: onstage and offstage [2].

“Onstage” refers to the status when people are aware of them being watched by others. Therefore, a kind of performance happens, as people have to act properly according to decorum onstage and be aware of the fact that they are leaving impressions on others. Goffman describes the status onstage as being in the “front-region”, where people constantly attempt “to give the appearance that his activity in the region maintains and embodied certain standards” [1]. Goffman calls the process of altering their behavior to meet the standards in a social setting, thus leaving the kind of impressions that people want others to have “impression management”. Either consciously or unconsciously, people participate in impression management all the way around, and this fact can be viewed as the core of social behaviors and relationships [1].

“Offstage” means the status when people are relatively free. They do not have the burden of impression management offstage, and they can act freely with fewer amounts of limitations to obey to meet and maintain the standard of behaving as they have onstage. Goffman calls this status a “back-region”, where “the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” [1]. “What appears like an offstage event turns out on closer inspection to be just another stage”, and therefore, “offstage and onstage sometimes become confused. Their boundaries blurred. This is frame violation” [2]. However, the relative relationship between onstage and offstage still exists. It is the distinctions between onstage and offstage that makes social interactions especially complicated and intricate. Therefore, the convert from onstage to offstage or otherwise is called “stage transformation”.

Stage transformation is widely used to design the plot of theatrical performances [10]. These moments of coming under the observation of others from a rather free situation provide a drastic dramatic conflict, in which the representing characteristic of the character essential for a plot twist or further conflicts is magnified. For example, in the musical *Dear Evan Hansen*, after starting the online program with some of his classmates to spread positive energy, and partly to hide the lie, after the death of Connor, the suicide boy, Evan frequently uses his laptop to communicate with the co-founders of the program inside his room. However, when his mother enters his room, Evan will close his laptop suddenly, shocking his mother. The following lines describe this situation:

Evan (tapping on his laptop, nervous for a moment): Were you friends with Connor, too?

Alana (on the computer): Acquaintances. But close acquaintances.

(Evan nods, relieved.)

Alana: Can I tell you something? I think part of me always knew that you guys were friends. You did a good job hiding it. But, I don't know. I could just tell.

(Heidi enters.)

Heidi: Who are you talking to on the computer?

(Evan quickly shuts the laptop and Alana disappears.)

Evan: Oh. Um. Just Jared. It was Jared.

A similar example at the beginning of the musical, where Evan is trying to complete the writing assignment his therapist assigned, but ends up talking to himself:

Evan: I'm not even going to worry about it, though, because seriously it's not like, it's not going to be like that time you had the perfect chance to introduce yourself to Zoe Murphy at the jazz band concert last year, when you.....because you were scared your hands were sweaty which they weren't that sweaty until you started worrying that they were sweaty, which made them sweaty, so you put them under the hand dryer in the bathroom, but then they were still sweaty, they were just very warm now, as well.

(Lights shift and Heidi Hansen stands there, holding a twenty-dollar bill.)

Heidi: So you decided not to eat last night?

(Evan quickly shuts his laptop.)

Evan: Oh, I'm, um, I wasn't hungry.

So, Evan is relatively free to talk with his classmates online, and even talkative when talking to himself, but whenever his mother enters the room, he became extremely nervous and starts to talk in a shy, stammering way. Evan's self-talking and online communication with his classmates can be viewed as his offstage situation of him, whereas the existence of the most important audience, his mother Heidi, turns his offstage to onstage. This stage transformation results in the change of Evan's mood and character, providing questions and curiosity for the audience, and more importantly, hints at the uncomfortable relationship between Evan and his mother. These stage transformations in the script lay the ground for the biggest conflict and climax of the musical, serving as indispensable clues for the audiences.

To sum up, frame violation means the alteration of the standard of behaviors in a setting. Onstage and offstage situations cause people to act differently following their character because they have to conduct impression management when being observed by others. The transformation between onstage and offstage in the plot of theatrical performances can help build the characters as well as serve as important narrative clues. Therefore, frame violations in the plot make performances more appealing with intriguing conflicts.

2.4 Four Elements of Drama and Three Kinds of Liminality

This paper had completed the discussion of the three kinds of liminalities and their relationships with theatrical performances. With further inspections, it can be discovered that the three kinds of liminalities penetrate through all four elements of drama as the table 1 shown below.

Table 1. Comparison Between Four Elements of Drama and Three Kinds of Liminality

Item	Four Elements	Liminality
1	Actor	Normative Liminality
2	Plot	Frame Violation
3	Stage	Normative Liminality
4	Audience	Empathetic engagement

Firstly, empathetic engagement influences audiences, because the realistic performance and watching experiences can arouse resonating effect which helps people to relate themselves to the story or characters, according to their own unique experiences. Therefore, audiences can assign distinctive values and meanings to the performance, individualizing the watching experience, thus making the performance more appealing. Secondly, both the element of actor and stage can be linked with normative liminality because, in normative liminality, the constitutive boundary such as the differences in identity between actors and audiences and the borderline between the stage and the seats are intentionally violated. This unconventional way of processing theatrical performances can attract the audiences' attention, add to the dramatic effects of the performance, and enhance the implicational meanings conveyed by the performance. Finally, frame violations are especially important in the plot of theatrical performances. The design of onstage and offstage plus the stage transformation that violates the boundary between the two situations can provide important clues for later plot development and strengthen the dramatic effects of the climax, making the performance more engaging.

3. Conclusion

All the liminalities have considerable effects on theatrical performances, making liminality closely linked with theatrical performances. Intentional refinements and improvements according to liminalities can make theatrical performances, the crystallization of human aesthetic with profound cultural deposits, more intriguing and influential.

In this paper, three kinds of differences while linked liminalities in the ritual study will be analyzed, the transformations, representations, and alternations concerning liminalities will be clarified, and the importance and associations between ritualistic liminality and theatrical performances will be emphasized and concluded.

With the mindset of considering theatrical arts from a ritualistic, anthropological point of view provided by this paper, several important significances can be offered. First of all, by intentionally designing the plotline while being aware of the existence of liminality in it, playwrights will be able to come out with more intriguing, rhetorically and artistically enchanting inspirations and scripts. Second, by acknowledging the liminalities in theatrical productions, audiences can have more clues about ways to enjoy and comprehend the performance, and consequently, further realize the ends of entertainments and artistic expressions embodied in the performances. Finally, with the knowledge of ritualistic liminality, actors can perform accordingly on the stage, and act more realistically and appealingly with the foundation of theoretical knowledge.

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