

# STUDENT GUIDE TO RESEARCHING IMMERSIVE THEATRE

## KEY STAGE 5

### What is Immersive Theatre?

'Immersive theatre' is a term which has become widely adopted in recent years and is characterized using installations and expansive environments, mobile audiences, and elements of participation. (Gareth White 2012) The roots of immersive theatre can be traced back to Artaud's revolutionary innovations on 'Total Theatre' but more modern influences come from Boal, Brook, Schechner and Beck. Before you start to explore immersive theatre both theoretically and practically, it is essential to understand its theatrical roots and evolution. A key figure to explore is Antonin Artaud and his theories on 'Total Theatre' in which he proposes to abolish the stage and the auditorium:

*'A direct communication will be re-established  
between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator,  
from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is  
engulfed and physically affected by it.'* (Artaud 1958: 96)

Artaud's ideas hugely influenced the performance theory and practice of the 1960s and beyond in terms of stage design, actor-audience relationship, and highly physical performance styles, with current immersive theatre companies adopting many elements from his revolutionary manifesto for theatre. In her book "Immersive Theatres- Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance" Jospehine Machon discusses the impact which Artaud's theories had on the wider innovations of the modernist period such as Boal's propositions about the 'coercive' in his seminal work Theatre of the Oppressed, Schechner's theories on 'Environmental Theatre' and Julian Beck's experiments with The Living Theatre (32).

Due to the disciplinary aspect to immersive theatre, she also cites installation and conceptual art of the 1960s onwards, with its intimate aesthetic and participatory relationships, as integral to the development of the genre. Interestingly, she suggests that Joan Littlewood's plans for "Community Architecture Art" and 'Fun Palaces' are also significant in development and evolution of current immersive practices (Machon 2013: 37).

### **Practitioner Focus- Punchdrunk**

Artistic Director Felix Barrett is keen to define the company's work as 'site-sympathetic' as rather than 'site-specific'. This means that the work is created for the site where it is to be performed, as opposed to responding directly to that site's history or context (White 2012: 223). The company have adapted a range of classic texts since 2000, including *Woyzeck*, *Aust*, *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*. The company selects and distributes scenes from the texts within the space so that each audience member encounters them in an individual and unique way. They become the epicentre of the work, going wherever they want, touching whatever they want. (Machon 2013: 83) However, a key aesthetic of Punchdrunk's working method is the use of masks for the audience members which inhibit speech and creates a certain anonymity which in turn encourages risk and fearlessness. There are also brief opportunities for one-to-one encounters with characters in more intimate spaces.

In Punchdrunk's New York production of 'Sleep No More', based on *Macbeth*, the audience are told at the start of the piece that "Fortune favours the bold", suggesting that the braver and more curious you are, the more you will be rewarded. In my experience, once students are given permission to be curious and playful in a live performance, they are at first slightly overwhelmed but then begin to feel empowered by the control and freedom they have as an audience member. It is essential that students experience this feeling, from the perspective of the audience member, to develop their own work.

### **References & Further Research**

- Artaud, Antonin. *The Theater and it's Double*. New York: Grove Press (1958)
- Machon, Josephine. *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*. London: Palgrave (2013)
- White, Gareth. "On Immersive Theatre". *Theatre Research International* 37.3 (2012): 221-35.

### **Articles**

<https://howlround.com/celebrating-audience>

### **Websites**

Punchdrunk: <https://www.punchdrunk.com/>

Shunt: <http://cargocollective.com/nigelandlouise/shunt>

Joan Littlewood's Fun Palaces: <http://funpalaces.co.uk/about/idea-come/>

Darkfield is an innovative immersive piece which you can experience online. It is a great way for them to see what is possible with sound and audio within immersive theatre: <https://www.darkfield.org/radio>