Review Essay

Never Leave the Hub Through an Open Door. Always the Window

Scott Magelssen

John Troyer. *[In John Troyer's Apartment]*. Minnesota Fringe Theatre and Perfor-
mance Festival, August 2001.

We have been led by docents, a couple dozen of us all together, up the stairs into a
cramped and hot living room (it is August), where we have found various corners,
chairs, or couches in which to awkwardly wait for what happens next. It is a
Bohemian Minneapolis apartment (if there is such a thing), and we are here for a
performance event entitled *[In John Troyer's Apartment]*, which is part of the 2001
Minnesota Fringe Festival. This, however, is the only production not taking place
in one of the Fringe's handful of Minneapolis theatre spaces or public coffee shops,
and the difference is palpable. We don't know how to behave.

    The docents (Kerry Keyes and Nathan Tylutki) have turned a seminar-style
notepad to a sheet that reveals the words "Interpretation B," and immediately rushed
out the front entrance, slamming and locking the door to leave us, the audience, to
look variously at each other or our feet in silence. Gradually, actors enter the
space, noticing us, but not saying anything. A figure on a ladder peers in through
the window. And then, an individual who has become familiar to the alternative
Twin Cities performance scene enters (he *doesn't* notice us), wearing his signature
mesh cowboy hat, thick black glasses, sporting an unkempt goatee—and a skirt.

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The man is John Troyer, and this is his Uptown Minneapolis apartment. We know him, already, from several performances in the past six years in which he and his performance company, The Praxis Group, have challenged the accepted conventions of public space and everyday life. In 1997, for instance, the Praxis Group, dressed in white labcoats and armed with clipboards, "infiltrated" the disputed public space of the Mall of America. In a synchronized maneuver, the performers silently circled the four levels of the Mall with quotations gleaned from its own literature ("More people visit the Mall of America every year than Disneyworld and the Grand Canyon combined," *et cetera*), and jotted the patrons' reactions on their notepads. The performance was met with complaints, and was intercepted by Mall Security, but had achieved its goal: to make visible the procedures of surveillance and behavior modification in the late twentieth century. The Mall of America, as a collection of shops, recreational facilities, and clusters of benches, fountains, and trees, does not seem qualitatively different from a hometown mainstreet or town square. Yet, unlike these civic places, freedom of expression is limited in a private retail area, and controlling forces dictate who gets to speak (protests, for example, are prohibited at the Mall of America). The Praxis Group showed that, while never quite explicitly stated, we forfeit certain privileges depending on where we go, and subtle observation often guarantees that we will cooperate with the expectations of the space. The group repeated the infiltrations at other contested public spaces, including the Walker Art Center and the barricaded police zone in downtown Minneapolis in July 2001 during a controversial conference of the International Society for Animal Genetics (ISAG). In this last instance, fearing similar riots to those in Seattle the previous spring, the Minneapolis Police Department had declared it had the right to search pedestrians to determine whether they had a "legal reason" to be in the vicinity. The Praxis Group highlighted the tensions between this quasi-police state and constitutional rights, as well as the blurred boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate inhabitants of a public space: neither police, nor animals' rights protesters, the group's actions defied easy definition in such a black-and-white categorization. The media solved the problem by labeling the performers "animal activists" engaging in a "disappointing bit of theatricalism" seeking awareness for their cause (*Channel Nine News*).[1]

But *[In John Troyer's Apartment]* marked the first time that Troyer punctured the delicate membrane between performance and everyday life with his own private realm. Echoing previous Praxis Group performances, *[In John Troyer's Apartment]* made use of surveillance technology: security cameras were mounted in the corners of the room, trained on the activity in the space as well as the audience, as part of a live webcast of the event. While Troyer was the first to admit (to me) that the concept of using a private apartment began as a gimmick to draw attention to the contrived notion of a "fringe" festival these days (his own ironic enunciation on the function of the performative space), what emerged from this production did indeed produce an "other" space and a challenge to the way performance and privacy are discussed. The production became at once what Michel Foucault would call a "heterotopic space" in which the normal rules of society are recognized but contested and reversed ("Of Other Spaces"), as well as a "catachrestic" space,

Gayatry Chakravorty Spivak's term for a space in which objects are wrestled from their predefined meanings and a new relationship is established between them and the viewer.

This is not the first time a private living space has been the venue for a theatrical production. In the twentieth century, and indeed as far back as the seventeenth century, homes have seen dramatic activity in the face of anti-theatre regulations (i.e. Samuel Foote's England) or censorship (i.e. Vaclav Havel's Czechoslovakia). In various moments throughout theatre history, guests have been invited into living rooms for clandestine performances—advertising the admission price for a "dish of chocolate" to circumvent the outlawing of professional productions, or employing the home as a safe haven for oppositional political theatre. At other times, homes have been used to emphasize the changing relationship between art and the world situation. Tadeusz Kantor staged a 1944 production of *The Return of Odysseus* in a bombed-out flat in Warsaw in the wake of the destruction seen in World War II, exemplifying the manner in which the preexisting social content of a space had been utterly devastated. *[In John Troyer's Apartment]* is both a variation of this tradition as well as a threshold pushing the notion of private/performance space in a different direction. In the twenty-first century, a host of dilemmas link themselves to this situation, where Troyer's ensemble hashed them out to be witnessed and/or commented upon. Like the Walker Art Center, or the Mall of America, this was a privately owned space which seemed "public" by virtue of being affiliated with the Fringe Festival. Thus, the security cameras echoed what had been shown in the Mall of America and the Downtown Minneapolis performances: that freedom of expression is conditional and depends on whose space one is in. In *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault describes Jeremy Bentham's eighteenth-century panoptic model of a prison which maintained order through the consistent visibility of the prisoners. Foucault invokes the panopticon to illustrate the way surveillance practices and technologies similarly reinforce expected, productive civic behavior in the present. In subjecting the audience to multiple layers of observation, *[In John Troyer's Apartment]* differed from previous living room performances by not only making the spectators as visible as the performers, but by making them aware that the gaze of the performers, fellow audience members, and unseen home-viewers shaped what it meant to "behave" as an audience.

After the docents leave the audience to stew in their awkward hyper-visibility in the space, further aggravated by the presence of the security cameras, an actor (Kathryn Guentzel) enters the room and considers us for a long moment. "Welcome," she says. "Indeed . . . the discomfort is apparent." With these words, the audience is somewhat relieved at the solace of finally having a semblance of a spectator-performer relationship. "We anticipate the discomfort and confusion associated with Total Character Perspective for new arrivals," the actor continues. "An orientation session has been created to make the transition less disturbing."

The orientation session, it turns out, is meant to introduce the rules of the space. In this scenario, we find that this apartment is not really an apartment at all, but a façade masking the last of several "interdimensional hubs" in space-time. The hubs are reservoirs where characters dwell while not on-stage. This artificial uni-

verse has been created to compensate for the inadequate offstage facilities required by characters who do not merely cease to exist the moment the actors they occupy leave the stage. As such, the space is the holding area for characters awaiting actors to play them. In other words, as an actor comes on stage, the character leaves the interdimensional hub (the apartment) and enters the actor's body (wherever they are in the universe: Brussels, Amherst, Paris, Tokyo, Monterey, Sidney, Berlin, New York). Always through the *window*. If the character exits the hub through the door, we are told, he or she exits the artificial universe and ceases to exist (this last point will become important later on). When the actor leaves the stage, the character reenters the hub through the window. "We had a real problem in the 1960s and '70s with the anti-theatre/anti-character movements," interrupts one of the actors (Andreas Levi). "All those 'people' kept dying. They refused to exit the hub through the window because—why can't a door be a window, too?" Any confusion on our part is furthered by an elaborate triangular chart on the seminar pad (broken into the designations "PLAY TEXT," "APARTMENT," "OFF-STAGE," "CHARACTER," "ACTOR," AND "ARTIFICIAL UNIVERSE"), which the "Caretaker" (Christina Pilsner) indicates with her pointer.

To illustrate the situation, the orientation is punctuated by entrances and exits of characters familiar to us from mainstream dramatic literature. Stanley Kowalski (Nathan Tylutki) hollers "Stella" from the street below. Beckett's Clov (Tylutki) peeks in with a spyglass through the living room window, muttering "zero . . . zero . . . zero." We begin to find ourselves in the strange position of being on the opposite side of the stage looking-glass (in this case, we occupy the "corpsed" landscape of *Endgame*). One last point of vital importance, we are cautioned: any problems with the artificial universe produces a "Great Moment of Instability" (or "GMI"). In such a situation, a siren will sound and the space must be evacuated immediately. If we have been in the artificial universe for less than thirty minutes, exiting through the door is still possible. Oh yes, and the artificial universe is maintained by a *briefcase* that must remain in the hub at all times.

With the orientation taken care of, we get to settle into the multiplicity of ways the situation may be unpacked in performance. Who are we in this hub? Are we characters? Who will we encounter? What do characters *do* in the space while they wait? And what do *we* do with the problematic presence of the guy from the "real world" who makes this space his home? Troyer, oblivious to the characters and audience in the space, moves from the kitchen to his desk, going back for coffee, making and receiving telephone calls, and engaging in all the other activities that, we find, makes everyday private life more boring than we curious voyeurs had imagined.

We quickly find out the characters' main function in the space. Since this is the last of the interdimensional hubs (the rest have been destroyed by accidents or by administrative cutbacks), the Caretaker and characters must carefully monitor the activities of the denizens of the space, so as not to compromise the integrity of the facility. A "Great Moment of Instability" in this last garrison would be deadly, obviously. It would disrupt the delicate balance of art and life, the relationship between actor and character, and, in our case, our own existence as "characters."

The consistent occupants of the hub on the night we dwell in the space, besides the Caretaker, are Medea (Guentzel) and Godot (Levi). The latter, of course, never leaves the hub, because his playwright, he mourns, fixed it so he never shows up. "It's supposed to mean something, but it makes me mean nothing," Godot complains.

The Caretaker and Godot proceed with the daily "formal report," meticulously tracking the behavior of Troyer. We become familiarized with the routines of this individual, while at the same time we are aware of the playwright's own hat-tipping to his past performances and the growing popularity of his own Twin Cities artistic persona:

> He awoke at 11:07am Central Standard Time . . . . He drank coffee from a mug he stole from the Gunflint Lodge in Northern Minnesota. French Roast. 300 coffee beans. Electric Grinder. He then drank a large glass of water. He went to the bathroom . . . for several minutes . . . .
> 12:07pm. He began writing words on *post-it* notes with a red *sharpee* marker and putting the yellow, rectangular pieces of paper on the walls of his apartment . . . .
> 1:15pm. He looked at internet porn on his computer and pretended he didn't enjoy it. Three redheads, two blondes, and an older woman he described as mature and horny. He spent an average of two minutes on each website . . . .
> 2:03pm. He talked to his girlfriend and pretended to be interested—six times.

All this serves to reaffirm our suspicions that everyday life is boring in most cases, pathetic in others, but the intricate detail nevertheless draws our attention to the way that the world's dramatic literature, especially realism, could not function without "editing" the everyday—reducing it to its most unexpected or interesting moments, and heightening them by putting them into grand themes: the struggle of humankind, love in the face of obstacles, the degeneration of family. In the world of *[In John Troyer's Apartment]*, we perceive that the protagonist is laid bare, unmediated by artistic themes, and unedited by the hand of the playwright.

However, this, too, is a performance, and needs to make use of the conventions of the space and the trajectory established by the elements of the plot. As the Caretaker and Godot draw near the completion of the final report, the entries begin to correspond to the "real time" of the performance: "8:25pm," a character announces at 8:25pm. "He began looking at a theatre monologue he had forgotten about." As we learn from the "formal report," throughout the course of his day, Troyer has become distressed by his own artistic process, and envious of another playwright (those well-read or savvy enough figure out from dropped hints that the playwright in question is one Heiner Müller, whose five-page *Hamletmachine* Troyer directed last year as an eight-hour version for the Fringe Festival). In an act of desperation (and, we find out shortly, the climax of "Interpretation B") Troyer throws his *post-it* notes in the briefcase and tosses it out the window. The characters and Caretaker are immediately thrown into a state of alarm and begin dying, the siren sounds, panic ensues, the docents burst through the door and herd us out of the room. This is the "Great Moment of Instability" we were warned about earlier. We are evacuated down the staircase and onto the front porch. Intermis-

sion.

For Act II, we follow the same drill. We are herded back into the apartment, the seminar pad is turned to the appropriate page ("Interpretation A"), and we settle (more comfortably, now) into our spots. We were lucky. We hadn't been in the space more than thirty minutes, and thus, could leave out the door without suffering the fate of Medea and Godot. However, back in the apartment, the performance does not continue where it had left off. It starts from scratch with "Interpretation A." We find, however, that this interpretation is far more touching and intimate than the quirky and largely expository "Interpretation B." Accustomed to the situation of the characters, we may now empathize with the existential condition of Godot, who cannot leave, and the other characters who, conceived by their playwrights, are condemned to enter and exit the hub to play out the same scenes into infinity. Medea, not surprisingly, has developed a schizophrenic complex over the course of twenty-five hundred years since Euripides created her. She begs Godot to enact the dialogue between herself and Jason within the hub—a needed fix. Godot, not in the mood, cavils, but Medea persists: "Play it with me. Please. I need it. Five minutes. That's all. Please. For me." Medea and Godot poignantly act out the scene in which Jason confronts his wife after her murder of their children. This is a twist for us: here, we have the performers of *[In John Troyer's Apartment]* playing characters, Medea and Godot, who, faced with their existential condition, seek to soothe their consciousness by replaying the scenes as characters that they normally live in the bodies of actors portraying *them*—actors playing characters playing actors playing characters. Simultaneously, though, the performances are of high enough caliber that we may suspend our own disbelief and imagine the relationship between Jason and Medea alone, with the various performative layers temporarily invisible. These are the moments in theatre when we get a little chill of exhilaration—even in the stifling heat of Troyer's apartment.

In the final moments of the performance, we are reintroduced, through the dialogue between the characters, to the notion of the interdimensional hub, less interesting now than the characters themselves. Troyer, whom our consciousness has lost track of for a while, is back at his desk, at work as a playwright. A final twist in the theme is about to be explored. Troyer is writing a play about an apartment that is actually an interdimensional hub where characters reside when they are not on stage. The play is called *In John Troyer's Apartment.* As it happens, we find out from our hosts, the way a character comes into existence is as follows: a playwright gets an idea for a character. At that moment, the character pops into existence in the hub. If the playwright is still thinking of the character thirty minutes later, the character achieves permanence and will remain in the hub until the play is finally produced, and will leave through the window to enter the appropriate actor performing the role. Or, as in the case of Godot—or a character of a play which is never produced—remain in the hub indefinitely. (Godot, as an aside, shares with us how unnerving it is every time an unpromising character appears, only to "die" within a half hour.) Troyer has, in the last few minutes, conceived of a group of people—an audience—who find themselves in the hub. Aha, it all comes together: we are here because we have been conceived in the mind of a playwright.

We are "figments of John Troyer's imagination." We are put in the concomitant position of spectator and character, aware of our own performativity in all senses of the word (we see each other, we are seen by the characters, we *are* characters, and we are aware that we are being monitored by the surveillance cameras and accessible *via* Bitstream Underground, a Minneapolis-based internet provider, to any web browser). Furthermore, in this world, we are aware of our own fragility. We are never seriously convinced that we exist only as conceptual entities in a different dimension, but if we choose to invest in this world, playing along with the idea, certain questions present themselves: we have not been here for thirty minutes yet. What if Troyer forgets about us? Do we cease to exist? At the same time, this is a performance, and the outside universe of theatre has been folded into the inside, artificial universe. A play is taking place inside the hub, so where do we go when we leave? Again, the little chill.

The prospects do not look good. Troyer, the characters observe, is doubting himself. He's not happy with the idea. It doesn't seem to work. He begins to agonize, to pace back and forth, and we realize that our time is coming to an end. Ophelia (Pilsner) enters through the window, a fitting character for the eschatological moment. She has just left *Hamlet* Act IV scene vii. She doles out wrinkled photocopies of botanical descriptions. "Here's Rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray you love, remember," she intones, "And here is pansies, that's for thoughts." It becomes apparent that this is a eulogy spoken in honor of our immanent passing. Ophelia prepares to leave. "You don't have to go tonight," Medea says, stopping her. Godot reminds her, "Every night you leave a thousand times, every night you return a thousand times." "But tonight is different," breaks in Medea. "Tonight you might not return." The lines strike the gravity of the situation home. "Please . . . stay. You know what it's like to die alone."

Troyer ponders over the script. Godot and Medea chant Beckettian fragments: Godot: "They make a noise like feathers." Medea: "Like leaves." Godot: "like ashes." Troyer, lost in thought, murmurs, "like leaves." In a manner that would be fitting for Maeterlinck, we understand that the movements through multidimensionality are not without consequences in the three-dimensional space of the visible world. As in the French Symbolist plays *The Intruder* and *Home,* the three-dimensional character of Troyer is attuned to the movements through the space which lie beyond normal human perception. It is not enough, though, to inspire the playwright. He throws the embryonic script out the window, shutting the door and locking it. Godot and Medea slump and die. Ophelia appears, tapping at the locked window from outside, the last haunting image we see before the docents break in, and herd us out for the final time.

This last moment, of course, highlights the limitations of such a performative situation. As characters, we should have died when the script was thrown out the window. In the dramatic world, yes, the stakes were high. But even though the borders between spectator and actor, theatre and everyday life, were dismantled, our safety was never compromised, and, in the end, our social status of audience members remained intact. Throughout the course of the evening, we were barraged with images and ideas which allowed us to transcend the traditional actor-

spectator relationship for a time. The reversal of the fourth wall, for instance, encapsulated so succinctly by Clov's appearance at the window looking *in,* as well as the very notion of an "off-stage" world for characters (*versus* actors) were satisfactorily provocative. The performance space itself, an apartment, with the normal rules of auditorium, no smoking signs, curtains, ushers, cell-phone announcements, were all suspended, and we needed to reinvent our relationship with the performance event.

Indeed, the situation put the "fringe" back into "fringe festival." Though the Minnesota version is touted as having become the largest fringe theatre and performance festival in the United States in the last two years, the original in Edinburgh was a counter-festival, an illegitimate collection of performances that did not make it into the valid and authoritative festival itself. The Minnesota Fringe Festival, on the contrary, is a well planned, organized event. In the past, the shows submitted for inclusion were non-juried, and were welcome as long as the companies fronted the application fee. But, having grown so large in the last years, some applicants are inevitably turned away (*Minnesota Fringe Festival*). Thus, the Fringe has become an example of what earlier fringes sought to change. Through bringing in his own venue, a "Fringe Affiliate," Troyer departed from the conventionalized, routine space of the festival, and reintroduced some of the liminality that the first "fringe" performers occupied. Others noted the exceptional circumstances: even the *New York Times* picked up on it. As Troyer pointed out to me, *[In John Troyer's Apartment]* was the only show mentioned by name in the Minnesota Fringe Festival listing in the *Times'* National/International Arts Guide, sharing the page with the concurrent festivals in Edinburgh, Insbruck, Pesaro, and San Sebastián ("Arts and Leisure Guide").

In this space, several possibilities presented themselves. As an audience, we were highlighted and brought into the dramatic action. We were on equal footing, as it were, with the actors, and the play was as much about *us* as it was about the characters, including John Troyer. Our traditional relationship had been wrenched from its preassigned meaning (*à la* Spivak) and placed in a new relationship. In a sense, this was a Brechtian situation: we were as aware, most of the time, of the performers' dual status of actor and character, as we were conscious of our own role as spectators; never allowed to fully immerse ourselves in the action. Had we had the mind to do it, we could have, at any time, interrupted the performance to assert our own presence. There were, of course, times such as the "orientation" when we were invited to ask questions. The actors also frequently looked to us for reactions at appropriate junctures, but each time were met with expectant silence. Perhaps this was because we were a polite, Midwestern audience—well trained to sit without shuffling, careful to turn our electronic devices off so that we didn't disrupt the theatrical illusion with a call from the world outside. Or perhaps it was because we were generous, or drawn-in just enough to want to see what Troyer and his collaborators had come up with on their own. We wanted to pursue the course established by the actions of the characters without ruining it. These are definitely possibilities. However, I perceived that we were never given full permission, as an audience, implicitly or explicitly, to step in and change the action. Our

behavior was regulated by the relationship between actor and spectator. It was not our place to interrupt. And we had the cameras on us at all times, guaranteeing our good manners as an example *par excellence* of Bentham's Panopticon. Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" sought to liberate the spectator from such passive acceptance by allowing him or her to step onto the stage and participate and change the action. *[In John Troyer's Apartment]* may have contained this possibility, but, at least on the evening I attended, no such liberation occurred.

In the end, though, I believe that such an interpretation would not have successfully fulfilled the aim of the performance. As an audience, we were not, for the most part, oppressed (on the order of Boal's spect-actors in South America). We were, however, naïve or complacent enough to have forgotten the extent to which surveillance informs our behavior in everyday life. It may even be argued that our practices are played out as per the regulatory norms conceived by our own "playwrights": our identity is just as sculpted by the media and social structures as a character's traits are written into a playtext. Political questions such as these, however, formed the backdrop of a mostly aesthetic and intellectual experience. We may not have left the apartment pondering our own politically and historically regulated condition. But we were, for a short while, able to delight in having the attention drawn to ourselves as spectators, instead of the other way around.

Notes

1. See also Sharon Schmickle, Joy Powell, and Dee DePass, "Activists Check In as Forum Begins; Protester Complains, 'Police are Making it Ridiculous.'"

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