

Belmont University

Belmont Digital Repository

Belmont Undergraduate Research Symposium
(BURS)

Special Events

4-11-2019

Breaking Down the Fourth Wall with Artaud, Punchdrunk, and the Wooster Group

Megan Huggins
Belmont University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.belmont.edu/burs>



Part of the [Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Huggins, Megan, "Breaking Down the Fourth Wall with Artaud, Punchdrunk, and the Wooster Group" (2019). *Belmont Undergraduate Research Symposium (BURS)*. 8.

<https://repository.belmont.edu/burs/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Events at Belmont Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Belmont Undergraduate Research Symposium (BURS) by an authorized administrator of Belmont Digital Repository. For more information, please contact repository@belmont.edu.

Megan Huggins

TDR 3510 Theatre History I

Fall 2018

Breaking Down the Fourth Wall with Artaud, Punchdrunk, and the Wooster Group

Innovations in technology change the way people connect, and storytelling must adapt and evolve to keep up. In theatre, smarter technology creates more intricate designs and improves the use of lights, sound, costumes, and sets to support storytelling in bold ways. With these innovations, welcoming the audience into a story becomes more natural and more personal. These advances blend easily with Antonin Artaud's vision of a shocking Theatre of Cruelty that connects audiences to the actors and stories in more profound, more emotional ways. Many companies worldwide have grown out of Artaud's vision of theatre, including the Wooster Group and Punchdrunk. How do these theatre groups use Artaud's principles to break the fourth wall with their storytelling, and what effect does this have on modern audiences? By incorporating Artaud's ideas, the Wooster Group's *Hamlet* and Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* use technology, design, and audience participation to eliminate the boundaries in theatre and bring classics to the contemporary world.

Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen, and others wrote plays that explored the subtexts of ordinary people, and their stories required the fourth wall firmly in place, that separated the actors from the audience. At the height of realism, giants of the stage studied under Constantin Stanislavski to create real life onstage. This style taught viewers to behave with a quiet reservation. In 1931, Artaud smashed onto the stage. He felt that the fourth wall created a complacency that separated audiences from the stories they needed to hear. He believed that the world needed a "culture-in-action," something that changed and grew as humans do (Artaud 1085). Artaud developed a Theatre of Cruelty within the avant-garde movement with one primary goal: "to shock and confront the audience, to go beyond words and connect with the emotions: to wake up the nerves and the heart" (Tripney). Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty operated

to create a connection with the audience, tearing down the fourth wall to interact directly with the people in the crowd and shock them into a deeper emotional understanding. This theatre intentionally strives to “break the boundaries between actor and audience” (Artaud 1084), to attack traditional theatre and incite change.

His attacks included lengthy arguments for destroying culture's idolization of ancient masterpieces. Artaud claimed that old texts and pieces of art were no longer relevant to the current world and did not need reverence. Masterpieces did not encourage change or growth, because they were "literary, that is to say, fixed; and fixed forms that no longer respond[ed] to the needs of the time” (Artaud 1087). He felt that masterpieces created an elitism that separated art from everyday people, making modern understandings of the beauty in the world inaccessible. Artaud did not care for preserving masterpieces in the way they existed when created. Theatre had become too psychological and too detached, a form of distraction instead of something that should push people into action.

Artaud was institutionalized in 1937 and remained in a mental hospital for confirmed insanity until his death. One wonders if his theatrical theory and lifestyle impacted his mental health and if the kinds of “cruel theatre” he explored are safe for both actors and audiences. His arguments spawned a desire to uncover new styles and methods of theatre in the name of breaking boundaries.

In 1975, Elizabeth LeCompte founded the Wooster Group with Spalding Gray to explore experimental forms of theatre through improvisation and mixed media. Despite Artaud’s belief that there are no more masterpieces, the Wooster Group turned to the classics for their next artistic experiment. In 2007, the Group adapted *Hamlet* by taking Richard Burton’s recorded and broadcasted 1964 version, editing the footage, and playing it simultaneously with the actors

onstage. The actors attempted to recreate the events unfolding onscreen in some moments and in others deviated from the source to evolve something new. Having duplicates of the same characters creates a doubling effect that follows Artaud's concept of doubling. The Wooster Group used *Hamlet* to comment on the nature of time, history, and modern adaptation. In doing so, the Group shattered the fourth wall and invited the audience into an understanding of the work on stage.

Instead of directly involving the audience in the action of the production, the Wooster Group welcomed the viewer into the process of crafting their version of *Hamlet*. From the beginning, an actor described the technological methods used to recover, edit, and rework the footage from Burton's live stream, openly explaining the process to the audience. The actor eliminated any illusion of magic so that the audience was not left confused or convinced that the work onstage was some tremendous new theatre form. By inviting the audience to understand the entire process, the Wooster Group asked the audience to agree to engage with their experimental storytelling. The audience did not immerse in the action of *Hamlet* but understood the machinery and methods behind the magic to focus more on the work on the stage and not the spectacle.

In an early scene of the production, the fast forward editing made the actors in the film fly through their words, and the onstage actors babbled, creating an odd echo. Each actor attempted to match the physicality and voice of the actors from 1964, reflecting the old style and developing something new at the same time. In other scenes, the actors on the screen were edited out of the video, so that they looked like ghosts. The stagehands even worked to recreate the camera angles of the 1964 production, moving set pieces to different positions as the film continued. In some places, the action on the screen was blurred out and filled in with original music. The Group even used other films as visual references, blending history with modern

culture. The whole production created a dissonance that unsettles and intrigues. The Wooster Group breaks the fourth wall by inviting the audience into the process of their work and by generating multiple realities of a story that exist at the same time. Their unique multimedia style, with TV monitors, microphones in odd places, mimicry, and edited footage allow the storytelling to feel fresh and new. The technology provides a sensory overload that fits well with Artaud's vision of theatre, as well as bringing the action and storytelling closer to the experiences of the audience members in their everyday lives. With surprises around every corner of the Wooster Group's *Hamlet*, the audience finds new life in an old story.

This production, though not physically immersive, dismantles the fourth wall and removes the separation between actors and audiences. The Wooster Group does not fully adhere to the principles of Artaud, providing the audience some distance from the reality of Hamlet's story. This distance keeps the audience from getting too confused or bogged down in deep emotion, allowing a fair amount of contemplation. Much of the Wooster Group's other productions function similarly, drawing on classic scripts from Anton Chekhov to Arthur Miller and incorporating technology to breathe new life into the story. The audience always receives an understanding of the preparations of the actors, technicians, and directors, lowering the separation between but keeping some distance. This distance keeps actors and audiences safe mentally and helps develop the ability to engage in an experimental environment with an open mind.

Fully immersive theatrical experiences cater to Artaud's dreams well but rarely succeed in good storytelling, getting lost in the spectacle. Successful productions require careful planning, masterful design, and meticulous commitment to improvisational storytelling when needed. Initially founded in the UK, the company Punchdrunk adapted Shakespeare's *Macbeth* into *Sleep*

No More. After transferring to New York, Punchdrunk found a new space in the McKittrick Hotel, designed with multiple floors in a 1940s film noir style. The design of the production gives visitors the opportunity to choose their own experience as they wander. The members of the audience cannot speak or remove the masks assigned to them to protect their privacy. The masks provide the audience with the freedom that comes with anonymity and the agency to become “active players in its world” (Flaherty 135). Though little of Shakespeare’s text remains, the actors convey the stories of Macbeth and the people around him through dance and movement. The lack of unfamiliar Shakespearean dialogue gives the story a more universally human and otherworldly feeling, it seems, making it more understandable to an audience member. Some moments are staged and highly dramatic, to the point that one visitor called it “melodrama formulations” (Hopkins 270). Other moments feel more free-form, intimate, and chaotic, like the penultimate scene between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, where they “danced aggressively in and around a claw-foot tub filled with bloody water” (Hopkins 271). The scene ends with one of the only moments of spoken Shakespearean text, as Lady Macbeth utters to herself, “Out damn spot.”

Occasionally, actors pull a member of the audience aside, to engage in a more personal kind of storytelling. One audience member remembers running into the nurse in the forest, who served him tea and told him a story about a sad little boy (Worthen, “The written troubles” 93). Another visitor found one of the witches, who plucked out some of his hair, brushed it, and kissed his neck before disappearing (Koumarianos 171). Each audience member enjoys a unique experience of the story as they wander and have the opportunity to be active observers instead of isolated, passive ones. In this way, actors invite audience members into the atmosphere and circumstances of *Sleep No More*.

Artaud would be pleased with Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*. The production shocks audiences with provocative dance sequences, intimate moments, and violent drama. The spontaneity of the output creates the most significant opportunities for surprise and human connection. Some moments are choreographed on a loop for viewers to catch glimpses, and others are improvised one-on-one interactions between actor and visitor. The barrier between actors and audience members is almost demolished, allowing actors the freedom to interact with the audience. The production keeps its audience safe by masking them and keeps the actors safe by encouraging them to make the first move in personal interactions. By eliminating the fourth wall that often separates theatergoers from understanding the story and words of *Macbeth*, the Punchdrunk actors make the themes in *Sleep No More* rise to the surface. Audience members experience such an emotional connection and visceral reaction that the production has gained a fan base and international attention. By deconstructing a classic, *Sleep No More* has done away with the language of *Macbeth*, fulfilling Artaud's desire for no more masterpieces. The focus of the production falls on connecting with the audience and allowing them the freedom to explore.

Though accomplished in different ways, both the Wooster Group and Punchdrunk adhere to certain principles of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. The Wooster Group creates more profound connections with the audience by removing the magic and mystery from the evolution of their projects. By using mixed media to develop timeless and fresh takes on classic plays, the Wooster Group embodies Artaud's idea of a culture-in-action, that grows with the people as they learn, and calls into question the language of an old genius. They choose to give their audience a bit of distance from the action but introduce the idea of immersive theatre through their work.

Punchdrunk develops an entirely immersive experience, getting rid of famous Shakespearean words to reach the nerves and hearts of their audiences. By granting their visitors the freedom to

choose their paths, Punchdrunk embodies Artaud's ideas of living theatre, as well as provocative and shocking storytelling. *Sleep No More* blends Shakespeare, dance, and film noir to turn a former masterpiece into something universally understood and felt. Both productions follow Artaud's dreams and find ways to keep their actors and audiences safe mentally and physically. In unique and inventive ways, both productions push theatre to new methods and strive for emotional connections with the audience above all, just as Artaud intended.

Works Cited

- Artaud, Antonin. "from *The Theater and Its Double*." *The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama*, edited by W. B. Worthen, 6th Edition, 2011, pp. 1084-1090.
- Callens, Johan. "The Wooster Group's Hamlet, According to the True, Original Copies." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 61, no. 4, 2009, pp. 539–561. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40660551.
- Flaherty, Jennifer. "Dreamers and Insomniacs: Audiences in Sleep No More and The Night Circus." *Comparative Drama*, vol. 48 no. 1, 2014, pp. 135-154. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/cdr.2014.0004
- Hamlet*. Dir. Elizabeth LeCompte. The Wooster Group, 2012. Kanopy. Web. 25 Sep. 2018.
- Hopkins, D. J. "Sleep No More (review)." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 64 no. 2, 2012, pp. 269-271. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/tj.2012.0045
- Jannarone, Kimberly. "Audience, Mass, Crowd: Theatres of Cruelty in Interwar Europe." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 61 no. 2, 2009, pp. 191-211. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/tj.0.0160
- Koumarianos, Myrto & Silver, Cassandra. "Dashing at a Nightmare: Haunting Macbeth in Sleep No More." *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 57 no. 1, 2013, pp. 167-175. *Project MUSE*, muse.jhu.edu/article/497772.
- Ritter, Julia M. "Fandom and Punchdrunk's Sleep No More: Audience Ethnography of Immersive Dance." *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 61 no. 4, 2017, pp. 59-77. *Project MUSE*, muse.jhu.edu/article/677827.
- Tripney, Natasha. "Antonin Artaud and the Theatre of Cruelty." *The British Library*, The British Library, 7 Aug. 2017, www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/antonin-artaud-and-the-theatre-of-cruelty.

Werner, Sarah. "Two Hamlets: Wooster Group and Synetic Theater." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2008, pp. 323–329. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40210280.

Worthen, W. B. "Hamlet at Ground Zero: The Wooster Group and the Archive of Performance." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2008, pp. 303–322. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40210279.

Worthen, W. B. "'The written troubles of the brain': Sleep No More and the Space of Character." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 64 no. 1, 2012, pp. 79-97. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/tj.2012.0017](https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2012.0017)