

ART, MUSIC AND PERFORMANCE

LECTURE: FUTURIST THEATRE & PERFORMANCE

SLIDE 1: TITLE

SLIDE 2: SECTIONS

This lecture by starts providing you with some historical performance contexts in order for us to place Futurism within its surrounding social and cultural climate. So, the nineteenth century had been focused on a theatre comprised of melodrama, so a highly exaggerated, stylised and artificial form, and also on the idea of Romanticism – plays which were full of noble and heroic action.

SECTION 1: CONTEXTS:

SLIDE 3

Avant-garde theatre movements flourished from about 1880 to the 1930s, of which Futurism was one. The most important legacy of these avant-garde ideologies was their insistent challenge to conventional modes of making and enjoying theatre. Prior to 1880, there might have been moves to reject conventional practices, but no one formed movements or wrote manifestoes. So, why did this happen now?

- Artists freed from obligations of patronage
- New struggle for economic survival – had to do art to make money!
- Emergence of bourgeoisie as wealthy, independent and confirming its own values – for example, Marinetti – the wealthy arts practitioner who had the independent means to do his work
- Technology – the diesel engine, the propeller aircraft, the automobile, the telephone and so on.

SLIDE 4: THEATRICAL CONTEXTS

In terms of theatre, one cannot overlook the influence of electricity and the electrical illumination of the theatre space.

- Electric lights offered immense range of new visual effects, utilised by directors such as Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig
- Changed dynamics between performers and audience:
 - Full dimming of house lights during performances
 - Spectators no longer able to communicate with each other
 - Shift from social experience to private one
 - Less interruptions of performances
 - Changed performance style – emergence of naturalism & realism
 - Arrival of the fourth wall
 - Psychologically motivated characters
 - Everyday and ordinary on stage – slice of life
 - Shocked audiences through banality, violence, sexuality etc

SLIDE 5: RIOTS AND REVOLTS:

In some ways, the seminal performance moment for Futurist theatre was the 1896 production of Alfred Jarry's slapstick play *Ubu Roi*. This was originally conceived of as a puppet play (and we will return to this). It was obscene in its scatological references, it is crude in dialogue and presentation and is a grotesque farce. The first performance caused a riot in the Parisian theatre (a feature of much performance work through these decades!). The first word of the play is 'merdre' – a pun on the word 'shit' which was absolutely not permitted to be spoken in a public venue - and on that first word being uttered the action was brought to a complete halt by the appalled bourgeois audience. The riot continued throughout the play, with catcalls and arguments breaking out amongst audience members. The play was an outright attack on bourgeois principles and society, not so unacceptable at this time (Ibsen was at it as well, after all) but it was the use of masks and grotesque costumes, alongside the staging of 40 life-size dummies that undermined any notions of 'serious drama'. Performers used singsong voices with exaggerated articulation and the set was a mixture of elements that upset naturalist sensibilities and cardboard signs were used to indicate scenes. Maybe not shocking to us now, but at the time this was scandalous theatre! Swearing, crudity, obscenity, dummies.... Not good for the nineteenth century constitution!

SECTION 2: IDEAS OF FUTURIST THEATRE

SLIDE 6

You might already sense that Futurist theatre is probably not going to be much different in terms of upsetting its traditional bourgeois audiences, and shaking them out of a certain theatrical snobbery and complacency.

Theatre became a favourite means of expression for the Futurist movement and throughout its short history it was provocative, activating and dynamic. As a practice it tried to address stagnant theatre practices, both the dreary linear narratives of the well-made play and their cloying performances, and it attempted to activate the audience, who was, to all intents and purposes, kind of asleep! Asleep to political messages and political activism, asleep to excitement and theatrical astonishment. Futurism questioned the role of the institution of theatre in social life – what was it meant to be doing? Surely its purpose was more than simply regurgitating boring plays. Futurism despised traditional theatre as a place of mediocrity and recycled materials. They employed counter-strategies that would jettison the idea of the well-made play and suggested that language could no longer provide adequate expression for the experience of modernity (a concept that clearly links to the development of sound poetry).

Theatre was conceived by Marinetti as a means of 'introducing the fist into the artistic battle' and of enabling 'the brutal entry of life into art'. It had to be intrinsically connected to political ideas and action – in other words, Futurist politics were to be performative. Artistic events were informed by politics and political activity was given an aesthetic frame.

SLIDE 7 - *Poupees electriques & Roi Bombance*

Marinetti staged his first play in January 1909 - *Poupees electriques*, during which he declaimed '*The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism.*' The performance was

unleashed on an unsuspecting bourgeois audience in Turin, who were looking forward to a posh premier, after a civilised meal out. What they got was an early example of the Futurist concept of theatre as art-action. In other words, not easily consumed traditional theatrical fare but controversial and activating performance.

In the play a husband and wife are plagued by mechanical figures, made by the husband. The wife attempts to kill them, only to find that they are actually the couple's alter egos. Apparently the audience got more agitated as the play developed and after the second act Marinetti took a curtain call to an audience reaction of boos and catcalls. For this action, Marinetti thanked the audience, which enraged them further, to which he responded with a tirade of political invectives. The third act was subject to audience sarcasm and interventions to the point that the whole thing became incomprehensible. Marinetti had achieved his aims though of causing a scandal amongst traditional theatre-goers.

This was followed by Marinetti's first performance in Paris, which was staged at the same theatre as the production of *Ubu Roi* in April 1909 and caused as much scandal. The set presented exterior and interior scenes simultaneously on the stage with props coming from an array of periods and places (distinctly anti-realist). Reviews described the auditorium as being more like a public meeting than a theatre event, with people shouting, making noises, talking to each other and so on. Again, this adhered to Futurist principles of the performance taking place amongst the spectators as well as the performers, on the stage and in the auditorium. The audience revolt and the booing was celebrated by Marinetti as a raging success! It ended with the proto-Futurist slogan "The future – that's the only religion!" A riot apparently broke out during the second act when the audience was confronted by the thunderous sound effects of a priest's digestive system in full action!

At the same time, the Futurists became involved in forms of political street theatre which was to some extent a form of advertising for the movement. In 1910 they threw 800,000 leaflets from the Clock Tower in the centre of Venice, expounding the virtues of turning Venice from a museum to the past, to a modern industrial and military centre. They also engaged in putting up posters, and holding speeches to create spectacles in the street. They stormed opera performances and dropped leaflets onto the stalls from the circles. In other words, they took performance onto the streets and into the establishment to make their ideas and their views heard.

SECTION 3: FUTURIST PERFORMANCE TACTICS

SLIDE 8: Futurist Serate

Futurist performances became known as 'serate' meaning a mixture of evening entertainment. Such 'Futurist Evenings', included poetry, readings of manifestoes, art displays, and theatrical skits, performed by artists and poets, and were emulated by other avant-garde movements, such as the Dadaists. They were a means of presenting key Futurist ideas and political ideologies to the public, as well as Futurist aesthetics in art, music and poetry.

Part of the Futurist performances was declamation (in its simplest terms, the delivery of a speech written by someone else), a new theatre form that became a Futurist trademark. For Marinetti, this indicated a kind of acting style and it engendered its own manifesto, that of *Dynamic and Synoptic Declamation*. Declamation of poetry was, apparently, an established element of French popular art during the nineteenth

century, with specialist troupes touring the country, so this was not a new theatrical device but Marinetti made it his own, turning it into a controversial theatre strategy. His manifesto instructed performers on how to declaim in a new, dynamic and warlike fashion. It depended on a kind of robotic speech. Marinetti stated that the Futurist declaimer should declaim as much with his legs as with his arms and in his hands he should hold and use various noise-making instruments. The idea was to vary speed and rhythm, using the whole range of vocal tone, bodily movement and all parts of the theatre. The audience were then meant to react against the declaimer with the text acting as a kind of score and the declaimer as the conductor of the audience/orchestra. The declaimer again had to provoke the audience into action.

SLIDE 9: CARICATURE OF SERATE

Such an evening is depicted in Boccioni's cartoon from 1911 (and there are lots of these kinds of cartoons from the press of the time). We can see:

- Paintings hung around the performance space
- Gesticulating and declaiming Futurists
- Brass instruments being conducted
- A heap of swooning audience members

So, not only was a serate interdisciplinary, but it was highly theatrical and confrontational.

Marinetti himself was apparently a charismatic performer, who often staged battles and scenes of war. A critic wrote:

Antiquity exploded. Tradition ceased to breathe... I have heard many recitations and have tried to describe many battles. But listen to Marinetti's recitation of one of his battle scenes.... The noise, the confusion, the surprise of death, the terror and the courage, the shouting, curses, blood and agony – all were recalled by that amazing succession of words, performed or enacted by the poet with such passion of abandonment that no one could escape the spell of listening.

He used telephones in his performances, drew on chalkboards, sound came from different sources and directions, he would march through the performance space declaiming and using sound poetry, while drums and hammers provided the sounds of battle.

Steve Dixon argues that Futurist theatre was a considerable forerunner of digital performance practice and began the utilisation of multimedia in their work, the marriage of art and technology in performance.

SLIDE 10: AUDIENCE

Theatre became part of the focus for Futurist activity because of its immediacy – it is and was a most direct means of forcing an audience to pay attention to their ideas. In wanting to place the spectator at the heart of their activity, as in painting, the relationship to theatre seemed entirely appropriate. This was going to be a shared experience, wedded to ideas of anti-naturalism and anti-psychological realism. They instructed people to “go out into the street, launch assaults in the theatre and introduce the fisticuff into the artistic battle’.

Futurist Evenings were set up as frameworks for art-actions aimed at provocation and uproar. By histrionically declaiming their texts and/or inciting their audiences, they challenged them to interaction. They aimed at creating a state of emergency, where lawlessness and chaos reigned in anarchic misbehaviour.

Audiences often responded with equal aggression, throwing fruit, vegetables and whatever else came to hand, spaghetti at one performance apparently! On one such occasion, Carra, being the target for such missiles, retaliated with: 'Throw an idea instead of potatoes, idiots!' It wasn't unusual for a Futurist evening to end in arrests, jail and some good publicity. Marinetti was himself brought to trial for obscenity and affronting public morals in relation to his novel, published in 1910. He even wrote a manifesto on the 'Pleasure of Being Booed' in which he claims that to get applause from an audience is a sign of mediocrity. It means the work is dull, regurgitated and too easily digested (cf Brecht and culinary theatre). He encouraged the performer to despise the audience, to find horror in immediate success, particularly if success came on the opening night, and believed that authors should focus only on absolute innovative originality. Booing proved the audience to be alive and fully engaged with the action. He even proposed various tricks to provoke and enrage the audience, such as double-booking the entire auditorium and coating the seats with glue.

The audience were to be participant / actors in the works, forging the idea of interactivity through direct physical involvement. It was an art form that was able to maximise the sensory, the experiential, the participatory, the visceral and minimise the intellectual.

SECTION 4: THEATRE FORMS:

SLIDE 11: VARIETY THEATRE

Ok, this is a long section! Such events and practices led to the writing of several manifestoes on theatre. In October 1913 they published the *Variety Theatre Manifesto*. Variety theatre was admired by the Futurists because it had 'no tradition, no masters, no dogma'. Of course it did, but it was the very nature of variety that appealed – a mixture of film, acrobatics, song, dance, clowning, comedy, slapstick, which made it an ideal model for Futurist performance. It had no narrative or plot and invited its audiences to become participants, to join in with the songs, to respond to the acts, to answer back, to laugh, to heckle. It was a place of pure enjoyment and astonishment, and mixed the concert, music hall, cabaret and circus in its various elements. It was considered to be 'anti-academic, primitive and naïve'. It 'destroys the Solemn, the Sacred, the Serious, and the Sublime in Art with a capital A'.

Fascination with the variety theatre also indicated the melding of high and low art forms. Marinetti advocated destroying masterpieces, plagiarizing them, parodying them and making them look like mere 'attractions'. Shakespeare could be reduced to one act, the works of canonical composers interrupted with popular songs.

Marinetti hated the dreary traditional theatre: "We feel deep disgust for contemporary theatre because it oscillates stupidly between historical reconstruction and the photographic reproduction of our day-to-day life: niggling, slow, analytical and diluted theatre'.

The variety theatre offered an idea of a mixing of forms, of utilising every theatrical technique and device in the pursuit of dynamism and excitement. The Futurists thought about the voice and audience address through declamation but they also thought about physical movement.

The *Dynamic and Synoptic Declamation* manifesto outlined rules for body actions and movements based on the staccato movements of machines. Gesture was required to be geometrical, creating 'cubes, cones, spirals and ellipses' in the air. Performances were often focused around the reproduction of machinic activity, with great attention paid to mechanical accuracy. Performers then often had sounds to make to accompany the movement.

One of the first performances to practice this occurred in 1914 in Rome. Futurists as dwarfs (no idea!) produced a cacophony of sounds from violins, trumpets, drums, saws and bells. Marinetti declaimed in the midst of red-lit scenery whilst others ran around the auditorium tormenting the spectators.

SLIDE 12: FUTURIST DANCE:

This all went so far as to integrate with dance. There are clear links between Futurist movement and scenographic aesthetics and modernist dance forms emerging at the turn of the twentieth century. Futurists advocated an integration of figures and scenery on stage that appealed to the modernist dance aesthetic.

For example, Ballets Russes were a ground-breaking ballet company, who first performed in Paris in 1909 as the Diaghilev Ballet. Again, like Marinetti, Diaghilev had independent wealth which he spent on curating art exhibitions and enabled him to spend time with artists, such as Degas, Matisse and Picasso. He was interested in taking art to the people, to the masses, removing it from the clutches of the elite. He was also no stranger to controversy and riots in the theatres he occupied. In 1913 they premiered *The Rite of Spring*, with music composed by Stravinsky. On its opening night, the audience rioted during the six-minute long musical overture – yep, the curtain had not even gone up! The dance was based on an archaic ritual practice from ancient Russia, with the dancers presented in turned in positions, and they shivered, huddled, shook and stomped through the performance – hardly proper ballet. It was only performed 7 times. Their most famous dancer, Nijinsky, took part in the work. His previous work, *L'Après Midi d'un Faune* had also created riots for its two-dimensional choreography which put the dancer's body on an unconventional plane and for its heavily sexual dynamics between the faun and nymphs.

SLIDE 13: BALLA AND STRAVINSKY

In 1917, Balla worked with Diaghilev's Ballet Russes company on Stravinsky's *Firebird*. His Futurist concept for *Firebird* was that the only performers would be moving sets and lights. The set was a 3-D version of one of Balla's own paintings and Balla controlled the 'light' ballet at a lighting board himself. Both stage and auditorium were lit and plunged into darkness during the piece, which lasted five minutes and apparently had 49 different stage settings. So, this was the scenography of a Futurist practitioner, staged during an evening's programme of ballet, with no dancers involved, only the dynamism of technologies.

SLIDE 14: FUTURIST DANCE

In 1917 Marinetti published his manifesto on *Futurist Dance* where he celebrated the qualities of particular dancers, such as Nijinsky, Isadora Duncan and Loie Fuller.

I will just talk a little about the work of Loie Fuller here. Fuller had started presenting work in Paris in 1892, although an American artist. She was not a Futurist but she experimented with using electronic and mechanical techniques for choreographing movement. For instance, she attached metres of white fabric to bamboo cane-shaped arm extensions to create a screen that enveloped her body. She then created flowing movement with coloured light projected onto the fabric. Using such techniques, she transformed her body into illusions of fire, animals and flowers. She worked with a team of up to 27 electricians. Again, this upset traditional notions of nineteenth century ballet, which told romantic and heroic tales of sylphs, swans and the occasional doll. Here was movement which stemmed from somewhere else, from a sensual and emotive centre, rather than a fairy tale. It was dance that interpreted the music rather than setting specific steps, and explored physical freedom and expression.

Marinetti, as predicted, meanwhile linked dance to the machine, desiring movement that imitated cannon fire and planes taking off. Such a boy!

SECTION 5: SYNTHETIC THEATRE 1915

SLIDE 15

Okay, back to theatre proper. Consistently Futurists wanted the merging of sound, scene and gesture in the theatrical space. They propounded synchronism and simultaneity, even in the theatre, in a dynamic exploration of time and space.

Synchronism had been detailed in the *Futurist Synthetic Theatre* of 1915. Synthetic meant:

- Very brief
- To compress events, scenarios, ideas into a few minutes, a few words, a few gestures
- It condemned naturalist theatre for trying to present life realistically
- Settings were reduced to a bare minimum
- Reason, meaning and logic were jettisoned
- Interpenetration of forms
- Directed at the senses and not the intellect
- Dynamic & fragmentary symphonies of gestures, words, sounds and lights

The manifesto goes on to say:

1. *It's stupid to write one hundred pages where one would do,*
2. *It's stupid not to rebel against the prejudice of theatricality when life itself is for the most part antitheatrical and even in this offers innumerable possibilities for the stage. EVERYTHING OF ANY VALUE IS THEATRICAL.*
3. *It's stupid to pander to the primitivism of the crowd, which, in the last analysis, wants to see the bad guy lose and the good guy win.*
4. *It's stupid to worry about verisimilitude*

5. *It's stupid* to want to explain with logical minuteness everything taking place on the stage,
6. *It's stupid* to submit to obligatory *crescendi*, *prepared effects*, and *postponed climaxes*.
7. *It's stupid* to allow one's talent to be burdened with the weight of a technique that *anyone* (even imbeciles) *can acquire by study, practice, and patience*.
8. IT'S STUPID TO RENOUNCE THE DYNAMIC LEAP IN THE VOID OF TOTAL CREATION, BEYOND THE RANGE OF TERRITORY PREVIOUSLY EXPLORED.

One of the most discussed of these syntheses is Cangiullo's *Detonation*: the curtain rises on a street at night, silent and empty apart from a street lamp. Pause. Then a revolver shot. Pause. Curtain.

Another version of the synthetic theatre was Bruno Corra's piece called *The Hands*. It consisted simply of a curtain the height of a man stretched across the stage above which male and female hands appeared and disappeared against a black backdrop. It suggested that all human emotion could be expressed through only one part of the body. Marinetti then did the same thing for feet.

Simultaneity was considered to be 'born of improvisation, lightning-like intuition'. It asked for things to be happening at the same time, think back to the painting of the dog walking, with its sixteen legs, rather than four. As a theatre device, this was first made manifest in a play by Marinetti where two scenes were staged side-by-side with one moment of interconnection between the two. Another version has three simultaneous scenes playing. This simultaneous, parallel action on the stage was borrowed from cinematic techniques. At points in these works, the barriers between the worlds would be broken and characters would cross the barriers between scenes and invade the other spaces. Again, this disrupted naturalist theatre, where the scene would remain in one location, adhering to Aristotelian notions of unity of time, place and action.

This echoed similar ideas by the English director and theoretician Edward Gordon Craig. Some Futurists, alongside Craig, called for the abolition of the performer. Craig had suggested the figure of the *Ubermarionette* as a replacement and some Futurists did build and perform with puppets and marionettes.

SECTION 6: THE FUTURE

SLIDE 16: THE FUTURE

The Futurist's use of brevity, absurdity, disruption and audience involvement to dislocate the spectator and break down the barriers between art and life had in it the germs of many forms of alternative and avant-garde theatre since – street theatre, agit prop, actions and happenings of Fluxus, Artaud, Beckett.

So, make performance that is bold, innovative, challenging to both you as performers and the audience. It should push you as performers to greater levels of vocal dexterity and physical expression. It should express Futurist ideas through the declamation of manifestoes and through the form of the piece – using dynamism, synthesis, simultaneity, sound and noise. Above all, it should excite and astonish!