

IN PLACE OF A SHOW

WHAT HAPPENS INSIDE THEATRES
WHEN NOTHING IS HAPPENING

AUGUSTO CORRIERI



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In Place of a Show

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When Nothing is Happening

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The existence of the theatre makes itself felt when there is not even a second person present, when the minimum requirement for any performance (two people) is lacking.

John Berger

But an unlit, empty and disused theatre is a gloomy place to all save theatre folk or to those who have trained their imagination.

Iain Mackintosh

Contents

Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction: A Smoke Machine that Cannot be Switched Off	1
<i>On Conservation</i>	9
1 Cuvillíés-Theater: The Lasting House	11
Part 1	11
Interval	23
Part 2	25
<i>On Appearance Through Disappearance</i>	47
2 Dalston Theatre: Progress Report on a Missing Building	49
Part 1: Locating Quietude	49
Part 2: Anatomy of Disquiet	54
Part 3: Description Without Place	63
<i>On the Human Enclosure</i>	83
3 Teatro Olimpico: The Avian Theatre	85
Part 1	85
Part 2	90
Interlude: A Rectangle of Sky	105
Part 3	110
<i>On Exporting a Building</i>	121
4 Teatro Amazonas: ‘The Opera House in the Jungle’	123
Part 1	123
Part 2	130
Part 3	136

Part 4	142
Part 5	150
Notes	159
Image Credits	183
Epigraph Credits	185
Bibliography	187

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Introduction: A Smoke Machine that Cannot be Switched Off

It goes by different names: the *théâtre à l'italienne*, the Italian stage, the perspective stage, the Western traditional theatre, the proscenium arch theatre, the neoclassical theatre, the baroque opera house, the standard European theatre, the conventional theatre, the proper theatre, the old-fashioned theatre, the real theatre, and the theatre of plush and gilt, velour and cherubs, to name a few.¹

It is at once tangible and abstract, concrete and immaterial; 'an instance of a real object that is at the same time an imaginative object', to cite poet Wallace Stevens.² It is both an architectural construct and a particular working configuration – an apparatus. Until recently it was the dominant paradigm for Western performing arts, proof of this being that between the early Renaissance and the late nineteenth century the word 'theatre' referred not just to a type of activity, but the place in which that activity happened: an enclosed hall or room, functioning according to specific conventions embodied in its form – curtains, stage, proscenium arch, auditorium, balconies, etc. Over the course of the twentieth century this place was gradually dismantled, first under the modernist impulse of renewal, and later through the rise of egalitarian aesthetics and politics. It now lies empty, demolished, or meticulously restored as a surviving relic of its glorious past. Either way, it is hardly relevant to contemporary art and performance, to social and political life, to town planning and architecture.

And yet – this is the first of many sentences beginning with 'And yet' – this building survives and persists. If we are asked to picture a theatre, chances are we will begin to visualize a stage, an auditorium, curtains, lights, an orchestra pit, balconies, trapdoors, ropes and pulleys: in short, the components of a specific architectural and imaginative

blueprint, the *théâtre à l'italienne*. Despite the abandonment of this theatre, and despite the rules and conventions associated with it having been largely banished or consigned to a bygone epoch, this vacant building continues to operate, to stage and to host. As philosopher Gaston Bachelard wrote, 'the houses that were lost forever continue to live on in us . . . they insist in us in order to live again, as though they expected us to give them a supplement of living'.³ This lost house, which during four centuries defined the place of Western performance, persists in its operations, like a smoke machine that cannot be switched off. Even in works of contemporary performance – avowedly free of red curtains, a formal stage or a proscenium arch – it is possible to detect anachronistic theatrical operations (more on this to come). There are curtains even when there are no curtains; there is a theatre even when there is no theatre.

And what about the buildings themselves? How might we attend to those spaces that have been literally or figuratively abandoned and torn down? Imagine yourself walking inside an empty theatre, taking time to look at its various parts, staying for a while to inhabit the place . . . What happens inside a theatre when nothing is happening? In a state of suspended functionality, the presumed emptiness of the auditorium might offer a renewed scene of possibility: curtains, walls and seats hold a certain potential – a promissory force of sorts – and conjure up past historical realities. As anthropologist Marc Augé writes, vacant theatres are 'poetic spaces in the etymological sense of the word: they offer an opportunity to do something; their incompleteness contains a promise'.⁴ This incompleteness, and its poetic promise, is the subject of *In Place of a Show*.

The empty or abandoned theatre does not signal an end to activities and events taking place within it. Different entities, lives and forms of agency take centre stage in this all-too-human enclosure: other animals, insects, vegetal matter, swirls of dust, animations of the inanimate. This awareness of more-than-human entities, together with the historical and material forces held within the building's architecture, invite us to consider the theatre with new eyes and sensibilities, as a place animated by a specific charge. *In Place of a Show* is an attempt to tap into this charge, and to shift the focus from the foreground to the background,

attending to overlooked or seemingly insignificant phenomena that might shine new light on the matter of theatre.

Four theatres

This book is not a eulogy of forgotten buildings or their supposed historical relevance; if anything, the starting point is precisely their irrelevance, and the loss of a clearly definable purpose. The guiding question is this: what do theatres *do* when their intended function – the presentation of performances – is no longer central or necessary?

There are four chapters, each one preceded by a short statement that outlines recurring thematic–conceptual motifs. Each chapter revolves around a specific building: the Cuvilliés-Theater, a dismantled and reconstituted baroque opera house in Munich; Dalston Theatre in London, demolished as part of the city’s ‘regeneration’; Teatro Olimpico, a perfectly preserved Renaissance theatre in the Italian city of Vicenza; and Teatro Amazonas, a century-old opera house in the north Brazilian city of Manaus.

The theatres span a period of four centuries, between the early Renaissance and late nineteenth century. They were not chosen so as to fit an established taxonomy or narrative of historical–architectural development. In fact, at first glance it would seem there is little connection between a rococo German theatre, a demolished Theatre of Varieties in London, a Renaissance reproduction of a Roman amphitheatre, and an opera house in the Amazon rainforest.

And yet this eclecticism serves a purpose: it is precisely by reaching far and wide that an all-embracing model can emerge, a blueprint that is common to all four venues despite variants in style and function. This blueprint, concretely embodied by these buildings, is precisely that of the *théâtre à l’italienne*, or ‘the theatre we have in mind’, as the historian Fabrizio Cruciani names it: a *forma mentis*, a structure imprinted on the mind, capable of conjuring, as though out of thin air, red curtains, balconies, plush seats, wings, orchestra pit, etc.⁵ Or, as Gaston Bachelard

writes in relation to the childhood home, ‘whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter . . . we shall see the imagination build “walls” of impalpable shadows.’⁶

Selecting which theatres to write about, out of the thousands available, was a matter of both method and chance.⁷ I chose to avoid derelict buildings, partly for the ways they have been fetishized by the ever popular ‘ruin lust’ photographs of abandoned theatres and factories in the US.⁸ Conversely I steered away from meticulously conserved national treasures such as Milan’s Teatro Alla Scala or the Opéra de Paris, as celebrated in Candida Höfer’s lavish photographs.⁹ The four buildings in these pages lie somewhere between these polar extremes, and in fact challenge the simple oppositional logic of terms like abandonment and conservation.

I also avoided theatres originally erected for a different purpose (e.g. factories, civic town halls), focusing instead on those that were built *as* places for performance: a relatively recent phenomenon, if we consider that the first freestanding enclosed theatre dates from 1590.¹⁰ As places built especially *for seeing and showing*, the question is how these twinned activities might continue, even when the buildings are turned to other uses, preserved as quasi-museums, or torn down and forgotten.

Other than these rather open sets of criteria, in a sense the four theatres found their own way into the book, by chance or by accident, each one presenting itself as matter for writing, usually against my better judgement – ‘No, surely I’m not going to write about *this*?’ – by which point it would already be too late.

I have attempted to match specific modes of writing and research to each building: the first chapter is rather academic–historical; the second involves what we might call ‘site-writing’; the third is intensely speculative and image-based; and the fourth composed as a travelogue. Much of the writing came about through a simple relational approach: often by being in place, immersed in the contingent particulars at hand, the theatre’s materials, its histories, attending to emerging perceptions, and organizing a trajectory of shape-shifting thoughts and images.¹¹ Particularly in the last two chapters, I pay heed to the kind of *distributed attention* invited by an empty theatre, where one’s focus tilts away from the human element

(the work of performers, artists, audiences, etc.), to attend to anything occurring within and around the space: air currents, a lone swallow flying around, the sound of car traffic, a pop song playing somewhere nearby.

What emerges across the four chapters is a particular quality of abandonment that seems inherent to theatre buildings as such: it is as though they had been built precisely to remain unused, to simply delimit and contain a portion of air. And this enclosure exerts attraction, inviting contemplation and reverie. Perhaps a theatre's ultimate function is to lie abandoned, empty and unused: it is for this reason that Cruciani describes the *théâtre à l'italienne* as a 'cathedral in the desert', an opulent and majestic structure entirely out of place, whose purpose remains unclear.¹²

Absenting performance

'Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble.'¹³ Let's take this aphoristic passage by Wallace Stevens and change a few key words to fit the purposes of the book: 'Performance is an affair of people not of theatres. But for me performance is an affair of theatres and that is the trouble.'

Across the four chapters the word 'performance' is barely mentioned: no 'shows' are discussed here; no analyses of artistic works or events; no accounts of staged encounters between performers and audiences. The book's title, *In Place of a Show*, explicitly drives home the absenting of live performance, while insisting on its placement i.e. the theatre, the place in which shows happen (from the Greek *theatron*, 'the place of seeing, the place of show').

This evacuation or suspension of performance merits a small digression. As a professional theatre and performance artist, I am versed in references and discourses that deliberately ignore anything occurring before the 1960s. There is in fact a tacit consensus across performance studies that the *théâtre à l'italienne* is anachronistic, and that its pernicious ideology has long been shattered by performance's irreverent and embodied politics; if the old theatre partially survives, it is only due



to the reticence of conservative aesthetics and elitist attitudes. As a case in point, I remember being struck by a flyer advertising an MA in performance at Queen Mary University of London a few years ago: it consisted of an uncaptioned photograph of Milan's Teatro Alla Scala, heavily damaged by allied bombing in August 1943. The flyer metaphorically cast contemporary performance as the bomb falling on

opera's headquarters, clearing the ground of all illusion, acting and fakery, annihilating theatre's disembodied aesthetics and apparatus once and for all. And yet the flyer was prey to an unwitting irony: it showed that performance studies, typically characterized as non-foundational and anti-disciplinarian, is in fact wholly dependent on the destruction of the *théâtre à l'italienne*. Performance needs the theatre, one way or another; it is telling that the flyer's visual message functioned according to a form of 'representational thinking' typical of its target.

Arguably since the 1990s the theatrical apparatus has returned as something to be reckoned with, re-discovered and deconstructed over and over. Many artists and companies working in contemporary performance have embraced 'the theatre', as exemplified by the works of Jérôme Bel, Ivana Müller, Boris Charmatz, Xavier Le Roy, Romeo Castellucci and Rimini Protokoll. The discourse around these artists' works usefully revolves around a Foucauldian emphasis on the theatrical *dispositif* (apparatus), as a mechanism that captures and directs perception and signification, even without a material architectural construction in place.¹⁴ The anachronistic apparatus of curtains, stage, auditorium and lights doesn't need to be materially present in order to function, and is far from defunct. For no matter how much this bygone mechanism has been dismantled (in fact, *because* it has been worked on so much), the theatre continues to operate: it seems we cannot undo the division of performers and spectators, the imperative to reveal and obscure (as tied to perspectival constructions of space), the other worldly time-space created by theatre, and the anthropocentric bias upon which this all rests.

We might find ourselves in the presence of the old apparatus even when (or especially when) the live event seems to have moved away from stage and curtains: much UK participatory and immersive theatre arguably deals in a conservative and illusionistic aesthetic, barely camouflaged by a rhetoric hellbent on discrediting theatre's alienating distance. And even works of a subversive ilk, such as contemporary performances or 'situations' in art galleries, unwittingly rely on the presence and force of the age-old apparatus.¹⁵

It was partly this – the re-emergence of the seemingly redundant apparatus – that led me, some years ago, to begin considering theatres

themselves: not just as conceptual tools but as *material sites*, to be contended with and wandered through. What might it be like to step inside these buildings left standing, abandoned, or demolished, places poised on the threshold of obsolescence yet curiously persisting?

The nonhuman

The etymology of the word *introduction* i.e. ‘to lead inside’, is fitting for a writing project unfolding within theatres. With *In Place of a Show*, my aim has been to step into these spaces and pay attention. I was often unsure as to what I was looking for, and always surprised by what I found. The writing is motivated by a practice of patience, attending to whatever happens to be happening. When performance (as a social occasion) is evacuated or suspended, the elemental, material or historical forces residing in these buildings can come to the fore: the more-than-human worlds that are always there, already here, shaping and making our lives, though our rational cogito would have us believe otherwise.

The theatre is a recognizably human encasement i.e. an anthropocentric apparatus structuring human bodies, modes of perception and signification. What about the nonhuman lives and forms that dwell insides theatres? And how might we rehearse a non-hierarchical *disposition* within this most hierarchical of *dispositifs*? In other words, how can we decentre the human within a quintessentially human mechanism, and what possible role might writing take in such a project? These are the open questions befitting the age that has been dubbed the ‘Anthropocene’.

The refrain that plays across these pages suggests that, with the right approach, even nestled within a gilded auditorium (the last place one would expect to encounter anything but humans), we can catch a murmur, intimations of nonhuman matters and scales, forcing us to rethink the boundaries between inside and outside, nature and culture, ecology and history.

The outside already inhabits the inside; what better place than an eighteenth century opera house to conduct ecological fieldwork?

On Conservation

If theatres are bulky, overly ornate and anachronistic, the question of their conservation belongs entirely to the present: what is to be done today with opera houses, velvet curtains and chandeliers?

After its early beginnings in the Renaissance, the théâtre à l'italienne became a matter of national pride; European cities vied for the grandest, most elegant and sumptuous theatres, regardless of what might take place inside them. This of course changed in the twentieth century, when the buildings began to lose their centrality, artistically, politically, and socially. Their dying out, however, did not signal their end; the agony of an empire can last a thousand years.¹

'The theatre', Marvin Carlson writes, 'is in fact one of the most persistent architectural objects in the history of Western culture'.² If curtains, stages and auditoria persist it is not due to their functionality, but because they configure a space (and attendant signifiers, perceptions, behaviours) to which we are still somewhat beholden.

One of the ideas tested across In Place of a Show is that the working configuration of parts – the theatrical apparatus – does not only structure the event of performance; it also intervenes in the matter of the building itself. Analogous to the way in which curtains hide and reveal objects and performers, there are conventions directing the appearance and disappearance of entire theatres. Simply put: the apparatus does not begin operating when spectators enter the auditorium, nor does it cease when they leave; rather, it extends to include the very fact and materiality of the building itself, orchestrating a dramaturgy of conservation and perpetuity. It is not just the show that must go on, but the theatre too.

The first chapter centres on Munich's Cuvilliés-Theater, a baroque opera house that performed an astonishing feat of endurance, re-emerging

perfectly intact after being bombed. It appears as though the theatre was built to escape ruination: the aim of its elaborately carved decor is to structure the longings of future generations, stage-managing certain affects so as to guarantee its own longevity.³ This 'old' theatre cannot be said to belong to the past, since it is an apparatus of capture operating very much in the present.

As I discovered through writing, it is not possible to understand the case of the Cuvilliés-Theater without delving into the context of 1944 war-torn Europe, when the city of Munich was being turned to rubble (only 2.5 per cent of its buildings remained intact). The conservation of this opera house dovetails with a more complex set of ethical questions involving memory, oblivion, and the ways in which Munich's residents recovered their spatial, temporal and psychical orientation in the aftermath of the Second World War.