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Mutual Integration of Spectator Immersion Mechanisms in Stage Performances

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Abstract

Introduction. The article is devoted to the study of audience involvement in a theatrical production in the context of two directions of performing arts: immersive theatre and stand-up comedy. The relevance of the study lies in the fact that with the development of modern technologies, changes occur in many areas of public life, including cultural life. The purpose of the work is to identify common features and differences in approaches to increasing audience involvement, as well as to consider the possibilities of their mutual influence and integration. To achieve this goal, the following tasks were set: to analyze what technologies of audience involvement exist in theater practices and stand-up comedy, to identify and evaluate successful practices of introducing immersive technologies into cultural projects.

Materials and Methods. The study analyzes examples of practical implementation of mechanisms for increasing immersion in theatrical productions and stand-up performances, features of interaction with the audience, use of multimedia technologies and organization of space. The study uses both general theoretical and practice-oriented methods, as well as semiotic and structural analysis.

Results. The results of the study showed that the synthesis of theatre and stand-up comedy mechanisms significantly increases the level of immersion of the project. It was also established that intergenre productions combining features of both directions are already becoming part of the Russian stage space. The study confirms that immersion is becoming a key trend in contemporary art, responding to audience requests for interactivity and involvement.

Discussion and Conclusion. The conducted case analysis can be used by the heads or art managers of cultural projects that are at the initial stage of implementing immersive technologies in their products. The topic of using immersive technologies in the cultural sphere requires systematic study. The development of immersive theater requires not only technological investments, but also a rethinking of traditional approaches to dramaturgy, acting and audience participation. Future research may examine the issue of expanded use of modern technologies in the cultural sphere, in particular, the use of artificial intelligence.

Keywords: theatre, stand-up comedy, immersion, immersion scale, immersive productions, audience experience, participatory culture, participation, interactivity, multimedia


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Оригинальное теоретическое исследование

Взаимная интеграция механизмов зрительского погружения в сценических представлениях

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Аннотация

Введение. Статья посвящена исследованию механизмов вовлеченности зрителей в театральную подстановку в контексте двух направлений сценического искусства – иммерсивный театр и стендап-комедия. Актуальность ис-

следования в том, что с развитием современных технологий происходят изменения во многих сферах общественной жизни, в том числе и в культурной. Цель работы – выявить общие черты и различия в подходах к увеличению зрительской вовлеченности, а также рассмотреть возможности их взаимовлияния и интеграции. Для достижения цели поставлены следующие задачи: проанализировать, какие технологии зрительского вовлечения существуют в театральных практиках и стендап-комедии, выделить и оценить успешные практики внедрения иммерсивных технологий в культурные проекты.

Материалы и методы. В рамках исследования анализируются примеры практической реализации механизмов повышения иммерсивности в театральных постановках и стендап-выступлениях, особенности взаимодействия с аудиторией, использования мультимедийных технологий и организации пространства. В исследовании применяются как общетеоретические, так и практико-ориентированные методы, а также семиотический и структурный анализ.

Результаты исследования показали, что синтез механизмов театра и стендап-комедии значительно повышает уровень иммерсивности проекта. Также было установлено, что межжанровые постановки, сочетающие в себе черты обоих направлений, уже становятся частью российского сценического пространства. Исследование подтверждает, что иммерсивность является ключевым трендом современного искусства, отвечая на запросы аудитории на интерактивность и сопричастность.

Обсуждение и заключение. Проведенный анализ кейсов может быть использован руководителями или арт-менеджерами культурных проектов, которые находятся на начальном этапе внедрения иммерсивных технологий в свои продукты. Тема применения технологий погружения в культурной сфере требует систематического изучения. Развитие иммерсивного театра требует не только технологических инвестиций, но и переосмысления традиционных подходов к драматургии, актерской игре и зрительскому участию. В будущих исследованиях может быть изучен вопрос расширенного применения современных технологий в культурной сфере, в частности – применение искусственного интеллекта.

Ключевые слова: сценическое искусство, театр, стендап, зритель, иммерсивность, культура, современные технологии

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Introduction. The trend towards introducing elements of immersive immersion is characteristic of various spheres of culture and art that make up the modern Russian media landscape. The noted dynamics are clearly visible in stage practices such as theatrical productions and stand-up comedy.

Theatre is a form of art, the specific means of expression of which is a stage action performed before an audience [1, p. 736]. At the same time, stand-up comedy is understood as a special genre of comedy in the form of a solo performance performed before a live audience, mainly in the form of a monologue, which also contains elements of dialogue to maintain contact with the audience [2, p. 109].

The phenomenon of increasing immersiveness is explained by changing audience expectations, in particular the tendency that arose in the second half of the 20th century to increase the level of audience involvement, the experience of participation, which replaced the culture of consumption. The modern viewer strives to move away from the passive role of content consumer and take an active part in the artistic process, to erase the boundaries between the observer and the author. Immersive art, offering new forms of artistic expression and communication, meets the demands of the modern audience for an interactive and multisensory experience.

The dynamics noted are clearly visible in stage practices such as theatre productions and stand-up comedy. In the context of studying and comprehending contemporary cultural dynamics, there is a need to deeply understand the new mechanics underlying the interaction between the performer and the audience. The artistic methods and tools used in immersive projects, both in the format of a theatre production and a stand-up performance, are aimed at creating the effect of presence and involvement of the viewer, but they are achieved through various expressive means. An analysis of the techniques used will reveal the specific mechanisms for creating the effect of immersion and their influence on the perception of the viewer's experience.

Materials and Methods. The study analyzes examples of practical implementation of mechanisms for increasing immersion in theatrical productions and stand-up performances, features of interaction with the audience, use of multimedia technologies and organization of space. The study uses both general theoretical and practice-oriented methods, as well as semiotic and structural analysis.

Semiotic and structural analysis, in particular, allows us to analyze the language of the theater and its communicative functions, where each element of the performance (gesture, costume, scenery, light) is considered as a sign that carries

meaning. In addition to performative studies, focusing on the performance itself and its uniqueness “here and now”, applied and practice-oriented methods are used, including the study of theatrical innovative systems, acting skills through practical familiarization.

Results. The theatre, with its rich historical tradition, is a multi-component artistic system in which immersive technologies can include spatial, visual and dramatic elements.

The stable position of the theatre in the field of arts is guaranteed by its high level of adaptability. A striking example is the change in theatrical forms that occurred with the spread of IT technologies. Cultural institutions had to reconsider their approach to working with an audience that is increasingly concentrating its attention on mobile and computer devices. Modern directors have found a way out of this situation - they actively use immersive technologies in their productions.

Theatre exists in close connection with other forms of art, both classical and modern. Stand-up comedy is no exception. When considering this genre in a diachronic aspect, its adaptation to changing cultural contexts is clearly traced. The origins of stand-up comedy go back to the traditions of vaudeville and variety show, popular stage genres that emerged in the 19th century. These forms of entertainment art involved alternating numbers with the participation of musicians, dancers and illusionists. Comedy was mainly presented in the form of sketch performances (from the English *sketch*: “draft, sketch”), that is, short humorous sketches. However, we cannot say that this form was stand-up comedy. Comedians of this period, for example, Milton Berle, delivered a short humorous monologue during their performance, then performed musical numbers, showed card tricks and danced [3, p. 58].

In the first half of the 20th century, solo comedy performances began to emerge as an independent genre, characterized by direct contact with the audience in an informal style, elements of improvisation and, of course, humorous material on various topics. This process led to the formation of stand-up comedy in its current interpretation, where the main emphasis shifted to the personality of the performer.

It should be emphasized that the process of formation of stand-up comedy as an independent genre significantly influenced the formation of its key feature: a high degree of interactivity, which is less characteristic of modern theatrical productions.

Some directors choose to influence certain senses in their productions. A striking example is the audio performances of the Mobile Art Theater, which are focused on the work of the viewer’s hearing and imagination. To participate in the performances, it is enough to download the theater’s application and choose the most suitable format for yourself: a performance on the streets of the city or a production that can be listened to at home or in any other convenient place. The user only listens to the plot of the work, visualizing in his imagination the characters and elements of the “stage” space. Thus, it is the freedom provided to the viewer that becomes the decisive factor influencing the level of his “immersion” in the production.

Other modern directors, on the contrary, believe that for the greatest level of immersion in a performance, it is necessary to make the stage and the actions taking place on it as realistic as possible. This approach is typical for the productions of the first repertory theater of Russia “Dashkov 5”, in which the stage is an entire mansion, where the audience can move freely. For example, 405 scenes with 27 actors take place in parallel in 50 rooms for three hours in the play “Crime and Punishment”. This format allows to expand the stage space and make it practically limitless for each specific viewer. By working with space, not only the effect of complete immersion is created, but also a unique viewing experience is formed. However, it is worth noting that during the production, the viewer must remain silent; he is also prohibited from removing the mask given by the organizer before the start of the performance.

Nevertheless, this approach to the implementation of immersive performances has become innovative for the Russian stage, since the viewer has complete freedom of choice and movement, collecting his own picture of what is happening, which contributes to the formation of an emotionally rich experience.

Another trend in the development of immersiveness in the theater is the introduction of multimedia technologies into performances, in particular, virtual and augmented reality technologies. As a rule, the theater sphere is not characterized by the widespread use of multimedia technologies: this approach has become widespread in modern Russian experimental theater in the last ten years. The authors of the performance prefer to use them to solve a specific problem: expanding the stage space, creating scenery or introducing an additional virtual character into the plot.

One of the impetuses for the development of multimedia theatre was the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced artists to look for new formats for implementing creative projects. Among domestic productions with a similar approach, one can highlight “The Cage with Parrots” by Maxim Didenko, “In Search of the Author” by Danil Chashchin, “Three Sisters” by Mikhail Rakhlin, etc.

It is important to note that “The Parrot Cage” was the first immersive performance in Russia using VR technologies. This project was implemented in 2017. The plot of the production is based on the story of an astronaut who must pass a certain test on the way to realizing his dream: a flight to Mars. The viewer, putting on virtual reality glasses, takes the

place of the main character. His task is to build interaction with the parrots in the cage. The main theme of the work is compassion and humanity, so the entire production becomes an act of self-reflection for the viewer, allowing him to fully immerse himself in the action.

Modern stand-up continues to evolve, introducing new artistic techniques, including elements of immersive immersion. Unlike traditional forms of stage humor, modern stand-up increasingly blurs the boundaries between the comedian and the audience, turning the performance into an interactive experience. The mechanisms for engaging the audience within stand-up comedy bring the communicative function of art to the forefront.

Immersive stand-up performance assumes that the viewer is given greater subjectivity by blurring the boundaries between him and the comedian, thus creating “a special social space in which people come together to participate in joint activities, creating a new community. It is characterized by the absence of a boundary between art and life, it exists in real time and space, requiring the simultaneous presence of both the artist and the audience” [4, p. 7].

Giving priority to the communicative function has led to a significant transformation of the structural and substantive features of a stand-up performance. An example of such a qualitative change is the series of performances by comedians Kostya Shirokov and Dima Kolybelkin “In Two Trubula”, the format of which is based on a free dialogue between comedians and the audience. Each of those present in the hall has the opportunity to ask a question of interest to them, which will be discussed by the speakers along with the audience. Since comedians cannot know the content of the questions in advance, we can talk about the complete control of the development of the show vector by the audience and, accordingly, a high level of intensity of influence on the audience’s perception.

However, open communication “on equal terms” is not the only way of immersive immersion. A striking example of the impact on the audience are comedy performances in the “stand-up in the dark” format, curated by the “StandUp Import” platform. This approach is experimental and focused on making hearing the dominant channel of perception, which contributes to the audience’s complete concentration on the content of the performance and the nuances of its delivery. In addition, the fact of performing in complete darkness itself acts as an amplifier of the comic effect, which also involves the viewer in the process.

Another way to enhance interaction between the viewer and the artist is the theatricalization of a stand-up performance. By theatricalization we mean the adaptation of the author’s material for stage embodiment by means of a set of expressive means characteristic of the theatrical sphere. According to the textbook by E.V. Vershkovsky “Directing Mass Club Performances”, theatricalization as a creative method of mass forms allows organically combining the main lines of directing: the artistic and figurative organization of the material and the artistic organization of the artists’ actions [5, p. 19]. The application of the principles of theatricalization by stand-up comedians allows for the creation of a unique, holistic artistic statement and going beyond the constitutional features of the genre.

There is a unique example of building a stand-up performance based on the principles of theatricalization. This is a concert by comedian Rasul Chabdarov “LURYEZNO OB KURYEZNOM” (Translation: Lourié talks about funny things), but he performs under the stage name Alexander Lurye in the company of other comedians (Rustam Reptiloid, Sergey Detkov, Tambi Masayev, Ilya Makarov and others). All the participants of the show perform in stage images and look exaggeratedly ridiculous: A. Lurye is dressed in a dressing gown and wears a long wig; he is on stage without shoes. He acts as a father who gives philosophical monologues at a family feast. Some of the comedians are dressed in business suits, the character of S. Detkov is dressed in a sheepskin coat on his naked body. The comedians act as participants in the feast. The performance includes a large number of props, for example, a set table at which the comedians sit, and a video camera on which the character of Tambi Masayev films the performance. At the end of the performance, the “spectator” enters into a polemic with A. Lourié and “kills” the comedian with a pistol shot. The use of the listed techniques allowed for the creation of a full immersion effect and gave the audience a unique experience of attending a comedy performance.

In our study of the practical implementation of spectator involvement mechanisms, we rely on the criteria of the immersion scale in theatre projects. These criteria are also applicable to stand-up comedy, since it originates from theatrical traditions and retains key elements of stage performance.

The model for assessing the level of immersion is presented by V.S. Molchan in his work “The scale of immersion as a tool for assessing the degree of immersion in the action of a performance”. This scale includes seven criteria: visual and auditory perception, impact on other senses, impact on the plot, interaction with actors, interaction of spectators with each other and the ability to move [6, p. 211]. We can divide the given criteria into two groups depending on the nature of spectator involvement: passive perception and active interaction.

At the same time, the combination of the mechanisms of both genres at a deeper level creates a new artistic reality, which is not limited to a simple combination of elements, but is an organic integration that forms new ways of immersing the audience in the action. Projects that represent a synthesis of formats are currently rare; they are innovative and experimental in the field of performing arts. Let us consider the mutual integration of a play and a stand-up performance using the example of the production “The Sovereign-Stand-Up” by director Alexander Loktionov.

The creators of the production position it as a philosophical and musical stand-up show, in which a theatrical performance and a stand-up performance are combined into a single artistic structure. This format involves a combination of several genres: stand-up comedy, musical numbers and a conference. Theatrical dramaturgy and elements of a comedy monologue performed by a stand-up comedian create a unique atmosphere, where serious philosophical and social topics are presented through the prism of humor and irony. The participation of the viewer in the process: whether it is choosing a character for interaction, reacting to improvisational monologues or responding to jokes or contributes to the formation of a special spectator experience, which includes both mechanisms of passive perception and active interaction.

Thus, the study identified the predominant mechanisms of immersive immersion of the viewer used in theatrical productions and stand-up performances. The analysis allowed us to conclude that the artistic methods and tools of immersive spectator immersion in immersive theater primarily involve multi-level sensory perception and work with space, while immersive stand-up performances are more focused on contact with the audience. This is probably due to the features that have historically been entrenched in the two genres. A classic theatrical production implies passive perception of the action by the viewer, while one of the defining features of stand-up comedy is the interaction of the comedian with the audience.

At the same time, the analysis of existing practices of immersive theatre productions and stand-up performances allows us to draw a conclusion about the productivity of inter-genre interaction and the direct dependence of the level of immersion of the project on the presence of mutual integration of immersion technologies. It is noteworthy that the synthesis of the two genres allows us to create a separate type of immersive productions with a unique artistic structure, which is characterized by a high degree of immersion of the viewer. This format of stage performances is a promising area for further research.

Discussion and Conclusion. The use of the immersive technology scale in theatre and stand-up comedy allows us to identify common trends in the use of immersive immersion methods, despite the differences in their implementation. In both areas of performing arts, the main goal is to create a unique spectator experience, but the mechanisms used for this have their own specifics.

The mechanisms of both immersive theatre productions and immersive stand-up comedy are mostly based on the passive perception of the action by the viewer: multisensory perception and direct interaction with the performer are of great importance. At the same time, the use of immersive technologies in the theatre includes a wider range of mechanisms for influencing the viewer. Here, elements of scenography, multimedia accompaniment and the ability of the viewer to move spatially play an important role. On the contrary, stand-up comedy relies mainly on verbal and emotional interaction with the audience, where the main attention is paid to the communicative function of art. Despite this, an analysis of modern trends shows that the elements of theatricalization introduced into stand-up significantly expand its genre boundaries, bringing it closer to immersive theatre.

It is also important to note the difference in approaches to the use of space in these forms of performing arts. Immersive theatrical productions are often realized outside the traditional stage context: in historical mansions, industrial zones, open street spaces and others. In projects of this type, it is not just the presence of a stage that is important, but the direct interaction between the actor and the spectator, the immersion of the audience in the events taking place. This fact also confirms the success of productions carried out in the space of augmented and virtual reality. At the same time, for a stand-up performance, both classical and immersive, space plays a lesser role, since the established canons of the genre imply greater freedom in the choice of location. Thus, immersive immersion technologies allow theatrical productions to go beyond the usual boundaries of the genre and, in a sense, bring it closer to the practices of stand-up comedy.

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