

# Experiential Theatres

Praxis-Based Approaches to Training 21st  
Century Theatre Artists

Edited by WILLIAM W. LEWIS and SEAN BARTLEY



# Experiential Theatres

*Experiential Theatres* is a collaboratively edited and curated collection that delivers key insights into the processes of developing experiential performance projects and the pedagogies behind training theatre artists of the twenty-first century.

Experiential refers to practices where the audience member becomes a crucial member of the performance world through the inclusion of immersion, participation, and play. As technologies of communication and interactivity have evolved in the postdigital era, so have modes of spectatorship and performance frameworks. This book provides readers with pedagogical tools for experiential theatre making that address these shifts in contemporary performance and audience expectations. Through case studies, interviews, and classroom applications the book offers a synthesis of theory, practical application, pedagogical tools, and practitioner guidance to develop a praxis-based model for university theatre educators training today's theatre students.

*Experiential Theatres* presents a holistic approach for educators and students in areas of performance, design, technology, dramaturgy, and theory to help guide them through the processes of making experiential performance.

**William W. Lewis, Ph.D.** is an Assistant Professor of Theatre History, Literature, and Criticism at Purdue University. His research focuses on spectatorship, politics, digital cultures, and experiential performance. As a scholar-artist he also utilizes practice-based research, where he integrates interactive technologies into live performance to better understand the relationships between contemporary audiences and mediatized culture. He has published in *Theatre Topics*, *Performance Research*, *GPS: Global Performance Studies*, *The International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, and *Theatre Research International*. Recent book chapters have appeared in *New Directions in Teaching Theatre Arts* (Palgrave, eds. Anne Flitosos and Gail S. Medford) and *Avatars, Activism and Postdigital Performance* (Bloomsbury, eds. Liam Jarvis and Karen Savage). Will is the founding co-editor of *PARTake: The Journal of Performance as Research*.

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## *Praxis-Based Approaches to Training 21st Century Theatre Artists*

Edited by William W. Lewis and Sean Bartley

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First published 2023

by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Lewis, William W., editor. | Bartley, Sean, editor.

Title: Experiential theatres : praxis-based approaches to training 21st century theatre artists edited William W. Lewis and Sean Bartley.

Description: New York : Routledge, 2023. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022025343 (print) | LCCN 2022025344 (ebook) | ISBN 9781032036045

(hardback) | ISBN 9781032036038 (paperback) | ISBN 9781003188179 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Theatre--Study and teaching (Higher) | Experimental theater. |

Participatory theater.

Classification: LCC PN2075 .E97 2023 (print) | LCC PN2075 (ebook) | DDC 792.02/807--dc23/eng/20220819

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022025343>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022025344>

ISBN: 978-1-032-03604-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-03603-8 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-18817-9 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003188179

Typeset in Minion

by MPS Limited, Dehradun

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# Acknowledgments

The Co-Editors of *Experiential Theatres* would like to personally thank Deb Alley, Sarah Bay-Cheng, Rachel Bowden, Scott Burrell, Bud Coleman, Mary Karen Dahl, Grace Edgar, Brett Garfinkel, Pedro Guevara, Greg Handel, Andrew Killion, Karen Laughlin, Francene Lemoine, Patrick McKelvey, Chuck Ney, Beth Osborne, Beth Osnes, Jessica Parr, Karn and Robert Richoux, Daniel Sack, Ann Shanahan, Niki Tulk, and Pia Wyatt for their personal and professional support. Special thanks to our partners, Gina and Kent, and our families for their patience, love, and encouragement during this three-year process.

We first met and discussed the earliest ideas behind this collection in an American Society for Theatre Research Working Group led by Penelope Cole and Rand Harmon. The full scope of the project began to form through a small group roundtable presented for the Association of Theatre in Higher Education. We set out to create a uniquely collaborative volume which could not have happened without all the help of the remarkable contributions from our Section Curators who added valuable insights throughout the formation and editorial process. Valerie Clayman Pye was instrumental in supporting early conversations about the project as well as offering guidance while editing and assembling Section One. She went above and beyond in her collaborative efforts and we are truly indebted. Marshall Botvinick, a trusted friend, signed up right away to help steer and support the project. Bruce Bergner and Rich Dionne introduced us to an entire area of practitioners and scholars in themed entertainment design. Throughout the stages of development, Lucia Accorsi, our anonymous reviewers, and the team at Routledge have offered kindness, encouragement, and timely logistic and editorial insight.

Our final set of thanks extends to the remarkable collection of artists, scholars, and educators who agreed to share their expertise and passion in this volume. Your overwhelmingly affirmative responses to our invitations to contribute were incredibly humbling, and your engagement with the themes and ideas we proposed, even in the earliest drafts, reassured us that we were on to something. The quality and insight of your case studies, essays, interviews, and responses pushed the project to deeper levels of engagement than we could have foreseen. We are proud to share your work with the field.

– William W. Lewis and Sean Bartley

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# Experiential Theatres: An Introduction

William W. Lewis and Sean Bartley

## EXPERIENTIAL THEATRES: EXPERIENCE IS EVERYWHERE

American institutional theatres and university theatre training programs are stuck at similar critical impasses. Broadway, regional, and residential theatres are weathering three existential crises: the closure of theatrical spaces and budgetary cuts forced by the COVID-19 pandemic, an industry-wide demand for more inclusive, equitable, and just hiring and programming practices, spearheaded by organizations like We See You White American Theatre amidst the Black Lives Matter movement, and calls to reckon with predatory financial practices, particularly an industry-wide dependence on unpaid and low-paid internships. Theatres increasingly seem unable to understand and attract younger audiences to sustain their half-century-old subscribership models. As organizational leaders grapple with addressing this long list of crises, many cling to conventional forms of the theatrical product itself. Innovative formal practice has certainly taken place amidst the pandemic, but as theaters announce new organizational structures and accountability plans, the programming offered by most professional theaters represents a clear return to the status quo.

As American theatres navigate these new identities and structures, college theatre programs have faced their own series of life-or-death questions. How do professors teach practical skills like movement, scenic construction, or lighting design on web platforms amidst a pandemic? How do programs train young artists for the rapid structural changes forced upon institutional theaters? Why teach audition skills when theaters are dark and casting calls disappear for more than a year? Perhaps more importantly, is it *ethical* for university programs to continue to define and structure themselves as preparation for the network of Broadway, regional, and institutional theaters? If theaters continue to hire smaller and smaller numbers of our graduates, fail to hire a sufficiently diverse, equitable, and inclusive set of artists, and continue to grossly underpay them through the system of internships and short-term positions without benefits, should we continue to feed the monster? As COVID-19 laid bare, almost everyone in the American theatre faces the realities of industry-wide financial precarity: even the tiny percentage of artists who worked with a measure of job security in full-time, salaried, and benefitted positions at regional and commercial theatre organizations often found themselves fired or furloughed without a moment's notice. While this book cannot address all these issues, it does focus on how we train our students for emerging theatre-making practices and avenues for applying theatrical tools and knowledge to burgeoning experiential theatres.

Experiential theatre practices propose a new frame for an increasingly audience-focused series of performance methodologies. For the past half-century there has been an ongoing conversation about the form of theatrical encounters. This conversation often centers on binaries such as passive and engaged, live and mediated, or political and non-political. As these conversations have played out, we have seen a growing emphasis on the role the audience plays as a central part of these encounters. This shift has largely coincided with more participatory and experiential modes of interaction and communication in daily life fostered by both new technologies/media as well as restructuring of social codes and milieus. What we see rising is a growing emphasis on all things experiential in nearly all aspects of contemporary social life. When the experiential is foregrounded, it expands the perspective one must consider when thinking about all encounters. An experiential encounter might be something as seemingly simple as purchasing a warm morning beverage or playing with tactile artifacts that enhance the educational benefits of a science museum or something as complex as interfacing with the multiple ways a marketing campaign has designed connections between a narrative component of a film, a live theatrical event using augmented reality, and the packaging of a consumer toy based on a character from the film. If everything has become a performance in the twenty-first century (McKenzie 2001) then every individual becomes a spectator of and in their own individual theatrical event. Robin Nelson (2010) refers to these spectators as “experiencers” who do more than watch with their eyes but instead interact within the event through a fully embodied act of perception (45). This is the basis of the experiential. When everyone is at all times a spectator, then it becomes commonplace to consider them as the center of personally crafted theatrical experiences. These experiencing spectators are the central pillar of all *experiential theatres*.

This book is intended to help theatre educators better understand this perspective of twenty-first-century life so that they may set their students up for the greatest possible success as innovative future theatre artists. To do this we will push the envelope of what the term theatre means both within an artistic frame, but also towards a more expansive social frame. Experiential theatres are performative encounters where the spectator becomes both witness and performer with and in the totality of the event. This is audience-centered theatricality and performativity. These theatres are often crafted to be both singular and communal due to their focus on the overall experience of the individual audience member who is interacting through a variety of means. These theatres are often labeled immersive or participatory when accepted as *theatre* and often simply considered games or simulations that have a performative nature by those who have not been introduced to broadened theatrical horizons. Experiential theatres are also encounters whose dramaturgical frame is expanded to encompass multiple senses, ideas, and actions. These might include the way Disney, Nike, or the Hard Rock Cafe develops a distinct theatrical encounter for the consumers who enter their physical storefronts. In these instances, these spectators become what Maurya Wickstrom (2006) calls “performing consumers” where one who is simply shopping becomes the star of their own theatrical encounter. The storefront becomes the *mise en scène*, the flow through the designed space the character arc which connects to the eventual purchase, which is, in fact, the performing consumer’s super objective. What is common amongst these examples is how the spectator becomes part of the narrative, part of the event, part of the overall experience. The authors in this collection unpack the various ways experiences are crafted through design, dramaturgy, narrative, structure, and performance in order to offer new models for praxis-based approaches to pedagogy for the twenty-first century.

To train students well for encounters of the twenty-first century we should accept that they need to learn sets of skills and methods that will be used outside of what is typically considered conventional theatrical business models. Training consciously for these expanded avenues requires softening some of the silos and specializations that have

become the habitualized norm in theatre training and specifically theatre departments in US higher education. Doing so will allow our students to become more creative, collaborative, critical, innovative, and socially observant. These are the skills that are most sought after in the arts but also in areas beyond the arts where many future experiential theatres will emerge. To train students to think experientially is to help them better understand the products of their craft as experiential processes, which in turn, sets them up for the greatest possibilities of success. For educators, this means adopting a methodology steeped in a broad range of theories and pedagogical approaches.

To begin, let us first explore the overly simplistic binary of passive and engaged spectatorship that has been the focus of so much scholarship in the past twenty years. For most of human history, theatre and performance practices have been highly experiential through various forms of social participation. In antiquity many theatrical encounters centered around participatory rituals that confirmed community and social belonging. Ancient Egyptians in Abydos partook in embodied commemorations of the god Osiris, perhaps in much the same way that devotees of contemporary religions participate in masses and services. In fifth century BCE Athens, audience members sitting in their seats at the Festival Dionysia looked not at a representational set, but at the very same Aegean Sea that features prominently in *Agamemnon* and other tragedies they experienced. By connecting the sea, to the sky, to the *mise en scène*, and to the seating area built into the hillside they understood the relational position they were in as participants in a larger cosmic encounter. In many parts of Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, wealthy audience members paid a premium to sit on the stage itself, literally and spatially inserting themselves into the action. The social performance made by these audience members was often just as important as the actors reciting the words of a dramatist. In the Egungun rituals of the Yoruba people, audience members dance with, sing to, and occasionally run from the masked and costumed performers embodying local ancestors not in a purpose-built theatrical space, but in the streets and squares of the community itself. And finally, today one might find themselves donning a nondescript mask that allows them to anonymously wander as spirits with/in an elaborate immersive scenic landscape crafted inside an empty industrial building. They might also be tasked with solving puzzles while interacting with a multi-branched narrative that is experienced across multiple parts of a bustling city scape. Across cultures and eras, theatrical practice has involved audiences spatially and experientially. The short period where audience passivity became the norm is simply a blip in the long history of engaged and interactive theatrical practices.

The most recent forms of engagement have emerged as a reaction to shifts toward media-driven passivity beginning a little over a century ago. At the end of the nineteenth century, a series of new traditions in the West that emphasized a physical, practical, and dramaturgical separation between performers and spectators emerged. Theaters shifted from elaborate boxes and spectators on the stage to more uniform, seemingly egalitarian fan-shaped seating areas. Electric lighting began to progressively dim on the audience and brighten on the stage, deemphasizing the social interactions between spectators and directing their attention onto the characters. Playwrights in the emerging Realist and Naturalist movements took advantage, writing works that shifted away from presentational acting styles suited to noble and upper-class characters declaiming their thoughts directly to audiences and moved towards more representational scenes between members of the emergent bourgeoisie. Before long, acting conventions emphasized an imaginary “fourth wall” facing the seating area, urging the actor to perform *as if the audience were not there*. This divide often became literal through the architectural mechanism of the proscenium arch, framing the onstage action like a painting or television screen. The rise of the craft of directing further solidified the separation of audience and performance product in the name of theatrical unity. What artists created for the stage had become distinctly separate from the totality of the theatrical event which

included the audience as participant. Crucially, these new conventions spread in popularity in the years surrounding the two World Wars just as educational theatre programs began to emerge in American and European universities. Whereas theatre practice had been taught through apprenticeship for centuries, theatre courses and, eventually emerging from Speech and Voice or English Literature departments, theatre programs trained actors, playwrights, directors, and designers to work in the presentational conventions of professional theatres and the passive relationship they created with audience members. These traditions still foreground both the professional theatres of the United States and virtually all university training programs that prepare artists to work in them.

In the second half of the twentieth century, a wide range of interdisciplinary artists began to explore impulses that led them back towards a more experiential frame for performance events. Allan Kaprow began to stage “Happenings” which sought to give audience members embodied tasks to perform in public spaces. Performance Artists like Yoko Ono, Chris Burden, and Marina Abramović put audiences in precarious positions where they were challenged to act, often physically and emotionally endangering themselves to force the audience interaction. Inspired by Antonin Artaud, the artists of The Living Theatre sought to negate the proscenium arch by inviting the audience on stage, to dance, sing, and even disrobe with the performers. Richard Schechner’s infamous Performing Garage experiments with audience interaction and environmental staging led to a renewed wave of engaged theatre that attempted to bring back some of the ritualistic and communal spirit of long forgotten traditions. In recent years, immersive, site-based, and ambulatory events, often inspired by the work of earlier artists in the United Kingdom (Mike Pearson and Brith Gof, Shunt), have seen a surge in popularity on both sides of the Atlantic. This brings us to the state of the field today where experiential practices are seeing a resurgence. This resurgence requires a distinct new set of pedagogies.

While experiential theatre practices have come into vogue in the United Kingdom, continental Europe, and many of the major cities in North America, there is a disparity between training related to these practices. In the United States a majority of theatre programs operate around a professional training format with the intentions of developing a skill set that is directly applicable to the regional theatre format of repertory productions of dramatic writing, typically focused on one area of practice (performing, directing, design, etc.) rather than embracing a more holistic approach that utilizes a “BIG C” collaborative model, one in which all involved in the creative practice have input on every area of development. This is most true in programs that embrace the MFA and BFA model but is also ingrained in the formal construction of most BA programs that honor the liberal arts tradition. In Europe, where the greatest advancement in experiential practice is seen, many programs focus more on the integration of theory and practice toward a holistic model of theatrical production. The merging of theory and practice is much more widely accepted in the UK model, where practice-led and practice-based masters and doctorate programs are abundant and serve as guideposts for undergraduate degrees. These programs often instill in students a questioning spirit while focusing on ensemble and creative practice modeled around devising practices. Outside of the few major conservatories that train artists in a specific skill set such as classical acting, the students who come out of these theatre programs more often form ensembles and companies that focus on making new work in a collaborative model. This is opposite to the training models in the US where students are typically trained in a specialization and left to fend for themselves when they enter the artistic market. No wonder many of our students end up working in other careers five to ten years beyond their degree.

Considering how theatre is heralded as a multidisciplinary artform that thrives on community and collaboration, there is an unusually predominant ethos that focuses on pre-professional training of individual artists in highly specific areas of creation. Marvin Carlson (2011) points to a paradigm of antagonism between professionalization versus scholarly

investigation that came about in the US during the 1960s and 1970s. Where previous students had been trained to operate as “theatre scholar-practitioners, equally at home in the archives or onstage, and equally adept at writing a scholarly article or directing or designing a production” a new mode of theatre education emerged. In this mode theatrical production should model itself after “serious” professional practices and therefore the study of theatrical craft should eschew scholarly pursuits and instead focus on training “real artists” who expressed their creative impulses (119). Carlson continues to explain how theatre historians could only be taken seriously if they spent their energies on research and not “putting on plays” (119). With these two positions becoming more commonplace, they were solidified in the 1970s with the mass adoption of M.F.A. programs whose goals focused on professional training for theatrical vocations. This ideology bled down into undergraduate training and eventually created the binary we are left with today where most departments are staffed by a majority of creatives with M.F.A.’s training a wide range of artistic specialties and a small handful of faculty with Ph.D.’s relegated to teaching the history and theory of theatre with, problematically, little connection between the two. Within most theatre training programs most of the coursework is devoted to practice with little space allowed for reflection, exploration, and intellectual curiosity. This narrows our artists’ ability to be truly creative and limits their ability to define their own artistic pursuits. Carlson concludes his essay by stating “American university theatre programs must no longer allow themselves to be drawn into the ongoing antagonism between those who study the theatre and those who create it” (123). We argue that this divide between theory/research and professional practice ultimately stifles innovation and evolution of our artform and reciprocally our pedagogies. This is why, for the good of our students and theatre as a whole, it is necessary to move forward toward new praxis-based modes of teaching and learning. We will adopt Robin Nelson’s (2013) articulation of *praxis* as “theory imbricated within practice-or what some people call intelligent practice or material thinking” (5). Establishing the connection between theory and practice more broadly will allow for a greater ability to develop skills for collaborative and interdisciplinary creation versus simply specialized production. Experiential practices require these skills as they are foundationally built around the prefix *inter* that follows the dictum of both/and<sup>1</sup>, a sense of mutual cohesiveness, and reciprocity.

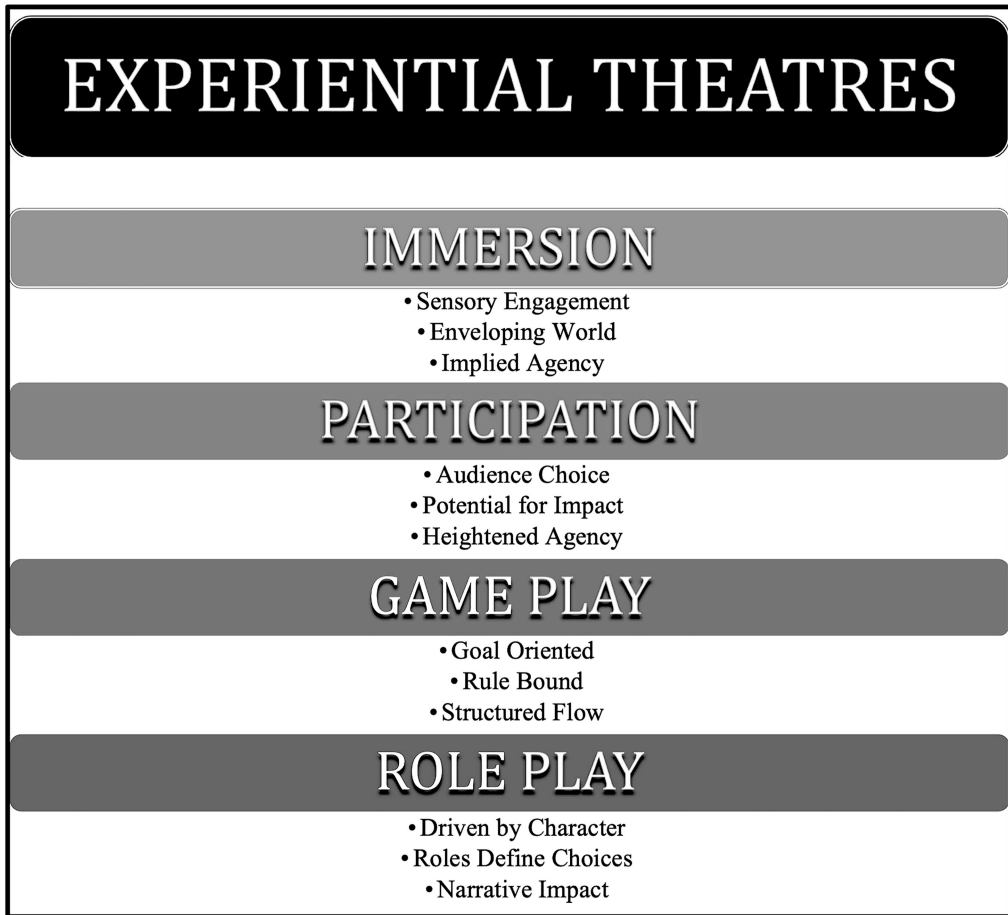
Experiential theatres are uniquely interactive and interdisciplinary. The term interactivity is often applied to theatre practices, however, when one discusses interactive theatre, it often comes with a set of baggage. A 2007 ATHE white paper by Ann Fliotsos applies the term interactive theatre to formats that are largely akin to Applied Theatre practice. Applied Theatre and its distant-cousin Practice as Research (PaR) have also been often maligned in the American academy as not belonging within the conventional arena of practical theatre training but also not sufficiently rigorous to belong to true theatre scholarship. We believe this is partially due to their difficult to determine applicability to a professional training model and partially due to their emphasis on practical research which due to the binary above has been largely ignored in the United States.

Without the artificial dividing line between theory and practice or research and profession, students are led to allow inquiry and interdisciplinary collaboration to flourish as a part of theatrical creation. Due to what we consider a misalignment of the term interactivity with these other areas of practice we prefer to focus on the word experiential which is both a more expansive a model and also narrows the focus on individual experience. Experiential theatres are those that rely on multiple forms of audience interactivity and often have similar aesthetics as narrative performance events. There is often less emphasis on research, social applicability, or defined analytical outcomes related to community building and politics, though these aspects do exist in some of the most compelling experiential performances. We will utilize a simple taxonomy of experiential theatres that operate under four architectures

of exchange: immersion, participation, game play, and role play (Lewis 2017, 2018a, 2021). You can see each in overlapping modalities in most of the types of practices our contributors explore in this book. It is the theory behind these terms that underpin the pedagogies and practical insights that our contributors offer.

Each term serves as a framing mechanism for a variety of practices and methodologies, but each involves some form of focus on the experience of the audience and the levels of agency that individual spectators manage with/in experiential events. These frames are distinct from an operational sense but rarely are they utilized in experiential theatre practices solely. There is often an overlap between one or more of the frames, and contemporary experiential performances often employ a combination of all these frames. But it is the distinct nature of each that educators must understand better if we are ever to develop a concrete set of pedagogies for experiential theatre making. In this project our contributors guide the reader through both the theory and methodologies behind these frames to help unpack the best practices and techniques one might lean on in their teaching. In many instances our contributors also discuss some of the ethical responsibilities one must consider when developing experiential works. This is necessary because unlike more conventional forms of theatrical practice, experiential theatres consider the overall experience of the spectator first, versus an emphasis on the event as stand-alone product for passive consumption.

Each of the four frames (See Figure 00A1) has a long history connected to interactive forms of theatrical practice but it is how they have been defined and implemented in twenty-first-century theatre methods that are of most interest to us. We will start with the term that has exploded both artistically and commercially in the past fifteen years: immersion. **Immersion** has become a sort of catch-all frame for many of the interactive practices this book explores. We, among others, find this problematic because it is in fact a more narrowly defined type of interactivity, but one that has the most marketing draw due to its powerful connection to one's affective senses. The numerous examples of scholarship (Machon 2009, 2013; Alston 2016; Biggin 2017; Lavender 2016; Jarvis, 2019; Frieze 2017) on the term beginning around 2010 have attempted to nuance its definition, but we will frame it simply as a sensory engagement that gives an audience member the feeling/idea of being enveloped by either a designed or dramaturgical world. The emphasis of immersive work is on feeling as though one is *inside* the work, and therefore it is often compared to being submerged in a body of water. Immersion does not require response, however. The spectators in an immersive event can remain passive and still interact simply through their affective senses. **Participation** on the other hand is a higher level of interactivity that is often paired with immersion but requires some form of choice making and direct action on the part of the audience member. These choices may or may not directly impact the trajectory of the narrative or the world one is immersed within, but they do alter the perception/reception of the spectator's encounter. Further up the scale of interaction is **Game Play** which capitalizes on the gamification of the choices one might make through participation. In works that focus on gameplay, one receives immediate feedback from these choices, and they are often structured in a way that the audience member is rewarded with the feeling of having achieved some form of goal/objective. Gameplay mechanics often are considered the most engaging for audience members due to the level of creative input they are allowed. The last frame we propose is **Role Play** which blends many of the above frames but is distinct in how it relies on audience members becoming more than themselves. They take on the role of a character, an operator, a guide, or some other member of the performance/narrative/designed world. They imaginatively immerse themselves in the fiction by playing an active role that belongs within the fabric of that world and ideally the choices they make while immersed in this world are informed by the role they are playing. Each of these four terms is deeply interconnected as experiential practices and is reliant on two common variables: experiential design and agency.



**Figure 00A1** Taxonomy of Interactivity in Experiential Theatres.

Experiential theatre practices take as a central point of interest the involvement of the audience. The designers, writers, dramaturgs, makers, and performers of experiential theatres are keenly focused on delivering a specific and tailored experience for each individual member of the audience. To do this they must focus on the overarching design of the project as well as the immediate sense of agency that the audience feels. Agency simply refers to a person's—in this case the spectator—ability to do something. In many instances this “ability” is simply a perceived feeling of control. One of the primary differences between the more conventional forms of “passive” spectatorship and experiential spectatorship is an emphasis on the audience member's sense of control over the encounter. This may be over the flow of the narrative or simply over their individual perspective on the event. Even in a “passive” fourth-wall event, the audience has agency to look where they want (though most skilled directors and designers manipulate the stage image in order to focus where the spectator looks). There is a common misconception that makers of experiential theatre are focused on giving the audience agency. This is a false impression. Agency simply exists. Theatrical audience conventions are the social forces that typically restrain that agency. For instance, in a fourth-wall proscenium theatre, spectator conventions set rules where the audience is trained to sit quietly facing forward in a dim lit room taking in, through eyes and ears, the product before them. The spectator has agency

to break all these conventions, but they rarely do. In experiential theatre the restraints are taken off. In many ways these constraints are reconfigured to allow a specific form of agential relationship for the spectator. The way the event is designed ultimately shapes what levels of agency the audience can engage. Each of the four frames of interaction we cover allows different modes of agency based on specific operations of experiential design covered in this book.

Experiential design is a *mode of thinking* that is broader than the conventional forms of theatrical design such as scenery, lighting, sound, and costumes that are taught in traditional theatre schools. These elements can be crucial to experiential design, but as they are taught today, they are often ornamental and operate to produce a staged fiction most often intended to be seen versus felt. If they are felt, it is primarily by the performers acting within that fiction. We propose they be folded within an umbrella of overall user experience which requires a broader understanding of how each area of design defines the audience encounter. Adopting methodologies from User Experience (UX) design might be helpful. UX design is a specific area of study often related to product and software development and often is taught within fine arts, technology, and business programs. It takes as a central focus the concept of interface; the interaction between a user and the product they will use. In this manner design for experience requires thinking beyond the elements that pertain to primarily sight and sound but also to the other senses and modes of interaction. One must conceptualize and understand the thoughts, feelings, sensibilities, and expectations of the audience member. They must consider ahead of time what the user will do when they encounter the product and how they will do what they do in the encounter. These designers are architects of complex systems who develop all aspects of an encounter that will be experienced with/in: both from the outside of an event and inside an event simultaneously. The object might be the initial focus, but the overall product is the designed interaction between the spectator and the event allowed in the encounter with the object. The designer must consider both how the spectator uses the object and is also part of the event with the object. If we think about our use of technologies in the twenty-first century, it becomes easier to understand this relationship.

## INTERACTIVE TECHNOLOGIES AND EXPERIENTIAL PRACTICES

The increasing rise of experiential forms of theatrical practices over the past fifty years has run in parallel to technological innovation. Where the early attempts at engaging the audience, disrupting the divide between spectacle and spectator, and expanding the spatial frame in theatre were largely motivated by an engaged sense of politics, the most recent evolutions have been influenced by the rapid adoption and integration of interactive technologies into everyday life (Causey 2006, 2016; Salter 2010). Technologies have always had an impact on theatre practices, but it is during the last quarter century that tremendous change has come both from the audiences engaging with theatre and the technologies themselves. As our environments have become more technologically interactive, so too have our daily habits related to all forms of media consumption (Couldry and Hepp 2017, Hepp 2013, Hayles 2012, McCarthy and Wright 2004). As such, theatre practices have increasingly modeled the modes of daily activity found in our technological devices.

In the first half of the twentieth century, theatre practices began to differentiate themselves from forms of visual media such as film and photography by expanding beyond notions of realism to become more abstract and theatrical in the movements of the historical avant-garde. These modernist movements reached a pinnacle during the rise of televisual mass media which also coincided with fragmentation brought about by post-modernism. While televisual media at first allowed a sense of simultaneity with the ability

to creep into the living rooms of everyday life, they quickly became targets of criticism for the way they had begun to hold their users captive. Guy Debord (2005:1967) marked the 1960s as an apex in what he called the Society of the Spectacle, a society informed by image-saturated influences of television and film media. This was an artistic, political, and capitalistic paradigm where people had become consumed through their own spectatorial practices, largely led by corporatized structures that understood the power of the media delivered via airwaves. Debord argued that these corporate structures had utilized artistic media to pacify their audiences. Updating Marx's theories of society and economy, he explained that the power behind the spectacle had become the driving force for anti-revolution by engineering societies toward passivity and subservience to their media influences. During this period the unleashing of the spectator began with a new wave of avant-garde theatre artists taking up the project of those mentioned in the previous section. The first steps away from the rapture of the spectacle began by engaging with the televisual in intermedial modes of theatre and direct participation in politically motivated performance. Artists such as the Living Theatre, The Performance Group, and The Open Theatre rebelled against the society of the spectacle by capitalizing on the power of interactivity between multiple bodies in space as a mode way of activating the audience into action. Artists and companies such as the Wooster Group, Robert Wilson, Laurie Anderson, Nam Jun Paik, and Joseph Svoboda utilized the power of televisual media to engage in a more cerebral form of intermedial critique. The methods used by these artists largely stayed on the fringes for most of the latter half of the twentieth century. As technologies evolved, these practices became more mainstream and informed new practices that were increasingly experiential whether they implemented technologies or not.

Televisual media became ubiquitous in the latter part of the century and a renewed interest in interactivity and *maker culture* began to slowly rise alongside advances in digital technologies. Rising at the very beginning of the digital era, maker culture's defining trait is a "do-it-yourself" spirit ingrained in a populace who wants to do more than consume an already conceived product. Instead, they want to partake in the production as a new mode of active consumption. The making of the product itself becomes part of the product. The shift toward the paradigm began in earnest in garages across the country with the implementation of build-your-own computer systems. It was with the birth of the early Internet that this spirit really took off. It exploded with Web 2.0 and began to significantly change the way theatre makers made their products for a changing sensibility of audience members. The ethos behind maker culture is analogous to the ideologies and operations included in theatrical participation. Both users and spectators are allowed access to the agency to become more than mere consumers but instead become part of the action and the encounter that any product is wrapped up in. By being allowed the choice to impact the development and flow of this encounter, these participants now had the sense of ownership over the outcomes that the event offered. As personal computing expanded into more connected and interactive modes of use (instantaneous communication, user-generated content, postable/editable media) these users became more and more hooked on the direct feedback found in participation.

Ideologies of making the televisual more tangible through sensory interaction also took root in social structures through technologies of the virtual which the Internet supported. This is where the seed of immersion across creative industries first took root. First made famous by Jaron Lanier in 1987, virtual reality (VR) became the new technological marvel that attempted to bring together the visual fidelity of film and television with the experiential presence and ephemerality of live theatre. One only needs to look at the trends toward simulation and digital realities in the cultural zeitgeist of the late 1980s and early 1990s to understand how powerful the draw toward technological immersion was. Just

consider the range of movies that played on the themes of cyberculture and machine interface. The most often cited example is *Lawnmower Man* (1992), but others such as *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), *Virtuosity* (1995), and *Strange Days* (1995), captured the imaginations of the masses to the possibilities of jacking into cyber worlds shortly before AOL ushered in a wave of digital connectivity. With *The Matrix* (1999) came the pinnacle of this era, leading to a mainstream questioning of our ethical relationship with virtual realities in the new century. Unfortunately, the promise of the technology was about three decades ahead of its time. True immersion using VR was too expensive, cumbersome, and gimmicky to find full adoption. At the turn of the century immersive practices began to take off in theatre. Even though the technology was not fully developed, theatre makers began to use the ideas and theories behind virtual reality and simulations and co-opted them to make interactive theatre pieces that capitalized on the idea of enveloping their audiences. In the early 2000s a range of immersive artists (i.e., Blast Theory, Punchdrunk, De La Guarda, Coney, Shunt) began experimenting with a hybridization of site-specific theatre and immersive narrative. This led to a full wave of artists (i.e., Third Rail, Speakeasy Society, Cynthia Von Bulher, Nocturnal Fandango) coming into their own near the end of the decade and inspiring others to follow. It is difficult to determine explicitly where these artists learned their experiential craft though. Were they taking what they were learning from digital culture and grafting it onto their established practices in theatrical design and storytelling or were they developing something entirely new on their own?

The immersive promise of technological virtual realities found another media outlet in the 1980s. Video gaming allowed some of the same properties of VR but could also amplify the user experience through aspects of game play and flow-based immersion. Most early video games are based around four basic design fundamentals described by play theorist/maker Jane McGonigal (2011): they must have a goal, a structuring set of rules, include a system of feedback, and require volunteer participation (21). The play found in early video games is a specific form that is more structured than open-ended play described by early theorists such as Johan Huizinga (1955) and Roger Caillois (1963). They capitalize on the performances of the player as an interactive choice-maker in a relationship between a digital product and a human user. Though most video games are largely pre-scripted for specific user throughput (a framing toward linear objectives) they give the player the feeling of control and agency over their individual playing experiences. This expanded as computing power multiplied and more and more games embraced a sandbox approach to world-building. Like a child playing in their schoolyard sandbox, these games offered an almost endless environment for imagination and free exploration. These games became more immersive and engaging due to their open-ended nature to roam as one pleases through the digital environments. This is the same format that experiential theatre makers such as Punchdrunk employ in their works. When discussing gaming it is hard to miss the term “flow” which refers to a state of immersion within aspects of play. This sense of flow, which allows the player to feel fully separate from the real world and become part of the game world, is key to meaningful game experiences. What in fact is the overall effect of constant gamification in our daily lives and with our daily interactions with our devices? How might this constant state of flow impact our perceptions and expectations of theatrical events?

Gamification has become pervasive across social aspects of life as we embrace the concepts of likes, pokes, badges, milestones, and other reward systems built into social media platforms. As life becomes more gamified, we see more and more aspects of gameplay in our artistic products. Like the popular game *Pokémon Go* we see a rising trend toward experiential encounters that use Augmented Reality and other forms of locative technologies. The popular running app *Run Zombies Run* is another example of

gamification of everyday routine events. By adding a soundtrack and cues to speed up or be eaten by the zombie horde at your back users are given the nudge to perform better. These nudges are folded into an ever-evolving narrative based on your individual running experience. These technologies are just now beginning to become standardized and accessible. As they continue to become more commonplace, they will ultimately create new paradigms of interaction with each other and our spatial environments. This is an outcome of our technological/media environments which are fundamentally based on relationality and mutual impact. As we engage with/in these environments we both shape and are shaped by the technologies and media. Underpinning all our technological environments is the heart of digital interactivity found in the processes of the Internet.

Under the process of digitalization driving technological change over the past fifty years, the invisible underlying construction of societies is based on complex networks of multimodal communication based on the structure of the Internet. While the Internet formally began in the 1980s as multiple small digitally connected networks primarily between academic and governmental entities, it quickly grew through the 1990s and early 2000s into a “hyper-textual” and interconnected digital backbone of the world we know today. Through protocols of computer-to-computer communication (HTTPS), a global digital infrastructure emerged and changed how communication operated and recirculated via digital, virtual, and mobile systems. These systems allow for near-instant interactivity and connectivity across vast geographical distances and give users the ability to both consume and create artistic products in a manner, unlike previous technologies. With the embeddedness of the internet into everyday lives came a shift in the way most people think about interactivity and communication. This is a shift toward the postdigital.

The tools that exist within an interconnected digital ecosystem allow their users to develop heightened sensitivity to direct response while using these tools. This causes a feedback loop where participatory action is embedded across multiple media and technological spheres. In the early 2000s when Web 2.0 ushered forth platforms such as social media spaces, user blogs, wikis, and content creation sites like YouTube, Vimeo, Instagram, and Twitch, users increasingly became producers as opposed to merely consumers of other people’s information. This unprecedented shift led to what Henry Jenkins (2006) describes as Convergence Cultures that are predicated on a sense of seamless flow and interactivity between “multiple media industries,” tools, and platforms (2). Jenkins’ concepts align squarely with our argument for expanding the scope of inquiry and training for theatre students. The very interconnected and interactive nature of convergence cultures bleed over into all aspects of life including learning and performance. When students are born into and formed within these cultures, they develop sensibilities that replicate and encourage deeper senses of convergence, cross-platform connection, constant interactivity, and a sense of agency that comes with pervasive choice making. They are less passive receivers of information and more participatory transmitters through their daily actions. Today’s students have a fundamentally different relationship to theatrical traditions and canons than any generation before them. They were also uniquely prepared for the emotional and social challenges of COVID-19 because they had already figured out how to create life experiences using digital tools such as Tik Tok and Instagram. Transitioning to making theatrical experiences with these tools seemed quite natural for them.

As Web 2.0 became pervasive, technologies continued to evolve and connect to the internet in ways that allowed innovative Apps (applications) to emerge that transformed how previous modes of work, play, communication, and interactivity occurred. Each step in the development of the internet changed how human communication worked and changed the social systems that inform how we all operate in our social worlds. The late twentieth and early twenty-first century became consumed by digitalization. In this