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The Theatrical Double Reflexivity Complex:
How the Spectator Creates Metatheatre

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MICRO CV

Dr. Cahill currently serves as the postdoctoral research fellow in the University of Missouri's Department of Theatre. Her specializations include Ancient Greek and Roman drama, Shakespearean studies, and the intermingling of theatre and religion. Her publications have appeared in *Theatre Survey*, *The Shakespeare Newsletter*, and *Studies in Theatre and Performance*. Dr. Cahill's first book is currently under negotiations with an academic publishing house.

ABSTRACT

"The Theatrical Double Reflexivity Complex" explores the possibility of the spectator's presence and influence in altering the style of a theatrical production during a performance. The author focuses on African-American audiences in American theatre as the primary subject of this phenomenon and claims that by incorporating their own reality into the world of the play, the spectators can force a play to become metatheatrical regardless of the actors' or director's initial intent. Beginning with the initial assumption of what we, as theatre artists, expect from our audience, this article explores the results of what occurs when an audience does not conform to the specific style set forth. In doing so, this article examines the engagement of the spectator as character and instigator by providing a new theory to the world of metatheatrical theory – the possibility of the Theatrical Double Reflexivity Complex.

KEYWORDS: Spectator, Metatheatre, Reflexivity, Theatre/Drama

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This is an article. You, as my audience, already know that – and you expect this article to be an article. But this is also more than an article. It will argue a point, and it will impact you. But for now, it is nothing more than an article. It depends on you, my audience, to make it into something more. Similarly, a play is a play. Like this article, plays require an audience to form opinions about the pieces. But while all plays require an audience of some sort to make it a performance, what makes one play different from another? One answer is the artistic style in which the play is presented, and of the styles available, metatheatre is one of the most intriguing when analyzed for its theatrical convention.

Coined in 1963 by Lionel Abel, metatheatre encompasses a vast range of definitions. Abel's description of metatheatre states, "Metatheatre gives [...] the stronger sense that the world is a projection of human consciousness, [...] and] assumes there is no world except that created by human striving, human imagination."¹ Yet, metatheatre should not be limited to this one explanation. Metatheatre provides an experience of reality within the theatre that usually confronts the audience with a social or existential problem or question. Sociologist Erving Goffman expanded metatheatre theory when he applied theatrical terms to everyday life. Coincidentally, this adaptation of the term spurred an anti-theatre prejudice in which theorists aligned the theatre with a negative, false reality in contrast to the world's reality.

Metatheatre or "metaplay" as employed by Abel existed long before any theorist coined the phrase in the twentieth century. William Shakespeare and Pedro Calderón de la Barca both utilized metatheatrical elements in their plays and characters to instigate dialogues and highlight certain aspects of the performance. In this regard, Abel argues that both Shakespeare and Pedro Calderón – while attempting to write tragedy – discovered a new dramatic form that included *self-consciousness*: metatheatre.² This new form was then seen repetitively throughout theatrical history in different parts of the world. In addition to Pedro Calderón (Spanish) and Shakespeare (English), other artists that exercised this new form were Jean Genet (French), Samuel Beckett (Irish/French), Bertolt Brecht (German), and Luigi Pirandello (Italian), to name but a few. Each of these dramatists used metatheatre in a variety of ways to emphasize their commentary

¹ Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), 113.

² Lionel Abel, *Tragedy and Metatheatre: Essays on Dramatic Form* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 2003), 151.

– usually political – on societal complications. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Pedro Calderón's *Great Theatre of the World* are considered the two classic examples of elementary metatheatre, wherein both comment on human nature and desire. Brecht and Beckett furthered the discussion of human nature through their metatheatrical Epic Theatre and Theatre of the Absurd, respectively.

Once metatheatre was recognized as a form, theorist Richard Hornby further described metatheatre with what is known today as the *drama/culture complex*:

A play operates within a system of drama as a whole, and, concentrically, also within the systems that form culture as a whole. Culture, centered on drama in this way, I am defining for the sake of brevity as the *drama/culture complex*. The drama/culture complex [...] provides our society with a vast model for understanding reality. A play is 'about' drama as a whole, and more broadly, about culture as a whole; this drama/culture complex is 'about' reality not in the passive sense of merely reflecting it, but in the active sense of providing a 'vocabulary' for describing it.³

In this model, Hornby creates a guideline for how drama can influence life, and life influence drama. While he does not believe that one play can alter society and its values, the feedback loop of the complex allows for gradual change should enough plays/media discuss the issue. In order to provoke change, Hornby argues that the dramatist should ferociously attack the sociological system and therein, force his audience to examine the codes of their culture. However, Hornby was analyzing the drama/culture complex from primarily the artist's perspective. He incorporated the audience into the complex, because spectators juxtaposed the actors' reality with their element of Real reality. But the audience members arguably did not play a prominent role in his investigation of metatheatre. Hornby's theory focused more on the text of the play and its treatment of his five techniques employed by playwrights.⁴ Of these, I will incorporate ceremony-within-the-play and self-reference into my overall analysis.

³ Richard Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama and Perception* (London: Associated Universities Presses, 1986), 22.

⁴ His techniques are: play within a play, ceremony within a play, role-playing within the role, literary and real-life references within the play, and self-reference.

Ceremony-within-the play occurs when a ceremonious act – seen as performative – is incorporated as a subunit within the larger unit of the theatrical performance. This technique is seen in plays that integrate acts that are religious or ritualistic within the dramatic action. Self-reference is the “most extreme, intense form of metadrama”⁵ occurring when “the play directly calls attention to itself as a play, an imaginative fiction. Acknowledging this fiction of course destroys it, at least temporarily.”⁶

According to Hornby, self-reference occurs only when the play calls attention to itself as a play. Flipping this theory on its side, let us examine metatheatre from a different angle. Suppose the play is *directed* and *acted* in the style of realism, but it is *received* metatheatrically. What of it then? By examining theories which discuss the role of the audience, as well as performances which have created this particular phenomenon, I will argue that a play not intentionally defined as metatheatre by its playwright or director can become metatheatrical based on the audience’s interaction during the performance. To satisfy this argument, I will first analyze the historical role of the audience, then the manifestation of the audience (specifically the African-American audience) as a responsive collective group in the twenty-first century, and finally, introduce a theoretical possibility for this cultural phenomenon.

The role of the audience has been an important aspect of theatre throughout history. Ancient Greek plays were performed in large amphitheatres designed to hold thousands, and Shakespeare used “the audience’s imagination to make giant leaps from the seen to the unseen, and what is more important, giant leaps to the insights [the audience would] need to play [its] part.”⁷ Simon’s quote concerning Shakespeare uncovers a fascinating trend that has been continuous since scholastic studies on the audience began. While all theatre artists realize the necessity for an audience – “No play will live and breathe without the fuel supplied by the audience’s one basic unstated yet powerful desire”⁸ – the common study has constantly examined the role of the audience from the director, actor, or playwright’s perspective.

James Baldwin once argued, “The artist has to assume that he creates his audience and that the audience won’t be there until he

⁵ Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*, 117.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁷ Mayo Simon, *The Audience and the Playwright* (New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2003), 32.

⁸ Simon, *The Audience and the Playwright*, 22.

starts to work. The artist is responsible for his audience, which may exist in his lifetime or may never exist until long after he is dead.”⁹ This statement holds a large truth in it. If there is no play, no audience will congregate to see it. But this balanced relationship of viewer/spectator has become muddled in theatre studies, resulting in theatre artists frequently assuming the position of Audience Creator: “by claiming the role of the actor, the performer also creates the audience.”¹⁰ Within this assumption, the actors have the influence or ability to “shape” the spectators into the audience they want.

Since audiences have regularly been evaluated through the eyes of the artist, metatheatre has also been evaluated as it pertains to the artist, and scholastic theories of metatheatre regurgitate this ideology: “There is something magical about getting an audience to respond [...] even to think when you want them to think. That never happens in real life.”¹¹ It is pellucid that this particular theorist is evaluating the results of metatheatre as it pertains to the artist – the *playwright* is forcing the audience to think what he wants them to think, a chimerical event that does not happen in the “real life.” This statement still forces the audience into abiding to the world of the play according to the playwright. But if the audience *is* aware that they are watching a performance, could they not just as easily influence the world of the play?

The relationship between the actors and the audience has always existed and has been the topic of many analyses. Unquestionably, theatre is a collective experience, in which a group of spectators observe actors and “when the group sees something enjoyable, it lets the stage know and the stage responds. You can feel the charges of electricity jolting back and forth between stage and audience.”¹² Simon argues the audience’s basic desire is “to understand,”¹³ but a number of other desires exist in the spectator, both individual and collective. A desire for a connection between the audience and the actors exists, partly because audience members want to participate. As a spectator, audience members have the power to experience “otherness” in certain characters, or ally with a relatable

⁹ James Baldwin quoted in David C. Estes, “An Interview with James Baldwin/1986,” in *Conversations with James Baldwin*, ed. Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 280.

¹⁰ Mira Felner and Claudia Orenstein, *The World of the Theatre: Tradition and Innovation* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2006), 28.

¹¹ Simon, *The Audience and the Playwright*, 85.

¹² Simon, *The Audience and the Playwright*, 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*

character or situation. Therefore, every play could possess a certain amount of metatheatre, which is entirely in the hands of the audience. Each play requires “an audience to collaborate actively in the creating of their fictions. The spectators complete, if they do not construct, these fictions, and in that – rather than in [the] complexity of ideas or systems of thought – resides what has always made American theatre engaging and exciting.”¹⁴ One example of this collaborative creation of the play’s world can be seen in certain productions with predominately African-American audiences.¹⁵

African-Americans have not always been a principal audience group in American theatre, but this statistic has been starting to change in recent years. During the 2007-2008 Broadway season, 6.3 percent of the audience was African-American, a rise from the 3.8 percent during the 2004-2005 season. However, in the 2009-2010 season, the Broadway League reported a drop in African-American attendances to 3.4 percent of theatregoers.¹⁶ The 2013-2014 Broadway season reported that Caucasian theatregoers purchased 80 percent of tickets.¹⁷ While these statistics do not include regional theatres, it is the only comprehensive analysis of the ethnic make-up of theatre audiences in America. Even though this report shows African-Americans as one of the smaller percentages, Tamika Sayles argues, “Black audiences should feel included rather than targeted: increasing the appearance of all-black casts, reevaluating the notion that black casts are only limited to traditional casting, and dismissing the mindset that Black audiences are less reluctant to go to the theatre.”¹⁸ As I was only made aware of the possible alteration to metatheatre theory at a production of James Baldwin’s *The Amen Corner*, I will be using African-American audiences as a case study in this essay. By no

¹⁴ Thomas P. Adler, *Mirror on the stage: the Pulitzer plays as an approach to American Drama*, (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1987), 152.

¹⁵ For an in depth analysis on African American audiences and a theory of their receptive processes, see Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A theory of production and reception* (London: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁶ “The Make-Up of Broadway’s Audience,” *In the Shadows of Broadway*, accessed 7 May 2013, <http://www.shadowsofbroadway.com/audience-article/>.

¹⁷ “The Demographics of the Broadway Audience 2013-2014,” *The Broadway League*, accessed 20 July 2015, http://www.broadwayleague.com/index.php?url_identifier=the-demographics-of-the-broadway-audience.

¹⁸ Tamika Sayles, “Black Audiences Should Feel Included Rather than Targeted: What is the Theatre Industry Doing to Reach Them?” *Huffington Post* (5 August 2012), accessed 5 May 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tamika-sayles/black-theatre-audiences_b_1739184.html.

means does this phenomenon only occur in African-American audiences. Their inclusion is solely because I uncovered this phenomenon with an African-American audience and other scholars have made similar reports concerning this particular demographic. Any play has the potential to cause similar reactions from their audience members, but examining more than one group of spectators is too large for the scope of this initial article.

James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* possesses a strong sense of realism. The events that take place are relatable and standard. The opening stage directions read:

We are facing the scrim wall of the tenement which holds the home and church of SISTER MARGARET ALEXANDER. It is a very bright Sunday morning. Before the curtain rises, we hear street sounds, laughter, cursing, snatches of someone's radio, and under everything, the piano, which DAVID is playing in the church. [...] On the platform, a thronelike chair. On the pulpit, an immense open Bible. To the right of the pulpit, the piano, the top of which is cluttered with hymnbooks and tambourines. Just below the pulpit, a table, flanked by two plain chairs. On the table two collection plates, one brass, one straw, two Bibles, perhaps a vase of artificial flowers. Facing the pulpit, and running the length of the church, the camp chairs for the congregation. Downstage, the kitchen, cluttered: a new Frigidaire, prominently placed, kitchen table with dishes on it, suitcase open on a chair.¹⁹

Although a director can choose the style for his/her specific production, on the surface this play offers scarce wiggle room to deter from the traditional fourth wall convention. Yet Baldwin's incorporation of the church services subtly reflects his "ideological and aesthetic posture: there exists an experiential reality outside of the self that can be grasped, that can be known, that must be lived."²⁰ This experiential reality is presented in the form of church services, which could arguably be defined as Hornby's ceremony-within-the-play and

¹⁹ James Baldwin, *The Amen Corner* (New York: Samuel French, 1968), 15-6.

²⁰ Adler, *Mirror on the stage: the Pulitzer plays as an approach to American Drama*, 147.

requires the audience member to be both a member and a spectator of the reality.

Intriguingly however, my witnessed performances of *The Amen Corner* as active dramaturge to this specific production were repetitively metatheatrical because of the participation of the audience. Unlike comedies when the audience laughs (singularly and separate) to the action onstage, these audiences' responded to Baldwin's play in tandem with the actions onstage, constructing a bridge between the two worlds. Although the time period was historical, it seemed to me that the men and women of the audience correlated their personal beliefs to the events onstage since Sister Margaret's church and character seemed to be familiar to many of the African-American spectators. These audience members knew the songs that the church chorus sang and joined in the refrains multiple times, evidenced by the accuracy of their lyrics and tempo. Many statements made by characters throughout the play were verbally affirmed or dismissed by members of the audience. "That's right!" and "Amen!" were frequently murmured during the production, simultaneously distancing other spectators from the action onstage while bringing the world of the play into the audience for those who declared affirmations. For those spectators not participating, the singing and verbal injections into the play's progression distanced them and reminded them that they were spectators. This distance was evidenced by commentary heard in the lobby following the production. Although some audience members noted the unique experience of their co-spectators participating in the show, others felt the injections were "rude," "distracting," and "took away from the performance."²¹ Employing Hornby's theory, the audience members self-referenced that this was a play by calling attention to themselves as the spectators. In this case, the audience unintentionally developed a conflicting equilibrium of metatheatre.

This equilibrium creates a unique role for the audience. Often in theatre, a director decides how he/she will "cast" the audience. The director usually initiates casting the audience when he/she envisions the style of performance for the particular text. During the process, the director asks him/herself, "Who is the audience to this production? What tools will they be equipped with upon entering the theatre?" By casting the audience, the director shapes the audience into the ideal group for his/her production and this casting will lead to the treatment of the audience by the actors. In *Mirror on the Stage*, Adler argues

²¹ Author's observation and interview, 22 February 2013.

that metatheatrical plays “demand that the audience consciously think of themselves *as* an audience, thereby establishing a link between these works for the stage and other forms of Modernist art.”²² If metatheatre forces an audience to think of itself as an audience, the audience is still being cast. What happens when the audience consciously casts itself as a participatory audience? What happens when the audience becomes a different (or more shocking, additional!) character in the cast? I suggest considering the audience in a reverse manner to the traditional directing view: by entering the theatre, what does the *audience* do to the *performance*? Although the actors in *The Amen Corner* did not break character, detour from their lines or reference the play, the audience was able to supply an element of metatheatre because of their active participation in song and judgment. The action onstage was “like looking in a mirror”²³ to a reality with which they were already familiar.

This phenomenon could be explained by one theory in cognitive neuroscience known as “mirror neurons.” Discovered in the 1990s by Giacomo Rizzolatti, MD, mirror neurons are one possibility of why primates react to the actions of others. For example, if someone burns her hand, grimaces and quickly pulls her hand off the burner, an observer who witnesses the burning might also grimace and pull his hand away out of instinct. A continuous study of mirror neurons would assist neurologists, neuroscientists, and psychologists to better explain empathy,²⁴ language development²⁵ and autism.²⁶

Zeami Motokiyo and Richard Shusterman recognized the possibility of mirror neurons being used in theatre by focusing on the performer – dance and Noh – and its possibilities in *proprioception*.²⁷ Barbara Montero expands this performance theory to include

²² *Ibid.*, 142.

²³ Nancy C. Cornwell and Mark P. Orbe, “‘Keepin’ It Real’ and/or ‘Sellin’ Out to the Man’: African-American Responses to Aaron McGruder’s *The Boondocks*,” in *Say It Loud!: African American Audiences, Media, and Identity*, ed. Robin R. Means Coleman (New York: Routledge, 2002), 32.

²⁴ Lea Winerman, “The mind’s mirror,” *American Psychological Association*, October 2005 vol. 36, no. 9, accessed 25 August 2015, <http://www.apa.org/monitor/oct05/mirror.aspx>.

²⁵ Beth Azar, “How mimicry begat culture,” *American Psychological Association*, October 2005, vol. 36, no. 9, accessed 25 August 2015, <http://www.apa.org/monitor/oct05/mimicry.aspx>.

²⁶ Sadie F. Dingfelder, “Autism’s smoking gun?” *American Psychological Association*, October 2005, vol. 36, no. 9, accessed 25 August 2015, <http://www.apa.org/monitor/oct05/autism.aspx>.

²⁷ David Davies, *Philosophy of the Performing Arts* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 193-5.

spectators of dance and their mirror-neuronal reactions to watching dance performances, yet Montero and David Davies both argue that the reflexivity of the spectator requires a certain level of dance training to fully activate the mirror-neuronal response.²⁸

Likewise, the participation of the audience members in *The Amen Corner* required a certain level of familiarity to fully engage. If the religious setting used in *The Amen Corner* was a setting similar enough to a religious setting that encourages active engagement and is experienced daily or weekly by the spectators, those spectators could instinctively react to the setting via reflexivity. That religious settings are interactive is not a new theory. Richard Schechner explored the interactivity of leaders and followers in various religions in his analysis on ritual and performance in *Performance Studies: an introduction* (2002) and Stephen C. Finley and Torin Alexander explored the particularities of African-American religious dynamics in their monograph *African American Religious Cultures* (2009). Through the similarity of the settings, mirror neurons could be one cause behind the reverse metatheatricality of the performance.

Neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese argues that mirror neurons are “one key to understanding how human beings survive and thrive in a complex social world.” He states, “It seems we’re wired to see other people as similar to us, rather than different. [...] At the root, as humans we identify the person we’re facing as someone like ourselves.”²⁹ Due to this identification of self in another and/or the neurological connection between a recognizable setting on stage that encourages audience participation in reality, it is possible that the audience members in *The Amen Corner* partook in the events due to the firing of mirror neurons. While the theory of mirror neurons is still relatively new and additional research is required to support its validity regarding humans, the basis of mirror neurons is logical and applicable to the thesis of this article.

Based on the settings and/or circumstances within the play, the African-American audience in attendance created a too-realistic setting for the production. The spectators brought the play’s world into the world of the audience. They encompassed both worlds into one reality. The audience did not attempt to believe that the action onstage was real; the audience enforced that the action onstage impacted their personal reality, thereby making the play part of their reality. The actor or director did not need to say, “We are real people.

²⁸ Davies, *Philosophy of the Performing Arts*, 198.

²⁹ Winerman, “The mind’s mirror.”

You are watching a play that corresponds to your own life, because this is my life,” or “This is reality.” The director wanted the world of the play recognizable to the spectators, but not calling attention to itself as a play. But the spectators inflicted their reality onto the actors’ world, reversing the metatheatrical element. In this sense, the audience actually possessed the power to change the style of the production.

For the spectator to create metatheatre, two elements are necessary: active participation and spectator self-awareness. As mentioned previously, in metatheatre self-awareness is discussed in regards to the characters/actors. But if the spectators possess self-awareness of their role in the theatre, could they also not feed into the metatheatre of the performance? Further, participation is required in the production to enhance this awareness for both the spectators and performers, and the participation must be more involved than the traditional applause. These two factors are “ultimately, dependent on the audience providing its own frame of reference.”³⁰ Yet, more importantly in regards to the audience’s capability in producing metatheatre lies the definition of that frame of reference – “The question posed of the American audience for the work is one that insists on audience members, collectively and individually, consciously recognizing themselves as that frame of reference.”³¹ This cognitive recognition, partnered with the neurological theory of mirror neurons, allows the theatre spectator the opportunity to become fully engaged wherein the line between theatre reality and Real reality is blurred or possibly removed entirely: “Theatre audiences are giving high attention to the spectacle and, partly as a consequence, are closely involved.”³² This fully engaged spectator is what Dennis Kennedy refers to as an “aroused” spectator. However, the creation of such a spectator in a structured performance poses difficulty in analysis because “so little evidence exists on spectator arousal”³³ outside of athletic or financial spectatorship. Instead, we must rely on first-hand accounts of these performances.

The aforementioned example of *The Amen Corner* is not the only instance of this phenomenon occurring. Mira Felner and Claudia

³⁰ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A theory of production and reception* (London: Routledge, 1997), 178.

³¹ Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A theory of production and reception*, 178.

³² Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, *Audiences: a sociological theory of performance and imagination* (London: Sage, 1998), 206.

³³ Dennis Kennedy, *The Spectator and the Spectacle: Audiences in Modernity and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 173.

Orenstein recorded more violent reactions during Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship* at the Free Southern Theater in 1968:

Slave Ship [...] enacted a history of African Americans in the United States and deliberately divided its audience along racial lines. [...] Many white audience members were so disturbed by this aggressive confrontation with history that they left at midpoint; others wished they had. [...] At many performances, black audience members, feeling empowered by the performance, joined the cast in shouting and intimidating white spectators.³⁴

Slave Ship was written during Baraka's "agitrope" phase and is symbolic and aggressive. The play's incorporation of dance, music, and minimal dialogue "create an experience that's closer to shamanic ritual than a 'traditional' European-style play."³⁵ Arguably, based on Hornby's tactics employed by the playwright, theatre scholars could consider Baraka's *Slave Ship* metatheatrical. It includes elements that identify the text with a ceremony or ritual, thus creating a kind of ceremony-within-the-play, similar to Baldwin's *The Amen Corner*. The important distinction is the abrasive behavior of several audience members during these performances.³⁶ It is possible that the African-American audience of *Slave Ship* felt safe to explore their instincts and react since they were in a theatre (a "safe space"), which implicated a fallacy of safety. By doing so, the audience removed the safeguard of "This is theatre" by participating freely in the menacing actions in the play. Their involvement penetrated the Reality of the non-participating audience members with the stage reality. Therefore, nearly every play could possess a certain amount of metatheatre, since every audience has the capability of making the play metatheatrical.

³⁴ Felner and Orenstein, *The World of the Theatre: Tradition and Innovation*, 30.

³⁵ Occupy Austin Reading Group, "Amiri Baraka, 'Slave Ship,'" accessed 10 May 2013, <http://occupyaustinreadinggroup.wordpress.com/2011/11/18/amiri-baraka-slave-ship/>.

³⁶ A side note relevant to this topic is the act of audience's rioting in the theatre because of a particular performance. Samuel Hay notes a performance of Baraka's *Slave Ship* in Greenville, Mississippi, in which the audience was "ready to revolt" (*African American Theatre: An Historical and Critical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 250). However, for the purposes of this article, I want to focus instead on the audiences' actions that take place during the performance and do not halt the performance.

The first example, *The Amen Corner*, presented a socially benign interaction with the text in which the audience participated in song and response. The second example, Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship*, offered the violent counterpart. These samples display two opposing incidents in which the audience created a metatheatrical performance by clashing the reality of the stage with the audience's Reality of life. This cultural phenomenon has yet to be explored theoretically. Noting this absence in theatre scholarship, I would like to suggest a possible theory explaining this cultural phenomenon in twenty-first century American theatre.

What is oft forgotten is that the audience, as a body, is actually comprised of multiple individual selves. The self is aware and knows it has been perceived as a unified mass, and therefore feels comfortable in participating in its traditional role of observing:

Most audiences prefer the pleasurable fantasy of observing without being observed. [...] Unlike real life, you – in your privileged seat – are deliciously invisible. You get your information by just happening to see it or overhear it. [...] If you realize the actors are playing to you while pretending to do something else, you're going to get annoyed [...] but notice how often the 'you' is some specialized person you are being asked to become, while the real you remains alert behind your screen of invisibility.³⁷

In some performances, the self recognizes the similarities to its reality and creates an understanding and association with the performance. Simon argues that this need for association stems from the idea that "all civilization, all our urges to perpetuate ourselves, all culture, religion, society, art, science, technology, wars, everything (including theatre), can be traced to the irreconcilable tension between the consciousness of self and the knowledge that the self doesn't last."³⁸ Therefore, by putting the self into something eternal (say, the world of a play – which never dies), it connects the play's existence with the existence of the self, creating a dual-existence that perpetuates the life of one by the presence of the other.

W.B. Worthen argues that a work is only complete by the entities that comprise it: "By locating the *work* in the text, [...] the

³⁷ Simon, *The Audience and the Playwright*, 48-9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

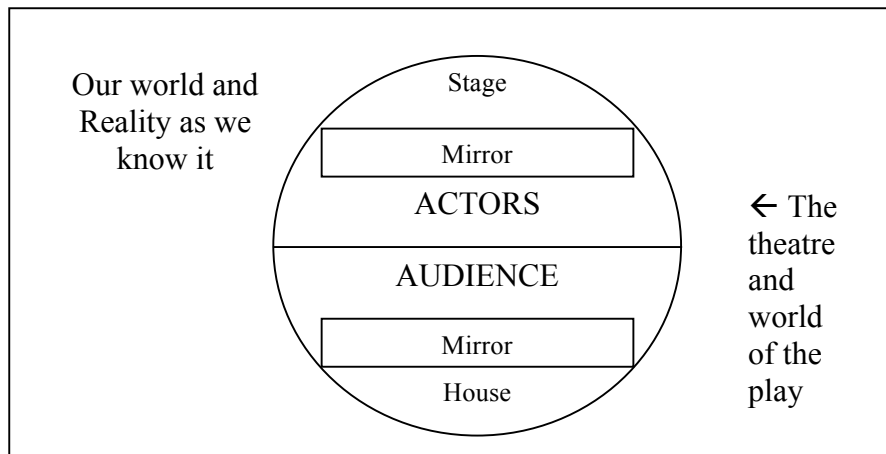
‘text vs. performance’ argument makes an odd eventuality possible: the unacknowledged importation of the kinds of authority associated with the *work* into the performance itself.”³⁹ Each performance of the work contributes to the *work* as a whole. When the self becomes intrinsically connected to the work through its relationship in a performance, it also becomes an entity in the work. By responding to the work as it occurs, the self influences that particular performance, altering the performance and thus, the existence of the *work*. By associating the self in the audience with the performance onstage, the self and the performance are both changed. This amalgamation of self and performance harmonizes with Hornby’s self-reference, which argues, “If the observer’s concept of self undergoes a contraction when self-reference occurs in a play, the world of dramatic illusion undergoes a displacement.”⁴⁰ Although Hornby meant that the observer’s concept of self is brought into question when self-reference occurs in the text of the play, it is also possible that the audience could be the instigator to throw the world into displacement, specifically seen in the incident during *Slave Ship*.

The metatheatrical elements at work in this analysis can be described as mirrors within the production. These mirrors are specific devices used to assist the actors and audience in understanding, “This is a play.” The devices can be the script, stage directions, audience placement, casting of the audience and actors’ interaction with the audience. But the audience can also provide mirrors. Those mirrors could be their interaction with the actors during the performance, their reception of the production, or possibly their presence in the first place. This power given to the audience exists because “The secret power of the gaze is that it does its work on both sides of the Cartesian frame, in which the mirrored subject appears even when – in the light that blinds upon the stage as it never does the silver screen – the gaze appears to be broken.”⁴¹ To illustrate this idea, imagine there are two mirrors in every theatre, one behind the audience and one behind the actors, as seen in the diagram below:

³⁹ W.B. Worthen, “Disciplines of the Text: Sites of Performance,” in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (New York: Routledge, 2004), 15.

⁴⁰ Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*, 116.

⁴¹ Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 6.



*Illustration 1: The Theatrical Double Reflexivity Complex
Illustrated by author*

In most plays, the mirror behind the actors is covered with drops or flats (metaphorically, of course), which symbolize that the performance is not meant to reflect its identity as a performance. In other plays like Annie Baker's *Circle Mirror Transformation*, the mirrors are intentionally incorporated into the play and frequently referenced. These plays were most likely written in a metatheatrical style. When two mirrors are paired together their reflections create an endless abyss, thereby making a consequential reality. If, in the theatre, two mirrors existed on the two back walls, the reflections would give the appearance that the entire world is consumed by the world of the stage, creating a continuous theatre world, leading to an infinite reality that is comprised entirely of the play.

The reflections of the theatre extend beyond the realms of understanding, thereby encompassing our whole world into the world of the play, leading to an endless existence of the play's world. This realization forces the audience to include their own world, Reality – as they know it – into the play's world. In most metatheatrical productions (specifically relating to Brechtian ideals), the audience is constantly reminded that they are the audience because the actors remind them. But I suggest it is also possible for the actors to be reminded that they are performing because of the constant participation of the audience. In this specific diagram, the audience knows they are the audience, because they can “see” themselves (either in the characters or setting) and judge or caution themselves. Consequently, the other non-participatory spectators are constantly reminded by these interruptions that they are part of an audience watching a play, and although they refrain from partaking, their awareness contributes to the added metatheatrical element. When the spectators force the performance into the metatheatrical realm, the actors can “see” themselves as actors because the spectators remind them that there is an audience.

This is the conclusion. Often, theatre scholarship has regarded metatheatre as a theory that explains certain elements employed by the playwright, director, or actor to consciously make the audience aware that the performance they are witnessing is a play. Richard Hornby provided five techniques the playwright could incorporate to make the play metatheatrical. Of these techniques, the most efficacious is self-reference in which the audience becomes aware of the play because the conventions in the background come into the foreground. I propose that the audience in attendance also has the power to self-reference the play by claiming their role in the world of the play as a participant, not just an observer. By participating freely in the action occurring onstage, the audience forces the Reality of their presence into the actors' reality. Sometimes, not every audience member wants to participate and the action taken by the fellow spectators jolts these audience members into awareness of the play. This divide between observers can occur when the content of the play is a) politically drastic or b) relatable to some or most of the spectators.

Audience participation, whether violent or enthusiastic, is an integral factor of live theatre. As in the cases of Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship* or James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner*, the participation of the audience stimulated a heightened awareness amongst all members of the audience – whether participatory or not – that this performance which was initially deemed a safe fiction of real events was itself creating a new reality within the theatre. This phenomenon is teased out in Baz Kershaw's study of the theatre in ecology terms:

A riot introduces entropy into the ecotone of stage and auditorium, actor and audience, so that its edge effects become unpredictable; a riot might make or break the reputation of a play, a production, or a theatre, but the impact of its excess of entropy can hardly be ignored. Such disordered energy always poses both a threat and an opportunity to an ecosystem, as it is the source both of decay and potential destruction and of rejuvenation and potential renewal. In this sense all ecosystems have an ambivalent potential, but ecotones are especially dynamically ambivalent, and those of theatre ecologies are no exception.⁴²

⁴² Baz Kershaw, *Theatre Ecology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 187.

In Kershaw's analysis, the audiences need to possess a certain state of unruliness to contribute to the theatre's ecosystem: "Theatrical performance is the most public of all the arts because it cannot be constituted without the direct participation of a public. [...] That is why the theatre in the twenty-first century, perhaps more than anything else, needs unruly audiences."⁴³ However, "unruly" should not only include violent audiences, but also could include those audiences that do not conform to the original intended performance style of the director or writer. It is in the presence of these spectators that theatre can find a revitalized and transformed sense of purpose: "When naughty spectators take the protocols of theatre into their own hands, so to speak, through riots and other incidents of 'illegitimate' self-empowerment, theatre ecology is often treated to a shock of renewal."⁴⁴

The production of *The Amen Corner* I dramaturged and witnessed was directed in the style of realism, but received by the audience metatheatrically. Since the predominately black audience knew the songs, setting, and characters, there were verbal affirmations and singing from the audience at specific moments, adding an unintentional metatheatrical element to the realistic play. Baraka's *Slave Ship* instigated politically fuelled performances, empowering audience members to join the action onstage, thereby clashing the safety net of the theatre with the real threat of an angry mob. The realm of metatheatre is expanding and the role of the spectator should be examined as one of power and persuasion. Hornby's metatheatre discusses the ability of the theatre specifically in relation to social change, allowing this theory concerning the audience to possess sustainability. When the audience decides to actively partake in the action, they express a desire to not only understand but also engage. In doing so, the audience generates a new possibility for metatheatre, further blurring the lines between theatre and reality, and creating a new dimension in the relationship between actor and audience and a new possible role for the effervescent spectator.

⁴³ Kershaw, *Theatre Ecology*, 205.

⁴⁴ Kershaw, *Theatre Ecology*, 187.

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