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## PLACES!

Live theatre audiences and their feelings of belonging in  
cosmopolitan London

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## **ABSTRACT**

*In response to the lack of research concerning the consistent prominence of live theatre in London vis-à-vis ever-changing cultural affairs, this paper gains a deeper understanding of audience perspectives regarding attending live theatre. The research aims to answer the questions, 'How does the act of attending live theatre in London relate to a person's sense of belonging in a cosmopolitan context,' and 'How does the concept of liveness relate to audience experiences in London theatre?' Through semi-structured interviews, ten theatre audience members were asked a series of questions related to themes of community, theatre, and liveness. Their responses allowed for insight into audience perspectives on attending live theatre and their motivations for continuing to do so. Despite the assumption that a cosmopolitan society may lack a sense of community and tradition, audience responses regarding themes of liveness imply that theatre may act as local stability in a rapidly growing society. Conversely, audience expectations of theatre regarding content and diversifying theatrical spaces reflect their perceptions of London's cosmopolitan culture. Despite its longstanding prevalence in British society, theatre has generally not been the subject of research, let alone audience research, leaving much to be desired of the topic. This paper takes a particular focus on theatre's role in Western societies, hoping to be a point of entry into broadening theatre audience studies to be inclusive of non-Western contexts.*

## INTRODUCTION

Live theatre has been tethered to its social and cultural surroundings since its conception in ancient Greece (Bennett, 1994). In the words of August Strindberg, the nineteenth century playwright resembled a 'lay preacher,' with the sermon of every play projecting modern politics and ideas onto attending audiences (Strindberg, 1992). Simultaneously, theatre has also been known to offer its audiences community enrichment and a sense of belonging. Whether it be through perceived community ties to fellow audience members (Anderson, 2006) or the implication that communities require storytelling to strengthen connectivity (Appiah, 2007), the theatrical experience undoubtedly extends beyond the stage. While recent history has branded professional theatre in Western contexts as a privilege for the few, it continues to thrive in major cities with increasing diversity and development. As information communication technologies (ICTs) advance, these diverse major cities are becoming amalgamations of people, cultures, and identities. The question then arises of the role that a traditional art form like theatre might offer these places as they continue to grow rapidly. One may assume that theatre's traditional format is at odds with the advancements of modern societies and is no longer relevant to today's contemporary media. However, London is a striking anomaly in this assumption. A city known for both its diverse, cosmopolitan society and for its prominence in the history, present, and future of theatre, it has yet to be examined if the city's theatre scene has been successful *because* of its expeditious growth or *despite* it. In the words of French theorist Nicolas Bourriaud, the cosmopolitan is frequently 'caught between the need of a connection with its environment and the forces of uprooting,' begging the question of where theatre rests on this spectrum in cosmopolitan London (Bourriaud, 2009: 5). To mediate this query, it seemed most appropriate to find the answer in the people who keep theatre alive: audiences. Through qualitative interviews, this paper enquires the primary research question, *How does the act of attending live theatre in London relate to a person's sense of belonging in a cosmopolitan context?* Supplementarily, motivated by preexisting theories emphasizing the importance of a performance's liveness, this research also addresses the question, *How does the concept of liveness relate to audience experiences at London theatre?*

This paper begins with an introduction to key concepts through the literature review, contextualizing ideas around theatre's intersection with community and culture, cosmopolitanism, and liveness. These concepts lay the proper groundwork to explore the research questions via empirical research. Next, the conceptual framework is established, and research questions are stated before moving on

to details regarding the methodological choices of the study. Particulars concerning the methodology, sampling, and data analysis are outlined to provide sufficient information regarding the design of the study. Importantly, ethics and reflexivity are then examined to ensure that the research remains in good standing against ethical expectations and research biases. The data is then presented in tandem with relevant discussion, examining audience responses vis-à-vis the research question and literature review. Limitations and contributions of the study are acknowledged before the conclusion draws the essay to a close.

Despite the prominence of theatre in London's history and culture, very little research has been conducted on the medium, let alone its audiences. This paper hopes to contribute to the few works that have taken an interest in theatre audiences, positioning London's cosmopolitan society against the age-old tradition. The research in this study relates mostly to theatre and audiences as they exist in Western contexts, hoping to establish a framework for future research to examine theatre in non-Western cities. There must be an explanation for the persistence of theatre and the fortitude of audiences to continue to arrive at the theatre. An understanding of this tenacity will not only offer insight into audience expectations, but it will also aid in understanding theatre's prominence in London culture. In the words of British philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'Why, you might ask, should we care about how other people think and feel about stories? Why do we talk about them in this language of value? One answer is just that it is part of being human' (Appiah, 2007: 29).

## **THEORETICAL CHAPTER**

This chapter explores dominant literature relevant to this essay's topic, contextualizing experiences of community and culture at the theatre, theories of cosmopolitanism and its influence on societies, and the importance of liveness to performance arts. First, discussions of community and culture as they have been experienced and related to theatre are presented to ponder theatre's role in modern societies. For the purposes of this paper, the topic of community will be used as a starting point in examining feelings of belonging. Next, definitions of cosmopolitanism are compiled to contextualize London as a cosmopolitan city. These ideas are also applied in the Analysis and Discussion section of this essay vis-à-vis audience perspectives on London and London theatre. Finally, given theatre's defining characteristic of unpredictability, the last section explores theories on liveness and ephemerality and their theoretical importance to audience members. Due to a lack of pre-existing

research on related topics, this chapter is largely based on theoretical conceptions, introducing a few relevant empirical studies when appropriate.

### **Historical Intersections of Theatre, Community, and Culture**

In order to properly address questions of theatre audience experiences of belonging, it is vital to establish the intersections of theater with communities and cultures. Historically, cultural theatrical activities can be traced back to ancient Greece. As described in Susan Bennett's book *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, theatre in Greece originated as a practice 'inseparable' from the city's social, economic, and even religious traditions (Bennett, 1994). Bennett elaborates on this relationship between Greek theatre and audiences, writing, '...the advent of drama as a part of the main Athenian religious festivals established an inextricable link to the religious experience of the involved spectator' (Bennett, 1994: 2). This connection between culture, societies, and religion is very similar to Strindberg's assertion of the playwright as a preacher, as described in this essay's introduction. Evidently, while this tradition of theatre representing the majority in a sort of ritualistic activity was not static, the practice undoubtedly remains connected to modern economic, social, and political structures (Bennett, 1994).

In addition to the intersections between theatre and societal structures, theatre also serves as an emotional tool for individual audience members. Both professor of theatre Theodore Shank and British dramatist Martin Esslin identify theatre as emotionally probing for audiences. Shank explains, '[the dramatic work] articulates for the audience something vital about their own emotive lives that previously they had not been able to grasp,' (Shank, 1969: 172) while Esslin elucidates, 'in ritual as in drama the aim is an enhanced level of consciousness, a memorable insight into the nature of existence' (Esslin, 1976: 28). For both Shank and Esslin, theatre not only connects societies through monologues and storytelling, but it offers the spectator insight into their own perspectives and emotions. Furthermore, Esslin's concept of memorable insight may also be viewed in relation to discussions of 'imagined communities.' Benedict Anderson asserts the ways in which creative sources, particularly print sources, have functioned to develop personal connections between places and/or people they had never physically been to or met (Anderson, 2006). Anderson described this process as creating imagined communities. Originally applied in the context of promoting nationalism, modern discourse extends this awareness within imagined communities to global identities (Anderson, 2006). Like Esslin's ideas of enhancing consciousness to the nature of existence, these imagined communities

allow audiences to experience perspectives outside of their own. Kwame Anthony Appiah broadens this sentiment to examine the influence of art beyond print publications. For Appiah, there can be no acknowledgment of a community without the human imagination and subsequent stories that are created. He writes, 'We wouldn't recognize community as human if it had no stories, if its people had no narrative imagination' (Appiah, 2007: 29). Beyond the importance of storytelling in communities, Appiah asserts that the identification of communities is dependent on the art of storytelling.

Through discussions of imagined communities and heightened awareness of others via rituals and performances, we may also arrive at discourse relating to the influence of one's identity and culture on their theatrical experience. Jill Dolan describes the nuances that one's identity may have on their perspectives of theatre productions. She writes,

*the feminist spectator might find that her gender – and / or her race, class, or sexual preference – as well as her ideology and politics make the [white, middle class, heterosexual, male] representation alien and even offensive. It seems that as a spectator she is far from ideal. (Dolan, 1988: 3-4)*

Through Dolan's declaration of identity, we may assume that an audience would prefer to see a version of 'themselves' represented on stage, a sentiment that communications theorists Antonio La Pastina and Joseph D. Straubhaar label 'cultural proximity' (La Pastina and Straubhaar, 2005). However, it is not always the case that audiences prefer a representation of culture approximate to their own. In their article, 'Here As Elsewhere: Thinking Theatrically/Acting Locally,' Sharon Mazer introduces the idea of 'cultural cringe.' Mazer specifically looks at theatre from the perspective of school productions in New Zealand, examining the differences in actor reactions to European plays and traditional Māori theatre. While Mazer Acknowledges that we would assume the New Zealander students feel more comfortable participating in a Māori play, they cite 'cultural cringe' as a potential reason for this to not be the case. Mazer writes,

*The 'cultural cringe' – an acute sense of embarrassment, shame, self-consciousness at seeing themselves in the context of the wider world – erupts in the class. Confronted with the artifacts of their own theatre history, they become reticent. A kind of 'that's not me' kicks in and threatens to blossom into full-blown resistance by the time we reach these two classics of Māori theatre. (Mazer, 2014: 37)*

Through cultural cringe, Mazer makes the point that a production relative to one's culture, whether it be content- or production-wise, may lead to audiences feeling unrepresented in the art. Whereas a production so far from their lived experience holds no expectation of being relevant, a culturally

proximate production may leave a higher possibility for feelings of misrepresentation. This is not to assume that this will be the effect of diversifying theatrical repertoire, nor should it deter theatres from doing so; it is only to suggest that the cultural and historical context in which theatre operates, especially in relation to Western theatre, may not exemplify La Pastina and Straubhaar's theory of cultural proximate television.

From the origins of Greek theatre intertwining with social, political, and religious values to the modern importance of cultural context in the audience, pre-existing theory implies that modern applications of theatre are inseparable from an audience's surroundings and values. As put by researcher Irene Ramos, theatre has created a space to strengthen communities, where audiences experience a shared, yet still individual, identity (Ramos, 2014). These assertions will be important in evaluating theatre in the context of London, particularly when audience members relay their feelings and experiences attending theatre. The proceeding section will address another prominent aspect of modern London culture: cosmopolitanism.

### **Cosmopolitanism and Tribalization**

Having examined live theatre's close connection to societal cultures and communities, it is necessary to establish an understanding of cosmopolitanism prior to examining theatre in London. According to British sociologist Gerard Delanty, cosmopolitanism as a concept originated in discussions of moral and political philosophy but expanded to wider discussions across the social sciences (Delanty, 2019). The political philosophy perspective was developed by Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, whose work has been adapted by many modern theorists. Garrett W. Brown draws on Kant's foundational work on cosmopolitanism to identify the concept as relating to the freedom of all global citizens to foster and develop a freedom in society, the 'cosmopolitan right' (Brown and Delanty, 2019). Brown also cites advancements in information communication technology as exacerbating the cosmopolitan experience, increasing awareness and acceptance of the 'Other' (Brown and Delanty, 2019). Brown is not the only theorist whose definition of cosmopolitanism includes an acceptance of difference. For Delanty, cosmopolitanism is '...the extension of the moral and political horizons of people, societies, organizations and institutions. It implies an attitude of openness as opposed to closure' (Delanty, 2019: 2). Ayona Datta echoes this sentiment, describing the fundamentals of cosmopolitanism as an 'openness to difference' (Datta, 2009). While both Delanty and Datta identify this to be an innate feature of the concept, Datta acknowledges that the global citizen may be



encountering liaisons of cultures without physically interacting with the 'Other' (Datta, 2009). Kwame Anthony Appiah also approaches cosmopolitanism with an appreciation of openness in their work *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. He describes the 'instinct of a cosmopolitan' to justify the impulse of members of society to appreciate diverse works of fine art. He writes that this instinct leads individuals to '...take pleasure in Akan proverbs, Oscar Wilde's plays, Basho's haiku verses, Nietzsche's philosophy. Your respect for wit doesn't just lead you to these works; it shapes how you respond to them' (Appiah, 2007: 26). While Appiah's examples themselves are restricted to works widely regarded as 'classics,' this does not negate the general sentiment of approaching art and culture with an openness to experience and learn something new. For Appiah, there is an objective importance in subjective art that is produced for and experienced by the cosmopolitan audience.

Although cosmopolitanism may be ambiguous in theory, it has practical and tangible influence on urban culture in cities such as London. London has long been considered a cosmopolitan city open to diversity and Other-ness. As described by Ranji Devadason building on various cosmopolitan theorists, 'in public and policy documents, media images and academic literature, London is presented as a "symbolic microcosm of the globe", a "world in a city" and a "true cosmopoli"' (Devadason, 2010: 2947). For Devadason, London's technological development and diversity is the cause for its amalgamated population of various cultures and people. This does not necessarily indicate that every Londoner will view London or themselves through the lens of cosmopolitanism. However, from the theoretical perspective, the combination of London's diversity and rapid growth have led it to being identified as a cosmopolitan city, welcoming to the 'Other.'

An approach to cosmopolitanism that has received reasonable pushback from modern theorists is the idea that a cosmopolitan society exists in replacement of the national or local society. In the introduction to their book *Cultivating Cosmopolitanism for Intercultural Communication*, Miriam Shoshana Sobre and Nilanjana Bardhan offer a perspective on cosmopolitanism that stresses the coexistence of the local and cosmopolitan. Particularly in times of modern global troubles such as climate change and world hunger, Sobre and Bardhan assert, '...we must find ways to communicate within expanding intercultural spaces as global citizens who are able to think, communicate and expand their cultural horizons in world-oriented ways while simultaneously maintaining local and national attachments' (Sobre and Bardhan, 2013: 5). Similarly, Delanty joins Sobre and Bardhan in their assertion of the coexistence of cosmopolitanism and the local. Delanty rejects the implication

that cosmopolitanism inherently opposes or contradicts the local, and instead declares the prevalence of a *'rooted cosmopolitanism'* where both the local and global are present (emphasis added) (Delanty, 2019; Meerzon, 2020).

Decades before Delanty's rooted cosmopolitanism, however, there was McLuhan's interpretation of *'retribalization'*. In his book *The Gutenberg Galaxy: the making of typographic man*, Marshall McLuhan details the societal shift that occurs when once *'closed'* systems become *'open'* through technological advancements. He describes the inability of societies to sufficiently adapt to the rapid growth of technologies, citing modern developments as more *'global in extent'* and less psychically supportable in societies (McLuhan, 1962). McLuhan goes on to apply Karl R. Popper's concept of *'tribalization'* to a globalized society. While Popper used tribalization to explain the security of ancient Greek societies before external ventures *'detrribalized'* the community, McLuhan applies this concept to modern technological influences. In the words of McLuhan,

*The tribal community (and later the "city") is a place of security for the member of the tribe. Surrounded by enemies and by dangerous or even hostile magical forces, he experiences the tribal community as a child experiences his family and his home, in which he plays his definite part; a part he knows well, and plays well. (McLuhan, 1962: 9)*

For McLuhan, the more that a society experiences rapid growth towards cosmopolitanism and encountering the *'Other,'* the greater the need for a local, grounding, *retribalizing* quality. It can be innovative and new, but its presentation must be one that grounds itself in a traditional format. Miriam Shoshana Sobre and Nilanjana Bardhan amalgamate a similar concept to McLuhan's with communications and cultural studies, emphasizing the importance of *'reterritorial,'* or local, facets of cosmopolitan societies (Sobre and Bardhan, 2013). For Sobre and Bardhan, there must be local exchanges and experiences of culture to maintain a sense of balance in cosmopolitan societies. The local is not only present, but it is necessary.

Héctor F. Pascual Álvarez is one of the few to investigate the relationship between modern cosmopolitan theories and theatre studies. In 2008, Pascual Álvarez conducted a study on theatre programs in the U.S. and the Netherlands to conclude that theatre has become a globalized entity. A prominent conclusion from these analyses was that theatre, having previously strengthened local identities, is presently contributing to the *'world society'* through an increase in representations of the *'Other'* on stage (Pascual Álvarez, 2008). While Álvarez's work addresses the relationship

between global societies and the content of theatrical works, this paper approaches the question from an audience-focused perspective, inferring that the practice of attending theatre may be representative of a grounding activity in a cosmopolitan society. With London identified as a globalized, cosmopolitan city, there is not a more apt context for this paper's research.

### **Liveness and Ephemerality**

It would be remiss to overlook the influence that theatre's format may have in audience experiences of belonging. Television, Cinema, and even bootleg recordings of theatrical productions make modern entertainment increasingly accessible and affordable, yet audiences continue to arrive at the theater for the *live* performance. To examine how theatre audiences may experience belonging within the changes of a cosmopolitan city, it is vital to have a firm sense of liveness. In their book *Liveness on Stage*, Claudia Georgi outlines five characteristics that are generally associated with the concept of liveness identifying,

*the copresence of performers and spectators, the ephemerality of the live event, the unpredictability or risk of imperfection, the possibility of interaction and, finally, a specific quality of the representation of reality.*  
(Georgi, 2014: 5)

Furthermore, Philip Auslander presents an assumed effect of the co-presence of performers and spectators, declaring that those characteristics are also often tied directly to creating a sense of community in live performances (Auslander, 2023).

While Auslander rests on the co-presence of performers and audiences, Herbert Molderings speculates that it is the ephemerality of live performances that gives them meaning. He argues that art is considered a performance specifically *because* it cannot be reproduced, and any reproduction that may occur in the form of photographs and videos is merely representative of that moment that has since passed (Molderings, 1984). To Molderings, a 'recorded performance' is an oxymoron – a reproduced representation of the raw material. Peggy Phelan joins the debate of reproduction, as well, declaring the circulation of performances 'representations of representations,' transferring out of being a performance entirely (Phelan, 1996). For Phelan, the loss of ephemerality correlates with the loss of the innate promise in performance. In concurrence with Phelan, theatre studies professor Patrice Pavis and Loren Kruger describe theatre that has been influenced by other media as 'contaminated' (Pavis and Kruger, 1992). To the theorists cited above, a performance's greatest

strength lies in its inability to be mass reproduced and consumed – in existing in a single, fleeting moment.

Philip Auslander, however, differs from the preceding theorists and statements, specifically this notion that live performances must be irreproducible. Auslander uses the example of the Blue Man Group to argue that, because they have multiple productions of the same show on stages simultaneously around the world, the live performance becomes something that *is* reproducible and experienced by masses. Counter to this point, however, is the idea that the gesture of staging the same live production in different places does not qualify it as ‘reproducible.’ The works and ideas of music composer John Cage stand in direct opposition to those of Auslander. Cage's piece ‘4’33’, titled for its duration, requires the instrumentalist to refrain from playing any notes. For Cage, the music is in the setting: the ambulance that drives by the venue or the cough from the back of the auditorium (Hermes, 2000). On paper, the performance is the same each time, but the experience of the piece is far from reproducible. The same perspective can be applied to performances of the Blue Man Group. Productions may be reproduced to the extent that they are recognized as similar; however, the audience experience, as described by Phelan, is different each time.

For audience researcher Martin Barker, Auslander makes a staggering false equivalence in his discussions of liveness. While Auslander details the use of technological devices, including headphones and large screens at music concerts, as inhibiting the performance’s liveness, Barker rejects the notion that technological intervention makes a performance less live. In his words, ‘[Auslander’s example] sees liveness as lack of technological intervention, rather than as, for instance, a mode of participation, a sense of shared purpose. It denies the possibility of *heightening* participation through technological means’ (emphasis original) (Barker, 2003: 35). Barker explores that an event may not be live *despite* technology, but rather, technology may *enhance* an event’s liveness. This discourse between Auslander and Barker contributes to the discussion of how much mediation a production may endure before its liveness is tainted, conversations that have never been more prevalent as technology advances and live performances look for new spectacles to engage audiences.

In terms of research, that which focuses on the appeal of theatre’s liveness has had the most influence on this study. Martin Barker has conducted extensive research regarding audience reception of film and television, and in 2003 published a study examining audience reception of the 1996 film *Crash* against its 2001 stage adaptation by the same name. Barker used a preliminary questionnaire to gauge

audience perceptions of the film versus the theatrical production, following up with 37 of the original 122 participants via interviews to gain more detailed insight (Barker 24). One of Barker's findings included a distinction between the *mediated* and the *immediate*. Audiences described their experience watching the film as 'removed' compared to their theatrical experience, which was 'direct' and 'immediate' (Barker, 2003).

This research was instrumental in contextualizing this paper's Analysis section on audience perspectives of liveness. While not related to theatre directly, another study relevant to discussions of liveness is that of Ludmila Lupinacci, who conducted research for their PhD thesis around the liveness of digital media. They used an interview-diary technique, conducting an interview at the beginning and end of the study as well as asking participants to keep a diary of their thoughts over the course of the five days. One of the conclusions that Lupinacci draws relates to the importance of ephemerality to participants – how the feeling of missing a time-sensitive post often kept them engaged on social media and other digital platforms – a phenomenon, says Lupinacci, that 'performance studies have been telling us for decades' (Lupinacci, 2022: 132). Lupinacci's research provides valuable insight for establishing the potential importance of ephemerality to theatre audiences.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK & RESEARCH QUESTION

As aforementioned, the prominence of theatre in London coexisting with the cosmopolitan title of the city invites research to address the relationship between a sense of belonging through theatre-going and cosmopolitan London. Several interpretations of cosmopolitanism are grounded in national and local culture while theories of liveness use a similar angle of anchoring audiences in the ephemeral nature of performances. Additionally, studies that have previously examined the influence of cosmopolitanism on the content of productions (Álvarez), leave space for exploration into how cosmopolitanism may be positioned against audience experiences. It may be that theatre acts as a form of *retribalization* (McLuhan) or *reterritorialization* (Sobre and Bardhan) for the cosmopolitan city and its audiences. In the spirit of Appiah's call for similarity-based research, this study explores the possibility of theatre audiences experiencing a sense of belonging *because* of live theatre, as opposed to *in spite* of it. To evaluate the validity of the claims above, the research questions for this paper are as follows:

RQ 1: How does the act of attending live theatre in London relate to a person's sense of belonging in a cosmopolitan context?

RQ2: How does the concept of liveness relate to audience experiences at London theatre?

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **Methodology**

This study utilizes semi-structured interviews to collect data from participants. The nature of interviews allows for in-depth data to be gathered from a small pool of audience members (Knott et al., 2022), with the semi-structured format allowing the data to vary among participants. As explained by Michele J. McIntosh and Janice M. Morse, semi-structured interviews are '...designed to ascertain subjective responses from persons regarding a particular situation or phenomenon they have experienced' (McIntosh and Morse, 2015: 1). Originally, surveys were inspected as the method for this research; however, seeing as surveys require theory to inform hypotheses corresponding to its questions, it was determined that there was not enough sufficient preexisting theory to form these hypotheses (Sedgman and Barker, n.d.). Instead, interviews allow for more free-flowing, nuanced conversations. Depending on the responses, participants were asked follow-up questions to explore both answers that were consistent between participants and those that diverged. This study employs a relatively detailed interview guide, outlining specific questions and ideas to ensure a reliable starting point for the conversations (George, 2022; McIntosh and Morse, 2015). Due to the lack of pre-existing research and theory on live theatre audiences, this study uses the semistructured interview to allow respondents the freedom of answering questions as accurately and personally as possible, a feature that quantitative research often lacks (Knott et al., 2022).

### **Sampling**

Theatregoers were recruited for participation from two independent theatres in London: The Cockpit Theatre and Southwark Playhouse's Borough venue. The intention behind targeting these theatres largely stemmed from their size and funding, with the faster turnover of productions offering the opportunity for more diverse audience members. Additionally, given the prominence

of fringe and experimental theatre in London, the independent theatres had a particular appeal. As for the interview participants themselves, there were few restrictions beyond having attended theatre in London and exceeding the age of 18. Because the research questions are quite broad, it was the intention that the interview participants themselves would cover a range of backgrounds. A combination of purposive and convenience sampling was used during the recruitment process to obtain this diverse pool of participants. Seeing as purposive sampling involves the non-random recruitment of participants based on their knowledge or background (Robinson, 2013), audience members of the Cockpit Theatre and Southwark Playhouse were specifically targeted in hopes of recruiting theatregoers who have experience attending smaller theatres in London. Beyond targeting the audiences of these specific theatres, however, convenience sampling was practiced, avoiding any personal biases that I may have as a researcher. Once inside the theatres, as many audience members as possible were asked if they would like to participate or learn more about the study, narrowing the pool to include those who were available and interested. This combination of sampling techniques allowed for some continuity between audience members while leaving space for a variety of experiences and backgrounds (see Appendix A for details of participants).

### **Procedure**

As mentioned above, participants were recruited at both The Cockpit Theatre and Southwark Playhouse. This study was limited to two theatres due to a lack of response from others when contacted for permission to recruit participants on their property. Audience members were approached before a performance and asked if they would like to provide their name and email to participate and/or learn more about the study. Those who agreed received a follow-up email with details regarding the study, along with an Informed Consent document detailing their rights as a participant (Appendix B). Participants were made aware both in the Informed Consent document and at the start of the interview that the conversation would be recorded for transcription purposes and all data anonymized in the final product. Additionally, they were asked if they had any questions about myself or the study before we got started to give them a feeling of control in what may feel like an unbalanced encounter (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). Ten interviews were conducted, lasting for an average of 34 minutes. The formats of these interviews were left to the participants' preference and therefore included 3 audio-only calls over the phone, 6 via the digital videochat service Zoom, and 1 in-person. The varied formats allotted the interviewees choice in the matter, ensuring an

environment most comfortable to them. While the interviews were being recorded, I also took notes during the sessions to aid my train of thought and highlight areas for follow-up questions. An interview guide consisting of main ideas and sample questions was created and tested in the 3-interview pilot study and adjusted for the main study interviews (Appendix C) (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). Changes to the top guide include rephrasing questions to implement comparative responses (i.e. *Who did you attend the last show you saw with?* followed by *Is that typically who you go to the theatre with?*), adjusting the questions to be inclusive of participants' cultural perspectives of London, as well as adding a question asking for their definition of community to contextualize and promote discussions of belonging and theatre. A constant between interview guides in the pilot and main study was the ultimate question, *Is there anything else you would like to add?* This question allowed the participants to close the interview, again, with a sense of autonomy and, in many cases, provide additional perspectives relevant to the study (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). All interviews were then transcribed as verbatim as possible to mitigate inevitable biases that exist within the transcription process (Kowal and O'Connell, 2014). Once the transcriptions were complete, the data was ready to be coded and analysed.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected in the interviews and identify common themes across respondents (Aronson, 1995), employing both deductive and inductive analysis to do so. Originally referred to as 'grounded theory' by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, inductive analysis draws theories from patterns in the data, whereas deductive analysis starts with drawing hypotheses from theory and collecting data to test said hypotheses (Glaser and Strauss, 2017; Naeem et al., 2023; Reichertz, 2014). As described by Andrea J. Bingham, 'Deductive analysis can be used to organize data or sort data into predetermined categories created from literature or theory,' while 'inductive analysis involves reading through the data and identifying codes, categories, patterns, and themes as they emerge' (Bingham, 2023: 2). The nature of the semi-structured interviews allowed this study to explore both forms of analysis, as the interview guide modelled deductive analysis, constructing questions as they relate to preexisting theory. For example, questions prompting participants to discuss whether they enjoy attending theatre alone or with others are drawn from the theory that people in a cosmopolitan society would be open to engaging with perspectives other than their own. Additionally, using these questions as starting points allow for



new ideas to arise and be explored during the interview and subsequently analyzed and compared to theory later, mirroring inductive analysis. Both deductive and inductive analysis require the framing of ideas around theory, lessening the risk of the researcher's personal biases contaminating the data (see Ethics and Reflexivity section for further discussion).

A coding process was used to conduct the deductive and inductive analysis on the data using the secure software platform Delve. The coding was separated into two cycles: inductive coding and deductive coding (Bingham, 2023). The first cycle consisted of coding the data for deductive analysis, highlighting points of discussion on 'liveness', 'cosmopolitanism', 'cultural perspectives of London', 'mediated theatre experiences', etc (see Appendix B for a Table of Themes). This was done first to make the process of inductive analysis smoother, as it was easier to see which theories did not originate from theory with the deductive analysis completed. The second pass of coding was for inductive analysis, organizing information into categories that did not originate from existing theory including 'perspectives on audience demographics.' With these categories established, the data was ready to be interpreted and contextualized via existing theory.

### **Ethics and Reflexivity**

Standards and ethical considerations outlined by the Media and Communications Department at the London School of Economics and Political Science were upheld in collecting this empirical data. As touched upon in the Procedure section of this paper, all participants provided written consent for participating in the study, signing the Informed Consent document that contained themes of the study, details of the research process, and their rights as participants. Despite the study's material not being inherently sensitive or compromising, all participants were given the freedom to decline to answer questions and revoke their participation. All identifiable information was withheld from the final paper.

I acknowledge my positioning as a researcher may have impacted the willingness of some audience members to participate in the study. Seeing as a few participants have higher education degrees themselves, it may have been the case that they agreed to the study from a place of understanding the procedures of conducting empirical research. Additionally, as expanded upon in the Limitations section, audience members may have a certain perception of what experiences are required to participate in research studies, which may have led to their unwillingness to participate. A factor that

may have helped mitigate my position as a researcher slightly is that I, myself, have been a theatre audience member of several London productions. This allowed me to present myself on more of an even playing field to the participants and as an ‘insider’ of sorts, as opposed to an outsider-looking-in. However, with this in mind, it was also important for me to reserve any personal perspectives or experiences as much as possible to prevent my ideas from swaying the participants’. Additionally, as I am a theatre audience member myself, I may have specific assumptions regarding what I intend to find during these interviews. To diminish this bias, I carefully constructed the topic guide to relate to previous theory that researchers and academics have presented. This positioned me in more of an objective stance, comparing interview responses to theory rather than my own experiences and opinions.

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

This Analysis and Discussion section consists of findings as they relate to preexisting literature on theatre vis-à-vis community and culture, ideas of cosmopolitanism, and liveness. Audience responses relating to community will first be established to contextualize proceeding perspectives on theatre and belonging, addressing the primary research question, *How does the act of attending live theatre in London relate to a person’s sense of belonging in a cosmopolitan context?* Following, audience perspectives on liveness will be presented in reference to the supplementary query, *How does the concept of liveness relate to audience experiences at London theatre?* For readability purposes, data has been cleaned to exclude vocal disfluencies such as ‘like’ and ‘um’.

### **Theatre, Community, and Belonging**

#### Defining and Finding Community in the Theatre

To introduce feelings of belonging and being welcome in a space, participants were asked to relay their own definitions of community. Doing so allowed interviewees to express their general feelings on the concept before relating it to their experiences in the theatre.

Several responses included words such as ‘support’ and the sentiment of working towards a common goal, signifying togetherness as a necessity in community.

*I would say community, to me, anyway, is a group of people who are brought together by **shared support for one another**. They don't necessarily need to have the same values. Arguably, **I think it's sometimes better if they have differing values**. And there are moments of contest and contrast between them. But so long as they are all working together towards their collective good, per se, I think that is what I would define as a... as a community. – Participant 4*

*I grew up in a church... **So my definition of community is service, and everyone serving, and people benefiting, everyone benefiting from that, do you know what I mean? So, a community of people that all help each other.** – Participant 7*

These definitions emphasize the importance of other people in one's community. They don't necessarily need to have everything in common, but their priorities must be aligned enough to work towards a common good. This mirrors Anderson's idea of an 'imagined community,' where a connection is felt between people without any personal knowledge of one another. They are brought together by a shared goal and support for one another, providing synchronicity across the collective.

After the general definitions were established, interviewees were then asked to elaborate on whether those definitions applied to their experiences attending live theatre. All participants expressed a relationship between theatre and their definitions of community in one way or another. Unsurprisingly, many audience experiences of community in theatre related to the presence of other audience members around them.

***I think community is very important... I think it's a part of the experience of a play. I think the producer of a show should... notice that community is very important...** – Participant 1*

*I don't know, there's something about the theatre that... you just get a buzz from it. And... I think it's so easy to... just get chatting to people at the theatre. I don't know if everyone feels like that, but I often go to the theatre on my own. So if there's someone, you know, sat next to me, it's nice to have a little chat at the... interval and it... **I think it feels like a community when you go to the theatre.** – Participant 9*

*...I think that there is a sense of connectedness through that shared enjoyment, or sadness, or like emotions. – Participant 5*

*... theater does serve like a church, in a way, I think. People are telling stories to people that... are going to the theater, because... when people are in need, it is art that they turn to, and creative outlet and intake.... So, yeah, I think it is, I think it is a service. **I think people are giving, and people are taking, and I think that that is community.** – Participant 7*

This sense of community that audiences describe ranges from being present in a space of fellow audience members (Participants 9 and 5) to feeling found in the overall experience (Participants 1 and 7). Particularly in descriptions that don't necessarily involve talking or connecting to people within the theatre, themes of Anderson's imagined communities are once again represented. There seems to be a connection for audiences to the habit of attending the theatre and the co-presence of those around them, without necessarily knowing the cast or the other theatregoers personally. It appears that theatregoers' connection to fellow audience members tends to lead them to a sense of community and belonging, connecting to strangers in a space of art and creativity. These themes will be discussed further in the section on Liveness and the Ephemeral Experience.

### **Cosmopolitan Perceptions of London**

With most participants having lived outside of London in their lifetime, and some in other countries, it was important to harvest their perspectives on London as a city before examining their perceptions of London theatre. It was vital for this project, in particular, to understand if theatregoers viewed London as a cosmopolitan city, or if they had other ideas to offer. While the term 'cosmopolitanism' was withheld from participants in hopes of framing the question as unbiased, several respondents described theoretical cosmopolitan ideas in their description of London.

*I think it's incomparable, actually.... it is so [amazing] because, it's because so many people from all over the world are here, and I think everyone has made it their home. And so, you've got all of these different cultures and different communities that have all brought themselves here, and London has become a hybrid city that, I think, sort of encapsulates the world. – Participant 7*

*...it's the biggest city I've lived in. And within that, I mean, that just means there's so many people from so many different places. And that's one of my favourite things about it.... I think just knowing that there's so many people from different places makes people open to meeting new people and forming a sense of community, I guess. – Participant 5*

There is a clear connection between the participants' responses and Brown's interpretation of cosmopolitanism as creating space for the 'Other' in societies (Brown, 2019). Additionally, Participant 5's response directly relates to Delanty's idea that, through diversity and cosmopolitanism, there must be a degree of openness to witness experiences outside a person's own (Delanty, 2019). Not only do they explicitly describe an openness to Others, but they also relate that openness to a search for

community, promoting the theory that within cosmopolitan societies there is still a search for community amongst citizens. For an experience of togetherness among the diverse and different.

### Theatre and Cosmopolitanism

In addition to the theatregoers' descriptions of London generally resembling an 'open' cosmopolitan society, diverse in people and cultures, they also described similar experiences and perceptions of live theatre in London. A few participants described enjoying theatre alone to not have their views on the production influenced by others' opinions and perceptions. The majority, however, described positive experiences attending theatre with other people due to their curiosity and openness to hearing other perspectives, a sentiment that may reflect their reception to diversity in London.

*...I love going to the theatre with other people. Because then you can kind of chat beforehand, you can chat during the interval or chat afterwards, like get your thoughts and someone would take away, like I said, someone would take away something different from you. And you can be like, 'oh, I never thought about that.' And it then challenges your mind... you see things differently. You might even have interesting debates about your thoughts on the play. – Participant 8*

*I do like to take my partner with me because, as I said, she doesn't go to the theatre a lot and she hadn't, before she met me, hadn't seen a lot of theatre that wasn't the West End stuff with her family. And she's also Finnish, so there's not a huge amount of theatre in Finland. There is a bit, but isn't much. And so, it's rather a newish world for her. So, I like taking her purely because I get to see stuff through her eyes and see perspectives that maybe I wouldn't have necessarily seen myself. – Participant 4*

Again, Brown's explication of creating space for the 'Other' comes through in these responses. In this case, the 'Others' are fellow theatregoers who may not have the same perspective or as much experience attending theatre as them (Brown, 2019). Participant 4, in particular, uses the example of their partner who is of a different nationality. They enjoy having the experience of theatre with someone who may not only have different theatrical perspectives, but also cultural perspectives. This openness, however, does not stop with hearing other perspectives on productions. Many interviewees also described an openness in terms of the play's content, as well as expectations of what other London audiences are open to experiencing.

*...what I really, really love is going to get lost in the story and to learn about other people and other people's stories and yeah.... It's stuff like that that... you chase that... level of storytelling and empathy.... – Participant 7*

*I think I kind of tend to find people [in London] really open. And... kind of open to, to new experiences and what it is they're watching....* – Participant 3

*[In] London, there is so much here, you know?... There is so much going on that there is something for everyone, if they take the moment to have a look in. And because... London is such a diverse city, and you have people from all around the world... there are so many stories to be told and so many stories to be invested in that people want to see something different.* – Participant 4

These outlooks on being open to hearing other people's perspectives and stories through theatre also reflect Datta's definition of the cosmopolitan as being open to differences between oneself and those around them (Datta, 2009). These responses create an interesting discussion regarding theatre's positioning against the local and global. As far as content is concerned, audiences seem to describe the ideal theatrical experience as one closely resembling the cosmopolitan nature of London. There is an openness to and an enjoyment in hearing different perspectives of fellow audience members and through witnessing diversity in the plays themselves. These responses also support the findings of Álvarez's research in the U.S. and the Netherlands, that the content of plays is opening to represent diverse stories. The content of theatre continues to open cosmopolitan audiences to diverse stories and perspectives while the audience members ground one another in a sense of community and belonging, as detailed in the proceeding section.

### **Belonging in the Theatre: Identities**

It is not only true that audiences enjoy hearing the perspectives of diverse audience members, but also that they find the strongest sense of community in these diverse spaces. Interviewees were asked what they notice about other attendees and, surprisingly, several participants described noticing the demographic of audiences. Beyond the notion of noticing an energy in the theatre, participants described intentionally taking time before the start of a show to recognize the people around them.

*Well, I think one thing I always like to do is try and work out the demographic of that show... it doesn't really make a difference to me what the audience is like.... [But] you can kind of learn from that majority of audience demographic a little bit about the show and about what that show will probably mean to people. So, yeah, I think that's the only thing that I really notice.* – Participant 8

*I noticed the demographic differences most immediately, which are huge, just in terms of age and race, mostly, which are hugely dependent on, you know, where you are and what show*

*you're seeing... But I am, I am very conscious that, you know, most of the things that I go and see are just, the audiences are all like old white people....* – Participant 6

*...probably subconsciously, I do take in who's around me and kind of the vibe and the feel of the space that I'm in.... But yeah... I think when I am around audiences, where it's a diverse audience... I would probably go into the show with a little bit more open mindedness and joy than if I was surrounded by other people.* – Participant 10

To these audience members, it is important who is around them, whether it influences their perception of the art or otherwise. Another interesting feature of the responses is their motivations for surveying the demographic population. While Participant 6 seems to be motivated by curiosity and what they later describe as feeling 'different' from the older, white audiences they find themselves in, Participants 8 and 10 both describe assumptions that they make about the productions based on the demographics in the audiences. Participant 10 even hypothesizes that they may feel more 'open-minded' towards the production if they are positioned in a diverse audience as opposed to not. This doesn't exactly represent the phenomenon Dolan and La Pastina/Straubhaar described, respectively, as both of their theories related to feeling a sense of community in spaces that most resemble one's own culture. Conversely, most interview participants for this study described feeling more comfortable in spaces with higher levels of diversity. This may be explained by the participants themselves identifying as a type of 'Other' in theatre audiences, so an audience full of other 'Others' provides them with a feeling of security and relatability. It may also be the product of a cosmopolitan society, as participant 4 described London as a 'beautifully diverse' city, audiences in community spaces not representing that outlook may make them feel uncomfortable and the community unrecognizable.

### **Liveness and the Ephemeral Experience**

As discussions of audiences' sense of belonging attending theatre in cosmopolitan London come to a close, the question still remains of the importance of liveness in this community experience. In a growing, mediated society it is important to determine how much the live theatre experience is enjoyed because it is live as opposed to other factors. Is there anything lost in the mediation of theatrical performances, or does it simply enhance the experience? To start with audiences' general perspectives on liveness, some interviewees echoed the first point of Claudia Georgi's five characteristics of liveness, stressing the presence of both the performer and audience members.

*I like liveness. I like being in the same room as the performers. I like the fact that they're doing it right there, now, in front of me, sort of thing. – Participant 2*

*...you can't, you can't take away either performance or audience member, you both have to show up for it to work. And it's the reason it's been around for so long.... That can't disappear because you need both the audience and performers to show up and engage in each other. – Participant 4*

In a heavily mediated society with digital content quite literally at the general population's fingertips, this emphasis on the presence of both performers and actors is sensical. To take the live actors out of a production would resemble an experience at the cinema. There are so many diverse forms of media that even the slightest diversion from one may closely resemble another, resulting in a loss of its defining characteristic and potential disappointment from the audience. Participant 4 even attributed the persistent success of theatre to the coexistence of the audience and performers, establishing a bond that can never be lost or replaced, and motivating both the actors and the audience to return to the theatre.

While some audience responses resembled the theories of Claudia Georgi, one audience member described an appreciation for the variety of experiences that exist within a single production. To Molderings' point, the live event is ephemeral, irreproducible (Molderings, 1984). You must be there in the moment, or the experience will not be the same.

*I think, like, for one moment, because it's live, everyone has to go in with the same level of understanding and knowledge. Everyone at that first, like, opening 30 seconds is sitting in the darkness going, 'now, what on earth is about to happen?' Regardless if you've seen the play before or not, it's never going to be the same. And that's beautiful about theatre, it's never going to be the same, it's always going to be different every night. – Participant 4*

This point also counters that of Auslander, who argued that performing a show repeatedly makes it reproducible. For this participant, even witnessing the same production twice will not produce the same experience. The beauty of theatre lies in its ephemeral and irreproducible experience. The nature of having a live production with a live audience provides suspense both on the part of the actors and on the part of the audience. Anything can happen from either side of the stage, a point that John Cage was adamant in projecting. These are not simply characteristics that are true for certain theatrical productions, every live theatre experience contains a component of liveness as well as the ephemeral pressure of being present for a fleeting, irreplaceable moment.



An interesting metaphor that several interviewees have made when discussing their enjoyment in attending live theatre is its relation to being *alive*. One participant, in particular, reconciled their feelings towards theatre's liveness explaining, 'the artists and the audience are together in one room, and they're experiencing that, and... it's not just they're in a cinema, it's a different thing, like, **it's very alive, and it's weird. It's weird, but it's magic, really**' – Participant 7. While the sentiment behind the statement was similar to those regarding the copresence of audiences and performers, the verbiage adds a layer to the expression. It's not merely about the actors and audience members being alive, but the collective *experience* is alive. Another audience member described their experience seeing *I, Joan* at Shakespeare's Globe where the production's energy and liveness appeared to be transferred onto them.

*...it [the performance] was so passionate and so alive that it made me feel the same way; and I left the theatre feeling like- in like my whole body I could feel this kind of energy burning through me and I took a long walk along the river and I was... I was walking very directly, very forcefully, like **I was walking to get rid of the emotion because... I'd never felt something so strong.*** – Participant 8

This particular description of the transference of aliveness relates closely to the ideas of Theodore Shank and Martin Esslin. Shank's proposal that theatre provokes undiscovered feelings and perspectives to arise are clearly exhibited in this audience member's description of their other-worldly emotive experience. Esslin's theory of increased consciousness through theatre is also represented in the participant's sudden, vigorous emotions triggered by the play. They describe the singular experience as being so 'alive' that it then made them feel that way, implying that the play felt more alive than they had in that moment.

Similarly, other participants likened their appreciation for theatrical experiences to being surrounded by others and acknowledging the communal experience in the *breath* of the audience.

*...there is something about the **sharp intake of breath** and the sorts of, you know, the laughter and the sorts of head shaking and that kind of thing, which I quite like.* – Participant 2

***It's in the breath, basically.** When people are invested, you can hear it in the breath. It kind of almost coalesces into almost, not shared, but people hold their breath. Or if they're laughing a lot, you can hear it being expelled.* – Participant 4

This is yet another example of a living human phenomenon used to describe the experience of attending live theatre. Similar to how a wind section in an orchestra stays in unison, the collective

breath within the audience is how they recognize their surroundings and feel closest to the strangers surrounding them.

Inevitably, audiences recognize the importance of the live aspects of theatre and the effect that it has on their experience, often identifying it as an irreplaceable quality. However, many respondents went beyond the aforementioned theory to relay their experiences in the theatre, relating their audience experiences to being alive and finding commonality in the breathe of their fellow audience members. The specific choice of words makes for an interesting interpretation of liveness and theatre audiences as they relate to the habit of being alive and breathing; the way that people seldom recognize that they are doing either until they no longer can.

### Mediating Theatre

To determine if these experiences in the theatre may be applied to other artistic media, participants were asked how digital forms of media compare to their experiences attending live theatre. The responses reinforced themes on the topic of liveness, especially when comparing the communal act of going to the theatre with the act of going to the cinema.

*There's a nature of passivity to TV and to film, even in the cinema. Yes, you're watching it together, but it's not happening live. It's pre-recorded. I think film is definitely better than maybe watching TV or films at home, because there's still the community expectation. You don't get your phone out, you don't start Snapchatting or whatever. You're all collectively engaging and watching this film together and experiencing it together, but it is prerecorded. Everything is going to happen the exact same way in that film regardless...there's a nature of give and take [in live theatre], I think, which you don't necessarily get in... in tv and film... in any pre-recorded artistry. Certainly not that sense of community. – Participant 4*

In addition to Georgi's notion that the copresence of the actor and audience fundamentally determines the validity of a performance, this response also implies that the liveness of a production also influences relationships *between* audience members. The participant describes that going to the cinema may be regarded as a closer experience to theatre given the *expectation* of community, referring to the similar processes of going in-person to experience the art as a collective. Despite this expectation, the respondent clarifies that the sense of community that they've experienced in the theatre is not matched when going to the cinema, marking the theatrical experience as one of singularity.

Respondents were also asked to detail any pre-recorded theatre productions that they had watched outside of a traditional theatre, an important comparison to determine if the ‘magic’ that theatre is often referred to having may exist even in a recording. The experience of watching a recorded production in a cinema was of particular importance to the comparison between live theatre and cinema, as respondents detailed their views on experiencing theatre through the format of cinema.

*I mean, I wouldn't want to sort of just see things on the screen, but it's a way to add further experiences of productions... I, you know, realistically, I can only sort of get away [to London] a certain number of times per month. So, if I can get down to the local cinema and see something that's great, you know? – Participant 2*

*... I can't imagine that [enjoying a recorded theatre production] necessarily being the case very often. So it's... for me it's very much a second-rate way of experiencing a theatre production. – Participant 6*

Additional responses echoed the sentiment of those above, regarding watching theatre productions in the cinema as a cheaper, *supplementary* option as opposed to a replacement for attending live theatre. As clarified in these cases, even in situations where the only difference is mediating the performance, audiences are not convinced that it provides them with the same experience or sense of community as attending live theatre (Auslander, 2023).

To conclude discussions of technology and mediation in theatre performances, one audience member gave a particularly interesting comment on the integration of technology in live theatre, specifically when productions use screens and cameras in their staging. The participant was describing their experience attending London's 2024 production of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that adapted Oscar Wilde's novel into a one-woman stage production utilizing large screens and pre-recorded excerpts to aid in the presentation of multiple characters. While it received rave reviews, this respondent offered a perspective that sits between the conflicting ideas of Barker and Auslander regarding mediating liveness (Barker, 2003).

*I mean it was an amazing production on loads and loads of levels, but a lot of it was to do with the technology. It was her performance interacting with the technology, and the way that they filmed it. And then they had her interacting with pre-filmed versions of herself and so it was super cool. And I came out*

*going, 'that was amazing, and I really hope that's not the future of theatre.' Because... it felt like it was sort of slightly moving in the direction of, you know, this is gonna be more filmed than live, and at some point you just go, 'Wait! I wanted to sit here and see somebody pouring their heart out on stage, that's why I'm here.'* – Participant 6

To Barker's point, the specific use of technology in this production was done with care and therefore added to the experience of the play. However, this participant also echoed Auslander's concerns in that there is a threshold where a live event can become *too* mediated, taking away from the personability of the liveness. There is a danger to both sides of the polarized argument. If a production becomes *too* mediated, it loses the liveness that has proven to be instrumental in the theatrical experience. Conversely, when used with intention, mediating aspects of the theatrical experience can lead to innovative productions, enriching audience experiences. The further theatre strays from its traditional and expected format, the less it is able to *retribalize* the surrounding community. In a society developing technology at such a rapid pace, theatre grounds audiences in a traditional practice, in the art of an actor 'pouring their heart out' live on stage. To lose its liveness is to lose its anchor in history and therefore anchor in society. Ultimately, the live aspects of productions are instrumental to audience members when attending the theatre. Even in cases where incorporating technology into the production reinvents the spectacle, it comes with the risk of feeling less alive and grounded.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

To recognize the scope and application of this paper, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the research. In terms of methodological limitations, as previously stated, interviewing is a qualitative method that focuses on gaining in-depth information from a small group of people. This limits the research to a smaller pool of participants and restricts the data to only 10 perspectives. Additionally, given the lack of a quantitative method, numerical and statistical conclusions may not be drawn. The sampling process also comes with its limitations. Given that participation in this study was voluntary, self-selection bias must be considered. This requires an understanding that, while the participants may be of diverse backgrounds, their willingness to participate, or not participate, in the interview may have been influenced by certain characteristics, including working in the industry or obtaining a particular interest in the subject matter (Robinson, 2013). For example, many of the participants of this study work in creative industries, giving them a particular interest in discussions

about theatre and theatre audiences, potentially making them more inclined to participate. It may also be the case that those who decided to not participate in the study do not believe that they have the necessary experience or knowledge to do so. Despite being informed that no experience or knowledge were necessary, some audience members may view discussions of fine arts as an exclusive activity in which only certain demographics (historically upper middle-class, white, male) may participate. Additionally, because recruitment took place at theatres before showtime, the production on stage may have attracted audience members with particular views. This is not to discount participant responses, but it may be the case that the data represents specific perspectives, rather than theatre audiences in general. In no way does this paper intend to project its conclusions as objective and definitive 'truths' of theatre audiences (May and Perry, 2014). Rather, it attempts to rationalize the ten live theatre audience perspectives vis-à-vis existing theory on cosmopolitanism and belonging, presenting a fragment of perspectives that may eventually be confirmed to be representative of the whole.

The current research regarding theatre audiences is an underwhelming collection consisting primarily of market research (Sedgman, 2017). Additionally, with most empirical papers analyzing the content of plays and subsequently projecting interpretations onto the ambiguous 'audience,' very few studies have asked audiences directly about their experience in the theatre. Respected audience researcher, Helen Freshwater, describes the disparity between research in the creative industries, 'Whereas researchers working on television and film engage with audiences through surveys, in-depth interviews, and ethnographic research, almost no one in theatre studies seems to be interested in exploring what actual audience members make of a performance' (Weaver and Freshwater, 2009: 29). Though most audience research relates to audiences of film and television, this paper hopes to contribute to the works of theatre research that have taken the time to ponder Sonia Livingstone's question, '*but what about the people?*' While theatre exists in many different contexts and cultures, this paper has been limited to discussions of Western conceptions of theatre with the hopes of widening discussions in the future to non-Western contexts. Audience research gets so enthralled in the modernity of film and television that it forgets to address the original source: theatre audiences. In the words of drama theorist Augusto Boal, 'Nothing is going to remain the way it is. Let us, in the present, study the past, so as to invent the future' (Boal, 2008: ix).

## CONCLUSION

This paper set out to determine how audiences view the act of attending live theatre within a cosmopolitan context. Specifically, it hoped to establish if theatre is seen as a retribalizing/reterritorializing (McLuhan; Sobre-Denton) activity within such a diverse and rapidly changing society. The findings of the ten qualitative interviews point to these audience responses positioning theatre in some ways as a local activity, and in others, as a reflection of their cosmopolitan environment. In respect to the primary research question, *How does the act of attending live theatre in London relate to a person's sense of belonging in a cosmopolitan context?*, the interview analysis concluded that audiences approach theatre with expectations that reflect their cultural perceptions of London. Similar to definitions of a cosmopolitan society, audience members expressed an openness to hearing a variety of stories through London theatre and different perspectives from London audiences. The interviewees arrive at the theatre hoping to have new experiences through the content of productions and audiences, as opposed to surrounding themselves with uniformity and familiarity.

In addition to these perspectives on diversity and difference in theatrical spaces, the interviewees also reflected on the impact of liveness on their experiences, addressing the supplementary question, *How does the concept of liveness relate to audience experiences at London theatre?* Supported by audience perceptions of community, it is within the *live* nature of the productions and the presence of fellow audience members that lead audiences to find senses of community and belonging in the auditorium. The necessity for both the performers and the audience to arrive at a performance creates an inescapable demand for living in the present, ephemeral moment, as supported by audience perceptions on the mediation of live theatre. Whereas audience expectations for the content of the plays may reflect their cosmopolitan environment, the traditional format of live theatre is viewed as a local and retribalizing activity for audiences. London is a 'beautifully diverse' city with a variety of people and cultures, yet inside the theatre, everyone breathes as one retribalized community. It is important to acknowledge that the diverse population of London is not inherently represented in theatre audiences, but that does not negate the sentiment that theatre is a medium in which people become a collective. One solid body understanding of their role in that space.

Perhaps the most unexpected conclusion drawn from this research is summarized in the simple statement: *people notice people*. They not only recognize the energy surrounding them in a theatre, but many take time to notice the people around them and make judgements regarding how they

themselves fit into that audience. The theatre industry has made significant attempts in recent years to open its doors to communities that were previously not welcome in the space. While audience feedback was likely not the catalyst for this change, it should be acknowledged that London audiences, specifically, often look for diverse spaces to feel welcome. With a medium that is seen as so personal and so *alive*, to be surrounded by an audience that does not represent their outlook on London's cultural diversity often leads to a level of discomfort and disappointment. London audiences find a sense of belonging in diverse spaces because they view themselves as diverse people, and that is an undeniable connection between theatre audiences and cosmopolitan London.

Theatres are the places in London where cosmopolitanism and community exist in equal opportunity, as the aforementioned theorists have stressed they would. The human experience of theatre lies in its lack of unanimity. The variety of perspectives and opinions with which audiences come away from a show give it the excitement that propels people to return, hoping for an experience that is both more diverse and welcoming than their last. There are still questions to be asked of theatre audiences as time progresses and cultures inside and outside of the theatre change. This paper has established the importance of asking theatre audiences directly about their experiences in the hope of more studies asking Helen Freshwater's question: *what did you make of that?* (Weaver and Freshwater, 2009).

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## APPENDICE

## Appendix A: Interview participant table

| No. | Format of Interview | Current Place of Residence  | Places Lived Outside London<br>*Place of growing up              | Time Lived in London | Frequency Attending Theatre<br>(shows per month) | Age | Occupation                        |
|-----|---------------------|-----------------------------|--|----------------------|--|-----|-----------------------------------|
| P1  | In-Person           | London                      | *China (21 years)  | 9 months             | 1-4  | 22  | Postgraduate Student              |
| P2  | Video Call (Zoom)   | South Yorkshire (Sheffield) | *Northwest of England  | -                    | 3-4  | 54  | Professor of Creative Education   |
| P3  | Audio Call          | *Medway                     | Brighton   | -                    | 1-2  | -   | Project Manager                   |
| P4  | Video Call (Zoom)   | London                      | *Southampton   | 8 years              | 1 every 2 months                                 | 27  | Actor                             |
| P5  | Video Call (Zoom)   | London                      | *Seaside California, U.S.;<br>Barcelona, Spain;<br>Bilbao, Spain | 8 years              | 2-3  | -   | Speech and Language Therapist     |
| P6  | Video Call (Zoom)   | *London                     | -  | -                    | ~4   | 56  | Market Researcher                 |
| P7  | Audio Call          | London                      | *Midlands, England   | 13 years             | ~4   | 32  | Theatre Sound Designer            |
| P8  | Video Call (Zoom)   | London                      | *Bristol   | 3 years              | 5-6  | 21  | Actor; Royal Albert Hall Employee |
| P9  | Video Call (Zoom)   | London                      | *Sheffield   | 9 months             | 2  | -   | Drama Student                     |
| P10 | Audio Call          | London                      | *New Zealand   | 9 months             | 1 every 3 months                                 | -   | Film and Television               |

## Appendix B: Table of themes

| Themes | Sub-Themes | Codes | Quotes |
|--------|------------|-------|--------|
|--------|------------|-------|--------|

|                 |                                     |   |  |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| Community       | Definitions of community            | Unified support and common goal             | I would say community, to me, anyway, is a group of people who are brought together by shared support for one another. They don't necessarily need to have the same values. Arguably, I think it's sometimes better if they have differing values. And there are moments of contest and contrast between them. But so long as they are all working together towards their collective good, per se, I think that is what I would define as a... as a community. (Participant 4) |
|                 |                                     | Theatre as reflecting community definitions | I think community is very important... I think it's a part of the experience of a play. I think the producer of a show should... notice that community is very important.... (Participant 1)   |
|                 | Sense of belonging through identity | Positioning self in audience demographics   | ...probably subconsciously, I do take in who's around me and kind of the vibe and the feel of the space that I'm in.... But yeah... I think when I am around audiences, where it's a diverse audience... I would probably go into the show with a little bit more open mindedness and joy than if I was surrounded by other people in the show. (Participant 10)   |
| Cosmopolitanism | Perceptions of London               | London as diverse                           | I think it's incomparable, actually.... it is so [amazing] because, it's because so many people from all over the world are here, and I think everyone has made it their home. And so, you've got all of these different cultures and different communities that have all brought themselves here, and London has become a hybrid city that, I think, sort of encapsulates the world. (Participant 7)  |
|                 |                                     | London as open to diversity                 | ...it's the biggest city I've lived in. And within that, I mean, that just means there's so many people from so many different places. And that's one of my favourite things about it.... I think just knowing that there's so many people from different places makes people open to meeting new people and forming a sense of community, I guess. (Participant 5)  |
|                 |                                     | London as incomparable culturally           | I think it's incomparable, actually.... it is so [amazing] because, it's because so many people from all over the world are here, and I think  |

|                 |  |   |   |
|-----------------|--|---|---|
|                 |  |   | everyone has made it their home. And so, you've got all of these different cultures and different communities that have all brought themselves here, and London has become a hybrid city that, I think, sort of encapsulates the world. (Participant 7)   |
|                 | Perspectives reflected against theatre | Audiences open to other audience perspectives         | ...I love going to the theatre with other people. Because then you can kind of chat beforehand, you can chat during the interval or chat afterwards, like get your thoughts and someone would take away, like I said, someone would take away something different from you. And you can be like, "oh, I never thought about that." And it then challenges your mind... you see things differently. You might even have interesting debates about your thoughts on the play. (Participant 8) |
|                 |  | Audiences open to theatre content                     | I think I kind of tend to find people [in London] really open. And... kind of open to, to new experiences and what it is they're watching.... (Participant 3)   |
| <b>Liveness</b> | Ephemerality                           | Importance of the co- presence of audience and actors | ...you can't, you can't take away either performance or audience member, you both have to show up for it to work. And it's the reason it's been around for so long.... That can't disappear because you need both the audience and performers to show up and engage in each other. (Participant 4)  |
|                 |  | Irreproducibility of theatre                          | ...And that's beautiful about theatre, it's never going to be the same, it's always going to be different every night. (Participant 4)  |
|                 | Theatre as Alive                       | Theatre experiences as being alive                    | ...it's very alive, and it's weird. It's weird, but it's magic, really. (Participant 7)   |
|                 |  | The breathe of the audience                           | ...there is something about the sharp intake of breath and the sorts of, you know, the laughter and the sorts of head shaking and that kind of thing, which I quite like. (Participant 2)   |
|                 | Mediating Liveness                     | Cinema and television lacking liveness                | Yeah, there's a nature of passivity to TV and to film, even in the cinema. Yes, you're watching it together, but it's not happening live. It's pre-recorded. (Participant 4)  |
|                 |  | Pre-recorded theatre as a                             | ... I can't imagine that [enjoying a recorded theatre production] necessarily being the case  |

|  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|
|  |  | supplemental experience                            | very often. So it's... for me it's very much a second-rate way of experiencing a theatre production. (Participant 6)   |
|  |  | Technology as both enhancing and reducing liveness | I mean it was an amazing production on loads and loads of levels, but... I came out going, "that was amazing, and I really hope that's not the future of theatre." (Participant 6) |