Alternative Approaches to the Classic Model of Stage Presence in Performing Arts: A Review

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Abstract

Stage presence in theatrical traditions is generally understood as the singular actor's ability to enchant an audience, in what has been called the 'classic model of presence' (Sherman, 2016). According to such a model, presence is conceived as a prerogative of the skilled performer, resulting from intrinsic charisma and regimens of training. Whether stage presence is described as a kind of innate intensity or as skilful practice, the performer occupies a position of power, and audiences are conceived as merely receivers, without agency. Is presence an intrinsic aesthetic quality or rather is a state of mind that both audience and actors can share and experience? Some researchers have argued that the sense of stage presence emerges from interaction with the audience and the context, and that audience and performers constitute the performance event by their phenomenal co-presence (Zarrilli 2009, 2012; Fischer-Lichte, 2012), others claim equal responsibility for audience and performers in shaping the performance's reception (Heim, 2016). Through critical analysis of the existing literature, this work proposes an ecological framework for the study of stage presence. By moving away from a classic model, it suggests possible methodological directions for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of stage presence.

Keywords stage presence; theatrical practice; performing arts; cognitive ecology; phenomenology of acting

Introduction

Stage presence is a much-debated theme in the literature and history of theatre. Among performing artists it is commonly conceived as the "ultimate enigma of acting" (Trenos 2014, 64), or the "supreme attribute for an actor" (Goodall 2008, 17). Definitions fluctuate from the mystical and "intangible quality" possessed by the actor, to "the actor's most important creation", to "the most significant interaction in theatre" (Trenos 2014, 64-65). Due to its multifaceted and multi-dimensional nature, "stage presence has proven remarkably resistant to scholarship" (Sherman 2016, 5). Performance scholar Jane Goodall in her book *Stage Presence* (2008) points out how the phenomenon of stage presence is in fact intrinsically mutable and dynamic, ultimately identifiable as a product of social construction, shaped by the progress of different aesthetic and scientific and

political ideas across time. In Western theatrical tradition this enigmatic attribute is shrouded in mystery and surrounded by a vast imagery. To grasp stage presence's many facets, I start by reviewing how stage presence became such an ineffable and captivating quality. This paper discusses some of the most significant interpretations of the phenomenon of stage presence, while suggesting possible future methodological directions for the study of stage presence across the performing arts. The following section illustrates the evolution of some of the various meanings attached to the concept of stage presence in Western culture and theatrical tradition.

A dangerous liaison: stage presence and charismatic allure

Indubitably one of the most common places, from popular culture to academic discourse, is to associate stage presence with charisma. We are used to thinking that "presence belongs to those actors we cannot take our eyes off, who are riveting, who draw us in, are magnetic, charming, and charismatic" (Trenos 2014, 64). As McAllister-Viel underlines, also among professional actors and performers, the word 'charisma' is often used interchangeably with 'presence' (McAllister-Viel 2016, 449). Performance scholars who tackle the phenomenon of stage presence have stressed the problem that results from coupling it with a sense of charisma. Through their analysis grounded on different methodologies, from literary and historical analysis (Roach 2007; Goodall 2008), to philosophical and critical theory (Power 2008) to phenomenology of acting (Zarrilli 2009, 2012); to ethics of attention (Sherman 2016), the problematic association of 'presence' with personal charisma is highlighted in all their respective accounts. According to Power, the 'having of presence' mode includes a sense of prestige or authority, but it also includes an abstract quality, a presence which is above the ordinary (Power, 2008, 47). This idea aligns with Max Weber's concept of charisma: "*a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men [sic] and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities*" (Weber [358−9] quoted in Sherman 2016, 3) This conception is deeply rooted in the Western understanding of presence and finds a direct correspondence in the Oxford English Dictionary, where stage presence is defined as "the ability *to command* the attention of a theatre audience by the impressiveness of one's manner or appearance" (emphasis added). One of the issues that lie behind this conception, as Goodall notes, is that even if "presence may be the supreme attribute of the performer, but the lure of charisma carries with it the insidious idea that it is a supreme attribute of human being" (Goodall 2008, 51).

What is problematic with this view is the fact that by associating the work of the actor with the actor's personality, stage presence not only becomes reified as the "secret power of the actor's

art" (Zarrilli 2012, 123), but also this understanding perpetuates the modern ideology that underlies "the cult of the individual" (Goodall 2008, 12). What meanings underlie the idea that the performer's stage presence is coupled with the idea of innate quality? And how has the idea of presence become infused with mystical allure? The following sections provides an overview of some common rhetorics that inform presence's conception.

Brief history of a multifaceted concept: the classic model of presence

Embracing an historical approach to the analysis of performers as different as Nijinsky, Mesmer, Hitler and Bob Dylan, to name just a few, Goodall (2008) outlines the rhetorics and poetics that shaped the evolution of the idea of presence across different historical contexts. She starts from a reconstruction of the pre-modern origins and meanings of presence, derived from the Latin *praesentiă*, which stands for the present events, to what is present. This term also includes two other connotations, invoking both the idea of potency or *power* and the idea of *appearance* which is linked to epiphany. In Goodall's analysis, one of the earliest usages of the term 'presence' is associated with the Eucharist, which "symbolises the Presence of Christ when Christ is no longer there" (Goodall 2008, 8). Since the Renaissance period, Goodall outlines a split in the meaning of presence, that from this point the idea of presence acquires a dual character, "there is divine or divinely ordained presence and there is worldly presence" (Goodall 2008, 8). According to Goodall, the idea of presence that stands at the core of the western theatrical tradition can be traced back to these two models of human presence. On one hand there is "the classically educated noble man identifiable by manners, speech and bearing" (Goodall, 2008, 8), and on the other there is "the hermetic model of the ideal man" (Goodall, 2008, 8) where the magus, through his privileged relation to the power that he draws from the universe, is the sole bearer of metaphysical forces. The image of the magus as a powerful metaphor to describe the actor's ability to enchant audience attention is found also in the work of Early Modern scholar Evelyn Tribble. In her recent book *Early Modern Actors and Shakespeare's Theatre: Thinking with the Body (2017),* Tribble emphasizes the idea that in the late Renaissance, the actor, through the execution of meaningful movements, was believed to be mastering the extraordinary power to charm audience attention. She states that "in early modern plays […] the ability of the skilled actor or orator is likened to bewitchment" (Tribble 2017, 25) Tribble cites one early modern text where the author describes the skilled actor's ability to draw the audience's attention to him: "sit in a full Theatre, and you will thinke you see so many lines drawne from the circumference of so many eares, whiles the Actor is the Center" (John Webster 'The Excellent Actor' (1615) as cited in Tribble 2017, 25) . As Tribble notes,

> the ability to produce 'significant' or meaningful movement through the managed body is akin to sorcery, a reminder that the secret of both the actor and the conjurer is to manage and direct attention and affect. The actor is imagined as seizing the eyes, ears and attention of the audience and directing them through an invisible tether (Tribble 2017, 25).

This view that considers stage presence a prerogative of the performer, and her ability to direct audience's focus and attention is precisely what Jon Foley Sherman describes as 'the classic model of presence' (Sherman, 2016). For him the classic version refers to "the sense of perceiving something about the performer, a unique truth about the performer magnified by the stage" (Sherman 2016, 2). This classic view of stage presence consists of several facets. The following sections illustrate some common elements of this view.

A radiant energy: the auratic presence of the performer

A common view of stage presence, in its classic sense, involves the concept of aura. As Goodall describes, charismatic people and performers are imagined to have presence when "an energy field that extends around them in space and in time also, so that you might sense them coming, or feel that they've been here, after they've gone" (Goodall 2008, 7-8). Performance scholars who deal with the phenomenon of stage presence in theatre (Goodall 2008; Roach 2007; Power 2008; Sherman 2016) all refer to the ways in which an auratic presence can be manifested in its classic sense. It can be constructed through the fame or reputation of the actor, referring to a conception of aura linked to Walter Benjamin's definition[1]. This type of 'aura' is mainly grounded in the existing and previous conceptions that surround the reputation of an actor or an artwork. The second way of manifesting an auratic presence is in the act of performing, where the actor's presence "can be constructed through [sic] his manipulation of space and materials, including his own body and posture, as well as the way in which the actor confronts his audience and engages their attention" (Power 2008, 49). As Cormac Power underlines, frequently in the artistic discourse the concept of aura assumes a spiritual component, often understood as an energy field surrounding the body (Power 2008, 50).

[1]Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility*, 1935. Sherman writes that "Benjamin defines aura as "a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, no matter how close it may be" ("The Work of Art" [1935] 23). The aura is first of all unique—it pertains to one object only and separates that object from all others. Hence the association of aura with stage presence in its classic sense—both refer to something special about an actor, namely the appearance of his or her uniqueness" (2016, 69).

Coniunctio oppositorum*: the embodiment of opposite qualities*

According to Goodall, since the beginning of modernity in Europe and America, presence came to be associated with the cult of the individual, where

> the formally symbolic and religious connotations of Eucharistic Presence are diluted into a more generalised sense of 'dwelling power' and the state of 'I am', the language used to describe it begins to draw on the vocabularies and image banks of the dynamic sciences (Goodall 2008, 12).

The idea of presence became associated with a radiant power that transcends the natural and lifts the individual to higher plane, a property that previously had been only reserved for superhuman beings such gods and kings, spirits and angels. Goodall states that in the later Renaissance, "[presence] and its connotations start to split: there is divine or divinely ordained presence and there is worldly presence" (Goodall 2008, 8). According to Goodall, these two models of human presence, the divine and the mundane, are what lies at the core of the western theatrical tradition and its understating of stage presence. Goodall explains how this 'worldly' presence started to be related to "the regimes of training and technical prowess: elocution and vocal technique, deportment, the aesthetics of gesture and facial expression" while the 'divine' or otherworldly' presence "is suggested in the more mysterious qualities of magnetism and mesmerism, a sense of inner power being radiated outwards" (Goodall 2008, 8). These two models of presence persisted through the Modern epoch, and from this point two different aspects were merged together: the *theatrical training* and a sense of *inner power* being radiated outward associated with a vocabulary borrowed from the sciences of the epoch such as radiation, electricity, magnetism, mesmerism, which combined with magic and mysticism became synonymous with presence.

From this combination of art and science, presence started to be understood as the skilled performer's capacity to create a sense of transformation. Goodall concludes her analysis with a reflection on the dual quality of presence and its intrinsic double essence. In her view, the practice of performing reveals presence's ontological core, the fact that

> presence is often bound up with paradox, a holding together of contraries, as if the one who embodies it is a convergence point for opposing forces. An alchemist would have understood this also as a switching point, the *coniunctio oppositorum*, through which transformation occurred" (Goodall 2008, 188).

This idea of presence as embodiment of opposite forces echoes what theatre scholar Joseph Roach describes as "the power of apparently effortless embodiment of contradictory qualities

simultaneously" (Roach 2007, 8). According to Roach stage presence is associated with the so called 'it-effect', a sort of allure that certain people exercised effortlessly. This fascination is characterised by the combination of mutually exclusive qualities like "strength and vulnerability" (Roach 2007, 8). the lucky person who possesses such fortunate convergence is deemed as having 'it', as having presence. According to Roach, the fact that "performers are none other than themselves doing a job in which they are always someone else" (Roach 2007, 9) contributes to their magnetic power. For Roach, the essence of this fascination is precisely located in the "fortuitous convergence of personality and extraordinary circumstances or efforts" (Roach 2007, 8). What types of circumstances or efforts are involved in the externalisation of this kind of presence? To illustrate the idea that at the core of the 'it-effect' resides a particular play with polarities, Roach refers to Eugenio Barba and his notion of 'Resistance' (Roach 2007, 8). 'Resistance' corresponds to what in classical theatre is named 'contraposto', a specific technique of the body aimed at generating asymmetries and oppositions within the movements of the limbs, with the goal of creating interesting lines of the body. Through 'resistance', writes Barba, performers create 'total presence', in the way that they

> exploit and compose the weight/balance relationship and the opposition between different movements, their duration and their rhythms, enables them to give the spectator not only a different perception of their (the performers') presence but also a different perception of time and space" (Barba and Savarese 2006, 227).

Through this technique the performer can create a tension from her body on stage, that confers on her a sense of fascination. This idea that the performer's presence can be enhanced and manipulated through skilful practice is another view sustained by the classic model of stage presence: the next section provides examples of this conception.

The skilful art of presence: enchantment smothered in artifice

The history of theatrical practice is scattered with the development of different methodologies and specific training systems to develop actors' presence. From Zeami, the founder of Noh theatre, who maintained in his *Fushikaden* in the 15th century that 'it' can be unfolded only by the skilled actor once he reaches the 'Flower of Peerless Charm' the ultimate level in the actor's training. Stanislavsky described in in *Building a character* (1949), the second book outlining his system, how the actor must enhance 'Stage Charm', a notion developed further by Grotowski's theorization of the 'holy actor' who "through discipline with intense physical and mental training, could […] become a spiritual embodiment of humanity" (Power 2008, 63). Central to these theorists, and

many others, is the idea that stage presence can be developed through assiduous training and the acquisition of specific theatrical techniques, a view summarised by director and voice coach Patsy Rodenburg, "many people believe it is something you have or don't have ... I don't agree: you might not have the make-up, clothes and lighting effects that enhance the stars but you can learn to find your full charisma" (Rodenburg 2007, xi, quoted in McAllister-Viel 2016, 449).

This idea that a performer can enhance her presence through focused training has extended beyond the theatrical domain and has become entrenched in our common understanding of presence. A significant example of this rhetoric can be found in the recent popularity obtained by authors who promise effective strategies to help develop everyone's intrinsic charismatic potential, such as the work of social psychologist Amy Cuddy. Her book on 'presence' (Cuddy 2015), grounded on her research on body language and power posing, has become a bestseller, while her TED talk (Cuddy 2012) became the second most-viewed project in the history of TED, reaching over 47 million views.

The limit of this conception of presence is that by focusing only on the performer's agency, it neglects the interactive aspects embedded in performing. We have seen how this common view that associates stage presence with either a concept of charisma, of a performer's aura, or with the embodiment of opposite qualities on one side, and with the idea that presence can be enhanced by the practice of specific training techniques on the other, revolves primarily around the performer's agency. As many performance scholars have argued (Power, 2008; Zarrilli 2009, 2012; Fisher-Lichte 2012; Trenos, 2014; Sherman 2016; Heim 2016) to comprehend the phenomenon of presence we should recognise that the phenomenon of presence exceeds a single performer's intentions and actions.

The co-constitution of presence: a matter of social interaction

Some researchers have argued that rather than being a quality or a skill, presence is inherently a social event. Caroline Heim refers to Ervin Goffman's theory of social interaction[2] to illustrate the role played by audiences in shaping the unfolding of the performance and how "the real enchantment in theatre happens in the encounter between actors and audience members" (Heim 2016, 2). While providing a definition of stage presence, Helen Trenos has stressed that "in performance, presence is the occasion when the actor and audience are fully and totally in communion, when they are both consumed by the moment, and are fully present together" (Trenos 2014, 65). This reciprocal recognition of audience and performers of being fully present is what

[2] Goffman E., *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1956

Erika Fischer-Lichte calls the 'radical concept of presence' (Fischer-Lichte 2012, 112–16). She proposes a tripartite definition of presence where "the simple presence of the actor's phenomenal body on stage" (Zarrilli 2012, 122) stands for 'the weak concept of presence' (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 94). The second definition in Fisher-Lichte analysis, in contrast to the weak concept of presence, is 'the strong concept of presence', namely "the 'actor's ability of commanding space and holding attention" (Zarrilli 2012, 122).

What Fisher-Lichte describes instead as the 'radical concept of presence' (Fischer-Lichte 2012, 112) is a conception of presence as mental phenomenon, as an embodied process of consciousness. Several performing arts scholars (Fisher-Lichte 2008; Power, 2008; Zarrilli, 2009; 2012; Trenos 2014; Heim 2016) have in fact pointed out how a sense of presence in performance can "be created through an interaction between actors, text and audience; that is, in the 'moment to moment' unfolding of the performance rather than the realisation of a metaphysical ideal" (Power 2008, 53). Power's idea is similar to Philip Zarrilli's (2012) understanding of presence not as a quality possessed by individual agents but as a process that unfolds across different social actors, the performers and the audience, within a specific spatiotemporal frame and context.

Audience and performers' emergent co-presence 'on the edge of not knowing'

Zarrilli maintains that audience and performers constitute the performance event by their phenomenal co-presence. For Zarrilli "the so-called sense of stage presence, emerged in the spatio-temporal realm of experience, embodiment, and perception shared between the performer(s), the performance score and its dramaturgy, and the audience" (Zarrilli 2012, 120). He considers that 'presence' should only exist for the actor as an emergent state of possibility, as a "state of being/doing where one's embodied consciousness is absolutely 'on the edge' of what is possible" (Zarrilli 2012, 147). Zarrilli assumes an 'enactive approach' to acting in which the actor optimally engages his body mind fully in each moment of performance as he responds to the performance environment (Zarrilli 2009). In his view "actors should situate themselves in the indeterminate position of being 'on the edge' of not knowing. This place of 'not knowing' is a state of readiness – a dispositional state of possibility to which the actor can abandon herself in the moment. To inhabit this state of not knowing what is next or what might emerge is to inhabit a place where there is the potential to be 'surprised' in the moment of abandonment" (Zarrilli 2012, 147). According to Zarrilli this state of 'surprise', the openness of the performer to the unfolding possibilities of the performance event, is precisely what could enable the audience to perceive presence. Zarrilli's

interpretation of presence as perceptual openness to what is possible and unexpected, echoes philosopher Suzanne Jaeger's account of presence grounded in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology:

> "Presence is the possibility of transformation in familiar, habituated, and socially entrenched patterns through which one experiences the world. The "on performance" or moment of stage presence is possible because of this capacity to be open to what is other than a mere repetition of familiar ways of structuring experience. Being present requires having a recognizable style of being the world, but it also requires the power to concentrate on the singularity of the moment, ready for the shifts, accommodations, and adaptations belonging to the challenge of active, conscious, fully embodied engagement 'in the moment'" (Jaeger 2006, 139).

An analogous understanding that stage presence has to do with a loss of certainty or a sense of surprise and disorientation shared between performers and audience members is maintained also by Sherman (2016), who like Zarrilli (2009, 2012) supports the idea that presence is neither a possession nor a quality of an individual but a certain relationship between active agents.

Disciplining audience's gaze and the ethics of attention

Sherman, however, distances his view from other accounts of stage presence by insisting that the ethical aspects that shape the audience-performers' relationship during the unfolding of a performance have been overlooked by previous interpretations. Grounding his analysis on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Lecoq's theatrical method, Sherman's account focuses on the ethics of attention entangled with spectatorship, and he criticises previous interpretation of stage presence. In his view "all of these renderings of stage presence, whether formulated as a quality, a possession, a state, or an action, obscure a crucial element: the attendants. More precisely, these theories imagine attendants without agency. Whether stage presence is described as a kind of personal intensity or as a learned practice, the performer occupies a position of power" (Sherman 2016, 4). Referring to Zarrilli's interpretation, Sherman argues that the existing accounts contribute to maintain the dominant ideology which separates performers and audience, "because stage presence never exceeds the control or practice of the performer, attendants do not have a choice over how or to whom they attend: performers demand a particular response and are granted it. Alteration, movement, and involvement in this kind of stage presence lie in the will (or training or "being") of the performer to whom the attendant is not responsible but obedient" (Sherman 2016, 100). Sherman elaborates his philosophical analysis on Renaud Barbaras' phenomenology of distance and desire to locate in the separation of audience and performers the cause for the classic view of stage

presence. He then returns to Merleau-Ponty's description of space and phenomenology of perception to bridge the "uncrossable distance between perceiver and perceived" (Sherman 2016, 91). Sherman's argument remains however on a more theoretical level, even if he recognises the important role played by history in shaping the evolving conceptions tied to presence, he keeps from providing an account of the specificity of the historical processes that might lie behind the audience's agency fading from matters of stage presence.

The role of history, culture and diversity for the study of stage presence

Researchers who undertook a more structural perspective have stressed how from the end of the eighteenth century, a variety of strategies were adopted to minimise audience interference with the unfolding of the show (Fischer-Lichte 2008; Heim 2016). The introduction of penalties aimed at discouraging disruptive behaviours like eating, drinking and talking during the performance, or the invention of gas lightening which permitted the darkening of the auditorium (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 39) were aimed at disciplining the audience's behaviour in order to lessen its disruptive impact on actors' performance execution. The practice of "darkening of the theatres combined with the enforcement of theatre etiquette structures anesthetised demonstrative audience performance" (Heim 2016, 76) and might have played a role in shaping stage presence's classic rhetorics.

Many recent analysis of stage presence in performance arts are grounded in postmodern theory, from Derridean critics to the metaphysics of presence to phenomenology. By engaging predominantly with philosophical investigations, these theorists often neglect the specificity of the cultural and historical context in which the phenomenon of stage presence take place. After all, not all audiences in all genres or forms of performance are or have been equally able to interact and construct a shared sense of presence. Suzanne Jaeger has stressed in fact how the analysis of presence in performance theory has revolved mainly around two conflicting viewpoints, "first there are those for whom the lived phenomenon of presence still makes sense and is borne out in practical experience. Presence is thought of as "the lingua franca" for many stage performers, acting teachers, critics, and audiences. Second are poststructuralist interpreters of performance art who reject the possibility of any singularly meaningful experience of self-presence" (Jaeger 2006, 122). Current interpretations of stage presence in performing arts oscillate between theory and practice, and generally tend to infuse the lived experience of acting with more theoretical analysis. Can we envisage a perspective where instead the practice of performance informs philosophical reflection? Can we find a more embodied phenomenon of stage presence? By focusing primarily on the dynamics of power and the ethics of attention that couple performers and audience's relationship,

we risk overlooking one of stage presence's fundamental aspects. As stressed by scholars who grounded their accounts on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perceptual experience, "stage presence can be defined as an active configuring and reconfiguring of one's intentional grasp in response to an environment" (Jaeger 2006, 122). If we want to understand the phenomenon of stage presence in its complexity, we need to consider its experiential situatedness in a specific environment and cultural context, as well as also extend the investigation to other performative contexts and cultures, such as religious rituals or dance for example, where the separation between the lived presence and the fictional presence of the performer is not so neat as it can be in theatrical practice.

Embracing an ecological framework to the study of stage presence

Performance scholar Gabriella Giannachi has stressed how the "discourse on environment and ecology should therefore play a crucial role in the analysis of presence" (Giannachi 2012, 50). She considered a series of artworks from John Cage to land art, to emphasizes how "presence is also an ecological process that marks a moment of awareness of the exchanges between the subject and the living environment of which they are part" (Giannachi 2012, 53). She grounds her interpretation on several accounts stemming from cybernetics and artificial intelligence, that share neuropsychologist Riva's definition of "presence as a neuropsychological phenomenon, evolved from the interplay of our biological and cultural inheritance whose goal is to produce a strong sense of agency and control [28-33]: *Presence as the feeling of being and acting in a world outside me*" (Riva 2008, 103). This is not to return presence to the inside of the individual, but in an ecological spirit to treat all the participants in aesthetic experience as open to and engaged in the same complex and uneven world. Can this ecological approach to art be applied to other performative practices and contexts where the association to the environment is less immediate than land art and environmental artworks? After all, some performance genres actively embrace context and environment, while others are more shielded and inward: only attention to the specificity of performance practices can catch the genuine variability of presence across contexts. If we aim to address presence's multifaceted renderings, we need to account for the complexities of the performance event, as it has been argued that the emergence of the state of presence is often context-dependent (Zarrilli, 2012, Giannachi, 2012). If stage presence comes to be understood as a particular psychological state that involves "appearing and being perceived as embodied mind" (Fisher-Lichte 2012, 115), and considered a cognitive phenomenon, it cannot be disjointed from its cognitive ecology. Cognitive ecology is a growing field in Cognitive Science, "the study of cognitive phenomena in context" (Hutchins 2010, 705), that understands cognition not as internal to the individual but as constituted

by the interaction and interconnection of perception, action, and thought across particular social beings and complex environments. As Early Modern scholar Evelyn Tribble and philosopher John Sutton argue, the aim of cognitive ecology is to direct our analyses towards "the multidimensional contexts in which we remember, feel, think, sense, communicate, imagine, and act, often collaboratively, on the fly, and in rich ongoing interaction with our environments" (Tribble and Sutton 2011, 94). They also suggested how the "Cognitive ecology facilitates a system-level analysis of theatre: this model of cognitive ecology would posit that a complex human activity such as theatre must be understood across the entire system" (Tribble and Sutton 2011, 97). Therefore, to grasp the phenomenon of stage presence I propose we turn towards a cognitive ecological approach. In order to address the complexity of stage presence' as cognitive phenomenon, we need to address not only audiences and performers' perceptual relationship but the global cognitive ecology of the performance, that includes audience and performers' co-presence and how they construct meaning, the socio-cultural context and the situatedness of the aesthetic performance event.

Approaching stage presence through cognitive ethnography

What also remains unexplored are the ways in which the relationship to other performers on stage can affect a performer's sense of presence, and how this sense is integrated with the broader context in which stage presence is enacted. Moreover, if presence can be understood as an emergent social phenomenon, what is missing from the current interpretations is the experience of the performers. While the experience of audiences has been investigated from an ethnographic perspective (Heim 2016), the lived experience of stage presence from the performers' point of view has often been overlooked or filtered through scholarly interpretations relying on different philosophical accounts. The study of the phenomenon of stage presence would benefit from a cognitive ethnographic approach that encompass Hutchins' view of human cognition as "profoundly situated, social, embodied, and richly multimodal" (Hutchins 2010, 712) and Sutton and Tribble' understanding of cognitive ecologies (Tribble and Sutton 2011).

Conclusions

The phenomenon of stage presence encompasses several perspectives. In its classic version, the emphasis revolves primarily around the performer's agency, and depends either on specific acting training methodologies to enhance performers' presence, or on a more mystical conception of the performer's charismatic qualities. Scholars who distanced themselves from this classic model have argued for a more relational understanding of presence, emerging from the encounter of audiences

and performers. This paper highlights the need for a more inclusive analysis of stage presence, that considers both the lived experience of performers, and the situatedness and the cultural context in which a performance event take place. Through a critical review of different performance scholars' interpretations, it emphasizes how an ecological and ethnographic approach could provide us with a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of stage presence.

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