

Re-Conquering Space: Peter Handke's *Offending the Audience* as a Critique of Western Theatre

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Abstract

Peter Handke's *Offending the Audience* stands as a radical departure from traditional theatre, challenging the norms and expectations of both performers and spectators. This paper explores how Handke's work deconstructs the essence of theatrical performance by turning the focus onto the audience, thereby subverting the conventional narrative structures that dominate Western theatre. By refusing to offer a traditional plot or characters, Handke forces the audience to confront their own role in the theatrical experience, effectively placing them at the center of the performance. This shift not only critiques the passive consumption of art but also emphasizes the active role of the spectator in the construction of meaning. The play's use of language and space serves to further this deconstruction, dismantling the 'fourth wall' and engaging the audience in a direct and often uncomfortable dialogue. Additionally, this paper examines the postcolonial undertones in Handke's work, highlighting how *Offending the Audience* can be read as a critique of Western dramaturgy and its colonial legacy. By stripping away the familiar elements of theatre, Handke invites a reconsideration of the power dynamics inherent in the theatrical tradition, pushing towards a decolonization of the stage. This analysis situates *Offending the Audience* within the broader context of anti-theatre movements, drawing connections to contemporary efforts to democratize and decolonize artistic spaces.

Keywords: Anti-theatre, Meta theatre, deconstruction, Western dramaturgy, Theatrical illusion, Avant-garde theatre and Performativity.

Introduction

The western theatre-form with its play-texts attracts more attention while spectators are not considered part of the process. The demarcation line between the actors and spectators renders the audience passive. There is no real space for the spectator in such a dramatic structure. They are expected to watch and hear the actors assuming a dominating role in the theatre. This is due to the precedence given to texts in western theatre. Texts rule the performance of a play. The actors are given to recite lines that are poetic, philosophical and emotional. Since the actor focuses more on the text and less on the spectators, there is a huge gap between the actors and spectators. This distancing and the privileging of the actor with a well-lit elevated platform over the spectators in the dark space create a situation, where the actor forms the centre, while the spectators are pushed to the margins.

Drawing from Aristotle, western theatre-form built a system that focused on plot, character and structure along with the ‘responsibility’ to evoke pity and fear among the audience. Since only an elaborate literary text can meet all these demands, western theatre paid no attention to spectators and did not incorporate the spectator within that system. Only the literary and dramatic text was its focus and not the live spectators; they were always outsiders to this form of theatre. In his book *Drama: An Introduction*, G. J. Watson states that it is a form of theatre where “. . . the audience constitute the fourth wall of an imaginary room, the actors perform before them in the space of the other three walls, and studiously ignore- or pretend to ignore- all the people watching them” (6).

Moreover, the actor too pays more attention to his own skills, expertise at pretence and the ability to make-believe. This attitude further distances the spectator as the actor operates in an unconnected space removed from his own reality as well as that of the spectator. The priority given to texts based only on their literary merit and the special focus on acting skills which further functions in a disconnected space for the spectator consolidate the hegemony of the western theatre-form over the spectator. This marginalized spectator is conditioned to a rigid system where he/she is expected to passively listen and watch; to laugh at the actors’ jokes and to weep at the sad plight of the characters. The texts and the theatricality of western dramaturgy condition the spectator to a theatre-form hegemonic in nature. By ignoring the presence of the audience, western dramaturgy usurps the space of the spectator.

Therefore, it can be said that the western theatre keeps the colonial fabric intact even after several nations achieved political independence. This theatre-form is a major impediment in the process of decolonization. The spectator is conditioned to this form as it gives a semblance of comfort and the scope to forget oneself. But this shell of comfort needs to be broken to counter the colonial structure of theatre. The spectator needs to be brought out of the dark space to see him/herself in new light and to develop new perspectives about their own space in the theatre discourse. They require a new form of theatre to have a ‘defamiliarized’ view about their space. Once that happens, the whole rigid structure of the theatre can be removed of all its colonial ideals.

It is at this critical juncture that Peter Handke’s *Offending the Audience* comes in to subvert the assumptions of western dramaturgy and re-conquer the space for spectators. Paradoxically, Handke’s play is seen as an anti-theatre though written for the stage. Instead of writing an essay on the prevailing form of theatre, Handke decides to write a play in opposition to the western theatre-form. In an interview titled “Nauseated by language” to Artur Joseph, Handke says, “I first intended to write an essay, a pamphlet, against the theatre, but then I realized that a paperback isn’t an effective way to publish an anti-theatre statement” (58). Contrary to a conventional western play, Handke’s *Offending the Audience* has no plot, no character, no theatrical images nor any emotion-evoking or thought-provoking language. The play is only a play of words and the actors are merely speakers who speak directly to the audience. Not a single word is exchanged within the speakers. All the words and sentences are directed at the audience. No props, histrionics or lights are employed. The speakers do not exhibit any trace of ‘character’ in them. They are merely the uttering agents of words in the play. The play constantly reminds the audience that they are in a theatre.

Handke's play is called the *Sprechstucke*, meaning 'speak-ins' which, as Bonnie Marranca states "lack setting, plot, dialogue, and character- all the elements of traditional drama (53). In "The *Sprechstucke*: Peter Handke's universe of words" Marranca quotes Handke as saying, "They [*Sprechstucke*] need a vis-a-vis, at least one person who listens; otherwise they would not be natural but extorted by the author". Marranca adds that "the audience is not allowed to be passive in Handke's theatre; it is not pacified by the illusions of a fourth wall" (53). So, the actors in Handke's play do not play any pre-imagined characters, rather they play themselves. They speak about themselves, that particular time, place and audience members in the house. Thus, Handke acknowledges the audience and creates a new self-perspective for them. He uses this to counter the western theatre which has so far marginalized the spectator and neglected their physical presence. Their texts did not recognize the reality of the audience. So Handke creates a text where each sentence is meant to be addressed to the audience. As has already been suggested, the western theatre consolidates a colonial system within the theatre. Handke's text and its presentation subvert this situation through 'defamiliarization'. Handke encounters a few generations of theatre personalities and audience who have been conditioned to a form of the theatre that renders the spectator passive and marginalized. It familiarizes opinions about spectator's space in the theatre. These opinions are forced upon them by the theatrical discourses of the west whose ideals are colonial. Therefore, there is a need to 'defamiliarize' the spectators to see themselves anew.

In this context, Peter Handke's offending the Audience can be seen as a postcolonial text as it employs defamiliarization on different aspects of the theatre to dismantle its colonial fabric. This process takes place mainly on these four different aspects of the theatre as follows:

Lighting and Costume

Firstly, the text approaches the spectator-actor space by directly addressing the spectator; and by making the spectator the subject-matter of the play. This technique instantly merges the gap between the actor and the spectator. Thus, the play makes the audience re-think their space within the theatre. In western theatre, the audiences were made to believe that they were eavesdroppers on somebody else's lives. However, Handke's play gives the spectators a new perspective about their space in the theatre. In fact, the playwright chooses to write this sort of a play for the proscenium stage only to show its innate paradox. It is this paradoxical situation which shifts the space of the spectator. An alteration in the space of the spectator invariably alters the space of the actor as well.

Secondly, defamiliarization takes place through the use of language. Removing language from all its literary and theatrical frills, Handke breaks it down into words and sentences hurled directly at the spectators. Stripped of metaphorical significance words are void and hollow. This kind of language further takes the spectator into fresh views about theatre. Thirdly, the text employs defamiliarization to disturb the notion of the actors and spectators about the significance of the unities of time, place and action in a play. In western theatre- time, place and action on stage are different from off-stage. However, Handke's play makes no attempt to hide the fact that the time, place and action of the actors' are no different

from the spectators'. Once the spectators realize they are also living and acting in the same time and place of the actors, a new ground breaks in their consciousness as spectators. It also leads to an awareness of a new form of theatre where the spectator is the centre of the action.

Finally, the play does not stick with the conventional lighting technique with special lights on actors and the spectators in darkness. This play demands that the lights should be on the spectators throughout the performance. The actors do not come on stage wearing elaborate theatrical clothes and their costumes are also not very different from the audience's. The audience sees the actors wearing everyday clothes and it takes a few minutes for the audience to realize that the performance has begun.

Actor-Spectator space

The first and foremost thing that the text does in merging the spectator with the actor is that it addresses the spectator directly. Unhappy with the prevailing western dramaturgy and determined to subvert the situation, Handke says, "All you have to do is turn to the spectators and start off; with a perfectly simple shift of ninety degrees, you have a new play, a new dramaturgy (58). One can notice that the play begins with the actor addressing the audience, "You are welcome. This piece is a prologue. You will hear nothing you have not heard here before. You will see nothing you have not seen here before" (7).

The audience is caught unawares with such a beginning where they are not only addressed directly but the actors also talk about the audience and their expectations. The bewilderment mounts when the spectators realize that the play does not have a narrative. The subject matter of the play is the spectators themselves. The actors talk about what the spectators is about to watch and how it may not correspond to their notion of conventional theatre. By doing so, Handke awakes in the spectators two levels of consciousness. At one level, they are constantly looking and re-looking at themselves as spectators. They gain a new perspective about their space within the theatre. At another level, they look at the emergence of a new form of theatre which subverts all the conventional notions about western theatre. This new form of theatre that Handke seems to propose is paradoxically, the anti-theatre.

In the first level where the spectators are forced to constantly review their space within the theatre, all the familiar notions about themselves as spectators disappear. They know they are being directly addressed and their presence in the theatre is acknowledged because the actors say "you are not disregarded" (8). To 'defamiliarize' and create new self-consciousness in the spectators, Handke puts the spectator through the discomfort of "being looked at" (8). In the other theatre, they were comfortable looking at the actors. But here, the spectators are the objects of scrutiny by the actors. In the second level, the spectators are also aware of what is not happening on stage. They find that this show is bereft of all accepted, conventional theatricality. A new kind of theatre seems to emerge through this direct addressing of the audience and the creation of a new consciousness for the spectators. Since the spectators are the subject-matter of the play, they form the centre while the actors form the margins. So the actors tell the spectators, "You don't have the pleasure of encircling us." (11)

Towards the end of the play, the actors encircle the audience and declare that the audience was the actual actors. It is the spectators, who receive applause for their acting skills

from the speakers, “You were thoroughbred actors. . . . You reached Shakespearean heights You were a smashing cast You were a dream cast You were born actors. Play-acting was in your blood” (30-31). The defamiliarization process takes the unsuspecting spectators through varied layers of self-consciousness and finally subverts their situation. The audience enters the theatre expecting to watch someone else from the fringes. However, the play makes them the actors and the centre of the play. By making the spectators re-look at themselves as actors, the play recaptures the space for the marginalized.

Handke also accuses western dramaturgy of imposing power over the spectators by making them sit in a particular pattern. By sitting in a theatre, the spectators play themselves into the hands of the actors. Handke employs defamiliarization while telling the audience “You are sitting. . . . You are friendlier when you sit. You are more receptive. . . . You are more long-suffering. Sitting It is easier for you to forget your surroundings You become spectators. You become auditors. . . . You forget yourself” (18). By making the audience sit and watch, western dramaturgy has usurped their individuality. He writes, “You are not someone here but something” (17). By directly confronting the spectators with the immediate truth, Handke forces them to acquire a new consciousness. He goes on to suggest how they can be more assertive if they were a standing audience. He writes, “Standing, you would be more effective hecklers. You could show your opposition better. . . . You would be more individual. You would oppose the theater more resolutely. You wouldn’t be satisfied to be mere spectators” (19).

Western dramaturgy employs certain tools to keep the audience in their place. Making the audience sit in an ordered fashion is a way of keeping them under the spell of the hegemonic performers. The only way to break the spell is to speak directly to the spectators. This is why Handke did not write an anti-theatre pamphlet or an essay. Instead of proposing a treatise for a new form of theatre (the anti-theatre), Handke merges his theory and practice in *Offending the Audience* where the space for the spectators is re-conquered.

Language of the play-text

The western theatre is a colonial construct. In order to create a new dramaturgy sans the colonial structure, Handke’s choice is the anti-theatre. Though written for the stage, *Offending the Audience* strips itself of all theatricality. It is this paradoxical situation that helps in the differentiation of the older theatre from the new. This paradox creates a contrast, which in turn makes the picture clear. For the purpose, he chooses to use language in a completely non-theatrical sense. Language is reduced to mere words and sentences which when uttered by the actors, sound bland and un-theatrical. The actors would merely utter words and sentences and not act them out. Since there are no characters in the play, those words and sentences are not designated to actors in any particular order. Any actor can randomly pick any line and deliver it. So there is more scope for the actors to contradict themselves.

In fact the play also speaks about it when the actors tell the audience, “You recognized that we contradict ourselves” (14). It also results in confusion and the overlapping among the actors. The actors end up dishing out an amateurish performance or a performance with no acting at all. Brecht’s *Verfrumdungseffeskt* would result in such a presentation. In an

article “Brecht and Rhetoric”, Terry Eagleton too states that “Bertolt Brecht approved of amateur acting, since the occasional flatness and hollowness of its utterances seemed to him an unwitting form of alienation effect. For Brecht, the whole point of acting was that it should be in a peculiar sense hollow or void” (633). With Handke’s play, defamiliarization can be seen as a version of Brecht’s “alienation-effect.” All this may look like it applies only to the actor but the spectator forms the centre because Handke’s language addresses the spectator. The language that does not give scope for the actor to steal the show recaptures the space for the spectator.

Three Unities of Time, Place and Action

In the older theatre, the stage is a different world from the spectator’s. The characters are of different times from the spectator’s. And what those characters do on stage matters only to the other characters on stage. The spectators are there only to have a sneak-peek at the world of the others, their different times, places and actions. The actors too pretend that spectators never existed; they pretend that they are not being watched all the way by a set of audience. This is the western theatre’s unities of time, place and action. In this theory of unities, there is no acknowledgement of the spectator’s time, place and action. It is so because the western theatre has reduced the spectators into being passive and inactive. However, Handke’s play attempts to unify the actors’ and spectators’ time, place and action. Handke ‘defamiliarizes’ the ‘three unities theory’ of the western theatre by placing the spectator at the centre of it all. In Handke’s theatre, there is no difference between the time, place and action of the actors and the spectators. The actors and spectators do not live in separate bubbles. The hitherto gap between the actor and the spectator is completely erased because Handke creates a new version of the unity of time, place and action.

In the process, Handke creates space for spectators to act and be watched while doing so. At one point during the presentation, actors come down from the stage, encircle the audience and give them stimuli to respond. The response need not be vocal or overtly physical as well. But all spectators invariably stop being passive and attempt at some response to the stimuli provided by the actors. One of the stimuli is ‘offense’. When the actors use offensive or commanding language, the spectators are acutely aware that they are being verbally provoked to react and that their reaction would be scrutinized by the actors. At this point, most spectators react or try to hide their reaction. Either way, it would be registered that they acted in the theatre and were watched for it. The following passages cannot keep the spectators passive in the theatre:

Try not to blink your eyelids. Try not to swallow any more. Try not to move your tongue. Try not to hear anything. Try not to smell anything. Try not to salivate. Try not to sweat. Try not to shift in your seat. Try not to breathe. Why, you are breathing. Why, you are salivating. ‘Why, you are listening. Why, you smell. Why, you are swallowing. Why, you are blinking your eyelids. Why, you are belching. Why, you are sweating. Why, how terribly self-conscious you are. Don’t blink. Don’t salivate. Don’t bet your eyelashes. Don’t inhale. Don’t exhale. Don’t shift in your seat. Don’t listen to us. Don’t

smell. Don't swallow. Hold your breath. Swallow. Salivate. Blink. Listen. Breathe. (21)

While these lines are delivered, most spectators would invariably become conscious of themselves. Many begin to shift in their seats, roll their eyes, smile bashfully or even heckle at the actors. This sort of response from the spectators comes out of a certain discomfort created by the process of defamiliarization wherein they are made to look at themselves anew. This response of the spectators is their action. By responding to the given stimuli, the ones to who came to watch a play are now acting and are being watched. This subversion captures the space for the spectator which was hitherto occupied by the actor. Moreover, while the response is taking place, the actors encircle the audience from all sides. The intention is to make the spectators feel claustrophobic and pass through a zone of discomfort and end up with a fresh view about the space for spectators in the theatre. Thus, the spectators see themselves from the centre and become actors while the actors turn into on-lookers and are pushed into the periphery. Furthermore, Handke's sarcastic tone is exhibited when he subverts Aristotle's theory of a classical play pertaining to the three unities.

By creating a play without any element of drama and claiming it to be a classical play, Handke hits back at the dramaturgy of the west. Western theatre has so far pretended to live in a different time-space than that of the spectator's. As a result, this theatre form privileged the actors over the spectators. This set-up akin to colonialism was not questioned because this theatre form gives the audience a semblance of comfort. The spectators were given to believe that watching and being passive is relatively easier. However, the space for spectators is totally ignored in the western dramaturgy. The spectators are the most important feature of any theatre but they are marginalized because the theatre form does not give attention to their real time, place and action. The marginalization of the spectator is further escalated when the actors and their imagined time, place and action is given primary focus. Therefore, to reconquer the space for the spectators, Handke's text focuses only on the real time, place and action of the spectators. This results in the process of defamiliarization where the spectator looks anew at his space within the theatre.

Lights and Costume

Handke is very particular about the way lighting and costume should function in his theatre. As he is constantly trying to remove all kinds of theatricality in his dramaturgy-starting from his subject matter to his language, he also insists on lighting and costumes that are far from any sort of theatricality. Western theatre cannot afford the kind of lighting that Handke prefers. Handke's instructions to the producers of *Offending the Audience*, with regard to lighting and costume, "As they (actors) walk forward noncommittally, dressed casually, it becomes light on stage as well as in the audience. . . The stage and the auditorium remain lighted throughout the performance" (6), confront the audience with a paradoxical situation. They are in a theatre; yet there is nothing theatrical about it. It is not just the physical non-theatrical ambience that surprises the audience but when the actors also mention that, "The light that illuminates us signifies nothing. Neither do the clothes we wear signify anything. They indicate nothing, they are not unusual in any way, they signify nothing" (11), it extends the paradox. This contradictory situation creates the platform for spectators to

begin questioning about the norms of the theatre with regard to the spectator. By being non-theatrical within the theatre, Handke's play raises awareness in the spectators about their space in the theatre. The play also poses questions for western dramaturgy as it does not speak to the spectators, as those plays "really have nothing to do with his [spectator] situation in the outside world" (Joseph 59).

All theatrical aspects like rhetorical language, skillful acting, lighting and costume are consciously not played but played upon in Handke's *Offending the Audience*. All the realities that the western theatre hitherto ignored are brought to the fore. The realities like the physical presence of the audience, their real space and time and their importance to the production of a play are all given credit for. This attempt of the play subverts the accepted norms of a rigid form of theatre. The taut colonial fabric manifest in the theatre form requires a counter system to re-conquer space for the reality of the spectators. The pretense of the actors of being alone in a different world in different times needs to be questioned. All the familiar norms of the western theatre need to be looked at from a new perspective. Handke's play picks up the 'anti-theatre' route to 'defamiliarize' all the accepted norms of the western theatre. Using neither a plot nor characters, Handke's play re-conquers the space for the spectators while the text performs both as a critique of western theatre and also as a treatise for a new dramaturgy.

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