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# Ototheatre

## Summoning theatricality

LAUREN R. BECK

Theatre is the first human invention and also the invention which paves the way for all other inventions and discoveries.

Augusto Boal (1995: 13)

In 1983 Chris Hardman published a three-page manifesto called 'Walkmanology'. He stated, 'The walkman is the backbone of a new kind of theatrical experience' (1983: 43). Despite Hardman's manifesto and theatrical experiments with the Walkman, Walkmanology did not take off in the 1980s. However, there has been a boom in mobile sonic works, especially since the advent of the smartphone. Audiobooks, streaming music, audio tours, podcasts and even sound-based games have become easily accessible through smartphone apps, each with the ability to facilitate theatrical experiences. I have coined the term *ototheatre* to encompass mobile, sound-based works that create individualized theatrical experiences for *audients*, to borrow Hardman's term (*ibid.*). Prefixing *theatre* ('seeing place') with *oto* ('ear') is intended to emphasize the importance of the audio recordings in framing the theatrical events. However, I also use *oto* because of its homonymic connotation of *auto*, or the self. I define *ototheatre* as a self-sufficient theatrical work that can be both enacted and viewed by one person who makes use of a scripting audio recording.

Hardman uses the term 'audient' to indicate an audience member for a theatrical work who could serve as a range of roles, from mobile listener to active performer. For Hardman, the benefits of this new type of audience engagement could come from more active and participatory experiences for audience members, as well as the ability to provide theatrical experiences in places where a large audience could not travel; 'you drive a car, climb a fire escape and end up in a dingy apartment', for example (1983: 45). I understand the audient's combined role of audience member and performer in *ototheatre* as one that fulfils

its promise now, in a time when our bodies and everyday experiences are augmented by digital technology that we wear and interact with.

Today's audient routinely experiences virtual worlds and shifting perspectives, comfortably switching roles from performer to audience/spectator.

Ototheatre encompasses a comprehensive category within which we can see fundamental links between different types of mobile audio work. An audio tour, a podcast, a soundwalk, a fitness app and a sound installation may not have been created to be works of theatre, but each may prompt audients to engage with recorded sound in a way that transforms space and provides multiple ways for them to act as both audiences and performers for themselves and others. Ototheatre allows for spontaneity and individualized experiences, providing audients with a virtual and portable theatrical frame in which they synthesize information from the physical sites, the recordings and themselves to ultimately enact a performance

### SUMMONING THEATRE

Theatre is not a singular media form, but is always made up of other media. For this reason, Chiel Kattenbelt calls theatre a hypermedium (2006: 29). Theatricality is thus tricky to define. Theatre, especially experimental theatre, may be difficult to recognize and define in the absence of traditionally recognized forms of these elements. I use the following broad definition.

- 1) Theatrical events occur within an interval of time, one that has a beginning and an ending. (Jacqueline Martin, Georgia Seffrin and Rod Wissler argue that 'the duration through time of the theatrical event is one of its enduring hallmarks' (2004: 101).) Gertrude Stein asserts that an audience member experiences two intervals of time

in the theatre: the time of the play and the emotional time of the audience member (1985:94.)

- 2) They contain one or more human beings who perform and witness. (According to Keir Elam, theatre is the 'complex of phenomena associated with the performer–audience transaction' (2003:2).) Augusto Boal explains that 'theatre is born when the human being discovers that it can observe itself; when it discovers that, in this act of seeing, it can see itself – see itself in situ: see itself seeing' (1995:13.)
- 3) They occur in a hybrid space that merges a physical environment with a virtual world. (The staging of written plays is a clear example of a fictional world that is actualized in the theatre. However, not all theatre is fictional. In such instances Hans-Thies Lehmann claims that even when theatre resists the dramatic or the representational, it is 'a place where a unique intersection of aesthetically organized and everyday real life takes place' (2006:17).)

To examine the role that sound plays in summoning theatre, I give three very different examples of otheatre. Although not necessarily easily understood as theatre, each case represents an innovative use of sound-based theatricality in an otheatrical context. *Zombies, Run!* is a narrative exercise app for smartphones, and acts like a radio play; *Everyday Moments* is a dance podcast produced by a theatre production company as a site-specific work; *Sights* is a walking tour guided by phones in booths and was installed at a theatre festival by an art collective with a theatre background.

Sound functions theatrically in a different way in each of these works. In *Zombies, Run!*, it produces a narrative that augments the space through which the audience runs, allowing the audience to take on a role that completes the performance. In *Everyday Moments*, the sound creates an intimacy between the listener and audience, creating a sense of liveness and human connection. The podcast also guides the movement of the audience creating a performance, as well as guiding the audience's perception of the

movement as performer and viewer. For *Sights*, the sound is played over the phone in booths, delivered as segments of conversations and augments the audience's walk through the city from booth to booth.

#### ZOMBIES, RUN!<sup>1</sup>

The sounds of groaning zombies that I hear in an otherwise deserted wasteland do not fit with the busy Chicago street on which I run, so I turn down a side street that is often devoid of pedestrians. A voice that I hear through my earphones tells me that he will refer to me as Runner 5, because the old Runner 5 has recently been killed. Occasionally, a voice urgently warns me of approaching zombies. Alerted, I see an older man limping towards me, and a sullen teenager standing on the corner. 'They could be zombies,' I think, and I run towards the other side of the street. I lean against a brick wall, afraid, although I am unsure whether I fear an asthma attack or killer zombies. The fears blend together. Another voice in my ear asks an important favour of me: she wants me to fetch much needed medical supplies from an abandoned hospital. Just around the corner in my real-life neighbourhood sits a hospital that has been abandoned for nearly two decades. I cannot resist the connection between the recorded script of the zombie drama and my real life, and so I jog towards the abandoned hospital. I am encouraged by the voice to run home, quickly, so that I am not attacked by zombies. As I near my home, I smell something awful, a stench that might be coming from a gutter, the sewers or the dumpsters behind the nearby McDonald's. I probably smell something like it every day as I walk down this same street, but, this time, as I associate the odour with the rotting stench of zombie flesh, I come very close to vomiting. I open the door to my apartment, remove my earphones and return to real life.

In 2010, Adrian Hon, head of gaming company Six to Start, approached novelist Naomi Alderman about creating a new kind of game – one that combined storytelling, gaming and fitness. The two took a popular trope in early twenty-first-century entertainment – zombies – and created *Zombies, Run!*, a fitness app compatible with smartphones. Hon and Alderman's goal, they say, was to provide

<sup>1</sup> *Zombies, Run!* was co-developed and published by British independent games developer and entertainment company Six to Start. All references to the game are from Six to Start 2012.

people with motivation to run by scaring them with chasing zombies, piquing their interest with an unfolding serial narrative and making them heroes in a post-apocalyptic world whose survival counts on fast-running zombie-evaders (Six to Start and Alderman 2012:45–6). While *Zombies, Run!* is marketed as a fitness app, the serialized narrative delivered in episodes, or ‘missions’, were written by a novelist, suggesting that it can be understood as an audio drama as well.

The second-person address of the audio narrative encourages audients to imagine themselves within the narrative world. This world is constructed through the descriptions provided by the dialogue of the characters in the recordings, as well as through sound effects, such as the groans of zombies, the sound of gunfire and motorbikes and the distant voices of people calling for Runner 5’s help. This aural augmentation alters the ways that audients perceive the people and structures within it. Barry Blesser and Linda Ruth Salter coined the term aural architecture to describe the aural condition of an environment based upon its size and shape and the objects within it (Blesser and Salter 2007). Audients can sense aspects of a space because of the way that sound waves interact with the surroundings. As Blesser and Salter note, most of us can tell the difference auditorily between a cathedral and a chapel, or a bathroom and a living room. We can also make sense of imaginary or virtual spaces in the same way (Blesser and Salter 2007: 20). The sounds of nearby zombies and other sound effects allow an audient to *hear* the shape of the space through which they run, blending it with that which they see. The blending of these two realities is not unlike the work of a spectator in a theatre who must merge the realities of the stage with that of the set.

The audient in *Zombies, Run!* is aware of the body’s movement through two spaces – one actual and one virtual – both created through a blend of sound, sight, architecture and imagination. In *Zombies, Run!*, the virtually created aural architecture reveals height, depth, size of space and openness of space that combine to provide an augmented reality for the user to run through. This space is produced through sound, yet also experienced through the other senses. Depending on the sounds heard in the

environment and recordings heard through earphones, people on the sidewalks can seem like fellow runners, insurgents or even zombies. And, depending on the sounds, an unidentified and unpleasant smell on a run can seem to come from toxic waste dumps or rotting corpses.

An augmented reality is especially successful as a cohesive world when the actual space and the virtual space blend harmoniously. The worlds cleave together in moments of convergence between what is heard and seen, forming a ‘visiophonic knot’ (Thibaud 2003:337). Jean-Paul Thibaud, in discussing the Walkman, claims that people are highly attuned to the connections between seeing and hearing, and thus when listening to a Walkman they notice and find pleasure in the connections between what they hear through their earphones and what they see in the world. Artists have great power with their audio recordings to alter the perception of real, everyday spaces, including those with historical and cultural significance. Adjusting perceptions of the physical qualities of a space can also affect the otheatre audients’ perception of the relationship of their bodies and the bodies of others within that space.

The narrative recording in *Zombies, Run!* transforms runners into performers. They are performing for themselves – the only ones who have access to all the artistic stimuli – as well as for passersby who become an unknowing audience. The movements of the runner are scripted and choreographed by the narrative world, including directions given to Runner 5 by the other characters, and the events that occur in the narrative. This type of motivation for movement is not unlike that of theatrical script, suggesting movements of the actor through its plot points, character interaction and narrative logic.

Sound has other choreographic powers. Tia DeNora uses the concept of entrainment – ‘the alignment or integration of bodily features with some recurrent features in the environment’ – to argue that sound can regularize and reproduce bodies and bodily states over time (2000:79). Consequently, in addition to receiving directions from otheatrical recordings, audients alter their behaviour in less explicit ways due to tone, pacing, mood and musical content. The gait, stride, style,

pace, facial expressions and the shortcuts and detours that audiences take are modified by the audio content, and these behaviours 'contribute a new tonality to city streets' (Thibaud 2003:337). The *Zombies, Run!* audience, perhaps running faster due to a twinge of fear, perhaps glancing furtively around in response to the suggestions of the voice in the recording, has the ability to project this fear and urgency of the apocalyptic narrative into the tonality of the street. Non-participants do not hear the ototheatrical recording and yet are affected by it since listening audiences contribute to the tonality of the streets with their performances.

#### EVERYDAY MOMENTS

Late at night, I sit in my dark bedroom, wearing earphones, as per the instructions I hear from a voice in my ear. I hear music playing. It begins as swelling static that resolves into an orchestral chord. Then, after a quiet pause, a man's deep voice quietly and slowly says, 'I'm not going to tell you what to do. I'm just going to tell you what to think. Or what not to think about' He speaks quietly though his voice is almost loud, as if he is speaking directly into my ear. His voice is breathy, almost sensual. This is a personal and intimate exchange. He issues a directive: 'Stand up ... Think about your body ... Don't think about me.' He leads me through a fifteen-minute dance performance, guiding my movements with instructions like, 'Feel your body being very light. Being empty, like an empty plastic bag. It starts moving because it's so light and empty.' Throughout the piece, the music becomes faster, the man's voice becomes louder and my movements become more frenzied until I am lying on my bed, out of breath and disoriented. The man calmly says, 'You are inside your body. You are outside your body. You are inside your body. Nobody can see us. You are outside your body. You are inside your body, outside your body.' He repeats this refrain, pulling my attention inward and outward. I feel my body from the inside from the perspective of a dancer. I then imagine that I see my body as if I am on the ceiling above my bed, watching a performance. The piece ends with this refrain, as the music swells and then becomes silent.

In 2011, the London-based producing organization Fuel teamed up with *The Guardian's* Culture podcast to present *Everyday Moments*, a year-long, monthly series of podcasts, conceived of by Fuel and created by artists, authors, poets, musicians, comedians, choreographers and theatre and performance artists. Each podcast was meant to be a site-specific work, listened to in a specific kind of space and time of day by the audience. Some of the podcast episodes serve as a backdrop and soundtrack for everyday mundane activities of the listener, like drinking coffee, shopping for groceries or taking a bath. Each promotes a different type of listening experience and a different relationship to the narrator, the space in which one listens and the listener's own self and body.

The fifth instalment of *Everyday Moments* was created by Hofesh Shechter, a London-based Israeli choreographer. This work was designed to be listened to at night, alone in a dark room. Shechter says that the work is a dance show that occurs inside the listener's body. He makes use of the technological, physical and social characteristics of the podcast form to create a virtual experience of the dancing body. Shechter's *Everyday Moments* provides a script that positions the listener as performer, auditor and viewer of a theatrical dance piece.

A work designed to be experienced by a single person, completely alone, in a private space, seems the antithesis to a theatrical work. The theatricality of the piece is clearer when it is considered as a work of ototheatre. Ototheatre requires listeners to change their roles many times from listeners to audience members, perceivers and performers. Audiences shift their understanding of what is being viewed, heard or experienced and – more importantly – move between the role of performer and audience member. Sometimes they are imaginatively inside their bodies as performers, and sometimes they are imaginatively outside their bodies as observers. What is ototheatrical is that the listener performs both roles. In *Everyday Moments*, this synthesis of roles is facilitated by sound, and in particular the method in which the narration/direction is recorded.

Ototheatre summons theatricality by augmenting spaces, simulating physical proximity between people and guiding the audience back

and forth from performer to audience member. Theatricality is created by an intimate exchange between the performer and audience. The liveness and immediacy of a performance can create that intimacy or the place and spatial construction of the performance event. Sound, however, has the ability create a sense of intimacy between the recorded voice and the listener that facilitates a sense that the experience is a singular, live, unreplicable event. Vibrations of sound reverberate in the ear canal; a listener can both hear and feel a recorded voice though the speaker is far away in space and time. R. Murray Schafer asserts, 'Hearing is a way of touching at a distance' (1994: 11). In narrating *Everyday Moments*, Shechter speaks quietly in a deep, rich voice, amplified to resonate within the skull of the listener, reverberating in an intimate exchange.

The intimacy of the recorded voice not only creates an immediacy and sense of liveness; it also helps move the roles of performer and audience closer together, blurring the boundaries between the two. According to Blesser and Salter, listeners evaluate relationships between themselves and sound producers by detecting the proxemic distances of sounds (2007: 35). The sense or perception of distance between people can be manipulated through electronic means. For example, a listener can hear the whispering of a distant speaker through earphones. Without this form of electronic manipulation, this act would require a very short, intimate distance between two people. However, with technology, intimate spaces can be created in a virtual fashion. Blesser and Salter claim that earphones allow for entrance into a sphere of intimacy, crossing the barrier between outside and inside. The intimacy helps to hybridize the work, transforming the podcast into theatre.

Shechter fosters two distinct, intimate relationships: intimacy between narrator and listener and intimacy between body and self. Michel Chion names the spaceless voice of cinema the 'I-voice'. Chion claims that the use of close miking and the absence of reverb remove the voice from space and allow the spectator to identify with the speaker (1999: 51). While there is also a spaceless quality to Shechter's voice, *Everyday Moments* conveys a spacelessness that is inside the body. Schafer has theorized

about this phenomenon of earphone listening, explaining that when listening to earphones a listener is no longer 'surrounded by a sphere of moving elements'; rather, the listener 'is the sphere ... is the universe' (1994: 119). When the internal space of the listener becomes the site of the performance, a virtual theatrical space is created in which Shechter choreographs his dance. Shechter carefully orchestrates the feeling of togetherness, and then solitude, and then back again, by establishing a rapport, and then replacing his voice with music, and then returning to the private listening space he has created.

#### SIGHTS

I began my journey at a temporary telephone booth made with a simple wood frame in front of the police station in Bern, Switzerland. It was a perfect day, sunny and seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit, with a breeze. I had been given an envelope filled with nine tokens and a map of the city marked with the route I was to take. The phone-like apparatus had two handsets. I picked up one, put it to my ear and inserted one of my tokens. A sign in the booth informed me that I would be hearing from Angelika. I heard a sound like someone clunkily picking up a telephone receiver from a cradle. She began to speak. She said, in German, 'I do not live in darkness. I don't see, but that has nothing to do with life in the dark'. Angelika explained that she sees pictures in her head, but that the pictures are memories frozen in time from before she lost her sight thirty years ago. After Angelika 'hung up', I followed the map to the next location. As I walked, prompted by Angelika, I thought about the impermanence of what I saw around me and the scale of that impermanence. Although the buildings around me had been there for hundreds of years relatively unchanged, the face of the city, the shop fronts, must change often, as would the residents, tourists, fashions and technology.

*Sights*, by Cristina Galbiati and Ilija Luginbühl of the Swiss theatre company Trickster<sup>9</sup>, was developed around the question: what does sight mean for the blind? *Sights* is an urban journey in which audiences take a long walk through a city, stopping at special telephone booths where they listen to narratives that provide alternate

perspectives of space – the sensory experiences of the non-sighted. At nine stations, each a simple telephone booth that Trickster<sup>p</sup> had set up around a city, audiences listen to the personal stories of urban citizens who are blind, which highlights complexities of the perception of space and memory<sup>2</sup>.

In the previous two examples of otheatre discussed in this essay, audiences listen to a continuous audio track through earphones that both serve to block out outside noise and, often, provide a high-fidelity soundtrack that manipulates the aural architecture the audience experiences. In *Sights*, however, the audience listens to recordings at booths that simulate telephone calls. The telephone conveys a different set of meanings and experiences than a soundtrack played over earphones. The sound of a telephone conversation is grainier, more distorted and usually heard through one ear at a time. Telephonic sound is designed for legibility of spoken language rather than fidelity. Phonographic sound, however, to borrow James Lastra's term, aims for the highest fidelity – to record and transmit all of the sounds in the environment in order to present a faithful representation of the sound in that space (2000: 139). The soundscape is not important in *Sights*. In *Zombies, Run!* and *Everyday Moments* the soundscape augments the reality for audiences, altering their perception of the actual world as they experience the work. In *Sights*, however, the city of Bern is augmented for the audience by the new perspectives offered by those they hear over the telephone handsets. The flexibility that Galbiati and Luginbühl build into the format of their work requires audiences to step away from the work and process it on the next leg of their journey before they listen to the following piece. There is an additive effect to the work; each time another contributor tells their story, the audience has a new way to process the space of Bern.

The lack of fidelity in the sound was not a detriment to the production. In fact, I would argue that an attempt to create an immersive virtual reality would be inappropriate in this context. *Sights* intentionally keeps audiences from immersion with the use of non-mobile phones. The telephones used in *Sights* mimic an older style of analogue telephone booth, one that

conjures different memories and associations in the user. The telephone, although used in different contexts, carries with it the connotation of intimacy tied to a person's memories of talking to loved ones who are uncomfortably far away. Since the late nineteenth century, telephone advertisements have focused on the ability of the telephone to bring loved ones close. *Sights* makes use of these understandings of the telephone, using the audience's associations to its advantage. Each call begins and ends with a sound effect of the phone being taken out of or being put back into its cradle. This creates the image of the person on the other end of the line talking into a handset. Rather than feeling as if I were listening to a recording, I got the sense that I was having a live and personal exchange with another person, separated by space, but not by familiarity.

The performers of *Sights* provide different understandings of time and place, not necessarily apparent to the tourist. The stories seem to lend themselves to different elements: memory, experience, legibility. I found the fourth telephone booth in a playground behind the cathedral and listened to a performer named Georg. Watching the children play, I listened to Georg describe the experience he had as an adult of returning to a playground he used to play in as a child. He describes the disorientation that he felt when trying to move through this very familiar place. Because his body had changed, he was now 'not able to read the site'.

Georg perceives things around him through his sense of hearing. He says that a space is made up of its sound reflections, and therefore abstract visual concepts like perspective views or the horizon mean nothing to him. Georg says, 'If something does not produce a sound, it's not there.' The sounds of the city, the smells, the action up close, blocks what is distant. Thus, the experience of the city that each story communicates is one of immediacy, change and contingency.

Various lookout points across the city feature wide, cinematic vistas of the medieval architecture, river and Alps that are difficult to capture photographically. But there are also the small, low to the ground, hidden places of Bern that are remarkably different in the ways that they look, sound, smell and feel. The specificities of

<sup>2</sup> All references to *Sights* in this section are from Trickster<sup>p</sup> 2015.

the everyday experiences in Bern change as time passes and as the body moves. These experiences of place contrast with those of the wide, spanning vistas that remain largely unchanged year after year. Both of these experiences become muddled when one is visiting a place. Listening to Georg differentiate between the two experiences allows the audience to apply that distinction on subsequent walks in the journey.

*Sights* is different from the other works examined here. *Everyday Moments* and *Zombies, Run!* use sound to actively augment or overlay the world through which the audience moves, so that the sound and the performance happen simultaneously. In *Sights*, by contrast, the listening and moving of the audience are separated; earphones are not used. Theatre is still summoned by the sound, but the temporal and spatial location of the audience's performance is moved. Additionally, the voices heard through the telephone handsets in *Sights* must be separate from the audience, facilitated by telephonic sound. The experiences shared over the handsets are deeply personal, and we are not meant to inhabit the speakers' bodies. The telephone allows interviewees to share their experiences with the audience in a way that forms a different kind of intimacy, one that encourages the audience to be transformed by an empathetic exchange.

Sound sets the stage for the performance in *Sights*. Contextualized by the use of the telephone, the conversations with the blind that the audiences have at the phone booths augment and recontextualize the walking segments that connect the booths. The reverberations of the conversations layer on top of one another and the city as the piece continues, giving the audience a new way to perceive the world around them, performing and observing a role inflected by the phone booth conversations.

#### CONCLUSION: A FUTURE FOR OTOTHEATRE

Ototheatre allows for a way of listening and performing that is based on the knowledge, desires and experiences of the contemporary audience. The twenty-first century has provided technologies that augment reality. Ototheatrical works like *Zombies, Run!*, *Everyday Moments* and

*Sights* are important antecedents for the ways that reality augmentation can be used in future theatrical works. Naming ototheatre and making it an object of study fosters connections among theatre, sound, mobility and technology in the twenty-first century to promote ototheatrical experiments by artists to engage twenty-first century audiences.

The individualized and interactive ways that ototheatre can be experienced and understood makes it an ideal model for other works. Users with very different interests can enjoy ototheatrical works by participating in vastly different physical and imaginative ways. These works allow users—simultaneously performers and audience members—to customize their experiences based on their own desires, through the use of individual technology. Theatricality, lying dormant in these works, is activated by motivated audiences seeking interactive and personalized experiences. Theatricality, lying dormant in these works, is activated by motivated audiences seeking interactive and personalized experiences.

It is important to gather works that are not necessarily designed as theatre – *Zombies, Run!*, for example – and identify them as theatrical in order to expand future theatrical possibilities. In the epigraph to this essay, Augusto Boal notes that theatre 'paves the way for all [human] inventions and discoveries' (1995: 13). Theatre in this view is an experimental mode, not just reflecting the world that is, but anticipating a world that could be. Ototheatre directly participates in this experimentation and invention. Ototheatre asks an audience not just to observe but to perform. It asks an audience to interact with space, technology and presence in new ways. Ototheatre summons theatricality, drawing it forward into new worlds.

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