



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Immersive Theatre: A Comprehensive Review and Future Direction

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Jul 13, 2024	Immersive theatre, deeply embedded in cultural narratives, has eclipsed conventional dramatic forms, catapulting the term "immersive" into contemporary cultural discourse. This innovative format challenges traditional stage norms, offering audiences direct engagement with the performance space, thereby prompting a critical reassessment of theatrical conventions and the evolving dynamics between actors and spectators. The burgeoning interest in drama education further underscores the pedagogical value of immersive techniques. This research endeavors to undertake a comprehensive exploration of immersive theater, tracing its conceptual origins, mapping its historical trajectory, and dissecting the diverse methodologies that define it. Moreover, the study seeks to investigate the myriad forms and formats of immersive theatre, unveiling how cultural shifts and technological advancements have amplified its global significance. Through this scrutiny, immersive theatre emerges as a dynamic and boundary-defying cultural expression, poised to reshape the cultural landscape of the 21st century and beyond. The research also aims to unravel the intricate interplay between immersive theatre, cultural dynamics, and technological progress to decipher its transformative potential and enduring impact on contemporary culture. In essence, this paper delves into immersive theatre's dynamic nature and its profound influence on shaping the cultural narrative of the future.
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INTRODUCTION

"Immersive", along with other such terms, are being spent in several industries such as entertainment, technology, games, and culture. In their latest study, Brigante and Elger (2020) point to the emergence of a new trend in the world consumer behaviour with an increasing dark towards the experience consumption instead of material possessions. Now, people tend to look for meaningful encounters and not just the amount of goods they own. In the case of immersive theatre, the focus is on the viewer, which strives to provide the audience with an experience that is unforgettable. Specifically, the 2020 annual report of Pseudonym Productions estimated the total worth of the immersive entertainment sector in the US at more than \$61.8 billion, which is about 19% higher compared to \$49.7 billion reached in 2019. Immersive theatre is defined as new sort of entertainment in the public's mind. These novel forms of fun challenge the traditional stage viewing dynamics, which have been associated with the proscenium stage. Critics are now being asked to re-assess and reflect on those performance-audience relationships that new technologies have brought about. Such logic should not be adopted in drama, which means it does not have to be understood as it were in real life. It should be consumers themselves who determine the pace of cultural reproduction. Immersive theatre becomes a powerful tool in reshaping the boundaries by discarding the strict differentiation between mere consumption and true creativity in this scenario. Immersive theatre is different from traditional passive spectatorship as the former almost entirely centers on viewer's

experience and engages audience in an interactive communication with the performance venue. Moreover, technology advancement is important in terms of enhancing the sense of immersion of these theatrical productions.

Research problem

The studies focuses on investigating the improvement and development of immersive theatre and its impact on cutting-edge theatrical methods. The study seeks to explore how immersive theatre disrupts traditional notions of performance, target audience engagement, and spatial relationships, subsequently altering the conventional differences among actors and visitors. The research targets to research the conceptual origins, historical improvement, and experimental improvements of immersive theatre to expose its transformational strength and effect on the cultural scene. The look at explores how immersive theatre connects with technical breakthroughs, societal changes, and evolving target audience expectations, influencing the destiny direction of theatrical expression and audience involvement.

METHODOLOGY

This achievement stemmed from imposing a studies method that entailed a comprehensive literature overview of immersive theatre. During this studies a evaluation of the literature from loads of resources turned into performed that protected instructional journals, books, interviews, and government guides. The studies used various assets, which include "Essay On Theatre" via Denis Diderot & Konstantin Stanislavski and the recent reports from organizations such as Pseudonym Productions and the British Council, in order to obtain a detailed and current view on the emergence and status of immersive theatre. This data collection process involved the bringing together of information in a structured form from a wide range of sources, and through the consideration of historical, theatrical-development, and immersive theatre aspects. This strategy was characterized by the following approaches: seeking out relevant studies, papers and theoretical discoveries and also studying recent sources. All the information was gleaned, analyzed, and collated to determine the prominent issues, the philosophies, and the technological developments that shaped immersive theatre.

Concept and the history of immersive theatre

The rise of the immersive theatre has not been an accident of happenings; rather, it has been achieved by different factors interacting. It originates mainly from two areas: experiential theater and immersive experiences. In her article entitled "Aesthetics and Theatre: The Rise of Immersive Theatre", Qin (2023) contends that film and TV are the main sources from which the transition from environmental theatre to immersive theatre originated. Technological and scientific progression has evolved the complex and diverse ways for production as well as impacted the more engaging visual experience for customers because of these technologies creating the great artistic environment. Immersive theatre blends immersive experiences and dramatism. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1991), people tend to be the happiest when they are surrounded and concentrated on a task, the so-called "flow state." in (1996) Geirland's conversation with Csikszentmihályi (1996) who referred to 'flow' as,

Being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost.

Market requires a powerful attraction that makes the audience wish the drama to be an experience and not just a view by the emergence of dramas. Thus, the introduction of immersive experiences in cultural entertainment and other industries is like wooden spoons stirring in the sector to bring it to life again. In the UK, Punchdrunk, a well known British troupe, has led the way in integrating virtual reality with play. Punchdrunk is an originator who has been a leader in the area of immersive theatre since 2000. At the core of their artistic principle is the establishment and rendition scenario which entails the disintegration of sacred texts and their invariable and accurate placement in a well-structured scene. Another of the pieces of their works which is highly rated is the show "Sleep No More "(The Stage, 2016; Prudhon, 2018).

It was not until 2022 when British Council brought this performance attribute to their official website categorizing it as immersive theatre for the first time (Xinran,2022). It is said that immersive theatre was first born in Britain. The show runs on the grounds of unique histrionic style; the multi-room environment with actors or involving audiences in performance; and all the audience should put masks on. Immersive theatre differs from regular theatre because it does not use theatre stage and the audience are scattered in the performance. This unique experience is designed in situ, so spectators face not only the actors, but also the surroundings, thus breaking the conventional fixed position. In 1758, Denis Diderot has coined the term of the fourth wall, which puts an invisible wall between the audience and the stage. This was the case in the earlier times when the stages did not have curtains, and the shows traditionally took place outdoors. Diderot's statement is meant to remind a player that it is necessary for him to pretend he is performing, so the audience could see the barrier between the stage and the observers. Diderot stressed that the fourth wall should be utilized in provoking the audience's involvement as well as in creating a feeling of an authentic dream by suspending their judgment and disbelief. Audiences have the opportunity to mingle themselves with the plot as they know and accept the presence of this invisible wall, and watching the story as if they were real things taking place immediately (Diderot, 1771).

André Antoine (1964) made the fourth wall into reality at Théâtre Libre. He blends realism and naturalism; casts an ensemble; and proposes that the actors should show the real feelings only if the emotions are natural. He tries to make every scene as real as he can do. Besides, the Théâtre-Libre was designed with some sets that involved four vertical barriers at the rehearsal stage. With André Antoine (1964), a writer, we get a scene where a wall is chosen to be taken down at the beginning of the play and one determines the side or perspective of the audience. The three adjacent walls are portraying a scenery or a locality from the play that the audience is supposed to view. During this period, communication between the audience and the actors is not encouraged and the fourth wall caters for that need and it plays a huge role as well.

A group of radicals changed the history of theatre practice in the twentieth century by seizing the Odeon Theatre in Paris in 1968, (Bredeson, 2018). They argued that it was critical to leave the past and inventing a new theatre style which will be an open public space emphasizing on communication. Dedramatization put the theatre out of its original city center, and any forms of the 'sacred' space were thus gone soon enough.

Konstantin Stanislavski developed expressionist theatre, based on Antoine's concept of the fourth wall (Benedetti's 1999). Stanislavsky & Benedetti (2010) stated that actors should not be theatrical creatures attracting the attention of onlookers standing on stage taking part in some sort of improvisation of his or her life. Instead, they should simulate very real appearance of life in which the boundary between the stage and the audience is blurred in such a way, that one hardly realizes that he or she is watching the show from a hidden. The nature of the mix of the actor and the character, with the confrontation with the fourth wall is to the heart of Stanislavski's drama. This is also where the ancestor of the proscenium-arch stage came on board. The physical boundary wall in the theatre of proscenium-arch is absent. The proscenium arch is principally used as an isolation of performers and spectators, servicing as a clear opening from where the audience can watch the stage. Russian dramatist Stanislavsky, whose ideas are mentioned by Grey (1964), stated that the actor should identify completely with the world of the play and forget about the audience. The word "private," however, has a different meaning in this context, because it is used to describe "public solitude," a state in which a person is highly attentive to his or her privacy even though watched closely. It is also known as being "alone in public."

Brecht (1992) as well led to a deeper understanding of the term "fourth wall" using this method. He posits that the contriving actors usually act as if the stage has four walls with the public being the fourth wall. This sets up the scene and the theme, and makes the audience understand that the events on the stage are as if it is a real life event acclaimed by no man. Acting behind the given-circumstances principle involves doing as though there is no audience present. The fourth wall that prevent actors from doing things beyond the stage surface limit it to be a closed and compressed environment. In a rehearsal of this theater type, the actors perform realistic scenes in a limited space, and the audience

takes seats in an open space distinct from the enclosed one. The fourth wall “wall” props the audience’s involvement with the play. Brecht (1992) suggested that the softeners introduce the play’s participants and audience interaction, and the audience becomes a part of the show.

The method of fourth wall breaking – *Distancing Effect* – greatly modified theatrical performance, first of all, by completely redefining the connection between the actor and the spectator. Actors must adopt two identities when performing: their off-screen personae and the part they are playing. The Distancing Effect fades away the barrier between performer and the character, thus, the acting and viewing process can be considered as an active engagement into the theatrical space according to Grotowski’s theory (1968).

Kawatake (1978) pointed out that a theatre consists of several components, e.g., actors, scripts, and audiences, which, by virtue of the simple and fundamental structure of theatrical communication, represent the essential constituents of the theatre experience. The above include these parameters in addition to the physical space of the theatre, all which contribute to theatrical experience. The creative force of theatre spreads into the virtual spaces as well as the human emotions which involve both the actors and audience members (Grotowski, 1968). The unique relationship that exists between the performer and the audience, highly interactive, immediate, 'live', and direct, embodies the theater experience and, when extended to the public, creates both a collective and engaging atmosphere.

One of the key elements of the *Distancing Effect* is an elimination of the barrier between the stage and the audience that is traditionally separating them. As a result, the audience becomes active participants, while traditional theatre limits the audience's involvement to the role of an observer (Kawatake, 1978). By reorganizing the theater area this process will become more involved and will generate a sense of cooperation among all who are present. The changing drama genres, from improvisation theaters to the Distancing Effect and, finally, immersive theater, are the expression of the corresponding cultural traits of these epochs.

Shenghua (2006) argues that the performer-audience dynamic is not the only constitutive, but also crucial factor, of theatrical play. Clearly, active participation in modern theatre strongly contrasts with the passive role that traditionally was characteristic of the audience's relationship with the actors. This signals the evolution of the principles and methods of theatre (Stanislavsky, 1937). With the realism period, the audience-performer relationship shifted, and the servants where the show was happening turned to the show themselves. Stanislavsky made the bond stronger between the actors and audiences observing their deep involvement, the ability to express emotions in such a way that they would be moved by the audience.

Brecht (1992) promoted a conscious difference among the actor's actual self and the roles they play, not like conventional theatre, which makes a speciality of blending the two. This approach sought to elicit a logical reaction from the target audience, selling analytical involvement in place of passive absorption within the overall performance. Brecht's refusal of illusionism in theatre questioned traditional theatrical standards, encouraging visitors to be aware about the gamers' identities and roles in the course of the whole overall performance.

The upward thrust of environmental theatre inside the 1960s represented a brilliant shift from traditional spectatorship dynamics. Schechner (1968) highlighted the considerable position of both actors and audience contributors in influencing the performance environment, creating a blurred distinction between performer and observer. Wanru (2020) defined how the target audience plays an lively role in co-developing the theatrical revel in with the actors. Environmental theatre redefined the viewing area by means of eliminating the barriers among actor and viewer, turning it into a dynamic arena for collaborative inventive expression.

Ge (2001) explains that environmental theatre merges the audience and performance venues, establishing a cohesive theatrical setting where actors and viewers engage in an immersive experience together. Grotowski (1968) stressed the need to involve the audience's passion through promoting natural interaction between spectators and actors in the performance area. This method emphasised active involvement rather than passive observation, encouraging audiences to join directly in the creative process.

Immersive theatres are typically situated on the outskirts of cities. Experimental playwrights select abandoned areas as performance locations, where these deserted structures are transformed into public spaces through theatrical events, symbolising a social creation that surpasses physical limits. This disrupted both the conventional social hierarchy and the established theatre structure. They tear down the fourth wall, interfere with the stage illusion that focal perspective creates, and turn "fiction" into a relatable "reality." Shaughnessy (2013) defines immersive theatre as performances that fully engage the audience, blurring the lines between fiction and reality and challenging the traditional roles of performers and spectators.

Immersive theatre expands on the requirements of environmental theatre in the postmodern technology by means of seeking out to boom the capability of the performance venue. Immersive theatre objectives to contain the goal marketplace in the narrative environment through choosing or improving unique places and establishing scenes to suit the theatrical storyline. Immersive theatre allows site visitors to voluntarily select their narrative direction and actively have an impact on the plot development alongside the performers, not like environmental theatre, in which the audience adopts a issue in the production. This consciousness on immersion highlights the changing dynamics of goal market involvement and the continuing improvements in theatrical expression in current general performance techniques.

Early experimentations and innovations in theatre space

The beginning of the 20 th century marked a time of mirrored image and reassessment in theatrical philosophy, wondering the traditional limitations of the proscenium level. Scholars and practitioners started to mission the limitations of conventional theatre venues, leading to the emergence of innovative practices and theoretical frameworks. Lehmann (2006) presents the idea of "postdramatic theatre," aiming to move past the restrained settings of traditional theatre rooms, creating a more bendy and collective surroundings for each performance and audience engagement. This deviation from traditional requirements highlights a extensive shift closer to reinventing the creative and spatial components of theatre.

Antonin Artaud's "The Theatre of Cruelty" (1968) goals to break down mounted theatrical norms by using providing the removal of degree and theatre corridor limitations in favour of a cohesive appearing place. Artaud's concept prioritises direct engagement among performers and target market, surpassing conventional barriers to set up a greater excessive and engaging theatrical experience.

In "The Empty Space," published in 1968, Brook Peter advocates for a minimalist theatrical style where space performs a vital role inside the storytelling. The freedom from traditional barriers on area sets the inspiration for immersive theatre, which replaces the traditional proscenium arch degree with a extra dynamic and interactive performance setting.

Kehuan (1993) expands at the transforming capability of overall performance space, distinguishing among its bodily constraints and its boundless artistic possibilities. Kehuan believes that the core of dramatic art involves surpassing bodily limitations to set up infinite aesthetic dimensions, for that reason reshaping the theatrical stumble upon.

Richard Schechner (1994) hooked up the notion of environmental theatre within the Sixties, promoting a large transformation of traditional performance venues. Schechner highlights the fusion of theatre with its natural environment, questioning the traditional distinctions among audience and overall performance. His six axioms for environmental theatre emphasise the importance of using all available space for overall performance and target market interaction, converting the conventional theatre ecosystem right into a dynamic and immersive revel in.

Diverse approaches and formats

Following the 1990s, digital and multimedia performances started to appear, and the concept of "immersion" became linked to areas like cross-media, technology, and games during this period. The world's first electronic computer was invented in 1946, marking the beginning of the digital age in human media history. This transformation has not only permeated every facet of human existence but also catalysed revolutionary alterations in artistic mediums. Art in the computer age is more immersive and incorporates additional digital features.

This digitalization primarily involves producing a feeling of immersion through the use of digital images and their accompanying technical tools. New media arts, particularly virtual reality art, utilise digital media technology as their primary form of expression. Sensory information such as vision, hearing, touch, taste, and temperature can be digitised and stored on a computer in a virtual format. All information is liberated from the constraints of the media shell and can be distributed, rephrased, and transformed on the Internet more conveniently and swiftly.

Baudrillard (1996) argued that images have become indistinguishable from reality, making it impossible for humans to conceive of genuine objects as they are now part of virtual reality. Several artists are now utilising digital media technology to produce installation art and construct immersive exhibition settings. Yayoi Kusama is recognised for her Permanent Infinity Room installations; James Turrell is associated with the Light and Space movement; and artists like Olafur Eliasson, Ryoji Ikeda, and Refik Anadol are also focused on this area.



Figure 2.3: Infinity mirrored room (Yayoi Kusama)

Source: Humphrys, J. (2023).

Aside from individual artists, there are specialised teams like teamLab that focus on producing immersive art using new media technology to engage with audiences and craft unique experiences.



Figure 2.4: Forest of resonating Lamps at teamLab borderless

Source: teamLab (2019).

Furthermore, the rapid advancement of digital fact and augmented reality technology gives powerful tools for artists to produce immersive art. Immersive reviews utilising VR and AR technology have expanded into one-of-a-kind sectors, such as virtual museums and severa AR interactive games.

On this basis, virtual media technology intervenes in immersive theatre as an interactive method. Immersive theatre, a novel shape of theatre, arose in this surroundings. According to Machon (2013), immersive theatre originates from blending set up artwork with bodily and visible theatre techniques. White (2012) elucidated the connection among immersive theatre and the spatial context. He said that "immersive theatre" is now a usually used phrase to explain the use of installations in a large spatial putting wherein the target market may also freely navigate and performers can engage in performances that inspire target audience involvement. Immersive theatre performances commonly take location in a awesome architectural putting, unlike different degree paperwork. Attendees have the freedom to navigate the area and pick out their very own route for viewing and overall performance. White (2012) asserts that immersive theatre is characterized with the aid of being multi-sensory, exploratory, and rich in institutions, with space serving as a way to convey storylines. He described immersive theatre's narrative shape as basically a multi-line narrative this is dispersed over numerous factors. Spaces have to function metaphors that allow us to contemplate and talk their significance in a more expansive and resourceful manner.

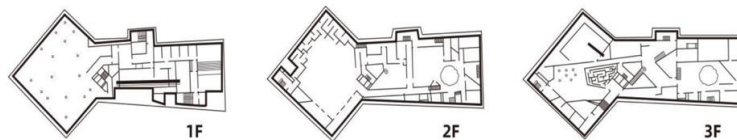


Figure 2.5: A sample of immersive theatre: *Stolen Heart* floor plan

Source: Yuqi (2022)

Smith (2013) pointed out that digital is defined as any data represented by a series of digits, and media refers to methods of broadcasting or communicating this information. Together, digital media refers to mediums of digitised information broadcast through a screen and/or a speaker. According to him, interactivity and group formation are two important elements of digital media technology.

"The most important parts of digital media ... the hard part – and the part that unleashes tremendous value for society – is taking advantage of these new capabilities relating to interactivity and group forming." (Smith, 2013).

John Millar Carroll (1995) introduced the concept of scene-based design in the realm of interaction design. He stressed the need to shift the focus of design work from outlining system operations to detailing the users who will fulfil its activities. Interaction design has shifted from utilising things as the focus in design to focusing directly on human behaviour as the design element. Carroll (1995) utilised the concept of "scene" from theatre to examine and elucidate the probable scenario when users interact with an application. Given this condition, which could influence market dynamics, designers want to address it using a specific approach. Several scene aspects in a play include the interactions between people, the different events that take place, and the setting as the backdrop of the action. The design scene can be separated into factors such as users, themes, time and space, and technology. Grau (2003) asserts that we are currently experiencing a phase of developing interactive and dynamic visual environments where virtual pictures in immersive digital media technologies can quickly appear, disappear, and be continuously altered. He noted that the virtual image is challenging to describe because human memory is not entirely dependable, as each recollection may vary. Immersive digital media technology works are enigmatic and continuously fascinate users due to the absence of memory reminders.

Immersive digital media technology theory is derived from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory (1991). Flow is,

"A state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer take of doing it." (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991).

Immersive digital media technology is a result of the advancement of human illusionist image history to a specific point and is also a product of visual illusions made at a distant beginning. Not only digital media art, but art itself is basically about generating illusions. Plato (1966) stated that an artist can only replicate 'form'; the artist's realm is one of illusion, a realm of mirrors that trick the eye. Ray Oldenburg (1997) defined the third place as a social setting distinct from the home ("first place") and the job ("second place"). The third space might encompass both the tangible and digital realms. This can cater to various needs for recreation, amusement, and social engagement. The environment is imbued with a specific aura that silently but intrusively affects the person experiencing it.

"Host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work ... the characteristics of the third place, as reviewed above, are what make for good informal public gathering places." (Oldenburg, 1997).

Xinyi (2022) asserts that technologies like digital truth and augmented reality offer additional avenues for target audience engagement with performances. The target audience has a enormous role in shaping the theatre thru their active engagement. Fixed locations and scenes can end up more dynamic by way of accomplishing distinct forms like projections, pics, and installations. Digital media generation enables the conversion between the actual and virtual scenes in this technique, improving the performability and interplay of the setting and scenes in immersive theatre. This enhances the effect of the scene by means of incorporating the backdrop environment and elevating the expressive elements, achieving a continuing integration of scenes, and raising the target audience's spatial revel in to a higher spiritual level. Digital media technology lets in for progressed organic integration of actors' performances with the level vicinity. By merging era and actors and digitally virtualizing performers, it complements the audience's notion through greater tricky visual consequences and stage communique.

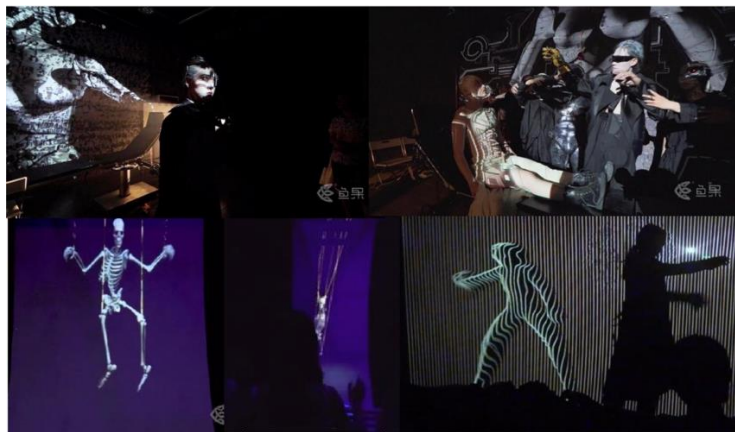


Figure 2.6: A sample of immersive theatre: *Stolen Heart*
Source: Guo (2019)

CONCLUSION

Immersive theatre deviates from traditional performance standards via encouraging interactive participation and cooperative storytelling. Combining immersive reviews and environmental theatre, this concept pushes traditional limits with the aid of encouraging viewers to actively interact within the narrative.

The evolution of theatre, from the proscenium level to immersive theatre, demonstrates a regular pursuit of innovation inside the performing arts. Early explorations like environmental theatre and the Distancing Effect laid the muse for the mainstream attractiveness and investigation of immersive theatre (Schechner, 1994; Grotowski, 1968). Furthermore, advancements in digital and multimedia technology have broadened the scope of immersive theatre, inflicting a fusion of bodily and digital realities (Baudrillard, 1996). The mixture of Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality technologies has transformed the immersive theatrical scene, presenting sparkling possibilities for target market interaction (Machon, 2013).

In the future, immersive theatre is anticipated to noticeably have an impact on the cultural scene and rework the dynamic among performers and audiences. Chinese immersive theatre is starting to discover new territory and is about to deliver fresh insights to immersive storytelling on a worldwide scale (Sujie, 2022).

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