

## Twice Have the Trumpets Sounded

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### Résumé de l'article

Il n'y a sans doute aucun signe aussi déterminant pour la sémiotique du théâtre que le signal conventionnel qui informe le public qu'il s'apprête à entrer ou à quitter le monde liminal d'une performance. Le même signal sert également à indiquer que les signes qui se présentent entre ces deux moments doivent être entendus non pas comme faisant pleinement partie de la réalité quotidienne, mais qu'ils appartiennent aux codes de la performance théâtrale. Par exemple, dans le contexte moderne, un signe familier de la fin d'une performance théâtrale est le salut des acteurs sur la scène. Dans l'histoire du théâtre, les principaux signaux utilisés pour marquer la fin d'un spectacle ont été visuels : salut, fermeture du rideau, éclairage de la salle, etc. Toutefois lorsqu'on considère les principales marques utilisées pour indiquer le début d'une pièce on trouve de nombreux signaux sonores : la première, deuxième et troisième musique du théâtre de la Restauration anglaise; la trompette et les fanfares du Festival de Stratford (Ontario); les "trois coups" du théâtre français; le "God Save the Queen" du théâtre britannique; ou encore, comme chez Ellen Stewart du théâtre La Mama de New York, l'usage d'une simple cloche. Dans certains cas la sémiose sonore est préférée à son pendant visuel pour convoquer le public, mais il arrive parfois que le public est déjà présent de sorte que le signal sonore prend un autre sens. Cet article examine certains des usages les plus importants que de tels signaux sonores ont acquis au théâtre afin de s'adresser au public.

# Twice Have the Trumpets Sounded

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In the early days of modern semiotic study of the theatre, such analysis was restricted, not unreasonably, to the operations of the many systems of signification operating within the theatrical production itself. Indeed, that focus is specifically articulated by one of the major pioneers in the field, Roland Barthes, in the opening of his “Literature and Signification”. “What is theatre?” he asks rhetorically, and then responds : “A kind of cybernetic machine. When it is not working, this machine is hidden behind a curtain. But as soon as it is revealed, it begins emitting a certain number of messages” (1972 : 61). Since Barthes’ early work on this subject, as theatre has come less to be analyzed as a kind of art object and more as an event embedded in a social context, this view has come to seem overly restricted. Whatever cybernetic machine is hidden behind the curtain is now recognized as a part of a much larger experience of signification composed of many other elements, such as the physical surroundings of the theatre space itself.

I.

I have elsewhere considered some of those other elements, but here I wish to begin with a major semiotic operation central to Barthes’ model but unacknowledged by him. As soon as the “cybernetic machine” is revealed, he argues, semiosis begins. This articulation, however, hides an even more basic semiotic operation, the sign of opening the curtain. Probably no single aspect of the semiotics of performance is more critical than the conventionalized signals that inform the audience that they are entering or leaving the liminal world of performance, and that the signs they will receive between these two signals are to be interpreted not necessarily as they would be in everyday life, but according to the codes of the performance situation.

Doubtless the opening and closing curtain is the most familiar and widespread of such signals, but it is certainly not the only one. Ever

since the technology developed for a more precise control of theatrical lighting, the lowering of the lighting of the auditorium and the raising of the lighting on stage has been another common visual sign of the transition to the world of theatre and its sign systems. Often indeed in the modern theatre, this change of lighting has replaced the use of the curtain entirely, which has taken on a faintly outmoded feeling.

Other conventionalized signs and actions have also served to signal the ending of a performance – the general dance in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the frozen tableau in the nineteenth, and the gathering of the actors for a final bow, a practice which goes far back in theatre history. It will be noted that all of these devices – the lights, the tableaux, the curtain – are predominantly visual, although often in the history of theatre they have been accompanied by sounds, particularly by music.

The same concentration upon a single sensory channel is not found however when we consider the signs that indicate not the conclusion but the beginning of a theatrical event. Here we find a significant number of sonic rather than, or in addition to, visual signs in operation. One of the most common and certainly one of the most impressive is some sort of trumpet call or fanfare. Even before the era of established theatre structures, traveling players setting up their entertainments in town squares or market places needed a way to signal to the townspeople that a performance was about to take place, and the sound of drums and trumpets was a favored traditional way to do this. If a visual statement was also thought desirable, a company might parade through some of the city streets to call attention to their presence, but sound makers like drums and trumpets were essential to attract the attention of those indoors or on side streets; and when the performance was actually about to begin, they were the best means of alerting the nearby population.

We can still see the traces of these signifying practices when the first public theatres were built in London, especially since they were located outside the city on the south bank of the Thames, while their audiences for the most part had to cross the river. The visual announcement of a flag was raised atop the theatre on the day a production was to be given, but an aural signal was presented as well – trumpet calls were made from the top of the theatre – to encourage patrons to take their boats across the river in time to arrive at the show. So important were these signals to the concept of the public theatre that both the flag and the trumpeter can be clearly seen in the only surviving contemporary sketch of the interior of an Elizabethan public theatre, the rather crude drawing made by Johannes De Witt in 1595.

Of course the theatre was by no means the only social event that saw the power of drums and trumpets to call attention to the beginning of an important event. Military, ecclesiastical and royal event planners from the Renaissance onward drew upon the semiotic potential of these

stirring sounds to call attention to the importance of particular occasions. The plays of Shakespeare are full of examples of this use of such instruments, and surely when the trumpets of the Globe were used to announce an imminent performance at that theatre, this served not only as an advertisement, before the age of the newspaper, but also as a claim to a serious public event, with a sonic parallel to royal entries and state celebrations.

One of the most ambitious use of trumpet introductions was employed by Max Reinhardt in his 1920 inaugural (and often repeated) production of *Everyman* on the steps of the Salzburg Cathedral to open that major festival. Neither curtains nor lights could announce the beginning of this open-air spectacle; instead Reinhardt employed a stunning soundscape – trumpets and drums followed by a tolling of the cathedral bell, followed in turn by other bells in towers throughout the city. The association of trumpets with celebratory events and festivals is today clearly carried on by the use of this sound to announce an impending production at the Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, Ontario.

This use of a trumpet signal at Stratford goes back to the very beginning of the festival in 1953. The festival opened in a huge tent with Tyrone Guthrie's production of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, a play with numerous battle and court scenes and frequent calls for appropriate "tuckets, alarums and fanfares". This musical accompaniment was created by the leading Canadian composer Louis Applebaum, who was the musical director of the festival since its inception. Applebaum's music for the production was presented by a small orchestra at one corner of the festival's thrust stage.

The production being housed in a tent and the performances being held during the summer, audiences usually wandered about in the surrounding park before the show and at intermission, and so some means had to be devised to warn them that the play was about to begin or to resume. In most Canadian theatres at that time, audiences were warned by a buzzer or a recorded announcement, but neither of these seemed appropriate for the festival theatre which aspired to create a distinct atmosphere. Applebaum suggested that since a brass group was already available, that he compose a set of appropriate fanfares for them to perform for this purpose. The result seemed so perfectly suited to the general celebratory nature of the festival that these fanfares have been used in this theatre ever since, and have been accepted as an important part of the Stratford experience. Indeed when a permanent enclosed theatre replaced the tent, its spacious public areas included two balconies where the musicians could present two of their now traditional four calls for the audience to assemble. Whether an individual production uses live musicians or not it will be heralded in this way, with four musicians playing festooned fanfare trumpets accompanied by a field drum. These sounds, coming successively from different parts of

the theatre, have often been praised as adding greatly to the anticipation and sense of occasion of the performance.

The close association of this fanfare with the festival is recalled in a book recounting the history of its second year (1954) : “Twice Have the Trumpets Sounded”. The phrase is, appropriately, from Shakespeare, and specifically from *Measure for Measure*, Act 4, scene 6. Here Friar Peter assures the waiting Isabella that this sign indicates that “very near upon/ The duke is entering”. Clearly what attracted the Stratford publicists was the combination of the number two with a signature aspect of the festival, but as the Friar indicates, the signification of the trumpet calls is much the same in Stratford and in Shakespeare’s imagined Vienna. Traditionally a sequence of three trumpet fanfares, somewhat separated in time, announced the arrival of a ruler, and this sign of an impending event of significance was of course preserved in the Stratford fanfares as well.

In both the Elizabethan public theatre and the Stratford Festival can be seen a clear practical reason for the development of a sound signal for an impending performance. Even within an enclosed theatre, when the audience is scattered through lobbies, bars, and restrooms, a sound signal like a buzzer has often been used for this purpose, but when the audience may in fact not even be within the theatre building when the play is preparing to begin or to resume, as in the cases of the Shakespearian theatre or the Stratford Festival, a sharp and distinctive warning like a trumpet fanfare is even more obviously useful.

It is in the nature of any sign to accrue additional meanings as it is utilized, and this can be clearly seen at Stratford where in addition to their utilitarian primary function the trumpet fanfares are now seen less as a signal to assume one’s seat than as a sonic synecdoche for the festival as a whole, evoking its air of celebration and its dedication to Shakespeare and the Elizabethan heritage. A more modest but equally telling example from the avant-garde theatre world in New York is the cowbell traditionally rung by founder Ellen Stewart before each production at her theatre, La Mama.

La Mama, which is still an important part of the experimental theatre scene in New York, is the only Off-Off Broadway house to have remained in continual operation since Ellen Stewart founded it at the beginning of the 1960s. In 1963 she began a policy of presenting only new plays, one each week, along with the custom of beginning each performance by ringing a bell and welcoming her audiences to the theatre. This custom continued as the theatre moved through various spaces, finally finding its permanent home on West 4th Street in 1969. In none of these spaces was the ringing of a bell necessary to assemble the audience. On the contrary, until an annex theatre was added in 1974, La Mama audiences gathered in a tightly packed lobby space half an hour or so before the doors opened because seats were not reserved and the relatively small

audience spaces generally filled up quickly. The signal that the performance was about to begin was the opening of the theatre door, which usually occurred several minutes after the announced curtain time and very shortly before the performance began.

Ellen Stewart's bell was thus not so much a signal for audience members to take their seats (it was never rung at intermissions) but a sonic symbol of the theatre, of its heritage, and eventually of Ellen herself. When she died in 2011, at the age of 91, a day of celebrations ended with a ringing of bells throughout the neighborhood and a video of bells being rung in her memory around the world, in specific homage to her well-known pre-show practice. The custom did not die with her, but was by this time so much a part of the theatre ritual that a member of the La Mama company continues to ring Ellen's bell at the opening of each production there.

During the English Restoration it was customary to provide a rather elaborate musical lead-in to every production, even for plays that had no singing or music called for in their scripts. This practice developed not, like the Elizabethan trumpet fanfares, to bring audiences to the theatre, but on the contrary was designed, like Ellen Stewart's bell, for an already-assembled public. The practice of assigning specific advance seat numbers was not really found in the British or American theatre until the second or third decades of the nineteenth century, and before that time theatres would normally open an hour or more before the curtain so that people who wanted to come early and secure a seat could do so. Having large crowds of audience members gathered for this long a time in cold and unlighted auditoriums was sufficiently unpleasant, however, that it became customary for theatres to provide a series of musical offerings as an interim entertainment. Very soon these were codified into the first music, second music, and third music, a system followed by every professional theatre in Britain and the United States for the next century and a half.

Soon after the theatre opened and a public had begun to assemble, the "first music," normally two short pieces, was performed by musicians seated either in the so-called "music room" above the stage or on the stage itself. Somewhat later a more elaborate and much appreciated "second music" would be performed. The "third music," essentially an overture, would normally be performed after the spoken prologue to the play and before the opening of the curtain (which often had its accompanying "curtain tune" as well). Although one could consider the first and second music in particular as signaling an impending theatrical event, their primary function was not to mark the passing of time before that event but to keep the audience in a positive mood during an often long and uncomfortable wait (*Cf.* T.S. Gilman 2001 : 243-245).

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England, the ending of a play was not quite so formally signaled as the beginning.

Rather a standard ending was a dance or jig, composed of both visual and aural elements. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, another element of symbolic sound was added which long outlasted the first, second and third music opening the evening. This was the playing (and singing) of the patriotic anthem "God Save the King", preceded by a drum roll. Strangely enough, there has been much debate over who wrote the words or the music to this, one of the world's best-known songs. Its first performance is documented in 1745 at Drury Lane Theatre in London.

During that year, with most of the British Army away on the Continent during the War of the Austrian Succession, Charles Edward Stuart invaded England from the North, hoping to re-establish the exiled House of Stuart on the British throne. On September 28, the entire male cast of the Drury Lane Theatre announced after the performance their intention to form a special Volunteer Force to help defend the city of London should the invaders reach that far. Three of the leading singers of the day then presented for the first time this new anthem. Public response was so positive that the song was repeated nightly. The other London theatres quickly followed this lead (*cf.* C. Dumont 1953 : 5).

The *Musical World* of 1840 reports royal visits to both Drury Lane and Covent Garden. On both occasions the evening opened with all or most of the company singing "God Save the Queen" from the stage, followed immediately by the performance of the main play of the evening, the custom being to present two plays, the first an opera or full-length drama, the second a lighter afterpiece. Between the two pieces "Rule Britannia" was sung, and at Covent Garden a reprise of "God Save the Queen" rounded out the evening (*The Musical World* (13) 1840 : 139-40). Obviously when the sovereign visited the theatre, their entrance was marked with a playing of the anthem in accordance with the custom at all such public occasions (just as "Hail to the Chief" is played before similar public appearances of the President of the United States). I have found no evidence however of the regular play of this music before performances during this period except upon the occasion of royal visits.

Nevertheless, at some time, apparently throughout the course of the eighteenth century, it became the practice in most theatres in Great Britain, and indeed across much of the British Empire, to perform a single verse of the anthem at the close of any theatrical event. Thus, a writer at the far end of the Empire, in New Zealand in 1900, notes that "No fault can be found with the attitude of reverent solemnity in which most Britishers listen, for instance, to the regulation performance of one verse of 'God Save the Queen' at the fall of the curtain night after night in any British theatre".<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, this custom was not accepted without protest in areas where support for the Empire was not strong. The pro-British managers of the Star Theatre in Dublin met with little resistance in 1897 when they changed the name of the theatre to the Empire Palace, but when they followed this with trying to initiate



the standard British practice of playing “God Save the Queen” after the production each evening, there was so much resistance that they had to give up the project (cf. A. Findlater 2013, online).

When I first began attending London theatres in the late 1950s it was the almost invariable custom for “God Save the Queen” to be presented to open (and in a few cases to close) the evening, although in non-musical theatres, which had long since given up the orchestra that could be found in every theatre a century before, this was presented in recorded form. It always seemed to me a moving reminder that I was in a British theatre, and I much missed the practice when during the next decade or so it disappeared, the victim of the era’s rebellion against authority and tradition. The rebellious and innovative director Stephen Joseph in Scarborough is credited with being the first significant theatre manager, in the late 1950s, to depart from the almost universal practice throughout the United Kingdom of performing “God Save the Queen” before every theatre (or film) performance, during which audience members were expected to stand and men to remove their hats.

During the following decade the custom was gradually abandoned, first by smaller theatres and at last by the larger and more traditional establishments. The key moment in the conversion came in the spring of that central revolutionary year in 1968 when Peter Brook, already internationally considered the most outstanding and daring of young British directors for his stagings of *Titus Andronicus*, *King Lear*, and *Marat/Sade*, was preparing for the National Theatre, then at the Old Vic and directed by Laurence Olivier, one of his most extreme reworkings, a radical jazz music version of *Oedipus*. Olivier accepted the twelve foot high golden phallus which became the most memorable image of the production, but he drew the line at musical director Richard Peaslee’s bizarre and irreverent rendition of “God Save the Queen”, which was to accompany the bacchanalia that ended the show. Olivier loved the production in general, but considered this parody “rude... vulgar... and childishly insolent”. He pleaded with Brook to drop it and Brook finally agreed, on the condition that the anthem, which up until then had been played at every Old Vic performance, would not be played again so long as Olivier was the director of the theatre. In Olivier’s own words, he “gleefully agreed” to this, “knowing what was to him, as to quite a few others, the laughable extent of my patriotism” (cf. L. Olivier 1982 : 271). Indeed in the late sixties, traditional patriotism was in very short supply in the theatre community of England, and when such prestigious figures as Olivier and Brook, and theatres such as the Old Vic and the National Theatre, gave up this long-established patriotic tradition, the rest of the theatres, mostly in the West End, who still maintained it, followed their lead. Within a few years it had almost completely disappeared.

Surely the best-known non-musical introductory sound in the Western theatre is the “*trois coups*” (three blows) of the classic French



stage. The “three blows” are actually always more than three : first there is a rapid series of blows, the number of which varies, and then three slower, more measured blows. These are traditionally produced behind the curtain, unseen by the audience, with a long pole that is hammered on the stage floor. The pole, wrapped in velvet with gilded nails, was traditionally known as the brigadier, so named because it marked the presence of authority backstage. The use of the brigadier goes back at least to the time of Molière, as does the tradition of the “*trois coups*”, although just how early these elements can be traced has been much disputed.

Some scholars have placed the origins of the “*trois coups*” in the very first professional theatre in France during the middle ages, with the three blows representing the Trinity, but there is no archival evidence of this. It is much more likely that the custom developed in the theatre of the seventeenth century, when much of the structure and the operations of the traditional French stage were established. Proponents of this theory explain the number of blows on secular rather than religious grounds. First come a series of blows in rapid succession (traditionally nine, although sometimes more) and then three at more deliberate intervals, recognizing, first the King, then the Queen, and finally the general public. The blows have also been explained as referring to the Nine Muses (those seeking an ecclesiastic explanation have argued that they were originally eleven, representing the eleven faithful apostles).

Finally, it has been suggested that the origins of the practice were neither from the church nor the court, but rather from the operations of the theatre itself where the sounds were not primarily intended to send a signal to the audience at all, even though that was a side effect. In the days before electronic communication between the different parts of the backstage, which by the nineteenth century had become in any large theatre very extended and complex, the “*trois coups*” have been explained as signaling a final check that all was in readiness to begin the production. According to this explanation, the rapid series of blows was simply meant to attract the attention of the backstage crew, upon which the head technicians above the stage, below it, and on the side opposite the brigadier, would each give a single blow to show that their area was ready to proceed.

Although this latter suggestion is most notably advanced in the present century by the technical director of the Royal Opera at Versailles<sup>2</sup>, the rather awkward system he describes has certainly not been used since the backstage areas began to be connected electronically more than a century ago. Since that time, the “*trois coups*”, whatever their history, have been clearly created by a single person, serving primarily as a signal to the audience that a production was about to begin and secondarily as a sign for a particular national tradition. Similar to the playing of “God Save the Queen”. The “*trois coups*” spread throughout

the theatres of the French empire, but made no inroads into the theatres of other countries, and so remains a sign of French theatre. Even today, where its use in France is much diminished, I have heard it in the United States and other countries as well before the production of a French play (even when not given in French) to remind audiences of the national tradition.

The “*trois coups*” has in fact survived somewhat better than “God Save the Queen”, especially in the large traditional theatres of the boulevards and of course at the Comédie Française. The Comédie, however, is the only theatre in France which sounds six blows instead of the conventional three after the first rapid staccato. The traditional explanation for the double signal is that it recalls the fact that the original Comédie was formed in 1680 by the merging of two separate theatre companies, the Hôtel de Guénégaud (the remnants of Molière’s company) and the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Whatever the origins of this practice, it has served – like the trumpets at Stratford, Ellen Stewart’s bell at La Mama, or the playing of “God Save the Queen” at Drury Lane – primarily as a sonic sign that a performance was about to begin; but as is typical of the nature of signs, each of these has with the passage of time taken on a variety of other meanings, some cultural, some political, which have distinctly extended their signification beyond their primary utilitarian function. The longest lasting of these, the “*trois coups*”, reflects this accretion of meanings through the plethora of stories about the origins of this practice.

Unhappily, the advent of modern technology has replaced purely sonic signals of a performance about to begin with recorded or live announcements headed by the warning now heard around the world that cell phones should be silenced. Legal requirements in some areas call for other notifications as well – information about the location of exits in case of emergency or warnings about the prohibition of taking pictures or making recordings (a matter of particular concern in the United States) – but notices about cell phones are ubiquitous. So ubiquitous have these announcements become that some theatres, perhaps seeking to avoid the repetition of a familiar verbal warning, have replaced it with prerecorded cell phone rings coming from loudspeakers in various parts of the house, to remind spectators to switch their phones to silent. Thus the recorded ringing of cell phones has come to serve, like the third music of the Restoration theatre, as a sign to the audience of the immanent beginning of the performance.

All of the examples I have so far considered have been developed and utilized within the parameters of a traditional theatre production, taking place within an enclosed theatrical space and confined within a particular time, a production for which the audience assembles, perhaps called to do so by sonic signs, and upon being seated is often quieted or brought to attention by other sonic indicators. And in many cases

audiences are even brought to a sense of closure of the evening by other sonic signs. One might add to these the common practice, especially in plays containing music or in musical comedies, of a final recapitulation of one or more melodies from the production as the audience is leaving the theatre. Of course any theatrical production will have within the actual performance its own complex system of sounds interacting with the other sign systems of the production, but it should be noted that this aspect is itself enclosed in an experiential envelope which makes its own contribution to the event.

In the various kinds of traditional theatrical performance I have been discussing, the production itself follows the model described by Barthes where an audience is assembled in an enclosed space to passively observe a mimetic representation revealed to them in an adjoining enclosed space. Here the two areas of signification, the sonic signs within the play and those outside its boundaries, are clearly distinct. Theatre semiotics in general has considered sonic signs, when it has considered them at all, only as they operate within the presented play, while in this essay I have moved outside that theoretical boundary to examine other sonic signs that have been part of the total performance experience but not of the mimetic representation itself. In the modern theatre, however, this seemingly clear division has blurred, as has much of the dividing line between the theatre and the world that, to a greater or lesser degree, it reflects. I will now turn to some of the functions sonic signs serve within this much more consciously ambiguous performance world.

## II.

Up until the 1960s, when the operations of theatre, like so much of the culture, were widely challenged, theatre experiences in much of the world were essentially the same, following the model taken for granted by Barthes which I have summarized above. But during that decade an important part of the experimental theatre moved outside these traditional spatial arrangements, creating theatre in new environments and offering new audience/performance relationships. There were a variety of reasons for this, but like most of the movements of that turbulent decade, they were generally based upon a desire for a more open, fair, equal and just society. In the eyes of many, the traditional theatre was overly controlled by and only accessible to the privileged classes. The works it presented were for the entertainment of those classes, and on the relatively rare occasions when those works were of a political nature, they addressed the interests and concerns of the privileged and not of the vast part of the population that did not attend the theatre.

A variety of strategies were employed at this time to bring the theatre to a more proletarian audience. One of the most ambitious, though ultimately least successful, was the French program of decentralization, initiated by Jeanne Laurent. Under this plan, state-funded theatres were

opened across France, and most notably in the working class suburbs of Paris instead of the city center where major theatres had been located up until that time. However, these new theatres did not primarily attract working class audiences from their neighborhoods, as planned, but regular theatre-goers from Paris who commuted specifically to see them.

A more successful realization of these political aims came in the form of modest experiments in France, the United States and elsewhere, to bring not only the physical institution of theatre to working class audiences, but a more informal and accessible experience of theatre. In many cases this resulted in theatre groups returning to the practices of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, before the establishment of permanent theatre structures, when performers went out into public spaces and gathered spontaneous audiences for their presentations. So-called "guerilla" theatre companies in the United States, like the Teatro Campesino, the San Francisco Mime Troup or Bread and Puppet Theatre, or artists in Europe like France's Armand Gatti, performed in the streets, markets, or actual working environments such as fields or factories, bringing politically relevant theatre directly to people who would not attend the established houses.

The new approach brought them back to the same basic concern that their predecessors had faced centuries before. They needed to assemble an audience to whom their performance could be addressed. Their solution was the same : to provide a sonic sign that something unusual and attractive was about to occur. Not surprisingly they went back to the same signs used hundreds of years before, still resonating in the cultural memory – the roll of drums and the blasts of trumpets. Even audiences who had never attended a theatre recognized these signs as indicators of an impending event which promised both interest and excitement, and they would follow the sounds to the temporary stage, perhaps only the flat-bed of a truck, upon which the performance would occur. In modern times, the traditional instruments could be reinforced by a loudspeaker, and for Chicano audiences by a welcoming guitar, but the function of sonic preparatory signs was essentially the same.

The use of sound of various kinds to gather an audience clearly has been the most common extra-performance use of sound throughout theatre history. However in more recent years, this function has in certain productions begun to operate in a somewhat different way, partly within and partly outside of the production itself. As I mentioned earlier, an important part of modern experimental theatre has consciously blurred the boundaries between the performance and reality. Thus far, the most widely discussed example of such work is the so-called "immersive" theatre in which the audience shares the same space as the actors, a space often involving a number of rooms or locations through which both actors and audiences move.

In such productions sonic signs often retain the traditional function

I have been discussing, to assemble an audience or to alert them that a performance is about to begin, but that function operates in a very different way in immersive theatre and other related forms. Generally speaking, although immersive theatre seeks to engage its audiences, it does not, like much political theatre of the 1960s, take its performance to where the audiences are. Rather, like traditional theatre, whether it takes place in an open or, more commonly, an enclosed space, it is a space that an audience comes to as they do to a traditional theatre. Once there, however, they do not require any sign that the performance is beginning, although they may, in some sort of antechamber, receive general instructions about the “rules” of the evening. Upon entering the actual “theatre” they have also entered the world of that performance, and no further transitional signal is necessary.

Although immersive theatre performances vary widely, it is a general assumption that audience members should not only have freedom to wander as they wish through the space in which the actors are moving, but that this freedom should be emphasized by providing them with a wide variety of spaces from which to choose. The best-known immersive performance, inspiring a host of imitations especially in New York and London, is the *Macbeth*-inspired *Sleep No More*, created in 2003 by the British Company Punchdrunk and opening to a continuously extended run in New York in 2011. In *Sleep No More*, audiences may wander at will through almost one hundred theatrically decorated rooms, in some of which they will find actors or other audience members, but mostly they will find themselves alone at any particular time. No other immersive production in New York has offered such spatial variety, for those which encourage audience mobility normally contain only 10 to 15 or more available spaces.

Many audience members simply follow actors through the spaces, thus guaranteeing that they will witness at least some of the prepared action, but for those who follow a more independent course and find themselves in rooms that are empty or contain other audience members, the major clue to find some part of the ongoing action is a sonic one – a sound effect, an actor’s raised voice, the noise of running feet, the crash of a fallen prop. In a conventional production any of these sounds would serve as iconic contributions to the fictional universe for the usually limited number of spectators actually present when the sound is created. But here, for the majority of the audience, such sounds have no such fictive signification, for they function as signals on another level, indicating the direction in which the spectator should move in order to encounter some part of the ongoing performance. Often the producers of the spectacle clearly use this device by design to draw audience members to a particular area. In the 2011 production of *Speakeasy Dollhouse*, which opened in New York soon after *Sleep No More* and was second only to it in popularity among such performances, an argument and a shooting are key events in the play, but both take

place while the audience is scattered over a number of rooms on two floors. The argument, a loud one, which takes place in the central bar, soon attracts almost every spectator, while the shooting takes place in an upstairs bathroom with no audience member present. The sound of the gunshots draw the spectators from all directions, and what they witness is the victim being carried out into the main anteroom to the bar where the action continues. One can say that in such cases the sound cues, even though they take place within the fictive world of the play, primarily function like the trumpet fanfares at Stratford, as a signal to audience members not yet in the performance area to move there in order to witness something.

This double semiotic function of a sound effect operating within both the fictive world of the play and the practical world inhabited by the audience inevitably blurs the boundaries between these two worlds, a feature not only of much immersive theatre but of much recent experimental theatre in general. A quite different manifestation of the same doubleness occurs in the 2013 stage version of Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* created by the experimental Dutch director Ivo van Hove and garnering significant international success. Taking a cue from the 1977 work *Fefu and Her Friends* by Maria Irene Fornés, van Hove presented part of the play in an abstract yet straightforwardly linear fashion, the center of the production consisting of a series of four separate scenes performed on stages facing four different directions, backing onto a common "backstage" area. The audience, divided into four groups, move from scene to scene, experiencing all four scenes but in varying orders. Since the four scenes converge into a common space, certain sounds from the scenes – like shots or loud cries – could be overheard from one location to the other. For the audience members present to the scenes where these sounds are produced, they work in a traditional semiotic fashion within the fictive world, but for the other audience members they function otherwise. Some overheard them before while watching other scenes yet not knowing their context. Others would hear them only later, recalling that scene while watching a different one. By the end of the rotation, the fictive signification of these sounds is quite overshadowed by their operations, reminding the audience of the construction of the performance itself.

I began this essay by calling attention to sonic signs in the theatre which serve an important function within the total experience but which lay outside the normal boundaries of semiotic analyses of performance. That division, once quite clear, has become much less so in a good deal of modern work. Contemporary productions continue to find ways of utilizing sonic signs on a variety of levels, some relating to the fictive world onstage, some to the real world of the audience, and some to an ambiguous location in between.

## Notes

1. Jean-Paul Gousset, in a film on French television, “Secrets d’histoire : Marie-Antoinette intime”. France2, 2012.

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## Abstract

Probably no single aspect of the semiotics of performance is more critical than the conventionalized signals that inform the audience that they are entering or leaving the liminal world of performance, and that the signs they will receive between these two signals are to be interpreted not necessarily as they would be in everyday life, but according to the codes of the performance situation. A clear example of one familiar modern sign for the ending of the performance is, of course, the curtain call. Throughout the history of theatre, the ending of the performance has most commonly been signaled by visual means – the curtain call, the bringing up of the house lights, the lowering of the house curtain, the general dance of the performers. When we consider the various means by which the beginning of a performance is indicated, however, we find that a significant number of them are in fact not visual but sonic – the first, second and third music in Restoration theatre, the trumpet fanfares at Stratford (Ontario) the “trois coups” of the traditional French theatre, the traditional playing of “God Save the Queen” in British theatres, and Ellen Stewart’s ringing of the hand bell for years at La Mama. In certain cases, the semiotics of sound have been prioritized over those of sight for the sake of summoning audiences, but most often they are already assembled and so other dynamics are at work. This essay will consider some of the most important uses of sound in this particular semiotic function, that is, as a signal for the audience to experience various theatrical works with a performance-oriented consciousness.

**Keywords** : Semiotics; Audiences; Fanfares; les trois coups.

## Résumé

Il n’y a sans doute aucun signe aussi déterminant pour la sémiotique du théâtre que le signal conventionnel qui informe le public qu’il s’apprête à entrer ou à quitter le monde liminal d’une performance. Le même signal sert également à indiquer que les signes qui se présentent entre ces deux moments doivent être entendus non pas comme faisant pleinement partie de la réalité quotidienne, mais qu’ils appartiennent aux codes de la performance théâtrale. Par exemple, dans le contexte moderne, un signe familier de la fin d’une performance théâtrale est le salut des acteurs sur la



scène. Dans l'histoire du théâtre, les principaux signaux utilisés pour marquer la fin d'un spectacle ont été visuels : salut, fermeture du rideau, éclairage de la salle, etc. Toutefois lorsqu'on considère les principales marques utilisées pour indiquer le début d'une pièce on trouve de nombreux signaux sonores : la première, deuxième et troisième musique du théâtre de la Restauration anglaise; la trompette et les fanfares du Festival de Stratford (Ontario); les "*trois coups*" du théâtre français; le "God Save the Queen" du théâtre britannique; ou encore, comme chez Ellen Stewart du théâtre La Mama de New York, l'usage d'une simple cloche. Dans certains cas la sémiose sonore est préférée à son pendant visuel pour convoquer le public, mais il arrive parfois que le public est déjà présent de sorte que le signal sonore prend un autre sens. Cet article examine certains des usages les plus importants que de tels signaux sonores ont acquis au théâtre afin de s'adresser au public.

**Mots-clés** : sémiotique; auditoires; fanfares; les trois coups.

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