

## The Shared Communicative Act of Theatrical Texts in Performance: A Relevance Theoretic Approach

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**Abstract:** This article adopts a relevance theoretic approach to meaning making in theatrical texts and performances. Theatrical texts communicate immediately to multiple audiences: readers, actors, directors, producers, and designers. They communicate less directly to the writer's ultimate audience – the playgoer or spectator – through the medium of performance. But playgoers are not passive receptacles for interpretations distilled in rehearsal, enacted through performance, or developed in study and reflection. Rather, in the framework of communication postulated by relevance theory, the audience is an active participant in making meaning. I will briefly review a range of approaches to meaning making in theatre, and then outline my view of a relevance theoretic account of the vital contributions of the audience in constructing the interpretation of performance, treating it as a communicative act.

### 1. Introduction

Playgoers go well beyond the evidence provided by the active and passive communicators on the stage. They populate their minds with assumptions, images, memories, and implicatures from a wealth of evidence provided by the text and the production which nevertheless leaves much for them to do. Current views of the role of the audience in constructing meaning do not adequately capture or describe the degree and the kind of work audiences engage in. In this article I adopt the relevance theoretic model of communication and cognition to argue that the audience arrives at or constructs an interpretation that goes well beyond the wealth of linguistic and non-linguistic evidence provided by performance by constructing a complex, *ad hoc* context. This context produces a wide range of foreseeable positive cognitive effects, any set or subset of which need not be precisely predicted. Relevance theory thus provides a framework in which to begin to disentangle the overlapping and interacting contributions of writer, company, and audience in making meaning on the stage.

In this article I am concerned not with the textual evidence presented by the performance of a play but with the contributions made by the paralinguistic and non-linguistic evidence conveyed in a production. Paralinguistic evidence is created by the performer, through vocal and gestural acts which may or may not be mandated by the text, and through the actor's physical relationship with other

performers and with the audience. Non-linguistic evidence is supplied by the designer in conjunction with the director and may have no basis in the text at all. So long as we bundle together interpretations produced by the words of the play with those made by set design, acting, and directorial decisions, it will remain very difficult to determine what exactly audiences do. To distinguish the work of the audience from that of the directors, cast, and writer, we need access to audiences' responses to performance, and we need some way to identify which paralinguistic and non-linguistic aspects of the production they are responding to. I propose that theatre reviews are just such a source.

Reviews provide information about a playgoer's responses to a production, rather than to the script or play text. While even the most ambitious and complete reviews fall short of the rigorous standards of reflection, precision, and consistency required of academic writing, they have the advantage of highlighting those aspects which most impressed the reviewer. Furthermore, they are usually composed shortly after the experience of playgoing, so they are drawing on experiences which are still fresh and sharp. Though it may be argued that their superficial and uneven treatment of the event weakens them as evidence, professional theatre critics and reviewers have highly developed skills of observation and composition, and often a profound knowledge of theatrical productions drawn from many years of playgoing. For that matter, amateur enthusiasts who may lack scholarly training have the benefit of an unmediated, strikingly direct experience; the best, indeed, write fully as compellingly as professional newspaper or magazine columnists. Finally, any source that reports more or less directly on the effects experienced by playgoers offers important insights.

I have located 60 reviews of two recent productions – 20 for *King Lear* (2018), and 40 for *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2013-2017) – by professional reviewers for a range of media outlets, and by amateurs posting on personal or organisational websites.<sup>1</sup> All of these have been listed after the Reference section to this article, even though I do not cite from all of them. I have been unable to locate any in-depth treatments by scholars of these productions along the lines of Hubbard's review in *Theatre Journal* (2017: 245-247) of a production of *King Lear* at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. The pieces I have found are cursory and impressionistic, very far removed from the kinds of readings which literary and dramatic scholars aim for. We can account for this in part by the fact that reviewers are responding to performances rather than to texts, under very different conditions from reading and study.<sup>2</sup> But we

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<sup>1</sup> The disparity in numbers may be explained by several factors. While *Lear* is familiar to most audiences and so needs little introduction, *Curious Incident* is a new work based on a relatively recent (2003) novel and would be unknown to most theatregoers. Haddon's novel had attracted a great deal of attention on publication, largely because the protagonist is neuroatypical; the stage adaptation drew critical plaudits for the inventiveness and sensitivity of the design and production. The reviews of *Lear*, on the other hand, focussed on the casting of an actor of international fame; many of the articles I found were not reviews at all, but were instead condensed interviews with McKellen or discussions of his performance history, and so I excluded them.

<sup>2</sup> In Furlong 2014, I argue that it is crucial to treat 'performance as an essential part of the interpretation of dramatic text' (70). The conditions under which interpretation occurs in

should also recognise that a comparison of reviews of performances and critical responses to texts is unlikely to shed much light in either direction, because critics and reviewers are quite literally dealing with different phenomena and with different communicative and interpretive goals.

In previous work I have applied relevance theory to the interpretation of dramatic texts in performance. In particular, I have appealed to 'non-spontaneous' interpretation to explain hearers' propensity to go well beyond implications and implicatures warranted by the text which are not quite captured in the notion of poetic effects.<sup>3</sup> I propose that a playgoer's cognitive environment is enriched by performance but not determined by it, and argue that reviews provide evidence that the audience is actively involved in meaning making in the theatre.

## 2. Going beyond the text

Let me begin by narrowing the field. I am concerned with productions of texts which have been written to be performed, texts that place primary stress on linguistically-provided evidence, both dialogue and authorial directions.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, I am focussing on texts which are performed (more or less) as written, and so am eliminating improvised dramatic or theatrical performances. Finally, I am interested in productions or performances where active participation by the audience in the performance is limited or controlled by the performers (e.g., Cleopatra's interactions with groundlings during the 2014 production of *Antony and Cleopatra* at the *Globe*: the actress playing Cleopatra, Eve Best, typically singled out one or two members of the audience each night and – still in character – flirted with them ostentatiously). The discussion that follows is thus restricted to limiting cases and conditions that clarify the audience's relationship to the intended interpretation: that is, the set of assumptions (including thoughts, feelings, questions, memories, sensations) which the playwright manifestly intended the audience should recognise, construct, entertain, or experience. I am not proposing that these constitute a *standard* to which productions should be held. On the contrary, I am dealing with almost the narrowest type of theatrical performance imaginable. Under these quite specific conditions, and treating the performance (as a whole) as communication, I propose that audiences are not mere passive receptacles for interpretations distilled in rehearsal, enacted through performance, or developed in study and reflection. Instead, they construct a mental representation of the

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performance radically restricts the audience's ability to carry out highly developed non-spontaneous interpretation of the text, while supplying assumptions which are specific to the event, and unrepeatable. Such assumptions may be highly pertinent to the playgoer's interpretation of the drama, but they are literally beyond the consideration of readers.

<sup>3</sup> I have also argued in conference presentations that reviewers are capable of producing non-spontaneous interpretations of one-off events such as performance; but I have not yet published on this topic.

<sup>4</sup> So, for instance, Shaw uses elaborate stage directions to restrict the director's and actors' autonomy and ensure his vision of the play will be preserved and respected.

world of the play, and an interpretation which is shaped but not determined or fully realised by the performance.

Current views of the role of the audience comprehend a range of positions. At one extreme, the playwright's vision is considered complete and authoritative, and audiences are relatively passive. So, for example, theorists such as Worthen (1998) and Campbell (1981) argue that the point of a dramatic performance is to realise the writer's vision as completely and authoritatively as possible. For them, an audience is guided by the performance to a recognition of that interpretation which they should strive to develop as fully as is consistent with their abilities and preferences. At the opposite extreme, the audience is regarded as equally the creator of the meaning of the work in collaboration with the company, and the author's intentions are of little or no weight. The most radical view – that the audience exercises indispensable, possibly decisive agency in determining the meaning of a text – is advanced by those who hope to 'remedy the audience's alienation and passivity' (Sakellariidou 2014: 14).

Between these two points lies a wide spectrum of possibilities, in which director, performers, and designers shape the interpretation communicated in performance. As Marsden puts it, '... the sense and purpose of language in the end is seemingly lodged not in the words themselves but in the audience that hears them' (2017: 306). Those who adopt this broader view, such as Scottish playwright David Greig, regard performance as a 'collaborative engagement' (Wallace 2016: 244). The playwright's authority is not diminished by the contributions of the audience during performance, nor is the intended interpretation exhausted by any given presentation or production. Spectatorship is 'essential for the operation of the work', as Swift remarks (2019: 147), completing 'the steps of creation', as Brook (1990: 142) puts it. For most critics, then, the audience's function is to combine the specifics of a given performance with the linguistic evidence supplied by the text and complete the performative event. The communicative act might seem to be concluded at this point, lacking only the audience to put the evidence together and construct or recognise the intended interpretation.

In spite of the advances made in performance studies, none of these accounts of the role of the audience has won out. I believe this is the case because none of the models of the role of the audience outlined above can adequately account for these distinct roles; and no theory of spectatorship specifically or directly engages in the cognitive and pragmatic processes by which audiences amplify and extend the contextual information, and derive sophisticated and complex interpretations, independent of the linguistic, paralinguistic, and non-linguistic evidence supplied by performance. Relevance theory does. In the following sections, I show how the application of the relevance theoretic framework to the audience's interpretation of performance suggests that even conventional interpretations (i.e. within the range warranted by the text, and generally accepted and circulated throughout the culture) rely on extensive input from the audience in the form of contextual premises, and on affective effects produced as part of the interpretive process.

Relevance theory, developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, is an account of communication and cognition, and though to this point it has been developed primarily to account for linguistic communication, its claims apply equally to non-linguistic communication as well (see Foster-Cohen 2004: 293). In my view, the assumptions communicated non-linguistically in performance are not supplemental to dialogue; rather, they direct the audience to the interpretation manifestly intended by the playwright, as determined by the director and company non-spontaneously through development and rehearsal. The same process that guides hearers to the manifestly intended interpretation of an utterance in everyday speech also directs playgoers in their response to performance. It is the audience that constructs the context in which the assumptions communicated by performance are processed, so that the evidence communicated by performance is eclipsed by the wealth of assumptions available to a playgoer in their cognitive environment.

From a relevance theoretic perspective, then, audiences do not and cannot construct their interpretations solely on the basis of the evidence *alone*, whether this evidence is linguistic, visual, aural, somatic, or affective.<sup>5</sup> The whole of the audience experience is considerably greater than the parts, because playgoers are obliged to put the elements together, to work out implications and implicatures, and (especially in less conventional productions) to develop the context in which all these achieve relevance. In doing so, audiences employ non-spontaneous interpretation, by means of which they invest increased effort in developing contextual premises and in deriving positive contextual effects, and arrive at conclusions which may rely on the unique results of the involvement and collaboration of the director, cast, crew, and designers.

### 3. Reviews as records of non-spontaneous interpretation

Relevance theory claims that readers are equipped with a single, universal, exceptionless criterion for evaluating interpretations as they occur to the audience. Successful communication takes place if the addressee recognizes (an adequate subset of) the set of assumptions the communicator intended. The communicator's utterance supplies (linguistic) evidence for the assumptions (propositions, impressions, emotions, recollections – i.e., anything that can be mentally represented) that the communicator wants the audience to recognize or entertain. An utterance is processed in a context that yields new information, or overturns and eliminates existing assumptions, thereby yielding *positive cognitive effects*. Something 'is relevant to an individual when its processing in a context of available assumptions yields a positive cognitive effect . . . [i.e.], a worthwhile difference to the individual's representation of the world' (Wilson and Sperber 2004: 622).

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<sup>5</sup> Playwrights, as users of language, are aware of this and compose their plays in the expectation that viewers will be able to make sense of their utterances.

One might imagine that relevance theory seems to suggest the hearer should never go beyond initial readings. However, Sperber and Wilson never intended this. Consider these utterances:

(1) Can you pick up some milk?

(2) I wandered lonely as a cloud.

A relatively spontaneous interpretation of the first utterance would be one that arrives at key conclusions (e.g. that the hearer should buy some milk, how much milk to buy, etc.) and then moves on to think about something else. A *less* spontaneous interpretation might dwell on further aspects of what the speaker might have intended (e.g., that the hearer has irresponsibly drunk all the milk in the house, that it's the hearer's turn to pick up milk, a complete miscommunication with an addressee unfamiliar with the idiom, etc.). The *more* evidence the interpretation takes into account, and the *more broadly* the audience extends the context in looking for evidence to support particular conclusions, the *less* spontaneous it is.

Audiences routinely carry out non-spontaneous interpretation. A text may have higher 'minimum effort' threshold than is typical (i.e., an increased cognitive *demand*: consider the effort required to read legal texts or technical manuals or to work out puzzles), or it may raise expectations in the audience (i.e. an expectation that investing more effort will result in increased cognitive *effects*: consider the invitation to invest extra effort implicated by poetic texts, such as (2)). Alternately, an audience may continue the interpretive process beyond the immediate communicative situation. In all these scenarios, the interpretation protocol described in standard relevance theory literature obtains, but continues over a longer period, and is undertaken on the *hearer's responsibility*.

Wilson makes analogous points in her discussion of the open-endedness of interpretation, and of the notion of 'weak communication'. She argues that 'communication is not simply a yes-no matter, but a matter of degree' (2011: 5), adding that 'in recognising the author's informative and communicative intentions, readers must necessarily go beyond them and derive some contextual implications (or other cognitive effects) of their own' (2011: 6). Plays, like the texts she considers,

contain utterances by characters, which may convey not only explicit content but also implicatures, carried by indirect answers to questions, metaphors, similes, ironies, expressions of attitude, and so on. They also contain depictions of events and actions, which carry implications or implicatures when combined with background information provided earlier in the text. (2011: 8)

Plays that invite (or require) a greater degree of non-spontaneous interpretation ostensibly encourage audiences to 'co-produce meaning as spectators' (Connor 1999: 426); but even conventional theatrical performances of 'undemanding' texts involve considerable inferential effort to produce the

audience's experience. And since it is that experience that interests me, I have turned to reviews as repositories documenting such experience. No matter how professional the company, no matter how strenuous the efforts to ensure that performances are the same from night to night, the nature of theatre means that every performance is an unrepeatable event.<sup>6</sup> Given these constraints, it comes as no surprise that reviews focus on those elements which cannot be inferred from the text alone, such as performance, *mise-en-scène*, and interpretation.

Regardless of their putative quality, reviews serve a variety of functions. Most often they are intended to help readers decide whether or not to attend a play. When the review is written for that purpose, it will normally include a plot summary, a description of the production, an interpretation of the work, and an evaluation of its success. If the play under review is new, plot summary will dominate. If, however, the reviewer assumes that the anticipated reader is familiar with the play, the summary is cursory; instead, the writer selects those aspects they judge will be most pertinent in supporting their appraisal. It is to be expected, then, that reviews of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, which premiered in 2012, will include more plot summary than will those of *King Lear*, whose plot points at least are broadly familiar. On the other hand, when standard works are performed, reviews focus on those aspects (such as performance, interpretation, and *mise-en-scène*) which reward the playgoer with a fresh, or at least expanded understanding of the play. We expect that evaluations of performance, the contributions of direction and design, and some interpretation will dominate reviews of any production of *Lear*.

Whether recommendations or opinion pieces, reviews provide first-hand accounts of the effects on the reviewer of paralinguistic and non-linguistic elements of performance as well as of the linguistic evidence provided by the script. Consequently, reviews demonstrate the extraordinary range and wealth of evidence which playgoers have available. We might assume, then, given the broad, deep, and complex material communicated in performance, that there is not much left for the audience to do in the process of comprehending and making sense of the play. That is, we might assume that any theoretical model of the audience will tend toward the more determinate end of the spectrum. While we may well reject Campbell's claim that the ideal audience is one prepared to receive, recognise, and entertain a fully realised interpretation communicated in performance, we may imagine that in most cases the audience's role is relatively minor and supplementary, passive rather than active.

However, the variety of views which even a relatively small corpus conveys strongly suggests that the contributions of the audience are far from minimal or cursory. It seems clear that the individuals who have experienced the same (or

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<sup>6</sup> In this, live performance differs fundamentally from cinema. It might be objected that companies do not aim at replicating performances through the course of a run; however, in commercial theatre, ticketholders typically expect that, with very minor variations, each night will resemble previous and future performances in virtually all respects. When a production is extremely popular – musicals, for instance – this expectation amounts almost to a contractual obligation, and deviations are unwelcome.

very similar) events arrive at conclusions which are incompatible with one another, though warranted by the text or the production. In fact, the attention to paralinguistic and non-linguistic evidence that shapes the reviewer's opinions and conclusions demonstrates the kind and degree of cognitive effort undertaken by audiences. The distinctions among them reveal the breadth of contextual implications they bring to bear as they do so.

In the sections that follow, I support my claims with reference to reviews of productions of *King Lear* (the 2018 production at Chichester and the Duke of York's Theatre), and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (the 2013/4 production at the Apollo Theatre and the Gielgud Theatre, in both London and the subsequent touring productions). I begin by considering the paralinguistic effects produced by actors, and move on to the effects of non-linguistic evidence derived from the *mise-en-scène*, specifically set design.

#### 4. Paralinguistic evidence: Acting

Of the two plays I have chosen, *Lear* makes the greatest demands on actors on account of the density of the text, the complexity of the relationships and actions, and the long history of notable, even defining performances. Running time often exceeds three hours, so that performing can be physically as well as mentally gruelling. If we add the raised expectations attendant on the production of a work of such high cultural value, it becomes clear that the success of a given production will likely rely on the degree to which the actors' performances confirm, confound, or expand the audience's understanding of the play. Performances which discover and explore previously overlooked or unsuspected lines of interpretation are likely to generate the greatest admiration. And while audiences are taking in and processing the dense language, the literary and rhetorical devices, and the complex narratives, they are watching human beings move and talk and interact. These paralinguistic elements supplement, or countermand, the propositional content and the affective effects of the performance.

The 2018 production of *King Lear* provided, in addition to the linguistically-encoded information, the work of the actors, clever intertextual allusions, and rather literal stage effects (such as creating a downpour on stage in Act 3). Of the 20 reviews I consulted, 17 mention McKellen's acting and vocal behaviours. Though a few described line readings, most focussed on non-linguistic aspects of the performance, and their interpretations suggest the range and complexity of the contextual premises which they brought to bear, and the degree to which they subjected the performance to non-spontaneous interpretation. Several remarked on the quality of McKellen's voice, which seems to have surprised them. Lawrence (2018), for instance, comments that the actor is known for 'too much command coming from the diaphragm', before going on to compliment the 'rich' and 'supple' voice that 'highlights the old man's vulnerability'. Akbar (2018) notes that the lines are delivered 'softly' or 'croaked', Wolf (2018) draws attention to their 'welcome softness', and Hemming (2018) writes that McKellen 'whispers'. The intimate space (the venue seats 500) permits a very wide



acoustic range – from 'thunderous threats' (Hemming) to a 'slight upturn' on a single word (Wolf) – but the effects are deliberate, not incidental to the theatrical space.

Reviewers also paid close attention to McKellen's movements. Matheou (2018), the reviewer writing for *The Hollywood Reporter* remarked that the actor 'delineates every aspect of the king's folly and decline with so much delicacy (and no recourse to grandstanding) that the experience has the telling air of familiarity about it'. Morgan (2018), in *The Stage*, comments that McKellen 'looks tired, as if he can't quite summon the energy to be angry', and 'slaps his hands over this mouth to stop himself from shouting'. Another reviewer focussed on his 'invocations to the heavens, gestured by a ritual hand signal' (MacDonald 2018), and yet another noted that how McKellen 'makes Lear a man who is always on the verge of rage, but seems to quell it, pinning his arms tightly by his sides as if to hold himself together' (Crompton 2018). Still others pointed out that Lear 'stepped gingerly' or shuffled 'aimlessly' (*Across Land & Sea* 2018), 'snuffles and lapses, coughs and stumbles' (Dezfouli 2018).

All the reviewers saw the same play (though not necessarily the same performance), yet different details emerge across the entire range, and few if any are repeated. This is in itself both unremarkable and extraordinary. We would hardly expect that in such abbreviated pieces the same behaviours would be noticed, or put in the same (or similar) words. Yet the specific flourishes that the playgoers identify hint at the wealth of gesture and action provided by a single actor over the course of the performance (or the entire run).

The reviews confirm that the actors' contributions lead critics and audiences to draw specific inferences. Akbar (2018) claims that the effect of McKellen's choices (soft voice, croaking, tear-filled interruptions or 'capers') is to 'show [Lear's] ignominious decline'. Wolf conjectures that McKellen's 'welcome softness' suggests a 'sense of psychic excoriation' and imputes the 'slight upturn' on the final word of the question he puts to his daughters ('which of you shall we say doth love us most?') to Lear's baffled recognition of his own hatefulness. Lawrence regards McKellen's Lear as 'capricious' and Hemming describes him as 'stubborn, volatile, vulnerable and, most poignantly, terrifyingly aware of his growing mental frailty', exhibiting '[i]mpulsive viciousness'. While these characterizations are consistent with the text, the reviewers have derived them, not from the words of the play, but from the acting choices of the performers and (presumably) the director.

To arrive at these interpretations, the viewers must construct very large, complex contexts from a variety of sources. Some may be drawn from their previous exposure to Shakespeare's plays in general (studied at school, perhaps), others from experiences with this particular play. Knowledge of McKellen's body of work in film will contribute other sets of assumptions; these are particularly rich, since cinema favours both close-up views of performers' faces (which give access to their range of emotions and their habitual acting choices), and sensitive sound design (which helps communicate complicated states of mind through nuanced vocal modulations). Still other assumptions may

be drawn from viewers' understanding of culturally dominant modes of communicating profound emotional states, or of the behaviours symptomatic of deepening dementia.

From such far-reaching sets of assumptions, viewers such as these critics create detailed explanations that account for the characters' words, actions, and vocal styles. Such readings follow from the principle of relevance operating over an extended period of non-spontaneous interpretation. Playgoers attribute states of mind, thoughts, emotions, and motives to the fictional characters not merely on the basis of the words they speak or the acts they undertake, but of the qualities of voice and body employed by the actors. Each viewer's context is both idiosyncratic and foreseeable, if not in the details, then in the implications and implicatures derived from it. The audience is therefore responsible to a significant degree for the composition of the resulting interpretation, the outcome of their active, imaginative, and creative engagement with these details of performance.

## 5. Non-linguistic evidence: Design

The designer does not necessarily give physical form to descriptions in the text (or narrative, if the play is based on a novel or short story), but instead invents devices to amplify or supplement the performances in support of the interpretation presented on stage. Ultimately, the director determines a line of interpretation that will make some linguistic evidence more manifest, some less, and closes down some lines of interpretation altogether. Importantly, the audience is under no obligation to accept the director's interpretation or emphases, though it requires more cognitive effort to resist (overthrow and eliminate aspects of) an interpretation.

We take it for granted that actors' contributions shape audience's perceptions and interpretations. Whether flamboyant or restrained, performers make choices that are clearly intended to convey information about the characters they portray; in that sense, they are actively communicating through their presentations. But non-human elements of the production also guide playgoers to experience the cognitive, affective, and aesthetic effects intended by the company: set design and staging, for instance, provide information not found in the script, and lead the audience to draw inferences which may or may not align with the words of the play. A production's performances are the work of individuals, dynamic and subject to change. Set and stage design are static and well-defined, consistent throughout a run. *Mise-en-scène* is the complex and multifaceted interface between them. Typically, it includes set, costume, make-up, properties, and lighting, but may also denote blocking, composition, and design. Crucially, it is shaped by the interpretation which the production as a whole is manifestly intended to communicate. While directors and producers may develop a conventional *mise-en-scène* – i.e. an arrangement that conforms to the readily predictable expectations of audiences – directors of performances

of well-known texts may use novel means to generate renewed interest in their productions.<sup>7</sup>

These inferences may go beyond what is warranted by the linguistically provided information, or may function as a commentary on the text itself.<sup>8</sup> Playgoers writing about their response to *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* demonstrated the significant contextual expansion – and the extended processing – that underpinned their interpretations, referring explicitly to links they drew between staging and effect. While in some cases reviewers could account for the effects produced by stage or set design, relevance is achieved by *poetic effects*, weakly communicated and weakly represented implicatures, implications, and assumptions.

Reviews of *Lear* focussed on McKellen, whose cultural and professional status made his performance highly salient; nevertheless, several writers drew strong inferences from the stage design. Akbar, for instance, remarked that '[t]he staging speaks [Lear's] power for him', suggesting that the 'oversized portrait' that dominates centre stage 'prefigure[s] Lear's end with his face already half in shade' (Akbar 2018). In a production such as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, however, staging and set design do not simply complement the performances. Instead, these elements make crucial contributions to the audience's experience of the play and their understanding of the characters, functioning as commentary, explication, and guide.

*Curious Incident* is adapted from the 2003 novel by Mark Haddon; its first-person narrator, Christopher Boone, though highly intelligent, is profoundly limited in his ability to interpret others' emotional or social cues. One of the attractions of the book, according to some reviewers, is its 'superbly realized' representation of the young man's perceptions of the world (Moore 2003), with its 'skewed perspective and fierce logic' (McInerney 2013). The novelist himself initially judged the text to be 'unadaptable' for stage or screen, precisely because of the difficulties in depicting a character who 'doesn't empathize' with others and who struggles with 'anything more than ... literal meaning' (Lunden 2014). The playwright Simon Stephens overcame some of the obstacles by transforming some of the narrator's internal monologue into lines spoken by Siobhan, his special education teacher. But these expedients merely relocate

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<sup>7</sup> The *New York Times* reviewer Jesse Green remarks that Delacorte Theater's 2019 production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, with its all-black cast and contemporary musical numbers, 'gently but firmly escorts the great comedy into a #MeToo, Black Lives Matter world'.

<sup>8</sup> The RSC 2015 production of *Othello*, for example, encouraged audiences to reflect on their assumptions about race by casting a black actor (Lucian Msumati) in the role of Iago; Iago's pathological hatred of Othello, frequently explained by appeal to sexual jealousy or racial animus, is put in a fresh light. Msumati (2015) remarks that he did not believe that 'what drives Iago is anything racial at all. There's something much deeper, much more dangerous, much more emotional than that'. By denying audiences the conventional explanation for Iago's behavior, the director Iqbal Khan indirectly criticized the racist assumptions underpinning traditional views and productions. Rather than restricting racist views to the villain, Khan's production reveals the inequities and prejudices that run through the entire society of the play. In this milieu, racism is not an individual failing but is instead the expression of systemic oppression and inequality.

the source of information without granting access to Christopher's view of the world. For this, the production relied on the set, which, according to the director, is 'designed to be like [Christopher's] brain, a little bit' (Lunden).

Playgoers' responses strongly suggest that the device succeeded. Of the 40 reviews I have consulted, 28 include mentions and interpretations of the design. Most seem to have followed the line of interpretation anticipated by Bunny Christie, who designed the set for the UK and touring productions. The set presents viewers with structures, numbers, graphs, grids, and words that give 'Christopher's internal response to the world an external manifestation' (Gardner 2013). Winer (2014) writes that the set helps 'visualize [Christopher's] universe' and his 'disassociated reality'. Rooney (2014) remarks that 'Everything here puts us inside the machine-like, coded order of math prodigy Christopher's mind, allowing us to experience events as he does. Most crucially, it immerses us in his disorientation when things prove beyond his understanding'. Critics consistently comment that 'the set reflects Christopher's mind' (Felgate 2014), or visualizes 'Christopher's mind' (Winer 2014), 'represents Christopher himself' (Hoile 2014), or takes 'us inside Christopher's mind as it short-circuits' (Suskin 2014). They did not agree, however, in their evaluation of the set as 'stagecraft' (Peatman 2014). Some found it 'distancing, even exhausting' (Rooney 2014), or felt that it 'completely overwhelms the spoken word' (Hofler 2014), becoming in reality 'the most powerful presence on the stage' (Shilling 2014).

The range of opinions confirms that audiences could achieve the effects the designer and director manifestly aimed at while evaluating the non-linguistic evidence as a literary (rhetorical) device. Some concluded that 'the spectacle never exists for its own sake but always serves to support the narrative or to convey Christopher's point of view' (Hoile 2014); others argued that the script 'doesn't deserve a better production. It deserves less production' (Rooney 2014). Most interesting of all were remarks that suggested the design added 'to the book's insights' (Stephens 2015) or made the audience want to 'read [the novel] again the moment you leave the theatre' (O'Brochta 2014), since none of the reviews criticized the adaptation on grounds of literal or thematic infidelity. Instead, some playgoers at least would draw on the expanded positive cognitive effects created by the play in a reinterpretation, or revision, of their understanding of Haddon's novel.

It might be objected that the audience's reactions were unsurprising. After all, if the designer and director had not wanted playgoers to treat the set as a representation (literal, metaphorical, or symbolic) of Christopher's mind or brain, then they presumably would not have invested the time and effort required to build, test, and employ it. On that view, the audience's responses confirm the effectiveness of the production's communicative, stylistic, and theatrical choices. In addition, it might be argued that the equivalence is both obvious and inescapable: one might wonder how else the set should be understood.

However, there is no necessary or obvious correlation between a 'cavernous digital box' (D'Souza 2017), a 'black box of crosshatched graph paper' (Zoglin 2014) and 'the remorseless logic and Narnia-like wonders of Christopher's brain'

(Walker 2013). Every writer who mentioned the set design agreed that it amounted to 'an inspired representation of Christopher's interior world' (Shilling 2014) but playgoers had to work out for themselves what was being communicated, going beyond comprehension and engaging in non-spontaneous interpretation of the evidence supplied by the set. One immediate effect, as we have seen, is to provide audiences with insights into 'the wondrous strange workings of Christopher's mind' (Lukowski 2017). Another and more satisfying outcome is an increased appreciation of and respect for minds such as his: the stage design sets intellectual challenges which audiences are invited to resolve, while being breathtakingly beautiful and ostensibly ingenious. It is left to the viewers to draw inferences not only about the character but also about their own attitudes towards neuroatypical human beings, perhaps encouraging greater empathy and respectful curiosity. Such implications align with the explicitly communicated aspects of the piece, but they are conveyed non-linguistically and are derived from the large, complex, and often idiosyncratic contexts that audiences construct.

## 6. The contributions of the audience

These reviews are consistent in the details they comment on, the implications and implicatures they derive, and the interpretations they develop. But as the excerpts have shown, the reviewers are not united in their assessments. McKellen's delivery was sharply critiqued by several writers, and though the majority of reviewers noted Christie's set design approvingly, more than a few remarked that the production as a whole valued technical wizardry over emotion and character development. The similarities across the reviews are impressive, but the differences are more telling. They confirm that audiences arrived at interpretations that overlapped at many points, but did not reproduce the same intellectual and emotional reactions. Their comments demonstrate the variability of the assumptions comprising individual cognitive environments. Furthermore, they indicate that the reviewers relied on evidence supplied by the productions over and above the linguistically-communicated evidence of the text: that is, these are the comments not of readers, but of spectators.

I have argued (Furlong 2012) that an interpretation of a play produced by reading alone will always be impoverished. A playgoer may arrive at a complex and multilayered interpretation, based on the words of the play, the *mise-en-scène* and the performances. These convey a vast array of very weak implicatures, most of which are non-propositional: emotions, impressions, sensations, memories, and so forth. But the process of interpretation does not stop here. The playgoer supplies contextual premises from their own cognitive environment, influenced by capacity, imagination, and previous experience, along with preferences and abilities. During the course of the performance, the audience constructs a rich and detailed spontaneous interpretation, which may be pursued at length and become non-spontaneous. The set of assumptions, impressions, poetic effects, and affective responses will be significantly constrained by the performance, as the playwright intended and foresaw – even

if the specifics of a given production could not have been anticipated (which is of course the case with *Lear*).

From a relevance theoretic perspective, any individual interpretation is the outcome of the interplay between the communicative act performed on stage and the processing of the elements of that act by any individual in the audience. And no matter how detailed and specific the assumptions communicated explicitly or implicitly might be, they require at the very least enrichment, decoding, disambiguation and so on. Given the immense range and content of these assumptions, it seems clear that an audience member can pay conscious attention to only a small fraction; and even unconsciously (that is, without conscious awareness or direction of faculties), they will take only a relatively small proportion on board. Moreover, the salience and strength of any of these assumptions will differ from one audience member to another, depending on preferences and abilities. The resulting contextual complexity produces the poetic effects – the wide range of weakly communicated assumptions – which in turn satisfy the presumption of optimal relevance and encourage the playgoer's extended (non-spontaneous) interpretation.

The effects I have identified in the reviews are responses not to the text, but to the performances, the set design, and the *mise-en-scène*. Just as the play text underdetermines the reader's interpretation, so these aspects of a production comprise only a part of the context from which the audience derives the effects – propositional, affective, and aesthetic – that constitute a given interpretation. The work of the viewer, then, completes the interpretive process, which begins with the writer and is continued and carried out by the company. No matter how comprehensive, detailed, and complete an individual production or performance may be, the viewers supply a vast array of premises, at varying degrees of salience, manifestness, and strength.

There is no doubt that the linguistically-communicated evidence of a theatrical production (of the type I identified at the outset) is the most propositionally complex. The effort required to process utterances, particularly in a play that is new to the audience, is formidable. The positive cognitive effects – implicatures and implications – which the hearer constructs or recognises interact with one another, and with the playgoer's cognitive environment, in a manner which even a scholarly review<sup>9</sup> will find difficult to capture and convey. Nevertheless, it is the paralinguistic and non-linguistic evidence which is generated only in performance that shapes the audience's interpretation, guiding it either subtly or overtly along particular directions. The audience for *Lear*, for example, focused on the central character's portrayal at least partly because of McKellen's fame, which made playgoers more attuned to his acting choices. By contrast, the audience for *Curious Incident*, some of whom at least were unfamiliar with the text, were engaged by the ostensibly salient set. Not only did the extraordinary design present a wealth of visual and linguistic evidence, but the 'holodeck-like

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<sup>9</sup> I have in mind pieces such as O'Beirne's and Carlson's 2015 and 2016 reviews of two productions of *Hedda Gabler*, at The Abbey Theatre (Dublin), and the Canadian Stage (Toronto) respectively. These are detailed, deeply informed reviews by practicing scholars in theatre arts.

set' (Nestruck 2017), so far removed from any naturalistic staging, posed a puzzle which audiences felt compelled to resolve. In this second production, at least, set and narrative were stylistically as well as thematically matched. *Lear*, by contrast, relied on more conventional, though exquisitely managed, stagecraft.

As with any communicative act, the audience is guided by the presumption of optimal relevance: all facets of the production communicate the presumption of their own optimal relevance, the presumption which underwrites the audience's investment of effort and attention. And though the performance supplies the playgoer with stimuli (aural, visual, somatic) which are virtually unavailable through reading alone, there remains a great deal for the hearer to complete and fill in. Having done so, they continue the interpretive process, engaging in non-spontaneous interpretation, which may persist long after the curtain has gone down. The longer that process continues, the more poetic and affective effects may be generated and entertained.

## 7. Conclusion

According to R. D. Laing (1967), 'Bertrand Russell once remarked that the stars are in one's brain', since regardless of the scale and complexity of a phenomenon, ultimately its mental representation extends and completes the sensory input with contributions from the viewer's cognitive environment. Scholars such as those I have mentioned focus on authorial intention, directorial authority, or collaborative meaning making, with varying degrees of theoretical flexibility. Depending on their theoretical framework, they may assert that the stars are utterly independent of the viewing eye (at one extreme), or that the stars exist only as a phenomenon, a product of the individual's brain represented in the mind (at the other). A relevance theoretic account, such as I have advanced here, suggests a way of reconciling the apparently competing roles of writer, director, cast, and crew. Such an account demonstrates that the audience has the final word on performance. Ignorant or erudite, ill-prepared or deeply experienced, open-minded or bigoted, audience members take from the profusion of visual and tactile and aural sensations supplied by music and words, acting and staging, and build up the world of the play. Ideally, their vision and that of the playwright, director, performers, producer, and crew will overlay one another, at least adequately. Perhaps the audience will fall short, or arrive at conclusions neither foreseen by the performers nor warranted by the production. Theatre, as a communicative act, is subject to inherent uncertainty, but the reviews I have found confirm it is a risk worth taking.

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