

‘If you could cast an audience, Port Talbot is the place to cast your audience’ Lucy Davies, Producer of *The Passion*.

Between performance and spectating: identifying the potential for narrative construction with audience participation in Michael Sheen’s *The Passion* (April 2011).

Peter Brook suggests that one ‘can take any empty space and call it a bare stage’, identifying that theatre occurs when ‘[a] man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching’.¹ Whilst Brook suggests that theatrical relationships can occur outside of a conventional theatre, his consideration of the actor/audience relationship remains traditionally transactional; the actor afforded narrative agency whilst the audience passively watch. Set up in opposition to the traditional theatrical setting associated with London, the National Theatre of Wales (NTW) focus upon producing drama that centred around Welsh communities. The NTW’s initial season concluded with an immersive, promenade production, *The Passion*, a three-day updated performance of the Easter story. Directed and led by Michael Sheen, the actor returned to his home town of Port Talbot to play ‘the teacher’; a man who leads community resistance against an exploitative company, ICU, that threatens to abuse the town for personal gain. The production’s narrative was adapted to reflect Port Talbot’s decline, vocalising memories of a town in the shadow of the fall of the once prosperous steel industry and the presence of the M4 flyover. With the NTW’s local focus, the production involved over a thousand community performers with reports of 12,000 more following the performance.² Whilst audience engagement is sometimes equated with social agency, recent scholarship upon audience participation is often sceptical of the tangible authority afforded to audiences when encouraged to participate.³ Employing Gareth White’s broad definition of audience participation as any involvement by an audience member ‘in the action of a performance’, this essay will question what happens when Brook’s spectator is walking alongside the actor.⁴ Consequently, this essay will be attentive to how the participation and reception of the Port Talbot community audience highlighted their crucial role in the narrative of *The Passion*, therefore readdressing scholarly cynicism of the extent of the empowerment achieved by audiences actively participating in theatre.

Without a permanent theatre space, the NTW seeks locations for performances that situate audiences and actors within the same space to ‘enrich and inspire creators and audiences, alike’, blurring the boundary between spectator and performer.⁵ *The Passion* follows the story of a Christ-

¹ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London, MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), 9.

² Susannah Clapp, “The Passion – review”, *The Observer*, 1st May 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/may/01/michael-sheen-passion-port-talbot-review> (Accessed 19th November 2022).

³ Examples being Helen Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience* (London: Methuen Drama, 2009). and Kirsty Sedgman, *Locating the audience: how people found value in National Theatre Wales* (Bristol: Intellect, 2016).

⁴ Gareth White, *Audience participation in theatre: aesthetics of the invitation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.

⁵ “About,” National Theatre of Wales, <https://www.nationaltheatrewales.org/about> (Accessed 19th November 2022)

like figure, as Sheen restored a sense of community within the town whilst resisting the exploitation of the ICU; an exploitative company which echoes the Roman empire. The play's narrative reflected the aesthetics of the production, as the promenade structure encouraged engagement from the audience that can be regarded as an attempt to reclaim the space for the community. The performance utilised settings that the audience frequented within their daily lives, such as the town's shopping centre and the local social club. Fiona Wilkie identifies a tension within site-specific performance where the rules of the community spaces compete with the 'theatrical codes', as 'the very act that a performance is taking place recalls the rules that have been taught through past experiences of theatre'.⁶ With roads closed for the performance and barriers put up to designate performance areas, the town can be considered to have transformed itself into a theatrical stage that created distance between the performance space and the real location of Port Talbot. Choosing to engage with these 'theatrical codes' recasts the audience as anonymous spectators, evident in the response of one audience member who described the performance as 'disorganised and ultimately very thin in terms of the performance we actually saw'.⁷ Conversely, Kirsty Sedgman identified opportunities for the audience 'to take on the role of the adventurer, to shape their own route through the location'. Sedgman draws upon Michael de Certeau's 'pedestrian tactics', arguing that the local community's knowledge of the town provides 'each audience member the participatory freedom to decide for herself how to rewrite a space'.⁸ This is evident within an interview with one audience member during the procession through the streets to the site of the teacher's crucifixion, who reported that 'in walking, we're talking. I have seen people that I haven't seen in years'.⁹ The response blurred the boundaries between participant and performer, truth and reality. The interviewee's reconnection with those she has not 'seen in years' was a response grounded within the real lives of community members but also can be viewed as a micro-narrative within the performance that focused upon the teacher bringing together his local community. Considering Bennett's argument that studies of audiences need to take into account the 'diversity of publics', it is important to recognise that different audience members viewed the play more in relation to performance than location, depending upon their level of local knowledge of the town.¹⁰ However, for the Port Talbot community, the public locations obfuscated the distinction between truth and fiction, inviting the audience to consider how the narrative of *The Passion* shared truths with their own view of the community.

⁶ Fiona Wilkie, "Kinds of Place at Bore Place: Site-Specific Performance and the Rules of Spatial Behaviour", *New Theatre Quarterly* 18:71 (August 2002): 255

⁷ Audience interview. Kirsty Sedgman, "Ladies and Gentlemen Follow Me, Please Put on Your Beards: Risk, Rules, and Audience Reception in National Theatre Wales", *Contemporary Theatre Review* 27, no. 2 (2017): 164-5.

⁸ Sedgman, "Ladies and Gentlemen", 162-163.

⁹ Audience interview. Rupert Edward dir., "It Has Begun", *Passion in Port Talbot*, BBC 4, 8th April 2012, <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/01CF75AB?bcast=82497372> (Accessed 19 Nov 2022).

¹⁰ Susan Bennet, *Theatre Audiences: a theory of production and reception* (London: Routledge, 1997), 94.

Whilst the site-specific theatrical space provided opportunities for audiences to participate in *The Passion*, the authenticity of this engagement and the consequent empowerment achieved through this interaction differed between audience members. Analysing these interactions, two distinct exchanges occurred. The first interaction was arguably premeditated, where crowds of audience members were gathered and expected to respond; the second, the spontaneous engagement from the Port Talbot community. Whilst the impulsive responses from the community members caught up in the events of the evening developed the play's focus upon reinvigorating community spirit, planned participation arguably was not the main proponent in driving the narrative forward. Lucy Davies, the producer of *The Passion*, congratulated the community stating that 'if you could cast an audience, Port Talbot is the place to cast your audience'.¹¹ Reviewing the audience's performance suggests there to be a symbiosis between the audience and actors, an argument Caroline Heim champions in her assessment of the way spectators 'play their role of audience during the actors' performance'.¹² Davies' appraisal of the Port Talbot audience suggests that the space for audience interaction had already been conceived. Helen Freshwater is critical of this approach, elucidating the falsity of theatre that claims to be participatory but only presents audiences with the opportunity 'to give responses which are clearly scripted by social or cultural conventions'.¹³ This engagement was evident within ticketed scenes of *The Passion*, such as the Last Supper that occurred within the Seaside Social and Labour Club. Here, audience members enjoyed a high tea spread whilst listening to and raising a pint with the teacher. The paying audience members sat at tables that were positioned below the club's stage where Sheen spoke from. Thus, whilst the audience were immersed within the action, their positioning was reminiscent of a traditional theatrical setting. Consequently, the audience were afforded little agency in the narrative construction of the scene, corroborating Freshwater's assessment that a lot of theatrical action which purports to be audience engagement is instead 'clearly scripted' and therefore does not influence the narrative.

Moments of scripted participation can be defined through the paradox of active spectatorship; conversely, opportunities within *The Passion* also occurred that provoked spontaneous engagement from the audience which shaped the performance's atmosphere. Still now, the NTW advertise their intention to cause 'a giant ripple effect that connects people' through their productions.¹⁴ Focusing upon Elias Canetti's theory on the 'de-individuation' of crowds who engage with animal-like, "'pack' behaviour", Gareth White assesses how audience members loath participation, supposedly out of embarrassment, and yet will actively contribute when they sense that others are performing the same

¹¹ Lucy Davies interviewed. Rupert Edward, "It Has Begun".

¹² Caroline Heim, *Audience as performer: the changing role of theatre audiences in the twenty-first century* (London: Routledge, 2016), 20.

¹³ Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience*, 75.

¹⁴ "About," National Theatre of Wales.

action.¹⁵ One audience member described the impact that the large crowd had upon the narrative, expressing how ‘[e]veryone joined together on those 3 days and the emotions I felt were incredible and shocked me a little’.¹⁶ This was evident within the community procession of over 12,000 people who followed Sheen as he dragged the cross through the town. Susannah Clapp recalls vocal responses from the audience during the procession that spoke directly to Sheen: ‘Go on. Michael’ and ‘you can do it’ rather than to his role as the teacher. Clapp considers these spoken acts of encouragement, asking in response ‘Do what, exactly? Walk to his death?’¹⁷ Arguably, instead of willing the teacher to his crucifixion, with the enormity of the crowds, the Port Talbot community recognised the opportunity the event provided to reunite the local community with Sheen leading the way. This interconnectivity between the play’s narrative and the community’s engagement was reflected within the final scene. Crucified, the teacher regained memories of the town and recited a list of lost names from Port Talbot’s past: ‘I remember nights at the Starlight, bands at the Troubadour!’ along with relatives that had died and shops that had closed.¹⁸ Prior to the performance, source material about the town was collected from the local community that informed the speech. The community’s response to these factual names merged the line between truth and fiction; their real engagement with the names a source of action for the audience members beyond Port Talbot. This is evident within Clapp’s response to the Crucifixion where, watching the audience, she asked:

‘Who, for example was the enthusiastically clapped Selwyn Jenkins? A deacon or don? No, a Port Talboter explained: that’s where we bought our trainers.’¹⁹

Returning to Brook, considering the idea that theatre is forged out of one person watching another perform, Clapp arguably took upon the role of the audience watching the community crowd spontaneously respond to their shared experiences. The script writer of *The Passion*, Owen Sheers, described the production’s openness to evolving the narrative, so ‘that [the actors] could discover rather than be given their characters and our story could evolve as the company lived in and interacted with the town’.²⁰ Thus, where the teacher sought redemption from the ICU through listening to the community’s stories, Port Talbot was brought together through the community’s shared performance.

With the NTW’s focus upon involving Welsh communities in the conception of theatre, the audience present at *The Passion* can also be considered to gain autonomy over the action through their engagement with digital technology. With the advent of social media, Sheen reported his surprise that

¹⁵ White, *Audience participation*, 133-136.

¹⁶ Audience interview. Sedgman, “Ladies and Gentlemen”, 165.

¹⁷ Clapp, “The Passion – review”.

¹⁸ Michael Sheen in, Rupert Edward, “It Has Begun”

¹⁹ Clapp, “The Passion – review”.

²⁰ Owen Sheers, “Author, author: A Passion play for Port Talbot”, *The Guardian*, 23rd April 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/23/owen-sheers-author-author-passion>. (Accessed 19th November 2022)

everyone was photographing and filming him.²¹ Within photos of the performance, cameras and phones are clearly visible as the spectators documented the action for themselves. The performance engaged a large online audience who followed through live streaming and Twitter the events of the weekend.²² Assessing the impact that digital technology has upon audiences' actions within twenty-first century theatre, Heim argues that audiences' engagement with technology affords them more 'authority' as it provides one the opportunity to 'document the performance and your attendance at the performance'. Yet, within traditional theatrical settings, Heim suggests mobile phones are 'also regarded as a public nuisance' as the interruption from a phone call breaks the emotional investment with the actors onstage, as it acts as a reminder of the audience's world beyond the theatre.²³ Moreover, the audiences interaction with the world external to the theatre, takes agency away from the actors on stage who have to compete with this other narrative. However, within *The Passion*, the audience inhabited everyday spaces which therefore, to an extent, negated traditional theatre etiquettes. The audience's willingness to film the production arguably transformed them from spectators to performers, as this natural reaction to public spectacle made the teacher's resistance movement and crucifixion feel more realistic. Furthermore, the crowd's engagement with the performance in front of them, through a camera, afforded them creative direction over the action. This consideration borrows from Janelle Reinelt's definition of performance as the process of creation instead of the final outcome.²⁴ This focus upon process is far more subjective, as with each audience member filming from a different angle, more versions of *The Passion* were produced. Reinelt's consideration builds upon Elin Diamond's postmodern argument that with "the death of the author... performance today has shifted from authority to effect" where, through processes such as filming *The Passion*, an audience's reception "make and transform the meanings [of the performance]".²⁵ Thus, the actors who drive the narrative forward and the audience who broadcast their subjective view of the action to a wider spectatorship arguably share parallels, with both being considered creators of the performance.

Analysing audience's engagement with the production of *The Passion*, the relationship between the spectator and performer is blurred, as is the play's relationship with fact and fiction. The narrative focus upon a man who rebuilds a community through listening to the memories of the town is reflected within the sense of empowerment felt within the Port Talbot audience. The open

²¹ Michael Sheen, "Brilliant Isles", *Art That Made Us*, BBC 2, 7 April 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p0bvgtw/art-that-made-us-series-1-8-brilliant-isles> (Accessed 19th November 2022)

²² Lyn Gardner, "Michael Sheen's *The Passion*: 72 hours in theatre heaven", *The Guardian*, 26th April 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2011/apr/26/michael-sheen-the-passion-port-talbot> (Accessed: 19th November 2022).

²³ Heim, *Audience as Performers*, 100-104.

²⁴ Janelle Reinelt, "The Politics of Discourse: Performativity Meets Theatricality", *SubStance* 31, no. 2/3 (2002): 201-202.

²⁵ Elin Diamond, *Performance and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 3.

interaction with the public locations provided audiences with the opportunity to subjectively engage with the weekend's events, thus forging their own narrative. The focus upon reception over intent is central to this consideration, as the audience's spontaneous participation imbued the performance with more emotional depth. Consequently, audience participation was innovated from traditional, often trite, engagement that only purports to offer narrative agency to audiences. Thus, with the NTW's focus upon community, both their planned and spontaneous involvement from the audience provided them with the chance to take ownership over the production. Michael Sheen attests to this, stating that '[the audience] were the show'; thus, the Port Talbot audience were arguably not spectators but rather performers of their own story.²⁶

Word count: 2515

²⁶ Michael Sheen, "Brilliant Isles".

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