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zine
is
one
in a
series
of five.

Each
contains
an edited
version of
a prelude
from
a
chapter
of
the book
*Experiments
in
Listening*
by
Rajni Shah.

The
book
was
published
in
June
2021
by
Rowman
&
Littlefield
as
part
of
the
performance
Philosophy
series.

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listening

waiting

theatre
a play?

audience

gathering



the occasion

of going

to the theatre



What this means is that some of the things that might have been thought of as peripheral activities – how an invitation is worded, what it looks or sounds like and who receives it, what the physical access to the theatre is like, where the seats are placed, how people are welcomed – become details that define what I am calling the listening of theatre. And it is the listening of theatre that determines what is possible in terms of visibility and audibility: what and who can 'appear'.

¹ Sara Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service* (Routledge, 2011), p. 26.

² Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening* [1985], trans. by Charles Lambert (Routledge, 1990), p. 72.

In thinking about the act of gathering itself as definitional to theatre, I'm proposing a shift in perspective – not a shift in what happens, nor in how it happens necessarily, but a shift in how those things are prioritised. Bailes observed that Beckett's stage emerged through and was held by the act of waiting; it became 'visible' through the illusion of 'waiting for'. I am proposing that to think of the gathering that happens around a piece of theatre as gathering *for* a performance on a stage, if not an illusion, is at least a description that is standing in for something else. In fact, the gathering and the performance are happening in relation to each other, but it is the gathering (a physical gathering, and a gathering of attentiveness, a listening) that makes the performance possible.

From the ages of six to eighteen I lived with my parents in a small town near Oxford and occasionally my dad would take us all to the Oxford Playhouse to see a play. This, I believe, is one of the key places I learnt to love theatre. More specifically, this is where I learnt to love the occasion of going to the theatre. And one of the things that thrilled me most was the thing I understood least: before the show started, during the interval, and right at the end of the show when it was time to leave, a large, somewhat unattractive, mysterious object came noisily down from the top of the stage and hid the stage from the audience.

I remember that this white industrial-looking screen had printed on it the quotes, "What, has this thing appeared again tonight?" and "For thine especial safety" and then in smaller type the name 'Hamlet' and some numbers. At the time, I didn't understand the function of the safety curtain, nor did I fully appreciate its Shakespearean references ('Hamlet', I remember thinking, was the name of a cigar that I had seen advertised at the cinema), but somehow its consistent appearance enthralled me. In particular, the quote, "What, has this thing appeared again tonight?" made a joke that I felt I understood; in the moment that the safety curtain made an appearance, it also commented on its own act of appearance.

In order to let go of the illusion that I am listening to something, I first have to recognise that illusion: and in order to recognise it, I somehow need to make it visible and audible. This paradox aligns perfectly with the theatrical model: the play, or the performance, is what allows us to listen – it has been created in order that we might pay attention to it. But its value, at least within the paradigm that I am exploring, lies not so much in its subject-matter – not so much in the thing that we are paying attention to – but in its status as having created the possibility for the act of gathering that enabled that attention.

But Beckett's theatre – perhaps in this respect a corollary to Fiumara's philosophy – reveals the construct in this waiting: we are not, in fact, waiting *for* anything in particular, but the human condition is one of waiting, full stop. In parallel with this, Fiumara insists that the human condition is one that already has the potential to embrace listening, if only we could bear to let go of the illusion that we are listening *to* something, and just listen. This proposition, to 'just listen' without already knowing what one is listening to or for, might seem simple. But the work that is needed in order for this possibility to manifest is immense.

Nowadays it is increasingly rare that I encounter the types of performance that take place in a proscenium arch theatre with a safety curtain. I'm more likely to attend performances that are site specific or that take place in studio theatres without curtains of any kind. However, I find it helpful to remember that while the content of those early shows at the Oxford Playhouse sometimes moved me greatly, it was the repeated appearance of the machinery of the theatre that enthralled me. It was the combination of all the elements – the words and sounds and visuals of the play, but also the curtains, the theatre lights, and the metering out of time – that appealed to me, and that made the world of the theatre stand apart from the rest of my world.

On reflection, I wonder whether I particularly loved the safety curtain because its presence during the intervals, before, and after the show indicated that in those moments when the narrative of the play was not visibly unfolding, when the play itself was definitely 'not happening', the theatrical experience continued to be held in place. Each play created a focused point in time and space around which a group of people might gather; but it is the repeated act of gathering, rather than the plays themselves, that has persisted in my memory.

In drawing a comparison with Beckett, I want to be careful not to collapse the activities of waiting and listening; though they sit in relation to each other, each has its own particular relationship to time and space, especially within the context of the theatre. However, there is one more parallel that feels important. Listening and waiting, in contrast to their counterparts speaking and doing, are almost always described (either explicitly or by implication) in relation to someone or something else: I am listening to or waiting for x. The not-doing of listening or waiting, then, almost always seems to exist in relation to the action or speech of another person, thing, or event that is temporally and/or spatially separate from the subject.

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In Fiumara's example, it is listening that creates the conditions in which speaking might occur. Just as Beckett's stage exists through and with the waiting of the audience and characters/actors, Fiumara's proposal (and mine) is that any form of speech or action derives its agency and shape from the attention within which it is held. The illusion that it is always speaking that creates listening, then, is entirely one of habit and perception. For each of us, there are people whom we have become conditioned to expect to hear, and there are people we don't realise we are not hearing. These behaviours relate more closely to the social structures that shape our attention than to the qualities of speech that seduce us.

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It has always surprised me that of all the wonderful plays I saw during those years, the thing that has stuck in my mind was a part of the furniture. But perhaps my surprise is related to an expectation that it is the play, or the performance, that creates the theatrical experience, and that everything else supports this act of creation. What I want to explore here is another version of this creation story – one in which the safety curtain, the stage, and all the other aspects of a theatrical production exist in relation to and as a product of another more fundamental economy: the economy of listening.

Before elaborating on this, I want to introduce a quote from performance scholar Sara Jane Bailes' book *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*. In this quote, Bailes identifies playwright Samuel Beckett's repeated and distinctive engagement with the conditions of boredom and waiting as being both characteristic of and foundational to his work:

Beckett understands boredom and the listlessness of waiting as an a priori condition and situation of the (expectant, empty) stage itself, a space and time to be filled, so perhaps we can think of it in this way: that in Beckett's work, the stage is not a space in which waiting is narrated, but rather that waiting is precisely what enables the stage to first of all "appear" and then to become animate.¹

There is plenty that could be, and has been, said about Beckett's plays in relation to waiting. I'd like to focus on this particular aspect highlighted by Bailes, that Beckett's theatre not only enacts but arises from – is made (visible and audible) by – waiting. The plays take place within this act of waiting; they are both about and made of the waiting of the audience, the characters, and (arguably) the actors.

This strikes me as being deeply resonant with philosopher Gemma Corradi Fiumara's proposal that:

[...] something can 'speak' if it is listened to, rather than there being something it might say, that one would subsequently attend to by means of listening.²