Navigating Shared Space:
Audience Agency and Passivity in Environmental and Immersive Theater

by

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INTRODUCTION

Encountering participatory performance

As a sophomore in high school, my theater teacher recommended me to be an intern on *Twelve Ophelias,* written by Caridad Svich and produced by Woodshed Collective, a company run by an alumnus of my school. I had worked on a handful of realist plays and musicals both onstage and off, and this particular teacher had a palate for the avant-garde, but my exposure to professional theater was limited to Broadway houses. *Twelve Ophelias* was mounted in McCarren Park Pool—an empty public pool in Williamsburg, Brooklyn used as a concert venue. A few sparse set pieces were all the company needed to highlight the dusky atmosphere of the park. Audience members were encouraged to bring their own chairs and picnic blankets to spread out across the base of the pool. By the time the house was full and the strings of Christmas lights were lit, the scene more resembled a gothic garden party than a theatrical production. Every night, I was struck by how simply the company and audience collaborated to transform a bare slab of concrete into a warm, intimate performance space.

My further experiences working with Woodshed Collective sparked a strong interest in performances that take place outside of traditional theater houses, especially those featuring audience-performer spatial relationships that are impossible to create in theaters with fixed seating. The idea of incorporating audience members within the designed space of a theater seemed simple and yet revolutionary to me— the solution to many of the problems I believed stagnated commercial theater. Introduced to me as 'site-specific,' I later learned that this type of theater exists under

many other names—immersive theater, interactive theater, journey theater, installation theater, theater of location, situation theater, situation performance, ambulatory performance, moving exhibition, narrated installation, environmental construction, and so on and so forth.

I first encountered Richard Schechner's writings about environmental theater in Fall 2012 and had first seen *Sleep No More*—an "immersive" theater production—a year before that. As my theatrical education had focused mostly on literary drama, until then I had limited knowledge about the theory and history behind these types of theaters and thus idealized my experience at *Sleep No More* as unique model of a new form of performance. These experiences stimulated me to focus on theater that rejected traditional relationships between story, performers, and spectators in favor of a more active, collaborative theatrical event.

As I began examining environmental and immersive theaters more closely, I was struck by three observations. First, theater makers who prioritize the actor/spectator relationship within performance nearly unanimously consider the spatial design essential in reframing it. Second, while these theaters are surrounded by a rhetoric of audience empowerment as they claim to 'liberate' spectators from the expected and usual passive role imposed on them in commercial theater houses, each still employs a myriad of techniques justified by safety reasons or as aesthetic choices that in effect limit and control audience behavior. Finally, aside from developments in technology and use of media, participatory theater today continues to rely on theories from the 1960s.

With these observations in mind, I prepared myself to spend the duration of my thesis project examining the relationships between space, the audience/spectator relationship, and audience agency. I turned my focus to two specific productions: Schechner and The Performance Group's *Dionysus in '69* and Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*. These productions are considered to be model examples of environmental and immersive theater, respectively. *Dionysus in '69* is cited as Schechner's most memorable piece and as a seminal performance in the environmental form. The critical success of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* makes the company and production synonymous with "immersive" theater in contemporary artistic and academic circles alike.

In this thesis, I explore similarities and differences in treatments of space and audience in *Dionysus in '69* and *Sleep No More*. The Performance Group and Punchdrunk both use performance space and direct audience-performer interaction to impose alternate modes of behavior on their audiences, but their respective intentions and expectations set the two performances apart. In exploring these productions, I hope to illuminate the connections and distinctions between presence, participation, and agency in performance.

Histories and theories of environmental and immersive theaters

I must begin this process by establishing a working definition of theatrical performance. Theater carries wildly different meanings depending on the culture(s) that produce it, but at its core, theater is constituted by the simultaneous presence of performing and spectating bodies. Whether or not it follows a script or score, the performing body will have prepared some sort of event "set in motion and terminated

by the actions of all the subjects involved – artists and spectators" (Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power of Performance* 22).

It is equally essential to explore potential definitions of environmental and immersive practices in theater. In *The History and Theory of Environmental Scenography*, scholar Arnold Aronson defines environmental theater as "any performance…in which the complete mise-en-scène or scenography cannot be totally apprehended by a spectator maintaining a single frontal relationship to the performance" (2). The ideas and theories behind environmental theater have been put into use throughout history, manifesting themselves in practice in theater, contemporary art, music, and ritual.[1]

The rise of environmental and non-frontal viewing is mirrored in contemporary practices in studio arts. Aronson identifies three interrelated art forms—environments, action painting and Happenings—that directly influenced environmental theater as defined by Schechner. Each of these forms, developed in America in the 1950s, combine performance and visual media to create art events and situations, rather than static works. Led by artists such as Allan Kaprow and Robert Whitman, the Happenings movement was "concerned to some degree or other with the spectators' perceptions, and this frequently manifested itself in the manipulation of space or the manipulation of spectators into specific environments" (Aronson 155).[2] Both Happenings and environmental theater set out with a similar intention— "to create a more true to life experience" (164) than viewing traditional visual art or performance—and both understood the incorporation of the audience within the scenography of the performance as essential in affecting this change.[3]

Richard Schechner first published his article *Six Axioms for Environmental Theater* in 1968, introducing the first set of formal rules and definitions for this sort of non-frontal performance. [4] As Aronson points out, Schechner cites many historical examples of this type of theater in the process of defining it and acknowledges that the environmental tradition existed long before he developed such specific parameters. Regardless, "By giving a disparate collection of theatre work a focus…[Schechner] turned [environmental theater] into a 'movement' and was responsible, more than anyone else, for the dissemination of information that would influence and inform much of the scenography of the late sixties and seventies" (Aronson 195). These axioms do not so much prescribe rules for environmental theater as they encourage theater artists to do away with the normative conventions of narrative drama and proscenium staging.

Schechner encourages directors and designers to use space and place to more actively include spectators within the performance event. The second and third axioms, "all the space is used for the performance" (*Environmental Theater* xxviii) and "the theatrical event can take place either in a totally transformed space or in 'found space'" (xxx), define Schechner's approach to space. Both of these axioms suggest that environmental theater cannot take place in a traditional theater. By provoking the designer to explore all of the physical space and to consider non-traditional locales when placing performances, Schechner calls for scenography that creates a dialogue among the performers, spectators, and the place of performance. This restructuring of the division of roles leads the audience "*not* to deeper

involvement…but to a kind of in-and-out experience; a sometimes dizzyingly rapid alternation of empathy and distance" (18).

Schechner and his designers also prioritize function in their environments. Rather than "trying to create the illusion of a place; [the environmentalist] wants to create a functioning space" (31). All scenic elements must serve a physical function during the play, thus becoming the materials of the theatrical event. While the design's aesthetic qualities never cease to be important, they fall into place as a *result* of functional decisions. The underscoring of scenic components' performative role emphasizes the relationship between the architecture and physical action in environmental theater. Such artistic choice forces the audience member to consider the architecture both as is and in the moment of its encounter with a body. In this way, "the environmental use of space is fundamentally collaborative; the action flows in many directions sustained only by the cooperation of performers and spectators" (39).

Schechner founded The Performance Group in 1967 with the goal of creating collaboratively devised environmental productions. Their inaugural performance, Schechner and The Performance Group collectively developed *Dionysus in '69* from January to June of 1968. Based on Euripides' *The Bacchae,* the piece told the story of Pentheus' sacrifice to Dionysus by the Bacchae. *Dionysus in '69* borrowed some 200 of Euripides' original 600 lines of text, supplemented by text written collectively by The Performance Group's members.

At the time of performance, Schechner and his collaborators were frustrated with the limiting nature of traditional audience/spectator relationships. In response,

they sought to recapitulate performance such that spectators were not held at such a distance from the material they were supposed to be engaging with. Schechner himself was also driven by the political state of the United States. He observed the conflicts between authority and the time's youth culture and saw a parallel relationship in theatrical productions. He believed theater should pursue "the opposition to aesthetic canons, to Aristotle, to the laws of drama" ("An Afternoon with Richard Schechner"). Driven by this greater hunger for revolutionary social change, Schechner intended to reimagine democratic socialism within and through performance.

To achieve this vision, *Dionysus in '69* "strove to establish a democratic relationship between all participants as co-subjects" (Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power of Performance* 41). Schechner worked to reverse the hierarchy implicit in performance by giving the audience the agency to contribute to the performance as equally as the actors. He believed that if the audience was not equally agential within the performance, his intentions would fail. There should be no hierarchical structure within the audience, let alone between the audience and performers. To avoid hierarchy, Schechner engaged every spectator as a part of the audience as a whole. No one was singled out—the audience was engaged as a collective. In his discourse, Schechner refers to his audience and actors as "spectators" and "performers", respectively. In this paper, I will continue to use these terms to refer to the spectators and performers in *Dionysus in '69*, and will refer to them collectively as the "community."

It is important to keep in mind that, alongside Dwight Conquergood, Schechner himself is considered to be a founder of Performance Studies as an academic discipline.[5] While numerous authors in other disciplines have written about environmental productions, one must keep in mind that Schechner himself has played an instrumental role in shaping the discourse about his own creative work.

Traces of environmentalism persisted in both avant-garde and commercial theaters in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. These productions primarily did not use Schechner's techniques to involve audiences in the production. Instead, productions chose to maintain the same audience/performer boundaries, including the spectators within the performance space without either requiring or allowing them to affect the performance.[6]

More than half a decade after Schechner published his axioms, Josephine Machon determines a spectrum determined by eleven elements "identifiable within any immersive experience" (*Immersive Theatres* 93). Rather than attempting to set out a strict definition of 'immersive theater,' she supposes that a production's range of immersive potential can be determined by its artists' application of these elements. Eight of these lend themselves to discussing the relationship between space, audience, and agency: the *in-its-own-worldness* of the performance, space, scenography, bodies, audience, the 'contract for participation,' and intention and expertise of the creators.[7] This spectrum of elements is similar to the axioms in that is does not set out specific definitions or rules. Rather, it identifies essential elements for creating an immersive experience, allowing practitioners to prioritize the elements that best serve their artistic intentions.

When asked, "Why do you describe your work as immersive," Punchdrunk's website answers:

> Punchdrunk applies the word immersive to its work in order to distinguish it from the familiar conventions of site specific and traditional promenade theatre. The physical freedom to explore the sensory and imaginative world of a Punchdrunk show without compulsion or explicit direction sets it apart from the standard practice of viewing theatre in unconventional locations. Although our work is necessarily structured from a practical and safety perspective, the non-linear narrative content coupled to the high degree of viewer freedom of choice make it a singularly intense and personal experience.

This description highlights a number of important features that characterize the company's work: "physical freedom," the use of a "sensory and imaginative world," and focus on "non-linear narrative content." These features have been present in practices in environmental theater and Happenings alike throughout the history of experimental performance. In the past decade, however, critics and audiences have nearly unanimously regarded production companies like Punchdrunk as "innovative". Punchdrunk's Artistic Director Felix Barrett has been praised as "the visionary who reinvented theater" (Hoggard). The concepts driving this "innovative" immersive theater draw heavily from older theories of environmental scenography, and prioritize the same use of the space to engage audiences.

Punchdrunk's mission statement describes their work as "pioneer[ing] a game changing form of theatre" which "focus[es] as much on the audience and the performance space as on the performers and narrative."[8] Founded in 2000 by Barrett and co-artistic director Maxine Doyle, Punchdrunk sought to expand on the experience of viewing a more traditional site-specific piece of theater by giving their audience no physical boundaries within the performance space.[9] Rather than being confined to a seat, or being asked to sit at all, spectators are required to navigate an

immense, incredibly detailed space, choosing their own path through the performance. Punchdrunk chooses to mask their audience—a connecting theme throughout their performances.

The success of groups such as Punchdrunk has made the term "immersive" more and more popular over the past decade. Because the use of the term immersive is a fairly recent development, there exists limited academic discourse on the subject. Machon suggests that it is not properly applied to many of the performances it is attached to, and in fact the trend "points towards the fact that there is a bandwagon being jumped on that is exploiting an increasing desire amongst non-mainstream theatre audiences to delve into a reality that both replaces and accentuates the live(d) existence of the everyday, actual world" (*Immersive Theatres* 60-1).

Gareth White points out that while the word choice of "immersive" suggests a total envelopment of the spectator within the performance, it "maintains a subject-object divide, as it implies (and structures our thinking about the experience towards) a subject inside the object, not interpenetrated by it" ("On Immersive Theatre" 7). Implicit in the term immersive is the idea that the subject (the spectator) is held within but at a distance from the object (the performance) –within it, but not an active part of it, and thus not fully agential.

This trend towards immersiveness is not unique to theaters, and discussions on immersive technologies and strategies in other media are surging in popularity. In *The Art of Immersion*, Frank Rose examines the driving concepts behind immersion through the lenses of film, gaming, marketing, and social media among others. He suggests that postmodern audiences "want to get involved in a story, to carve out a

role for themselves, to make it their own" (8). This suggests that the cultural appetite for a theater of this type is not simply due to recent successful productions but also a deeper social desire for interaction and immersion engrained in contemporary society.

Without the politicization implicit in *Dionysus in '69*, *Sleep No More* removes the audience members from reality with the intention of reinvigorating their conception of performance by making them individual players within it. To achieve this purpose, Punchdrunk "[creates] parallel theatrical universes within which audiences forget that they're an audience, and thus their status within the work shifts" (Barret qtd in Machon, *Immersive Theaters* 159). Unlike Schechner's approach, the production's emphasis is not on the democratization of the audience-performer relationship, but on reframing the audience's relationship with the production—the performers do not alter their behaviors to allow the roles of the actor and visitor to be equal.

Punchdrunk's hallmark performance, *Sleep No More*, first opened in London in 2003 before relocating to Boston in 2009, and subsequently New York City in 2011. *Sleep No More* is a loose adaptation of Macbeth, influenced by Alfred Hitchcock films such as *Vertigo*. The production contains very little text, instead representing the narrative through dance and movement. *Sleep No More* has been extended indefinitely in New York and consistently sells out. The production has reached such critical acclaim as to be featured in popular TV shows like *Gossip Girl* and is frequented by celebrities.

Rather than creating a collective or a democratic experience, *Sleep No More* aims to posit the spectator as an individual agent within the performance. As the

emphasis is on individual empowerment rather than a complete restructuring of performance norms, *Sleep No More* frames its audience participation in terms of the individual. The most distinctive feature of Punchdrunk's work that plays a key role in identifying the spectator as an individual player within the performance is the requirement that he or she wears a mask. As they cover the face of those watching, these off-white and identical masks "disrupt [the spectators'] identification with the crowd, and facilitate a more immersive and less performative experience" (White, "Odd Anonymized Needs" 225). Each audience member is expected to have his or her own personal experience of the performance, its environments and objects, rather than engaging as the member of a collective.

As those attending are framed so uniquely in Punchdrunk's work, scholars have assigned different terms to describe them: borrowing from Louis Marin's discussion of Disneyland attendees, Thomas Cartelli refers to them as "narrator-viewers;" other scholars have preferred to use Augusto Boal's "spect-actor." Because the focus in *Sleep No More* equally directs attendees' attention to objects, spaces and performers, I will refer to the groups as one of "visitors," as if they were entering or experiencing a museum.

Dionysus in '69 and *Sleep No More* are similar in that they attempt to give the audience members control over their experiences—to try to make them equal players in the theatrical event. Both performances utilize the performance space as a primary element towards altering this relationship, as well as featuring explicit moments of audience/performer interaction. They differ, however, in their respective approaches to defining the audience: *Dionysus in '69* employed strategies that considered the

audience as a collective body, creating an experience for the audience as a whole, while *Sleep No More* treats the visitors as individuals. While neither company truly achieves their intentions, each approach generates a distinct kind of audience experience.

SPACES AND PLACES OF PERFORMANCE

The space is, arguably, the only designed theatrical element that the audience actively participates in. By the very act of showing up for a performance, the audience becomes a material part of the spatiality of the theatrical event. For the purposes of my discussion, it is important to identify specific definitions of "space" and "place." Geographer and philosophizer Yi-Fu Tan states:

> The ideas "space" and "place" require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place. (6)

Building on this understanding of space and place, Erika Fischer-Lichte suggests:

> Even if particular genres of performance may take place in spaces that are specifically construed for them, spatiality of performance is always ephemeral and transitory. For it is not to be identified with the physical-geometrical space in which it takes place. It comes into being in and through the performative space. ("Theater history as cultural history" 4)

Considering both Tan and Fischer-Lichte's definitions, we can conclude that "place" provides the physical conditions necessary for the theatrical "space" to emerge. Moving forward, I will use the term "performance space" to refer to the "possibilities for the relationship between actors and spectators" (4) and "place of performance" to refer to the non-relational physical qualities and contexts of the performance locations.

Transitions

In *The Haunted Stage*, Marvin Carlson describes how every theatrical production is in some way "haunted" by the memories and preconceptions of theater that audience members bring with them to the performance. He describes theater as an art form made from recycled parts, each of which are likely to carry an extratheatrical semiotic meaning for the spectator. Each person thus enters a performance with a set of expectations that "are the residue of memory of previous such experiences" (5). His fifth chapter, "The Haunted House", is dedicated to describing how traditional theatrical buildings are attached to these memories, serving to frame spectator's experiences of performance events. Both *Dionysus in '69* and *Sleep No More* place their performances outside of traditional theaters and alter the processes by which their respective audiences encounter the theatrical event. By paying special attention to the ways that the audiences enter and exit both their performance spaces and places of performance, both *Dionysus in '69* and *Sleep No More* disrupt the spectators' expectations of the performances, broadening the possible conditions of reception.

All of The Performance Group's productions took place in The Performing Garage. A spacious loft in SoHo, The Performing Garage—roughly 50' by 35' by 20' high—featured cinderblock walls, a concrete floor, and a large rolling garage door that opened onto Wooster Street. The Garage did not reflect any qualities of a traditional theater at the time—it did not have clearly delineated stage and seating areas, nor did it have a lobby or box office of any sort. The Garage's most important

quality for Schechner was its flexibility because it allowed radically differing designs to be realized based on the needs of the show.

Schechner was and has been particularly concerned with the processes by which audience members encounter the theatrical space in his theoretical writings, and subsequently applies these theories to his performances.[10] Rather than entering in groups, spectators were made to wait outside and allowed in one at a time. The spectator entered the place of performance and performance space simultaneously. *Dionysus in '69's* original stage manager describes this strategy for incorporating the audience into the space:

> We let the public in one at a time. People on the queue outside the theatre ask me why. I explain that this is a rite of initiation, a chance for each person to confront the environment alone, without comparing notes with friends. People are skeptical. Some few are angry. (Schechner, Eberstadt, and Euripides n.p.)

By requiring the spectators to enter and encounter the space alone, *Dionysus in '69* intended to both physically and ideologically separate them from each other. At the end of the performance, the large garage door rolled up and the performers led the cohesive community developed over the course of the performance out onto Wooster Street. These processes, intended to shape the spectators' perceptions of their role within the performance, subsequently denied them control of their manner of entering and exiting the space.

The visitors' experience of *Sleep No More* also relies heavily on the transitory experience that separates them from their everyday lives. For the New York production, Punchdrunk acquired three adjacent warehouses in Chelsea. In addition to creating a lush performance environment within, they create a mysterious backstory for the building itself. Punchdrunk transforms this place into the fictional "McKittrick

Hotel."[11] By disguising the place as a building with historical significance, *Sleep No More* aims to further transport its visitors to a supposed alternate reality, erasing their preconceptions of the event and sense of the performance being situated in any geographical or temporal reality. Thus, *Sleep No More* creates the possibility for the existence of an ulterior mode of behavior within the performance.

Similar to *Dionysus in '69*, this experience limits the range of options actually available to visitors while creating an illusion of multiple options of freedom. From the very beginning, the visitors are introduced to the space as one they are conceptually familiar with, but it is certainly not a traditional theater. After queuing outside the building, visitors are asked to "check into the hotel" rather than "pick up their tickets." They are given a single playing card to act as their ticket. Once inside, they are funneled into a winding black felt maze, lit only by small fake candles where the walls intersect. After passing through the dark maze, visitors enter a posh nightclub, where they are treated to live music and encouraged to imbibe (there is a fully stocked Absinthe bar) before entering the performance space. Cast members float around the bar, filling the role of conventional ushers, chatting with visitors and preparing them for the performance.

This moment provides the visitor's first encounter with performers. Similarly to *Dionysus in '69*, the performers help to orient audience members within the performance. Immediately, the visitors are included within the designed space—they are not relegated to a separate area. The bar contains elements of the outside world previously abandoned at the queue, with some added features of *Sleep No More's* performance space. The visitors are told that they are allowed to return to the bar

whenever they may choose, where they are allowed to remove their mask, talk, and relieve themselves if necessary. The bar serves as a sort of portal into the world of *Sleep No More* as well as a safe place where visitors can return if they feel the need to distance themselves from the performance.

Visitors spend about 10-15 minutes milling around the bar after entering the performance space. One of the "usher" characters then calls them up by the number on the playing card they were given at the door (there are about 10 of each number distributed every night) and leads them into a small, dark room containing a table full of plastic off-white masks. A performer instructs visitors to put on a mask and says that there is no talking, photography, or cellphone use allowed inside the performance space. Visitors then file into an elevator and are let off on different floors of the warehouse at the will of the elevator operator—the individual visitor has no control over which floor he or she enters first. This transition contains elements of both traditional (queuing, instructions to be silent and turn off cellphones) and non-traditional performances—the first example of this sort of disciplinary ambiguity that is present in many aspects of *Sleep No More*.

Sleep No More's visitor begins with his or her fellow spectators in the queue, and then is separated in the maze. They are all reunited in the bar, and then separated when each individual enters the performance space. By rapidly altering the visitor's identification with the group, *Sleep No More* coaxes each visitor out of the community of spectators he or she arrives with. This structure mimics *Dionysus in '69's*, where the spectators are separated from and subsequently reintegrated into a collective, adding another step to finally separate the visitor from his or her

community. At the end of the event, visitors again gather in the bar before exiting the place of performance.

In order to position their performances as spaces where non-normative behavior is expected and encouraged, both performances use a series of processes to posit themselves as liminal spaces. Arnold van Gennep identifies three phases in a rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation. The transition stage is a liminal space that exists outside of the real world where rules of normal society no longer apply. While van Gennep writes primarily about rites of passage in terms of social status and cultural states, Victor Turner notes that these types of rites of passage are typically mirrored in movement through space.[12] Both *Dionysus in '69* and *Sleep No More* mirror Van Gennep's stages in a rite of passage in their performances, positing the performance space as a liminal space. The community is separated from the "outside world" through these introductory processes and is reincorporated at the end of the performance. Both processes require some degree of participation from the audience members, but control their entering and exiting of the space.

Treatments of space

Within the places of performance, disparate treatments of performance space have critical effects on the spectator's experience. In *Postdramatic Theatre,* scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann draws a distinction between "centripetal" and "centrifugal" treatments of space. Centripetal spaces "[reduce] the distance between performers and spectators to such an extent that the physical and physiological proximity…[mask] the mental signification," while centrifugal ones "[outweigh] or [overdetermine] the

perception of all other elements simply through its enormous dimensions" (150). Both approaches hinder the spectator's ability to encounter the performance as interpreters of series of signs, instead requiring a more active role as co-creator of the theatrical event.

Dionysus in '69 employed a centripetal understanding of space in order to create an immediacy and physical proximity between actors and spectators. For Dionysus, designer Jerry Rojo installed two wooden "towers of Thebes"—8' long by 4'wide and 19' tall with five levels each—in northwest and southeast corners of the Performing Garage. The towers surrounded an area of black rubber mats. The audience sat either on the towers or on the carpeted floor. The mats became the central magnet that anchors the architectural and performance elements of the production. The rugs, black mats, and rough-hewn wooden towers comprised the main scenic elements of the show. There was no decoration, and no hand props were used; the only elements present were those necessary to create a working environment for the performance. The space was decorated mostly with oriental rugs covering the floors and most of the walls. This spatial arrangement allowed for physical contact between spectators and actors and included the audience within the designed performance space.[13]

In contrast, Sleep No More treats both its place of performance and performance space centrifugally, creating a massive performance space that the visitor cannot wholly comprehend from a static location within it. Punchdrunk divides the 100,000 square foot warehouse into over 100 rooms. There are many more distinct spaces than there are characters, leaving many spaces empty at different

moments throughout the performance, thus allowing the solitary conditions necessary for occasional one-on-one encounters between performer and visitor. It is physically impossible for the visitor to experience or understand all of the action that happens during the performance—each person will inevitably miss most of the action. The visitor can only be in one location in a sprawling universe at any given time.

Two stairwells on opposing sides of the performance space connect the five floors of the warehouse. With so many possible pathways to take between different areas of the space, it is difficult for visitors to develop an understanding of the layout of the space. Similar to navigating a maze, viewers find themselves back in spaces they have already experienced yet still feel they have more to explore. This endless, labyrinth-like quality of the space makes visitors feel compelled to search and discover—to try and take in as much as possible without missing anything. It feels as if there is always more to be experienced and found.

In contrast to Schechner's focus on functionality in *Dionysus in '69*, Punchdrunk's designers focus on the minutiae of every room, elaborately dressing each space. Visitors are encouraged to physically explore the space both by moving around it and by investigating the details of the many rooms. Barrett challenges the visitor, claiming, "in our world, every single drawer, cupboard, wardrobe that can be opened, should be opened because you'll find something inside" (qtd. in Piepenburg "Stage Is Set"). This layering of detail gives the visitors even more to discover within the space. Visitors can sample candy from a shop on the third floor or examine the many samples of human hair in the hospital.[14] This encourages the development of a physical, tactile relationship between visitor and performance space.

The space is generally very dark, which means the audience must slow down and spend more time discovering and examining. Barrett says, "exploring in darkness creates an almost childlike experience of being in a world you're not supposed to inhabit" (*Sleep No More* Program 24). When *Sleep No More* was produced in Boston, the producers were required to illuminate the space more sufficiently for health and safety reasons, and "the show didn't work at all because the audience was just walking around it nonchalantly treating it like a gallery chatting because there was no sense of threat" (Barrett qtd. in Dubner). This use of light serves to further individualize the visitors, creating a solitary journey, as well as encouraging close proximity between them and the materiality of the space.

Machon suggests that Barrett employs a "site-sympathetic" sensibility to the performance space, rather than strictly site-specific: "as much as site is all-important and the space dictates what to do at every point, from the moment that the space is agreed and as the rehearsal process begins, the space also yields to the performers' interaction" (*(Syn)aesthetics* 6-7). By allowing for flexibility in the conceptual treatment of each site, *Sleep No More's* space takes on a collage-like character. Both visitor and performer are required to alter their modes of behavior based on the room they inhabit.

These rooms vary in size, resulting in performance spaces that range from tiny closets and offices to expansive ballrooms. In one moment, visitors gather on the ballroom floor watching the performers convene at a table on a raised stage. In most other scenes, single characters will go into smaller offices or bedrooms with no clearly defined playing space, and visitors will crowd in and surround the character as

they perform. The visitors' perspective and physical proximity to the performers shift from moment to moment.

Since each site within the place of performance offers different architectural qualities and serves unique purposes within the production, each room is designed with varying intentions. Some are treated as environments similar to Schechner's work, and others as literal representations of familiar spaces, like the aforementioned offices and bedrooms. Thus nearly every scene features a different audience/performer physical relationship. This changing relationship forces the audience to take on a different role in response to the various treatments of space.

Others are treated as visual installations providing contextual and narrative information and helping to set the atmosphere of the performance. Here, the viewer is given a choice in how to assess the installation. An experienced museum-goer may inherently view the work as a visual installation. Nicolas De Oliveira, Nicola Oxley and Michael Petry suggest that installation viewers are implicitly posited as an author of installation works because "[they act] like surfaces, endlessly returning our gaze, rendering viewer and viewed the same" (167). These visitors understand their relationship to the piece differently than ones more familiar with the text of *Macbeth,* who may assume the role of interpreters deciphering a semiotic physical realization of the text.[15] Thus, not only are the visitors required to adjust the conditions of their role as spectators when they encounter each different room, their ability to do so is also limited by their individual prior experience with these artistic media.

"Happening" of the space

Fischer-Lichte supposes that the performance space is in a constant state of "happening" rather than "existing" because "each movement of persons, animals, objects, light, each sound ringing out in the space will change [the performance space] and, thus, bring forth spatiality anew and otherwise" ("Theater history as cultural history" 4). In this way, the audience actively adds to the materialization of the theatrical event. In this section, I examine the ways in which the audience contributes to the happening of the space in *Dionysus in '69* and *Sleep No More*.

Because the spatial design is so sparse, the primary compositional element in *Dionysus in '69* became human presence: the body of the audience and the body of the performers. The constant visual bodily presence of the spectator made it impossible to experience the production without considering the community that comprised the visual composition of the space. By incorporating the audience into the visual experience of *Dionysus in '69*, Schechner drew attention to the autopoietic feedback loop that is constantly generated between spectator and actor during the performance, emphasizing the audience's participatory role.[16]

Once the audience members were inside the space, they encountered the performers midway through their warm-up process. The actors occupied the black mats, forcing most audience members to sit on the towers, rugs, and surrounding platforms facing the central area. While there were no real physical barriers dividing the audience and performance space, the mats were obviously meant to be left empty for the performers. Sometimes the performers would abandon their warm-ups to help audience members find viable seats. They were allowed to sit almost everywhere, but

were asked to relocate if they decided to sit in an area that was specifically needed for the performance. On occasions when audience members were, whether accidentally or on purpose, in the way during the performance, actors would attempt to circumvent them without breaking the performance.

Although Schechner intended for the space to be shared equally by performers and audience alike, its setup and conditions of use resembled a theater in the round with the audience surrounding a central playing area. Spectator movement contributed to the constant materialization of the space most tangibly at the beginning and end of the performances, and in the specific moments when audience members were invited to join in, as I will discuss later. The audience made up the static materiality of the world, while the actors added the most active contributions to the fluid materiality of the space.

Sleep No More's visitors play a more active role in the development of the space than *Dionysus in '69's*, as the conditions of performance necessitate movement. The visitors are constantly shifting, whether trailing behind the performance as it moves throughout the building or exploring the space on their own, acting as a moving sculpture of masks bending in and around the performance.

The masks in *Sleep No More* establish the visitors as part of the materiality of the world in a very different way from in *Dionysus in '69*. Visually, the masks transform the audience from a mass of bodies into a shadowy crowd of anonymous figures. This makes the performers easier to track, standing out against the masked crowd. The mask also renders the audience member as a moving scenic elements— audiences will, "unwittingly, [choreograph] themselves into beautiful carnivalesque

sculptures" (Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 5).[17] The masked visitor is put in a strange

position within the performance; each person's experience is surrounded by rhetoric

of empowerment, but the individual is supposed to regard his or her fellow audience

members as passive bodies. Visitors actively move around, determining places for

themselves within the world, but melt into the performance space when the

production requires them to. The mask "hides the public persona [of the spectator]

rather than putting it on display," so that the individual is placed in the performance,

and yet remains absent from it to those watching" (White, "Odd Anonymized Needs"

224). In *Sleep No More*, the visitor is rendered invisible, whereas bodies were

visually prioritized in *Dionysus in '69*.

Though visitors are able to move freely throughout the allowed performance

space, each one's movements within the space are still carefully monitored and

regulated. There are areas that are off-limits and stewards spread throughout the space

to ensure the visitors behave within the limitations of the performances. The space

changes independent of the visitors, manipulating and limiting their choices from

moment to moment. In *Punchdrunk: Performance, Permission, Paradox,* Sean

Bartley describes how this can make *Sleep No More* seem frustratingly constraining:

"Making a mental note to revisit a room often proved futile when a previously open

door became locked. At times, fellow audience members, newly encountered

performers, and other physical limitations within the space made continuing to follow

a character impossible." In *Dionysus in '69*, audience movement was limited by the

implied convention of sitting and structured invitations to join the action in the

middle of the space. Conversely, while *Sleep No More's* visitors are freer from

moment to moment, they encounter a set of limitations that shift throughout the performance.

Homogenization of the gaze

Fischer-Lichte identifies three broad processes that are prioritized in performances that aim to situate the spectator as a participant: "[1] the *role reversal* of actor and spectators…[2] the *creation of a community* between them, and…[3] the creation of various modes of mutual, physical *contact* that help them explore the interplay between proximity and distance, public and private, visual and tactile contact" (*Transformative Power of Performance* 40). She continues to explain that, while there are many different strategies for exploring these processes, performances that prioritize them share common ground in that they "actually create instances of these processes" (40) rather than depicting them. In this section, I consider community building in *Dionysus in '69* and *Sleep No More.*

Fischer-Lichte understands community as being "singularly based on…the concurrent presence of both [audience and spectator] groups in the same place" (60). She determines the existence of a community as essential to restructuring the spectator's role within performance. While an audience member's individual choice of seat would affect his or her perspective and visual understanding of *Dionysus in '69*, the entire body of spectators experienced the same sense of sharing the space with the performers. Each spectator was paid the same attention, and was offered the same invitations to engage with the piece. Along with the performers, the spectators became a part of the community that constitutes the theatrical event.

Spatially, *Dionysus in '69* was structured such that:

> Dominant actions such as the birth of Dionysus, the seduction of Pentheus, and the death of Pentheus take place on the black mats. Choric actions such as the taunting of Pentheus by the chorus, the planning of Pentheus' murder by the chorus, and the soliciting of help from the audience take place in various areas around the periphery, mostly among the spectators. Some actions such as the sexual relations between Dionysus and Pentheus and the initial meeting between Cadmus and Tiresias take place entirely out of sight of the audience, privately. (Schechner, *Environmental Theater* 4)

Schechner and The Performance Group did not set out to intentionally divide the space between audience and performers. Schechner suggests, "if some spaces are used just for performing, this is not due to a predetermination of convention or architecture but because the particular production being worked on needs space organized that way" (2). In effect, the space *could* be shared equally, but only when the performance allowed for it: the audience was directed away from the central playing area until they were invited to join the action, and the performers primarily used the mats except for when they intentionally breached the audience space. Whether the individual spectator decided to participate or not, each one was offered the same conditions of spectating based on their membership in the community. This co-presence in space created the conditions for role reversal to occur, as I discuss in the next section.

Rather than developing a community of participants for *Sleep No More,* Punchdrunk separates visitors from one another and distinguishes them from the performers using the masks. When traditionally used in performance, masks serve to highlight physical expression by drawing attention away from the emotions expressed on the face, as well as emphasize the one facial expression portrayed on the mask. The masks used in *Sleep No More* resemble Bauta style Venetian carnival masks. Bauta masks were used to make citizens anonymous in political decision-making

times in Venice in the 18th century.[18] By choosing to mask the visitors, *Sleep No More* erases their identities and establishes them as anonymous players within the performance. Barrett observes that the masks "allow people to be more selfish and more voyeuristic than they might normally be" (*Sleep No More* Program 24). This liberates the visitors to act in ways they typically would not, but does so by hiding their individualities.

Punchdrunk aims to "empower" the audience by allowing "performer and spectator-participant [to] occupy the same physical and fictive space…without them having to be present as a recognizable social subject" (Barrett qtd. in White, "Odd Anonymized Needs" 228), removing any possibility for failure or embarrassment within the performance. In this way, the masks achieve the same effect as darkening the auditorium—they give the visitors their desired anonymity to participate in performance and "[create] a boundary between them and the action" (*Sleep No More* Program 24). Thus, Punchdrunk's use of masks serves to perpetuate the subject/object divide implicit in the term "immersion."

The mask creates a divide between the visitor and the performance in addition to ensuring that "a crowd does not form to the same degree [as in a traditional performance], instead a string of – literally – faceless strangers mill around, each having very individual experiences" (White, "Odd Anonymized Needs" 224). By cutting off any potential interaction between visitors, the mask attempts to dissolve any community that could potentially have formed between visitors, or between visitors and performers. Punchdrunk does not shatter the community as wholly as they might by making the audience anonymous in a distinct way for each visitor; by

identically masking every visitor, Punchdrunk identifies each one as a part of the same body within the performance.

White argues, "[the mask] is about the inhibition of various kinds of interactions between spectators, which, paradoxically, facilitates interactions of other sorts" (221). This notion can be expanded to consider interactions between actors and spectators. By masking each visitor, Punchdrunk forces him or her to process information and communicate with the performance in a different way. Similar to spectators at traditional theatrical performances, audiences are not allowed to speak while experiencing *Sleep No More*. While the mask serves to create and perpetuate a division between actor and visitor, it does so in a way that liberates the individual visitor's movement. Thus, the mask enables the visitors in some ways, which I will discuss next, but does not allow them to bring their identities to the performance. While a visitor's literal experience of *Sleep No More* will inherently differ from his or her peers', the viewing experience is uniform for each because there is no reconciliation between the spectator's identity and that person's role in the performance.

PARTICIPATION AND INTERACTIVITY

As I have shown, immersive and environmental theater scenography share many aesthetic and conceptual qualities but take some different approaches to constructing their performance spaces. *Dionysus in '69* and *Sleep No More* use their performance spaces to align the spectators differently: as a community and as individuals, respectively. Based on this distinction, each performance employs inherently different moments of audience participation.

Invitations for interaction

Schechner defines participation as taking place "precisely at the point where the performance breaks down and becomes a social event – when spectators [feel] that they [are] free to enter the performance as equals" (*Environmental Theater* 40). This language implies that there are two mutually exclusive modes of performance conventions that a production can transverse between: the performance and the social event. This all-or-nothing approach to audience participation also suggests that individual audience members do not have the freedom to choose when they can take a participatory role in a performance. The spectator can choose whether to engage or not, but the audience member does not possess the agency to define those moments for his or herself. Accordingly, the performers determine the moments for allowed interaction within Dionysus in '69: when the performance became "social."

Dionysus in '69 featured a series of planned moments when performers either invited the spectators to participate in a communal action in the central area or went into the audience space to interact with them. Schechner describes these moments of structured participation:

> Not infrequently spectators spontaneously stripped and took part in the Death Ritual. These people already knew what was expected of them from seeing the Birth Ritual; and they identified strongly with Pentheus, or his murderers. Spectators always allowed themselves to be caressed in the scene that precedes the Death Ritual… Parts of the play—such as the Tag Chorus and the Ecstasy Dance following the birth of Dionysus—were easy to participate in simply by singing, clapping, or dancing, and each night nearly everyone took part in one or both of these scenes. (41-2)

This treatment of participation reinforced the budding community through collective action and experience.[19] However, the activities for engagement were already

determined for potential participants. The spectators were not able to determine their

actions within the performance.

In all scenes excluding the caress scene, spectators could choose to engage if

they wished, or to maintain their perspectives as outside viewers:

> For those spectators who remained observers to the community-building
> action, it presented itself as part of the fictive plot, the 'play,' while those
> participating in the community-building experienced it as a social reality
> collectively brought forth by actors and spectators… The shift from spectator
> not only to participant but co-player was the prerequisite for the change in
> perspective and thus, for experiencing community. (Fischer-Lichte on
> *Dionysus in '69, Transformative Power of Performance* 53)

Rather than dividing "participation" into two autonomous categories, Fischer-Lichte

develops a sliding scale of relationships between spectators and performers. She

understands a performance's "eventness" as characterized by a state of 'betwixt and

between' within the spectator, in which the viewer experiences the destruction of

oppositions between autonomous subject vs. subject determined by others; art vs.

social reality/politics, and presence vs. representation. Fischer-Lichte observes that,

by letting the audience members choose whether to participate or not in *Dionysus in*

'69, The Performance Group "offered the opportunity of liminal, transformative

experiences, and they did not inflict violence on those outside the community" (54).

Sleep No More creates a similar state of 'betwixt and between' within its

viewers.[20] Rather than oscillating simply between two states, *Sleep No More* asks its

visitors to constantly reconsider their role in performance from moment to moment.

The difference in interaction between performers and audiences is contingent on the

presence or absence of the mask. When audience members enter the bar (unmasked),

they are greeted by performers who speak directly to them and offer advice. This is

the only moment when visitors are allowed to directly communicate with performers. Throughout the rest of the performance, the actors tend to ignore the masked audience members. If an individual or crowd of visitors stands in the way of one of the performers, the performers simply part through the crowd and move on without any acknowledgement of the bodies they share the space with. In a few moments, performers will address visitors while they are masked. A few minutes into my first visit to *Sleep No More*, the actress playing Lady Macbeth grabbed my hand and dragged me behind her from the bottom to the top floor of the building. Occasionally a performer will turn to a visitor to hold a prop to free his or her hands, but only when it is needed for the performance to continue.

The only moment when *Sleep No More* does employ role reversal is when the mask is removed and the visitor is addressed during the one-on-one encounters that few audience members experience, as well as in the bar. Carefully planned into the performance are 5-10 moments when an actor will pull a visitor into a cordoned off space and perform only for that individual. These interactions take on a variety of shapes and forms. During my November 2012 viewing of *Sleep No More,* one of the nurses pulled me into an office where she removed my mask, lay me down and tucked me in on a therapist's couch before apparently regurgitating a carpenter's nail, whispering and then shouting some of the text of *Macbeth* at me, and depositing me back on the other side of the door. In my experience, the fact that my mask was removed (unexpectedly) was one of the most viscerally engaging moments of the production. I was no longer allowed to hide—I was forced to face the actor inches away from me. By removing the mask, Punchdrunk invites the individual visitor

onstage, "temporarily making the auditor feel co-equal with the actor" (Cartelli).

Physical touch also plays a large role in these intimate moments. While actors and

visitors are in very close proximity throughout the performance, they only come into

bodily contact in specific, targeted moments. This serves to make the visitor equal

with the actor—physical touch is usually reserved for being between actors—but only

in these moments.

The one-on-one interactions are a very popular aspect of *Sleep No More*, and

many visitors spend a good deal of the performance seeking them out. Many seasoned

visitors will go to great lengths to ensure they are the ones snatched up into these

rooms.[21] This sort of intimacy is *Sleep No More's* prize given to only the most

courageous fans. It is "the desire to be *un*masked, to be recognized or acknowledged,

if not exactly known, [that] seems to be one of the primary informing motives behind

the craving of *SNM*'s fan-base for one-on-ones" (Cartelli). Whereas *Dionysus in '69*

is built on a communal experience of the theatrical event, the crux of *Sleep No More*

is the most individual, personal experience possible.

Fischer-Lichte understands role reversal as "an interplay of disempowerment

and empowerment which applies to both artists and spectators" (*Transformative

Power of Performance* 50). Although Punchdrunk allows the visitor to take on a more

active role within the performance, *Sleep No More* does not truly achieve role

reversal in these any of the aforementioned moments because the performer does not

sacrifice any control to meet the visitor as an equal. The difference between

performer and visitor is not only perpetuated by the lack of community, but the actors

do not meet the audience halfway. The audience is thus not allowed to enter the performance as co-subjects determining the course and outcome of the performance.

Both performances allow the spectators to define their own terms of participation to some degree, but feature specific, implicit rules of participation that limit the spectator's true ability to encounter the performance as a co-subject. *Dionysus in '69* allowed participants to join in their predetermined activities, but the course of the play would not change based on the participation of spectators. Similarly, *Sleep No More* requires a certain degree of participatoriness for the performance to function, but employs many security measures, including the mask, to specifically ensure that visitors do not disturb the predetermined performance as it is.

Unplanned participation

In both of these performances, audiences sometimes acted in ways that ultimately disrupted the performance and created an unsafe environment for performers and spectators alike. Performers weren't trained to deal with these unplanned interventions, and were often frustrated and confused about how to proceed. Analyzing the moments in which participation backfired assists us in illuminating the boundaries of allowed behavior and understanding the separation of performer and spectator.

The community in *Dionysus in '69* was shattered when a spectator intervened in an unplanned way, halting the action of the play. When the play could not continue as planned, "the focus shifts from the performers to the spectators… However satisfactory this may be from a director's point of view, it is dismaying and sometimes humiliating to the performers" (Schechner, *Environmental Theater* 56). In

shifting the focus of the event from the performers to the spectators, neither group

was able to participate democratically in the performance. Here, spectators no longer

lived in a state of 'betwixt and between,' they were cajoled into a specific mode of

behavior.

In some of the more physical, intimate scenes, audience members would

sometimes "take liberties that offended the performers" (*Transformative Power of

Performance* 42). During the "caress" scene (which was eventually cut from the

performance), the performers would go into the audience and select an audience

member to intimately – but never inappropriately – engage with. Schechner describes

scene and the issues that arose:

> The performers moved slowly into the audience either individually or, usually,
> in groups of two, three, or four. Members of the audience were selected at
> random within the framework of simple rules: no one anyone knew; someone
> who seemed responsive… But these events, effective as they were, could not
> be maintained. With increasing frequency, audiences gawked, talked, or
> wanted to make out with the performers…on more than one occasion a nasty
> situation unfolded in the darkened room. The performers refused to continue
> with the caress. One girl put it very bluntly: 'I didn't join the Group to fuck
> some old man under a tower.' … the caress was the more radical doing. It was
> also more dangerous and more difficult to maintain. It depended on an
> innocence that a long-run play cannot have. And a willingness to participate
> within the terms of the production that audiences do not have. (Schechner,
> Eberstadt, and Euripides n.p.)

In analyzing this situation, Schechner observes that danger arose when the

audiences decided to act outside of the parameters of the performance as he had

defined them. A paradox arises: Schechner wants the audience members to

experience the production not as a "performance" but as a "social event" in which

they are an equally agential player, but then chastises them for acting outside "the

terms of production." Fischer-Lichte suggests, "the obvious disconnectedness of the

"caress-scene" to the rest of the "play" appeared as an invasion of the real into fiction, calling attention to the performers' real bodies," leading the audience to interpret the scene as an invitation to real, physical intimacy. Many of the male spectators took this invitation too far, "[extending the caresses] to body parts which the performers had deliberately avoided" (*Transformative Power of Performance* 62).

In other instances, audience members intervened with the narrative of the story such that the play could not continue as planned. *Dionysus in '69* took a relatively traditional approach to narrative storytelling; the story unfolded in the same linear fashion every evening, and each audience member experienced the story in the same way. On two occasions, spectators intervened with the performance in such a way that the production could not continue as planned and abruptly ended.

Joan MacIntosh, one of the actresses who played Dionysus, remembers an instance when Pentheus left the theater with a female audience member that he took a liking to.[22] After the pair had left, she announced: "Ladies and gentlemen, tonight for the first time since the play has been running, Pentheus, a man, has won over Dionysus, the god. The play is over" (qtd. in Schechner, Eberstadt, and Euripides n.p.). According to MacIntosh, the majority of the spectators and actors celebrated this unique turn the performance took, but she remembers feeling personally betrayed at having lost her lover, even within the fiction of the play. On a separate occasion, a group of students captured Pentheus to prevent his sacrifice to Dionysus. Performers and spectators alike were confused and frustrated. Schechner ultimately intervened and asked for a volunteer Pentheus from the audience to continue the performance.[23]

In these moments when the play was disrupted, one or more members of the community of co-subjects seized control over the production, derailing the performance rather than contributing to it and rendering all other spectators powerless. The individual co-subject *is* in control of his or her individual actions, perhaps more so in *Dionysus in '69* than in *Sleep No More*, but that agency has to be sacrificed in order for every spectator to maintain a uniform *sense* of control. Because *Dionysus in '69* defines its audience and performers as a community and asks all spectators to act as a group, the individual spectator can neither be nor feel truly in control over his or her experience of the performance.

Even at performances when these outlandish acts did not occur, audience members who were not inclined to immediately jump up and join in with the communal moments felt out of touch with the performance. Many reviews of the performance focus on the reviewers' sense of disconnectedness. Stefan Brecht questions: "The only free reaction and thus the only genuine participation possible is a gesture of refusal to participate. If genuine audience participation is excluded, is a liberative effect possible?" (164)

Sleep No More's actors observe curious, inoffensive audience behavior each night, but only on rare occasions will a visitor act outside of the allowed boundaries of the performance. These transgressions are usually harmless: visitors reject the instruction that they are not supposed to remove their mask or steal small props and costume pieces.[24] To ensure visitor and performer safety, as well as to protect the integrity of the performance, *Sleep No More* builds in a few other regulatory systems to control its visitor's behaviors. In addition to the mask and the opening and closing

of spaces within the hotel, as I discussed earlier, the creators plant phones in many of the rooms to deliver instructions to visitors. In these moments, "even if a narrator-visitor 'chooses' to answer the phone, she is simply responding in one of two predictable ways to a stimulus provided by Punchdrunk" (Bartley).

Stewards wearing black versions of the visitors' masks are stationed systematically around the building, silently intervening when they are needed and serving to help any distressed visitors. The actors can also summon stewards if they need assistance in removing a visitor.[25] Once, an audience member began throwing objects at the glass window behind which Lady Macbeth was performing. Tori Sparks, the actress playing Lady Macbeth, remembers "I just tried to stay in character and the steward that's in this room of course went to try and stop her, and she was just…just completely clueless" (qtd. in Dubner). In this moment, the actress relied on a steward to rectify the performance so it could continue as planned.

Some visitor interventions have righteous intentions. Choreographer Maxine Doyle says:

> There have been moments when audiences have tried to interrupt [the moment where a character tries to poison Lady Macduff]. And there's been moments when Lady Macduff, well we set this up, she falls in the party, sometimes they let her fall on the floor, most of the time somebody will save her. More interestingly is lady Macbeth. The decline of her story plays out in the hospital and she finishes in an image…she's naked and bloody and in another bathtub in the hospital. And she beckons to the audience sometimes to help. And some audiences will help her, pick up a towel, give her a towel, or hold her. (Dubner)

In these instances, she observes, audience members are inclined to protect performers, but this instinct is dependent on the personalities of the visitors. Myrto Koumarianos and Cassandra Silver suggest that visitors used to the traditional passivity of theater

spectators are more likely to suppress their "interventionist impulses" for fear of interrupting performances. In moments when violent or disturbing acts occur within the show, such as Macbeth's smashing Lady Macduff's pregnant belly into the wall and proceeding to rape her, the visitor's "fluctuating status as spectator-performer-agents placed on [them] the burden of accountability… What, really, was the extent of our agency if we could do nothing but watch these two horrific scenes unfold literally within reach?" (170)

CONCLUSION

As I have demonstrated, each of these performances offer varying opportunities for spectators to make themselves active outside of the behaviors expected in traditional performances. In the cases of *Dionysus in '69* and *Sleep No More*, audience members are occasionally allowed to determine *if* and *when* they are active within performance but they are never allowed to decide exactly *what* they do when they act. The audience members are allowed to make a series of choices that determine their experiences of the production, but the options are predetermined and laid out for them. There is no process by which the audience is involved in determining the material of the performance. This experience is inherently limited and controlling.

These limitations are only rendered problematic when compared with the rhetoric surrounding these specific performances. Bartley identifies this paradox within *Sleep No More*: "While Barrett, Doyle, and the Punchdrunk website consistently frame the experience of the narrator-visitor with terms like 'empowerment' and 'possibility,' the space and the movements of the actors in it are

constantly limiting and constraining; they prevent the narrator-visitor from exploring the full range of choices." Audiences are being explicitly told that they will attend a performance where they have agency to control their experience, but are instead required to fill predetermined roles.

A clear pattern arises when perusing reviews of each performance outside of critical journals: many of *Dionysus in 69's* spectators are aware of their limited role in the performance and are either frustrated or intrigued, while *Sleep No More's* visitors are enthralled by the supposed freedoms they are allowed.[26] Where these performances differ is in their ability to create an effective illusion of control for the audience. By giving the visitors individual power over their *perspectives* within the performance, *Sleep No More* allows them to believe that they are equally able to determine their *actions*. Because they are not identified as a part of a larger group and do not have to consider the agential desires of their co-subjects, *Sleep No More's* viewers are designed to be the controllers of their experiences. The experience mimics playing a video game—the player directs his or her virtual counterpart, but can still only respond to the presented stimuli. While *Dionysus in '69* does, in reality, allow spectators and performers to encounter each other as more equal co-subjects than in *Sleep No More*, its focus on community makes this sense of individual agency unfeasible.

Schechner claims, "the difference between scientific inquiry and artistic play is not so much what's going on, but how you treat what's going on" ("Behavior, Performance, and Performance Space" 98). If we treat *Dionysus in '69* and *Sleep No More* as social experiments, and assume that the visitor's sense of agency is what

draws audiences to *Sleep No More*, we can draw a slightly unsettling conclusion. The visitors' sense of control does not come from their ability to "participate" in the performance, but rather from the requirement that they forget all their other relationships, obligations and responsibilities and focus solely on their presence. They are not even truly required to watch the performance. What *Sleep No More* offers its viewer is the opportunity to be egotistic: to put away his or her cellphone, don a mask, and forget not only the outside world but also the other spectators. I am not so bold to claim that this focus on individualization is the sole contributor to *Sleep No More's* success, but I believe this points to an subtle trend in social behavior. In our contemporary world—where we expect our desire for personal relationships to be sated through social media and are constantly required to be connected to our bosses, professors, colleagues, peers, and family members through smart phones and emails—*Sleep No More* allows the viewer to, if only for a few hours, be released from any and all responsibility.

At the beginning of this thesis, I defined theater as the only art form that truly requires co-presence to exist. *Sleep No More* has circumvented this definition, creating a theatrical event that offers visitors the choice to attend only to their own needs, rather than the performance's communal ones. Visitors steal, fight for the most personal experiences, and sprint behind performers to ensure they are closest to the performance without considering the consequences of their behaviors on the integrity of the performance or the experiences of their fellow spectators. In this way, Punchdrunk has indeed created an "innovative" form of theatrical performance, one in which attendees need not attend the performance.

Dionysus in '69 and *Sleep No More* offer us two possible models of participatory performance: one grounded in community, another that promotes isolation and self-interest. In an age when virtual and physical walls are drawn between people with remarkable frequency, I feel compelled to use theater to reestablish these sorts of connections. Performances that require active presence from both actors and spectators allow participants to practice many skills in attention, communication, and collaboration. I urge my peers and fellow theater-makers to join me in focusing their energy on creating performances that do not simply suggest but *necessitate* collaboration, lest we lose sight of that one characteristic unique to the theatrical medium—co-presence—that drew many of us to it in the first place.

APPENDIX: SCENIC DESIGN FOR *THE SEAGULL* BY ANTON CHEKHOV
Appendix A: Aesthetic Concept for The Seagull

Because Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* deals with many prominent themes—from art and love to the essential nature of humanity—it has remained at the forefront of theatrical literature in the 100+ years since it was penned. Professor Kordonsky was most interested in *The Seagull's* commentary regarding the meaning, relevance, and artifice of art, and thus hoped to "turn theater inside-out"—to expose the mechanisms behind the magic and include the audience within the designed space of the theater.

We decided that the audience should enter the space and feel as if they have been let backstage into the world typically reserved for actors, rather than one specifically designed for this production. It was important that the space not feel "overdesigned" or prepared. The audience would enter the space with no specific directions and find a seat for themselves in and amongst the "theater stuff." There would be a single, central platform upon which the actors would create their "theater magic." This set up resembled a theater in the round, but the nature of the audience's seating meant that each spectator had a different perspective of the performance. Since action took place both on the central platform and in and amongst the audience seating, the audience's proximity to and perspective of the performers changed from moment to moment.

The metaphor for the mise-en-scène was this: the oldest theater company that has performed every play ever written and, thus, has amassed an unthinkable amount of theatrical resources, is evicted without time to pack. I drew on imagery from junkyards, furniture stores, and theater prop storage areas in various repertory

theaters. I strove for an aesthetic of controlled disorder, leaning more towards rolling hills of materials rather than a meticulously organized storage space. All of the necessary scenic elements were constructed from found items, as if the cast had to make do with the objects at their disposal: a chandelier and piece of muslin became the moon, while a large swath of fabric hit with a blue light became the lake.
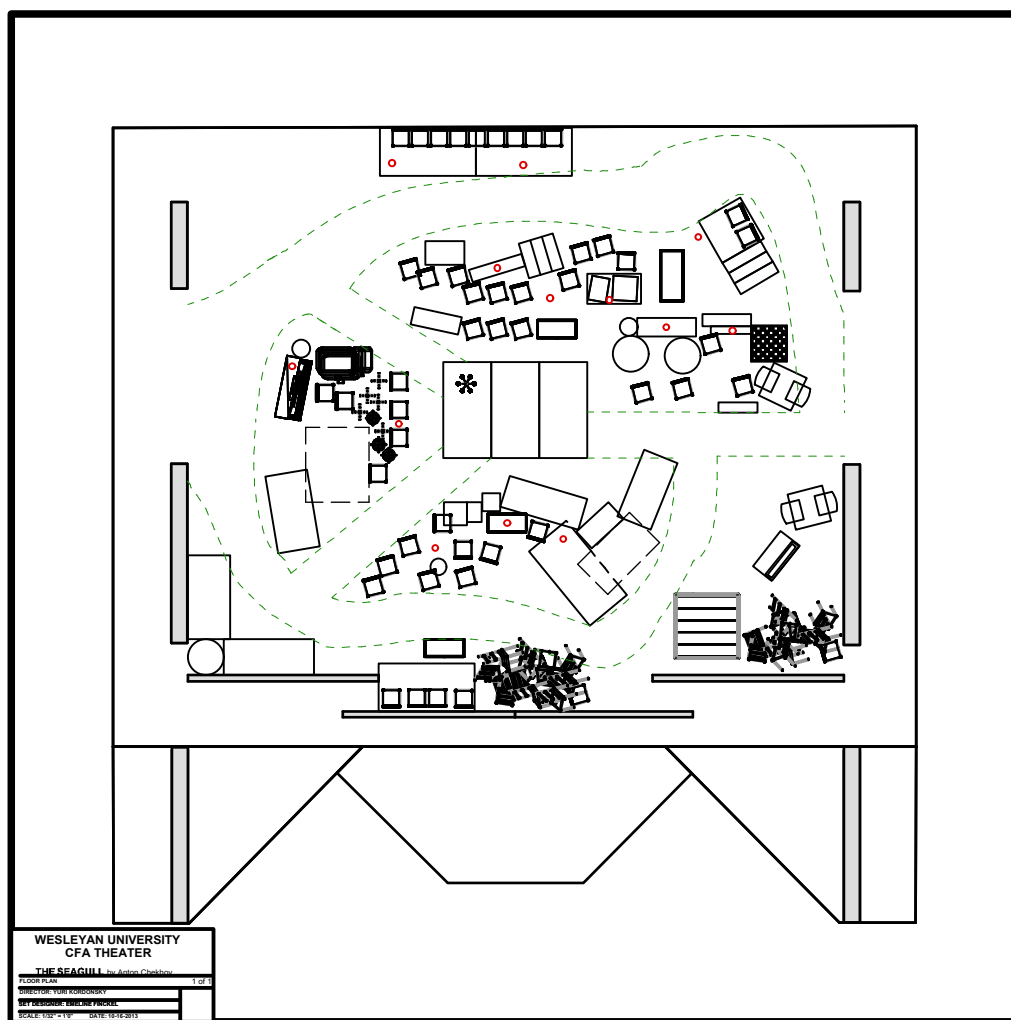
The majority of the objects used in *The Seagull* came from Wesleyan's furniture and properties storage, as well as donations from professors and other members of Wesleyan's community. These objects spanned a myriad of time periods and aesthetic styles. Because the final composition of the design was contingent on the selection of objects at my disposal, I chose to let them speak for themselves rather than predetermining a specific vision for composing the space. I chose to spend the rehearsal and design process exploring different compositions of found objects in conjunction with the cast. The result was an organic, fluid space that considered the architecture of the theater, the inherent functional qualities of the objects, and the needs of the performance. I used floor plans and 3D renderings to conceptualize the general layout and flow of the space, but determined the specific placement of objects through experimentation onstage with the actual objects.

I chose to order the space by item functionality as in a prop storage house, rather than by color, shape, or any other aesthetic quality. The space was thus divided into a series of loose sections: musical instruments, dinner and glassware, garden/outdoor, electronics, cosmetics, children's toys and books, et cetera, all surrounding a bare platform made up of three 4'x8' stock platforms. The audience was let into the theater through the loading dock—passing the scene shop and lighting

and rigging controls—to enhance the sense that they were not attending a traditionally designed production but being let backstage of the theater itself.
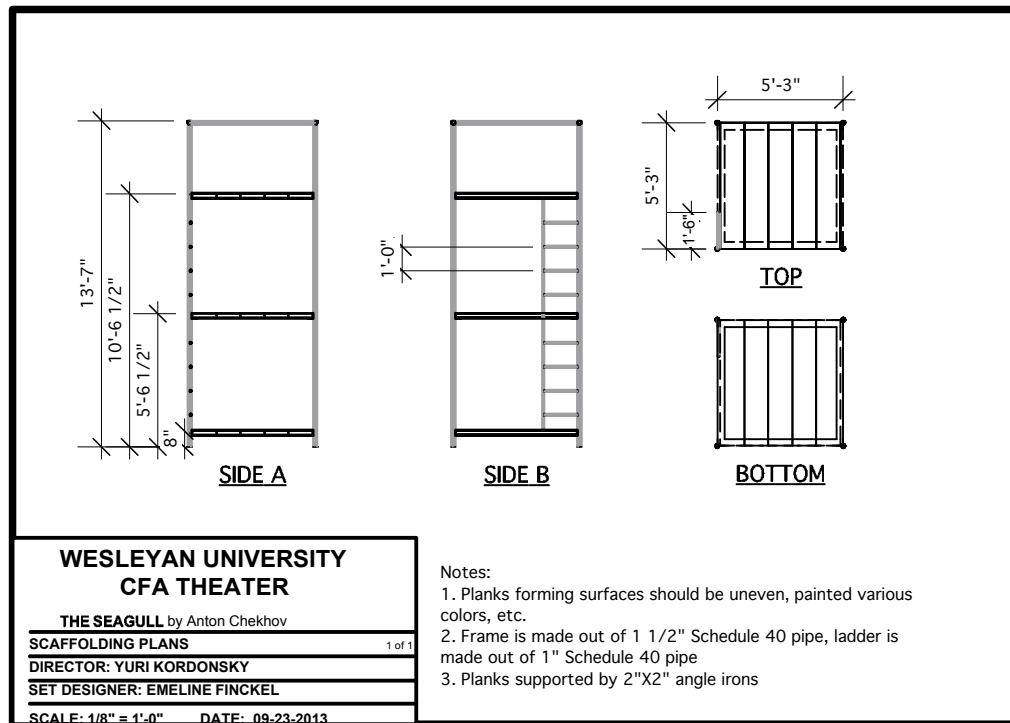
A few objects were constructed to serve specific functions within the production: to create levels and verticality within the space, allow ease in transitions, and provide alternative lighting to traditional stage lights and practical lamps. These objects were not designed with a specific aesthetic in mind, which would have implied an unwanted specific visual style in the rest of the performance. Rather, these objects were designed mainly to achieve the purposes they needed to.

Ultimately, the space existed in an intentional state of limbo: while there were clear floor paths indicating the flow of the audience and performers, there were many aesthetic imperfections to draw attention to the element of chance which played a essential role in the design process.

Appendix B: Schematic Top View

WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY
CFA THEATER
THE SEAGULL by Anton Chekhov
FLOOR PLAN   1 of 1
DIRECTOR: YURI KORDONSKY
SET DESIGNER: EMELINE FRICKEL
SCALE: 1/32" = 1'0"   DATE:10-16-2013

Scale: 1/32" = 1'0"

Appendix C: Object Build Plans

Scale: 1/8" = 1'0"

Photo by Emeline Finckel

WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY
CFA THEATER

THE SEAGULL by Anton Chekhov

VANITY MIRROR PLANS   1 of 1

DIRECTOR: YURI KORDONSKY

SET DESIGNER: EMELINE FINCKEL

SCALE: 1/2" = 1'-0"   DATE: 10-14-2013

1. Pre-purchased lighting units are inset within frame.
2. Bulbs should be clear and not of uniform size.
3. Theatrical mirror inset in frame
4. Paint: maroon with gloss, distressed

FRONT   SIDE   BACK

Scale: ½" = 1'0"

Photo by Emeline Finckel

CUT A
4'-0"
1'-0"

6'-0"
5'-7"
3/4"

5"
5'-2 1/8"
2'

1'-6"

SIDE A   SIDE B   CUT B

WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY
CFA THEATER

THE SEAGULL by Anton Chekhov

COAT RACK PLANS QTY: 2	1 of 1
DIRECTOR: YURI KORDONSKY	
SET DESIGNER: EMELINE FINCKEL	
SCALE: 1/4" = 1'-0" DATE: 09-23-2013	

1. Frames are made out of 1 1/2" square tubing
2. Platforms made of 3/4" plywood
3. 2" diameter casters
4. Clothes bar is made out of 1" round tubing
5. Shelves stained dark grey
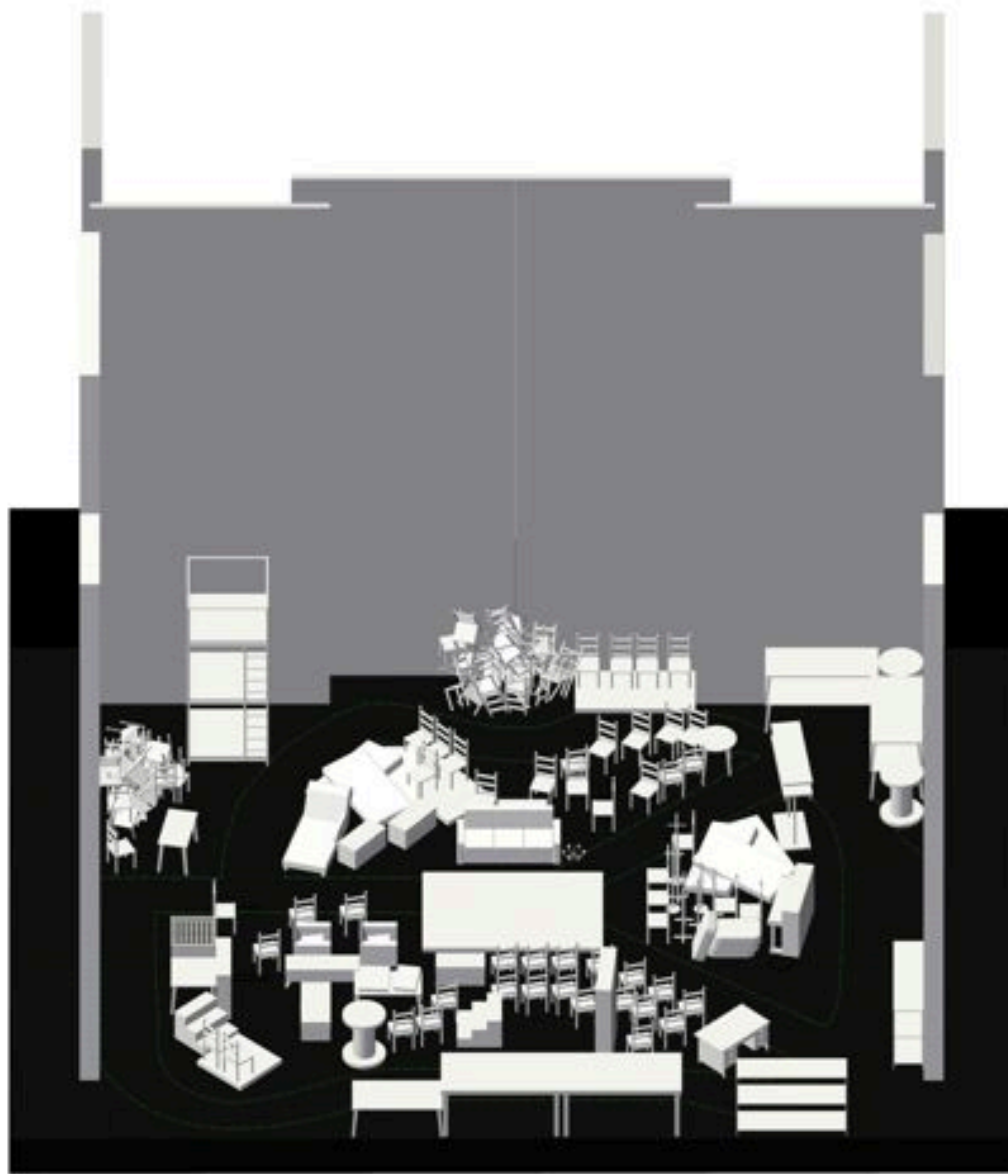
Scale: ¼" = 1'0"

Appendix D: 3-D Spatial Conceptualization

Appendix E: Production Photos

Photo by Emeline Finckel

Photo by Emeline Finckel

Photo by Emeline Finckel

Photo by William Wiebe

Photo by William Wiebe

Eva Ravenal as Nina in Act I of *The Seagull* at Wesleyan University Nov. 11-13 2013

Matthew Krakaur, Philip Halin, Maya Herbsman and Brianna Mann-Hernandez in Act I of *The Seagull* at Wesleyan University Nov. 11-13 2013

Eva Ravenal as Nina and Josef Mehling as Trigorin in Act II of *The Seagull* at Wesleyan University Nov. 11-13 2013

Photo by John Carr

Sarah Woolf as Arkadina in Act III of *The Seagull* at Wesleyan University Nov. 11-13 2013

Photo by John Carr

Eva Ravenal as Nina in Act IV of *The Seagull* at Wesleyan University Nov. 11-13 2013

Maddy Oswald as Masha in Act IV of *The Seagull* at Wesleyan University Nov. 11-13 2013

Appendix F: Model Photos

Photo by Emeline Finckel

Photo by Emeline Finckel

Scale: ¼" = 1'0"

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[1] For more on radical spectatorship in other artistic disciplines, see Aronson.

[2] For a more in depth discussion on environments, Happenings, and action painting see Kaprow and Kirby. For samples of work see The American Moon (1960), Flowers (1963), and Prune Flat (1965) by Whitman and Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts (1959) by Kaprow.

[3] For more on the influence of Happenings on Schechner, see Schechner "An Afternoon with Richard Schechner" and McNamara, Rojo, and Schechner 24-26.

[4] The axioms are as follows (from Schechner *Environmental Theater: An Expanded New Edition including 'Six Axioms for Environmental Theater'* xix-xlv:
1. The theatrical event is a set of related transactions.
2. All the space is used for the performance.
3. The theatrical event can take place either in a totally transformed space or in "found space"
4. Focus is flexible and variable
5. All production elements speak their own language
6. The text need be neither the starting point nor the goal of a production. There may be no verbal text at all.

[5] Marvin Carlson offers a more in depth discussion on Schechner's role shaping the Performance Studies department at New York University in his introduction to Fischer-Lichte *Transformative Power of Performance* 1-3.

[6] For a more on implementations of environmentalism in the 70s and 80s, see Nelson "Redecorating the Fourth Wall".

[7] For the full scale, see Machon *Immersive Theatres* 93-102.

[8] From Punchdrunk.com:
> "Since 2000, the company has pioneered a game changing form of theatre in which roaming audiences experience epic storytelling inside sensory theatrical worlds. Blending classic texts, physical performance, award-winning design installation and unexpected sites, the company's infections format rejects the passive obedience usually expected of audiences.
> Punchdrunk has developed a phenomenal reputation for transformative productions that focus as much on the audience and the performance space as on the performers and narrative. Inspired designers occupy deserted buildings and apply a cinematic level of detail to immerse the audience in the world of the show.
> This is a unique theatrical experience where the lines between the space, performer and spectator are constantly shifting. Audiences are invited to rediscover the childlike excitement and anticipation of exploring the unknown and experience a real sense of adventure. Free to encounter the installed environment in an individual imaginative journey, the choice of what to watch and where to go is theirs alone."

[9] Lehmann defines "site-specific" to mean theater which "seeks out an architecture or other location…because it is made to 'speak' and is cast in a new light through theater" (p. 152).

[10] See "Towards a Poetics of Performance" in Schechner *Performance Theory*.

[11] *Sleep No More's* website offers a fictitious version of the hotel's history:

"Completed in 1939, The McKittrick Hotel was intended to be New York City's finest and most decadent luxury hotel of its time. Six weeks before opening, and two days after the outbreak of World War II, the legendary hotel was condemned and left locked, permanently sealed from the public Until now…

EMURSIVE has brought the Grande Dame back to life. Collaborating with London's award-winning PUNCHDRUNK, the legendary space is reinvented with SLEEP NO MORE, presenting Shakespeare's classic Scottish tragedy through the lens of suspenseful film noir. Audiences move freely through a transporting world at their own pace, choosing their own path through the story, immersed in the most unique theatrical experience in the history of New York." (*Sleep No More* website)

[12] See the first chapter of Turner's book entitled "Liminal to liminoid, in play, flow, ritual."

[13] Schechner, Eberstadt, and Euripides *Dionysus in '69* features many photographs and other visual representations of *Dionysus in '69's* space.

[14] See Piepenburg "Stage Is Set. Ready for Your Part?".

[15] For examples of the various types of spaces found in *Sleep No More,* see Piepenburg "Something Wicked".

[16] In *The Transformative Power of Performance* Fischer-Lichte defines the autopoietic feedback loop as a "self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop" based on the notion that "whatever the actors do elicits a response from the spectators, which impacts on the entire performance" (38).

[17] See Holly Slade's Forbes.com article "Meet Emursive, The Company Behind 'Sleep No More,' The Off-Broadway Production That's Been Sold Out For Three Years" for photographs of performers and masked visitors.

[18] See Johnson *Venice Incognito*.

[19] See Fischer-Lichte *Transformative Power of Performance* 52-53.

[20] For further discussion on the audience's sensation of 'betwixt and between' in *Sleep No More* see Koumarianos and Silver.

[21] See Cartelli for interviews from *Sleep No More* visitors who seek out one-on-one encounters.

[22] "One Sunday night when I was playing Dionysus a woman came out to Bill Shephard and satisfied him. I went to break it up and get on with the play. Bill said, "I'm sorry, Joan, you lose." I answered, "Well, what are you going to do now?" And Bill got up and left the theatre with the woman. I announced that the play was over. "Ladies and gentlemen, tonight for the first time since the play has been running, Pentheus, a man, has won over Dionysus, the god. The play is over." Cheers and cried and celebrations. Objectively, I cheered too. Subjectively, I had lost. I felt betrayed. I was hurt and angry at Shephard. I had invested so much of myself in the performance that it became real. I had lost a lover. Amazed both at the commitment I had and at the relationship with Bill, I learned something corny but true: that if you invest all of yourself in the work, the risks are very great. Since then, I have had to fight against subtle defenses that creep in--defenses against feeling betrayed." (Joan MacIntosh qtd. in Schechner, Eberstadt, and Euripides n.p.)

[23] "On one other occasion people have planned and successfully changed the ending of the play. In June 1969, a small group of young people, led by some who had seen the play before, dragged Pentheus from the theatre. McDermott was playing Dionysus; and Shephard, Pentheus. It was not as clear cut as the time when Katherine took Bill away. This time Bill was comatose and a fist-fight almost broke out between Jason, acting on Dionysus's behalf, and several of the kids taking Pentheus out. After Shephard was dragged from the theatre, he came back but did not want to continue performing. Jason was very upset and went upstairs. Other performers were confused, blaming both McDermott and Shephard for an unresolved situation. I was not there at the start of the performance and walked into the theatre as Shephard was being dragged out. I sensed a bad scene developing and, perhaps unwisely, spoke to both performers and audience. I explained what had happened, how rare it was, and asked for a volunteer Pentheus from the audience. A young man who had seen the play five times volunteered. We asked him a few questions, explained what was expected of him, put in an improvised scene in which the performers, instead of reciting the death speeches, voiced their reactions to the night's occurrences and went on with the play. I participated in the death dance, kill, and clean up. Later I argued with the kids about what they had done. And to this day I do not know whether my intrusion was correct or not." (Schechner, Eberstadt, and Euripides n.p.)

[24] *Sleep No More's* creators and performers discuss audience transgressions in depth in Dubner "Fear Thy Nature".

[25] See Bartley for more examples.

[26] For a sampling of reviews see Als, Brantley, Brown, Cote, Geier, and Vincentelli.