

*How is our experience of time shaped by theatre, and how is theatre shaped by our understanding of time?*

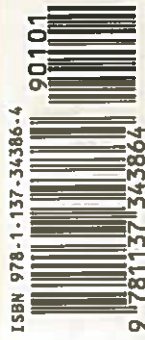
In this fascinating account of the relationship between theatre and time, David Wiles explores how performances are constructed in the dimension of time. From linear clock time and the cyclical time of the planets and seasons to the rhythms of the body and individual memories, different types of time have informed theatre throughout history. Examining the temporalities of early modern, late Victorian and postmodern performance, Wiles exposes the fundamental part that our perception of time plays in determining the form of theatre and its role in society.

'An illuminating, thought-provoking and very enjoyable read.

This short book covers a considerable amount of ground, inviting us to understand the topic of theatre time historically, philosophically, sociologically, religiously and scientifically'

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# Time

## theatre

David Wiles

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in order to find happiness with her soldier lover, yet that impossibility is reliant on what we might call the 'Victorian' social values of 1901, not the moral values of 2012. By seeking to transpose the world of the play into 2012, rather than creating a dialogue between past and present, the director, Benedict Andrews, reached an impasse. Perhaps he felt that the Young Vic audience – and note the significance of the theatre's name – were not interested in thinking how the world of a century ago might have shaped the present.

In the third act, when the town is reported to be on fire, the tempo at the Young Vic was set by the stagehands, who steadily removed section after section of the stage, creating an abstract image of loss and containment, whilst reminding the audience of the constructed theatricality of the event in the here and now. In 1901 Stanislavski was preoccupied by the same question of tempo, using rhythm and gesticulation to impress on all the actors the mood evoked by a searing provincial fire alarm. It is unlikely that the intensity of this fire alarm was a simple function of speed. Stanislavski explains how he learnt in rehearsing *Three Sisters* that the audience's experience of a heightened tone and quickened tempo did not relate to the actual speed of verbal delivery (*My Life in Art*, p. 372). Stanislavski's production could not possibly be replicated in the twenty-first century, because the spectator today lives to a different rhythm. The Moscow production was set in the now of 1901, but that historic now also, for example, involved the audience's awareness that Masha pining for love was also the actress married to Chekhov, sick with tuberculosis and far away in Nice. And

Masha in black must have conjured up her namesake in *The Seagull*, again dressed in black and married to a teacher. The moment of 1901 cannot simply be transposed to the present in the way the Young Vic update implies.

According to Aristotle, the now is what holds time together, making past and future time into a continuous whole. What time is not is a succession of indivisible nows (*Physics* iv.13, vi.9). I have argued in this section that it is worth trying to penetrate the mystery of now, because the maker of theatre has to work in the dimension of time. I have suggested that today's culture is preoccupied, more than most, by the pursuit of an indivisible now, detached from past and future time. I have examined a conspicuously now-oriented production in order to highlight some of the contradictions into which one is led by remorseless pursuit of the present moment. In the next section I shall turn to the question of rhythm. To quote Aristotle again, 'time is a measure of change' (iv.12). Time only exists when we measure and count it, and we can only count something that changes according to a regular measure. That counting is not done in the mind but through a living body, and bodies are only alive when they pulsate. [Aristotle]

### Rhythm 1: rhythms of the Earth

I shall begin with five propositions about rhythm. Perhaps some will appear more obvious than others.

1. Rhythm is movement. Plato described rhythm as 'ordered movement' when he placed dance at the

centre of children's education. Try to envisage music without the muscular action of the musician, and without something – air or a solid object – striking against something else. Try to imagine yourself listening to a rhythm and standing quite motionless. Because rhythm is motion, it is always linked to e-motion or feeling.

2. Rhythm is organic. It never quite coincides with the 'beat' produced by a machine. Instrumentalists can train using a metronome, but they need a human conductor to create rhythm in performance, for we do not apprehend time with the precision of a machine. Our brain processes different sensory inputs at different speeds, so we do not tap our feet in precise alignment with the words we sing, and in a live theatre acoustic our hearing of sound is complicated by reverberation. Our brain prevents us from hearing sounds as rhythmically connected when they are divided by a gap of more than two or three seconds.

3. Rhythm is obsessive. However hard we try to be arrhythmic, we slip into regular periodicity. Try rotating your two arms in different rhythms – very soon there will be a rhythmic connection. Rhythm energises the performance of repetitive tasks: the Greeks used a piper to help them row warships, the Scots once marched into battle with bagpipes, Radio One assists industrial production in the workplace, and joggers jog with earphones. In the same way, rhythm energises and sustains the delivery of dramatic

text. Once we are caught in a rhythm, it is hard to break free.

4. Rhythm is contagious. We instinctively fall into step with each other, or nod in time with the person we are listening to. Dance has long been bound up with courtship. This is a fundamental principle of human bonding and relates to the connection between actors and audience. Which is why Plato wanted dance to be the basis of political education.

5. Rhythm is the basis of artistic form. If we think of art as the imposition of order upon the chaos of observed reality, then we can learn from the Greek understanding that all visual images possess a sense of movement, that is, rhythm. Plato believed human beings had rhythmic skills that animals lack, but the American philosopher John Dewey in 1934 argued from the perspective of evolution that rhythm pre-exists in nature, so the experience of art begins when humans align themselves with those natural rhythms (*Art as Experience*, p. 154).

St Augustine rejected the materialist hypothesis that time is merely a function of planetary movement, citing the triumph of the Israelites in the Old Testament when God helped Joshua clinch a victory by making the Sun stand still. We can tease ourselves with the same question: if the Sun stood still, would time still exist? Can we abstract time so it is not just a function of the material universe? If we put the God hypothesis to one side, what follows? Dewey made



a convenient division between the internal rhythms of the human body and the macro rhythms of nature which stem from the rotation of the Moon around the Earth, and the Earth around the Sun, and the spinning of the Earth upon its axis. Believing that humans were social before they were individual, and looked outwards before they looked inwards, he concluded that in evolutionary terms the rhythms of the Earth were primary. Dewey's distinction is a convenient one, and I shall consider the rhythms of the Earth in this section, leaving the micro rhythms of the body to my next. We need to remember, however, that the body has internalised the rhythms of the Earth in all sorts of ways.

Take day and night. The circadian rhythms of the body, which determine our patterns of sleep and digestion, are familiar to all nightshift workers and users of long-haul East-West flights. These circadian rhythms are not acquired, but embedded in our DNA, as they are in the DNA of many forms of plant and animal life. We feel and function differently in the morning and in the evening, and these differences are inflected by age. When a blogger in New York enquired whether matinee performances of the musical *Sweeney Todd* would be of lower quality than evening performances, initial replies were concerned with the risk of too many children in the audience or the star being replaced by an understudy. The last contributor responded: 'Same show, same quality. ... My only problem with the matinee is that for "dark" shows like Sweeney Todd, I'd prefer to see them in the evening' (5 July 2006). In other words, the commercial product is the same, but the spectator feels differently

in the evening, and the killings of the demon barber match her evening feeling. This post terminated the short discussion, because there was no language in the blogosphere, or indeed the whole Western aesthetic tradition, capable of developing this debate about the 'quality' of experience. Yet the Sanskrit *Nāṭya Śāstra* – the classic account of Indian theatre aesthetics – took it for granted that performers need to seek Rasas (approximating to 'moods') appropriate to the time of day or night. Zeami in his classic writings on Noh theatre explains how the yin principle of the night needs to be balanced by a buoyant yang performance, whilst the yang principle of the day needs to be balanced by a gentler yin interpretation (*On the Art of the Nō Drama*, 1984, pp. 19–20). Humans are more attuned to their environment in this traditional Eastern mode of thought.

Sunday shopping and Sunday working have weakened the rhythm of the seven-day week, and fewer people regard theatregoing as just a weekend activity, within the seven-day cycle of work and rest. Though we increasingly live in a 24/7 culture, human biology makes the rhythm of day and night harder to escape than the rhythm of the week. The seven-day cycle nevertheless dates back to the book of *Genesis*, and its cultural resilience became evident at the time of the French Revolution, when the attempt was made to institute a ten-day week. The decimal principle was happily accepted for coinage and measurements of length and weight, but the rhythms of time proved too ingrained. The revolutionaries renamed and repositioned the months, but not even they dared to revert from twelve months to the