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Candidate session number

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Examination session (May or November)

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2013

Diploma Programme subject in which this extended essay is registered: Theatre

(For an extended essay in the area of languages, state the language and whether it is group 1 or group 2.)

Title of the extended essay: How has Sarah Kane's theatrical work implemented Antonin Artaud's theory of translation of text through 'aggressive gesture' as a means to utilise mise-en-scene with the intention of traumatising the audience into greater conscious social awareness?

Candidate's declaration

This declaration must be signed by the candidate; otherwise a grade may not be issued.

The extended essay I am submitting is my own work (apart from guidance allowed by the International Baccalaureate).

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Please comment, as appropriate, on the candidate's performance, the context in which the candidate undertook the research for the extended essay, any difficulties encountered and how these were overcome (see page 13 of the extended essay guide). The concluding interview (viva voce) may provide useful information. These comments can help the examiner award a level for criterion K (holistic judgment). Do not comment on any adverse personal circumstances that may have affected the candidate. If the amount of time spent with the candidate was zero, you must explain this, in particular how it was then possible to authenticate the essay as the candidate's own work. You may attach an additional sheet if there is insufficient space here.

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Assessment form (for examiner use only)

Criteria	Achievement level					
	Examiner 1	maximum	Examiner 2	maximum	Examiner 3	
A research question	<div>2</div>	2	<div></div>	2	<div></div>	
B introduction	<div>2</div>	2	<div></div>	2	<div></div>	
C investigation	<div>4</div>	4	<div></div>	4	<div></div>	
D knowledge and understanding	<div>4</div>	4	<div></div>	4	<div></div>	
E reasoned argument	<div>4</div>	4	<div></div>	4	<div></div>	
F analysis and evaluation	<div>4</div>	4	<div></div>	4	<div></div>	
G use of subject language	<div>4</div>	4	<div></div>	4	<div></div>	
H conclusion	<div>2</div>	2	<div></div>	2	<div></div>	
I formal presentation	<div>4</div>	4	<div></div>	4	<div></div>	
J abstract	<div>2</div>	2	<div></div>	2	<div></div>	
K holistic judgment	<div>4</div>	4	<div></div>	4	<div></div>	
Total out of 36	<div>36</div>		<div></div>		<div></div>	

How has Sarah Kane's theatrical work implemented Antonin Artaud's theory of translation of text through 'aggressive gesture'¹ as a means to utilise mise-en-scene with the intention of traumatising the audience into greater conscious social awareness?

Name:

Supervisor:

Subject: IB Theatre

Date: May 2013

Word Count: 3,957

¹ Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, 2010

Abstract

This essay analyses how the theatrical work of Sarah Kane has implemented Antonin Artaud's theory of 'aggressive gesture' through aspects of mise-en-scene with the intention of imposing a state of trauma on audience members.

The essay confronts instances of evident use of the theory within productions of Kane's plays; looking into two particular factors of the 1995 production of *Blasted*; analyzing how the actor is used as an 'illustration' in Act 2 of the performance and going on to analyze the displacement of objects and set destruction as a break from realism, then going on to use of light and set design as a factor of 'aggressive gesture' in two of her other plays.

The essay concludes with noting that several aspects of Kane's work certainly do implement the true realization of Artaud's original theory, however she implements the theory with use of her own technique of contrast between the fulfilled use of the theory while instilling elements of realism and other contrastive sensory techniques perhaps to accentuate the effect so as to impose a greater state of trauma upon the audience. While pondering as to the merit that the theory bares to its intention in relation to the field of Theatre as a whole, the essay concludes with the fact that this is immeasurable due to the fact that it is subject to opinion and questions whether this is worthy of further, perhaps psychological, study.

Word Count: 236

Acknowledgements

I would greatly like to thank Patrick Kennelly for his kindness in giving an interview concerning his directing of the 2007 production of *Crave*.

I use the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th edition throughout this essay.

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Introduction

The theatrical work of Sarah Kane, one of the most celebrated and perpetually controversial dramatists of the 20th century, has been arguably based on a unique blend of theatrical factors that are often prominent in productions of her work. Her productions, often categorized as predominantly 'In-Yer-face'² theatre, has been given two names which are important to consider when investigating her theatrical pieces and their intention. The first and better known name given to her unique blend of theory, practice and production is known as 'The Theatre of Extremes'³, and the less familiar, 'The Theatre of Trauma'⁴; a term used to describe theatrical intention in Kane's practice by Cathy Caruth (PhD), who defined trauma as a force so effective on the human mind that the brain is unable to cognitively and consciously comprehend the information⁵. She concluded that the data therefore was threaded into the unconscious mind, and had a greater effect on the overall permanent thought process, more so than conscious awareness and comprehension of the data could ever have. This idea can be traced back to Antonin Artaud, the pioneer of the infamous Theatre of Cruelty, and his own theory of translation of text through 'aggressive gesture'⁶; the technique of which had the overall intention of creating burning images that would broaden the human consciousness of his audience members⁷.

This research essay analyses the way that Sarah Kane uses elements of Artaud's methodology to construct a very particular mise-en-scene based upon an emotional and traumatic effect on the audience. In order to achieve this I will analyze instances of the use of the theory within Kane's work,

² Widely accepted scholarly agreement

³ Saunders, Graham. *Love me or Kill me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*, by Graham Saunders, Title. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002

⁴ Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1995.

⁵ Duggan, Patrick. "Feeling Performance, Remembering Trauma." *Platform*, 2007: 44-45.

⁶ Artaud, Antonin. "The Theatre and its Double." In *The Theatre and its Double*, by Antonin Artaud, 33-34. London: Oneworld Classics, 2010.

⁷ Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, 2010

focusing on the use of mise-en-scene in cases of typical Sarah Kane productions; with particular reference to the use of the actor as the unbiased 'symbol'⁸ interwoven with the mise-en-scene, the break from realism with the use of objects and subversion of form in the 1995 production of *Blasted*, the use of set design to create an 'alienated landscape'⁹ and then finally analyze as to whether the theory bears any merit as a 'traumatic' experience with intention of achieving higher moral ground.

The evidence given to support the argument ranges in different source material, drawing evidence from critics written reviews of Kane's work, theses and articles analyzing Kane's work, an in-depth knowledge of the theory of gestures, a written interview with Patrick Kennelly, the director of the 2007 production of *Cleansed* in London, personal viewing of Kane's work, and general knowledge research of the topic of mise-en-scene and effect on the audience.

While querying the question of how Sarah Kane has implemented this theory of gestures with the intention of imposing this state of trauma to raise the moral awareness of the unconscious mind, this essay will allow an understanding of how the theory has coincidentally and unknowingly evolved almost a century after its conception, and further gain knowledge of Kane's personal adaptations of the theory, where in one might ask whether or not this concept bears any merit. From this, the argument comes to the conclusion that there are several notable aspects and instances within the produced works of Sarah Kane that do in fact effectuate the gesture theories of Artaud that in his time were never realized, however show evidence of evolution to echo Kane's own techniques, particularly her use of stimulatory contrast within productions to perhaps accentuate the effect of the theory, the merit on the audience immeasurable however arguably verified within popular opinion.

⁸ Artaud, Antonin. *The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto)*. TheaterCruel. 2011.
<http://www.english.emory.edu/DRAMA/HistDrama2/TheaterCruel.html> (accessed July 18, 2012).

⁹ Interview with Kennelly, Patrick, by Siobhan Weber. (July 3, 2012).

Main Body of Argument

Primarily, an understanding of Artaud's theory of 'gesture' is necessary. Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty had the objective of expressing a 'true sentiment'¹⁰ in the theatre; not through classical text-based theatre designed to create an entertaining escape from reality for the audience; however through the use of his particular class of mise-en-scene to bombard the audiences senses. He tried to create a surreal experience for the audience. He encouraged life through theatre, the audience's receptivity to broaden, to create a passage to the deepest reaches of the human state.

This leads to Artaud's ideas of 'aggressive gesture'. To Artaud, gestures became a form of translation to the true unconscious sentiment of the actors, writers or directors, remaining previously unexpressed and inexpressible through simple speech. The act of a gesture, in Artaud's view, acts as a symbol; more can be dictated to the audience through the position or movement of a single muscle than could be relied on to be expressed through words. The role of lighting, music, noise, objects, and movement were therefore seen as an alteration aid, filled with an energy to express the sentiment¹¹. Artaud sustained the belief that the use of his gestures was the only so-called language capable of transferring a real message to the audience, evident in a quote from his infamous book *'The Theatre and its Double'*: 'I realised that the only language I could have used with a public audience would have been to take bombs out of my pockets and throw them in its face with a characteristically aggressive gesture. Because I don't think conscience can be educated or that it's

¹⁰ Loayza, Milton. "Strobe Light Consciousness and Body Technology in the Theatre of Antonin Artaud." n.d.

¹¹ Artaud, The Theatre and its Double 2010

worth bothering to try to educate it....These are not just words, ideas ...these truly are real bombs, physical bombs...'¹²

A gesture can therefore be seen as a bridge between actor, writer, director and finally audience member, playing double position as filling and altogether destroying the void between performer and spectator; as well as communicating the sentiment while disallowing the overuse of speech. As one brings Artaud's theory of gestures in itself to its entirety, the weaving and integrated mass of Artaud's metaphorical 'bombs' therefore appear themselves as the mise-en-scene.

Artaud's gestures as a means of expression therefore reduce theatre only as a way of sustaining itself as an appearance within the confines of structure. Artaud's belief of cruelty as a gesture leads back to the idea that tragedy as a physical movement should be used as a tool to alienate the audience member from the confines of real life inclination and the intention of the human conscious to focus only on cruelty as a permit to associate differently to not just the performance but tragedy itself¹³. The use of gestures was meant to tear open the human conscious to catastrophe; to clearly oppose the human desire. Through this Artaud hoped for his audience members to gain a perception of life itself that far transcended individual interest.

Moving forward a century and the evolution of this idea comes into play with the beginnings of Sarah Kane's own brand of theatre.

The use of actors as an imbedded factor of the mise-en-scene, as a gesture within itself, as opposed to the traditional focus on the speech to express sentiment, is an important aspect of Kane's work in which the purpose of the actor theoretically becomes an unbiased 'symbol'¹⁴ free from psychological testimony. The fact that many of her acted characters are staged as a vague mixture of

¹² Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double* 2010

¹³ Buchler, Louise. "In-Yer-Face: The Shocking Sarah Kane." *Thesis*. November 2008.

¹⁴ Artaud, *The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto)* 2011

both intense emotion without psychological grounds or explanation means that they become examples of aggressive gesture that are built, in equal status, to the amalgamation of mise-en-scene. A metaphoric explanation of this would be to elucidate her staged characters as stark illustrations on blank paper. Where usually characters are given ethical standpoint and justification for their actions within the realms of social context, Kane's characters thrive as a mixture of metaphors and images. Richard Morrison commented on Sarah Kane's *Blasted* for 'half realistic, half -symbolic characters...Either over-written or incomplete, more or less than real people, in order to be illustrations.'¹⁵ The first production of *Blasted* in January 1995 makes a strong case instance in which the character and/or actor is moved to the background to blend surreptitiously as an image or, as Artaud would state, symbol. Artaud stated that gestures should form physical and metaphysical symbols¹⁶, suggesting, in this case, that the actor does not play a character with clear psychological standpoint within the context of a specified social event in which time plays a continuous role, where instead the stage became a space free of the contamination of what the human mind perceives the elements of time and space to comply to; the characters do not act based on direct and understandable reasoning, they are free of psychological standardizing and to not conform to the vast array of societal stereotypes. Actors become a symbol of the overall theme, asking for the audiences understanding of the overall meaning instead of demanding pity, sympathy and empathy.¹⁷ The use of the word 'illustrations'¹⁸ in Richard Morrison's commentary on *Blasted* is indicative that the same concept of image applies to the practice of Kane's work. As actors become an illustration of the sentiment, they begin to interweave into the mise-en-scene, a gestural motion that differs from the actor, and his speech, being the centre psychological masterpiece. Kane's *Blasted* is a distinctive example of the unique use of staged characters as images. To explain the

¹⁵ Morrison, 1995

¹⁶ Knapp, Bettina L. *Artaud and the Balinese Theatre*. 2002. (accessed July 20, 2012).

¹⁷ Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, 2010

¹⁸ Morrison, 1995

methodology of how, in fact, this effect is reached; an analysis of one particular staged scene of the 1995 production of *Blasted* is an important factor to study. The aesthetics of the scene is written into the script with the intention of producing a set of moving tableaux, or vignettes, through the periodical darkness in between as beats of calm between each action:

'IAN masturbating.

.....

Darkness.

Light.

...

IAN strangling himself

Darkness.

Light.

....

IAN crying, huge bloody tears.

He is hugging the Soldier's body for comfort.

Darkness.

Light.

IAN lying very still, weak with hunger.

Darkness.

Light.¹⁹

¹⁹ Kane, *Blasted* 1995

On stage of the 1995 production this scene was staged as a set of vignettes; as a storm was created through the use of flashes of bright light, the sounds of thunder, and eventual 'rain' falling on stage. The production staged the images in a way that the audience would not be certain of the amount of time passed in between the flashes of darkness that separated each image; and actor Pip Donaghy, theoretically became the 'illustration'²⁰ of the war-zone that the audience was ignorant to. The actor was victim to the changes of the mise-en-scene on stage; and was not the main focus. It was not a matter of trying to resist to or use the use of set design, objects, sounds or light to the aid of building the psychological purpose of the actor; in fact, the opposite was staged in the way that the actor became the supporting role in endeavouring to extenuate the environment around him. In Graham Saunders' book 'Love me or kill me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes', Saunders compares the technique used in this production of *Blasted* to one used by director Sir John Gielgud in a production of *King Lear*, where 'instead of attempting to simply react against the raging elements, Gielgud tried to make Lear himself portray the storm.'²¹ From watching these stark and horrifying images it seems clear Ian was meant as a representation of the violence rather than an attempt to resist them. Kane's intention for making the character simply a part of the overall mise-en-scene seems clear by taking evidence from an interview with Saunders in 1997: 'I decided to take the most basic human activities - eating, sleeping, wanking, shitting, and see how awful they really are when you're really alone ...But, as a storm scene in the same was as *King Lear* I suppose it does become one because Ian gets as low as he can get...for me, it got to the point where I didn't know what words to use anymore, and it was a complete breakdown of language. I thought I'm going to have to do this purely through image, which I'm happier doing anyway.'²² This scene, an amalgamation of sounds, lights, objects and a barren, *Blasted* set is the epitome of this Artaudian theory. The actor,

²⁰ Morrison 1995

²¹ Saunders 2002

²² Kane, Sarah Kane's *Blasted* 1997

interwoven within the mise-en-scene, to create an image. Within the construction of the mise-en-scene of the production the actor himself becomes an object, even a prop, of the stage, and resumes a passive role free from psychological grounding. This production, specifically this staged series of vignettes, mark what is arguably the realisation of the Artaudian theory of symbolic acting within the theory of gestures. Kane unknowingly implemented this theory by sharing an aesthetic ambition with Artaud; when considering her own words referring to a 'break down of language'²³ in which Kane felt the only way to express the sentiment was through image. This illustrated a clear instance of an almost exact replica of Artaud's theories. However, by analysis of Kane's use of form within the same production, one can both draw clear lines of methodology back to 'gestures', but also argue that Kane has effectively evolved the idea.

What sets the 1995 production of *Blasted* apart as a Sarah Kane production is the contrast and the eventual transition from naturalism/realism into a break from time, space and typical form. At first the play constructs a safety and familiarity for the audience, one is presented with a hotel room set, champagne, bed and what-not. The atmosphere of seduction is assembled. A familiar place. The stage directions are read out and genteel harp music plays harmonically.²⁴ In Louise Buchler's thesis: 'In-yer-face: The Shocking Sarah Kane', Buchler argues that Kane's use of props and set design constructs a safety and promise to the audience; one that they are about to experience a linear narrative. By promise of objects such as the champagne, flowers, and overall expensive nature of the hotel room, tension is built on and symbolic destruction or displacement of the objects symbolize meaning within the theme as the production draws away from naturalism: '...the flowers which in the opening scene are neatly arranged in a bouquet, a symbol of seduction, love and romance, yet later appear strewn across the floor, petals torn suggesting the end...'²⁵ Through these and similar images created by the placement and destruction of objects as the play moves decidedly into the

²³ Kane, *Sarah Kane's Blasted* 1997

²⁴ Reading of various critic analyses and descriptions

²⁵ Buchler 2008

surreal Kane creates a contrast in several different aspects of the play. By building a safe and familiar environment on the stage in full accordance with linear time the play suddenly transforms into an unearthly war zone and few vestiges of realism remain in the set. As the soldier enters and the stage is literally *Blasted* apart; the security of the natural convention of objects are disposed of as the soldier relieves himself on the bed, and the ground of the ornate hotel room becomes Ian's burial ground. The sudden turn around of protocol creates a starker, bleach-like effect. It is argued that this effect is deliberate to the point that Kane was noticeably accentuating the realism of the first act so as to produce this black-and-white deviation.²⁶ Conceptually also, rape of a young woman in a hotel room is put up against the mechanic rape of hundreds of young girls, the vegetarian Cate gnaws on a stick of salami. Ian, the rapist, is raped and left to be as helpless as he had imposed the feeling on Cate. The blatant power of one human over another is contrasted with the eventual tenderness and mercy of two old lovers. The second act depicts all these with only small reliance on written word with massive jumps in time that is immeasurable to the audience. Kane, with use of these images as a form of aggressive gesture, creates a set of images that is intended to burn itself into the eyes of the audience; uncomfortable and yet, in her mind, necessary.²⁷ From this perhaps a deeper understanding can be developed of Kane's own unique twist on the original theory. It is the contrast that shows true evolvement of the method; Kane creates a safe zone for the audience and then tears it away to a true realization of the 'gestures', however adhered to a very naturalistic form within the first act. It is perhaps this that makes the play so effective as a production: the theatrical 'promise' is given to the audience through the use of objects and set design but never answered in the way the audience expects, literally blasted both metaphorically and physically. There is suddenly no safety for the audience to fall back on, and this in turn theoretically relates to Artaud's views on opening the unconscious mind through exposure to 'cruelty': '...bringing the audience into direct contact ...By turning theatre into a place where the spectator is exposed rather than protected, Artaud was

²⁶ Buchler 2008

²⁷ Saunders 2002

committing an act of cruelty upon them..²⁸ Arguably, this is an example of how Kane has used this in her unique fashion. While Artaudian practice called for complete and utter avoidance of classical form, Kane has used it as a base from which to jump into the abyss of pure gestural image, altogether using her own techniques of contrastive forms to highlight the traumatic experience.

Another instance, important to consider when analysing Kane's use of Artaud's 'gestures', is use of set design and more particularly the use of lighting and sound to create a landscape in particular productions. In an interview with Patrick Kennelly, the director of the 2007 London production of *Cleansed*, the importance of light and sound to extenuate image and movement became apparent in his words: ' Simultaneous movement and image became focused in an expansive found space through lighting that illuminated the psychological terrain. This rigorous convergence of elements extended through a layered soundscape that utilised over forty speakers – behind, under, and within the audience.'²⁹ Through this quote it becomes clear that Kennelly had a rigorous understanding of the intention of Kane. Artaudian gesture clearly gesticulated that audience members should have no escape from the performance; the involvement of the mise-en-scene as such a critical factor of the production conducted the audience interaction in a way that audience members have no choice in the degree of involvement they would play within the context of spectatorship. The 2007 production's use of speakers that resonated 'behind, under and within' the audience area clearly indicates this intention. It is one thing for sound to be an element found on stage, however to have sound as a factor played under and behind the audience is a technique that utilises the sensory capacity; making it impossible to be detached from the production. In a personal viewing of *Crave*, lighting became an obviously crucial factor. From notes taken after viewing, after being audience to a recent production of *Crave* in May 2012³⁰; the lighting was a factor that predominantly created setting within the production of the play. From notes taken after viewing of the play, ' ... the light

²⁸ (Jamieson 2007)

²⁹ Kennelly 2012

³⁰ Kane, *Crave* 2012

came from behind the audience...getting brighter, ... ('coming into the light?')....noticed how the light brings out tears of the actors... At one point the light was turned off and slowly back on, only enough to be able to make out the outlines of the actors...very effective and dramatic, created suspense in the fact that one did not notice that the amount of light produced was changing...³¹ The viewing of the play personally held many aspects of contrast. Although the only available light for most of the play was a set of desk lamps that was set up right in front of the actors, towards the end of the play it was this amazing use of light that struck a stark image. Although the use of sound in *Cleansed* is an obvious amalgamation of Artaud's ideals of audience bombardment as a gesture in itself, within the viewing of *Crave* there was a personal understanding of the unique blend of theories. The fragmented and violent conversation between four actors, which is what *Crave* ultimately succumbs to, contrasted with the subtle use of light which personally made the experience starker and created, as an audience member, a burning image.

Only after analysis of these plays can the question be asked; how much merit has the final realization, or partially, at least, of Artaud's theory of 'gestures', succumbed to? Trauma, as Caruth has stated, is known psychologically as the force in which great change can be made on to the conscious state of being. This force seems to be reliable as the intention of which both Artaud and Kane wished to impose; in which to create a higher moral ground within the unconscious and the conscious mind. Has it achieved this? Has the moral outrage of Kane imposed a higher view of society, free from bias? The images created have often been commented upon by theatre critics, and are almost unanimously agreed upon to be 'stark, burning...resonating in your imagination afterwards'³². Edward Bond, quoted in Saunders's book, agrees unequivocally that Kane's productions do indeed impose what he calls a 'change in reality': '... some sorts of dramatists change reality...half-way through watching *Blasted* in a small cramped theatre, I realized my reality had

³¹ Notes taken after performance

³² Saunders 2002

changed. I am not exaggerating...*Blasted* changed reality because it changed the means we have of understanding ourselves. Einstein changed natural reality-we understand it differently and so we make different bombs. Drama of this sort changes human reality. It makes a demand on us. We must either respond to it or reject it and in doing so we define ourselves.³³ Of course; this aspect of Kane's practice is subjective. There is no measurable way of knowing if every audience member of a true Sarah Kane production has had they're conscious 'reality' changed from the experience. There is not a way of knowing if each has been traumatized into the state. However, judging from these and several similar analyses of Kane's work, one can at least take away that the intention is dominantly apparent, and perhaps an audience member does walk away with a glimpse of the world through Sarah Kane's societal frustrations.

³³ Bond, *Theater der Zeit*, June 1999, quoted in Saunders, "Love me or Kill me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes.", 189

Conclusion

After the analysis of these productions and their effect, and returning to the overall question, one can arguably state with evidence given above that Kane's work implements clear cases of the same thought process that Artaud intended to put into practice. Kane has unknowingly used aspects of the theory, however it becomes clear through the argument given that it is Kane's use of contrast and the typical use of it within the use of mise-en-scene in productions of her work that make her productions unique and create a stark image. While analyzing the use of the actor as the 'illustration', one realizes the evident gestural status of the actor (equal to that of the mise-en-scene), however relating to the break from realism using the displacement of objects and set destruction, it is the base created in the first act, the theatrical promise, that altogether makes the use of the theory more evident when *compared* to the generally realistic first act. In *Cleansed* (2007) the full gestural use of sound is utilized as sensory bombardment to create landscape; again an implementation of the Artaudian theory. However through personal viewing of a production of *Crave* the unique contrast through use of light comes strongly to the foreground. Kane has used her own contrastive technique to implement the theory in a way that is altogether starker in the eyes of the modern audience that has been so desensitized to shock. As for trying to answer as to how much merit the theory bears, the question may of course be subject to opinion; and is immeasurable. This is something that perhaps merits more investigation, as psychology may indeed play a part in the purpose of theatre as a whole when considering effect on the audience. The intention to broaden the human consciousness was one that both practitioners from vastly different periods of history shared; and the thought process appears to have brought them to similar conclusions on the methodology and practice of theatrical production.

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