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Responsibilities to the Past; Duties to the Present: Considerations on Translating, Editing and (Re)presenting the Czech Structuralist Canon for Modern International Audiences

The papers collected in this volume represent the output of a group of scholars who contributed to one focussed conference, itself conceived of and undertaken as part of a much wider and on-going research project relating to ‘Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre and Drama’. That wider project is a major European Union funded initiative, hosted by the Department of Theatre Studies at Masaryk University. The diversity of outputs at this particular conference, in May 2013, entitled ‘[The] Prague Semiotic Stage Revisited II’, and now included in this volume, is indicative of the significant intellectual status of what has come to be known as Prague School Semiotic Analysis – together with its many applications in relation to both theatre theory and the practice(s) of theatrical production and reception. My own small participation in the conference was a conference summary, to be given at the event’s conclusion. This was an endeavour in which I was expected by the conference organisers (I presume) usefully to summarise, and to draw apposite theoretical connections between/conclusions from each and every paper that had been presented. Obviously, and as you will determine yourself in reading this volume and my own comments here, this was not only a frighteningly challenging prospect; it was also an absurdly reductive exercise... because, in a very real sense, any condensed response to three days of intense intellectual activity (particularly given the warmth, generosity and significant expertise of all of the participants in this particular event) could and should justifiably have simply been limited by the present author to: “We came, we gave papers, we debated and discussed ... now let’s eat...”

However, despite my fears and the impossibility of ‘summarising’ such a diverse and complex collection of concepts, research processes and evidential bases, there certainly *did* emerge

over the course of the conference a clear sense not only of the academic merit of a project of this sort (one that purposefully sets out not only to re-consider but also to select, edit, translate and (re)present to international audiences an indicative sample of the significant body of work that can be considered to be ‘Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre’); but also, to me at least, an overriding appreciation of the not-insignificant methodological, moral, and ethical duties that any contributor to such an endeavour should also consider, in addition to their own adherence to appropriate academic rigour and intellectual aspiration.

In what follows, then, I summarise (as I hope I did to the original conference delegates) what I see as a series of eleven suggested ‘tasks to be undertaken by’, or ‘topics for inclusion in’ the project. These have been derived in relation largely to the contents of individual papers, but also in response to the very lively interpretative discussions that followed them each. I hope, and would suggest, that at least some sense of the ‘guiding principles’ of what happened in Brno during three days in May, 2013 should remain somewhere in the minds of all those contributing to this on-going international endeavour. The ‘tasks’ below are both methodological and ideological – sometimes also they are aspirational. They attempt to offer opportunities to individual contributors who are working as part of a connected community of scholars to labour in principled and respectful ways not only in relation to their representation and analysis of the work of their historical forbears, but also with regards to our own closer-to-home communities of theatre makers and theatre analysts: our students – who this project is also intended to honour and to inspire, in equal measure.

Task 1: To Reposition Czech Structuralism within a Clearly Mapped Out Critical Continuum.

Such a genealogical frame should be one that acknowledges the needs of modern audiences (of both theatrical spectacle, and also of university-level theoretical education) to be *responsive* to critical theory and able to locate it not simply within a trans-historical narrative of developing intellectual thought, but also within a useful tool-kit of aesthetic understanding, that can be deployed *today* (perhaps alongside other approaches) in order to understand any new theatrical (or other culturally performative) product. This seems a necessity for several reasons: (i) because, as so many contributors to this conference stressed, we no longer make, nor do we need to analyse as new or innovative the early twentieth century European Avant-Garde that acted as the theatrical context of, or backdrop to, most Prague School theory; and: (ii) because the concept of a ‘literary’ (and thus linguistically decodable) or even ‘dramatic’ (and thus semiotically understandable) performance ‘text’ is more problematic for our own period (as a result of developing modes of performance, and types of theatrical ‘text’ that have taken our discipline well beyond conventional theatre buildings, or even social environments that can be considered as sanctioned performance environments).

Undertaking a deliberately historicised and theoretically-orientated repositioning of historical theatre theory, of course, requires a significant amount of effort to be applied

first in locating and contextualising Prague School theorists, not only against other more divergent critical traditions, but also alongside their near contemporaries and working associates. As many of the papers in this volume demonstrate, the development of anything that can be considered to be a ‘School’ is dependent often on geographical proximities (even to the level of individual coffee shops, sometimes in Brno as it happens, not Prague!) and shared sets of culturally specific circumstances. The languages read, heard and written by any theorist or practitioner also have a significant influence over any new theoretical developments that are possible in any particular period and between any particular set of individuals. This always needs to be foregrounded and contextualised.

In one paper of this sort, Ondřej Sládek’s contribution focuses on Jan Mukařovský and his relationship to the theatre and theatre makers of his period, bringing to the surface the ways in which a series of precise theoretical foci in relation to and analysis of particular performances re-surface with considerable regularity as part of his wider writings on aesthetics. Moreover, Sládek’s mono-authorial-subject approach demonstrates how a case study such as Mukařovský can be used to demonstrate the ways in which theatre theory can lead to broader understandings of form and meaning in all art. Sládek’s paper thus capably demonstrates the importance of *contextualisation* in the study of any individual practitioner or theorist, and also relates closely to the observations of Příhodová, Havlíčková Kysová and Musilová (see below) with regards to historical and political situation. Although Mukařovský repudiated Structuralism in 1951 (the renouncement being a political necessity under the rule of Stalin), his theoretical writings on stage speech, on individual practitioners, on individual critical case studies, and equally his critical histories and overarching theoretical frameworks of analysis all present a consistent approach to theatrical analysis that is grounded in wider tenets of Prague School Semiotics.

Three further papers included here attempt to connect Prague School structural analysis to wider genealogies of thought (Structuralist and otherwise) in relation to performance aesthetics. Herta Schmidt’s paper considers a second individual theorist, this time Jiří Veltruský, in order to re-visit his writings from the perspective of more general history of theatre aesthetics. Drawing attention to Veltruský’s focus on language and linguistic signification (and the subsequent development of our thinking in this area as a result of Veltruský’s problematisations of the topic), Schmidt relates Veltruský to a number of disparate theorists, (including Aristotle, Freitag, Mukařovský and Bakhtin) in order to focus on the common issue of the theatrical sign—pointing out the ways in which Veltruský formulates a more complex notion of signification than that which is possible if one thinks in purely linguistic terms. She consequently argues that Veltruský outlines an opening out of notions of referentiality so as to begin to encompass the integral frame of performance and its more complex monological and dialogical axes (i.e. both the communication of a dramatic author to an audience and the communication of characters/actors to each other).

In similarly pan-theoretical manner, Elizabeth Sakellaridou’s paper hones in on the doubts articulated by Honzl, Mukařovský and Veltruský, (amongst others) concerning the

fixity of theatre signs—and relates these Structuralist theorists' responses, challenges, and developments of conventional semiotics to the development of concepts relating to indeterminacy, changeability, motion and flow, materiality and sensory perception. Identifying these traits in later Prague School Semiotics as part of a more trans-national move towards a phenomenological way of interpreting (which she argues to have led to the development of the modern concept of performance and performativity), Sakellaridou sets Prague School Semiotics against the systematic development of phenomenological readings of human experience articulated by notable philosophers and theorists of phenomenology such as Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In doing so, her argument demonstrates not simply that Semiotics and Phenomenology are two sides of the same coin, but that they are profoundly complimentary modes of analysis, which can and should be brought to bear in apposition with, rather than in opposition to each other.

Task 2: To Translate Texts, if not Literally, then Usefully – observing all of the dynamics of interlingual, intralingual and intersemiotic translation that are outlined by Veronika Ambros in this volume. One of the primary imperatives of the wider project of which this volume forms a part relates to issues of translating and making accessible to modern international readers (especially student audiences) key works of Prague School structural semioticians. Yet translation is a decision-making process that involves numerous types of change to and departure from the source text. This fact, of course, raises the thorny issue of betrayal; and the topic is raised here very eloquently by both Veronika Ambros (in linguistic terms) and Martina Musilová (in political ones). Put simply: because the semiotic analysis of drama was born out of the European theatre of a particular period and the cultures that produced it, it is difficult, if not impossible to translate it usefully into modern English without significant semantic shift. This fact offers us several choices: (i) accept the semantic shift (and acknowledge that translational infidelity and a more metaphorical understanding of 'translation' can at times be appropriate); (ii) translate literally wherever possible and undertake detailed historiographical, literary and cultural explication (i.e. lots of footnotes); or (iii) foreground our own problems of authorship/interpretation/translation in the ways that recent generations of scholars seem to be more comfortable (see here, for example, the papers of Musilová, and Příhodová and Havlíčková Kysová – which are both very up front with their own methodological 'problem' areas regarding how to represent certain politically difficult and not necessarily methodologically straightforward issues). All of this debate surrounding the task of the translator and interpreter of both language and culture relates to a significant set of questions that applies in a major way to the wider project as a whole: are we rebuilding a monument? If so, why? If not, are we creating instead a user's guide... a toolkit of some sort? And if so, what should be in it and how should it be applied? Because even those who design spanners have an inkling of their potential uses...

Task 3: To Foreground the Practitioner, Then and Now (including the notion that audiences and individual audience members are themselves practitioners engaged in the arts of reading and decoding theatrical spectacle). Whilst Drábek's paper begins with taxonomies of translation and an account of translation as a decision-making process, he hints very early on at the instability of the void beyond and posits as an ontological paradigm the fact that theatre practice often enters where theory fears to go. He even suggests that it is anachronistic to refer to the Czech school as Structuralist and/or linguistic/semiotic. *Functionality*, he claims, was a guiding principle emerging from Honzl's formulations of: (i) function (i.e. actorly function); (ii) instrumentality; (iii) effect; (iv) liberation; and (v) mutability/variability/dynamics. If this emphasis on function is right, then theatrical signs are always fleetingly transient and dependent always upon the performative conditions applied to them: as Drábek states: "This dress changing of the theatre sign is its specific quality". The cognitive level of language not only admits, but also directly requires recoding and interpretation (i.e. translation); this can be undertaken by individuals applying a set of learned rules to any given text, or discourse; but it is actors and audiences acting *together*, working collaboratively as makers and decoders of fleeting signs, who become the true dramatic (or non-dramatic) 'authors' of theatre, the creators of its meaning. Is it any wonder, then, that the moments in which the structural and semiotic qualities of drama become most evident is in those moments of metatheatre, comedy, and high tragedy in which the 'frame' that regulates such activity becomes as visible as the image it contains – and audiences and performers come together as *communities* who acknowledge not only each other's presence, but each other's active *function*? How and in what ways can an understanding of Czech Structuralist thought on theatre influence modern theatre-makers' attitudes towards the making of theatrical meaning(s) and their audiences' active reception(s) of them?

Task 4: To Consider the Significance of Theatrical Form to our Understanding of the Historical Development (and Subsequent Utility) of any given Analytical Theory. Much of the theory of the Prague School was constructed during a radical explosion of Avant-Garde theatre – thus the theatre practice that acts as a context for this theory is often (though not always) deeply involved with formal and structural (i.e. mechanical/material/mediatised) elements of production. As Eva Šlaisová points out for us, one of the characteristic qualities of Prague School criticism is – precisely because of its inception during a period that was experimenting with theatrical form, performance media and theatrical materiality – its ability to provide theories capable of deconstructing and re-constructing any form of multimedial and intermedial theatre. If there is no incongruity between Zich's observation that [good, effective] theatre is "free from conflict" and the more prevalent to us contemporary notion of "tension" constituting an essential part of theatre, how can Prague School criticism reveal the ways in which theatre draws on other semantic systems, but is at the same time its own distinct representational system? The connection between historical semiotic analysis and modern performance studies is thus to be found in the weaving together of

formal acts of intermedial semiotics, in order to create a more semiotically astute 'fabric of appreciation' that is constituted through guiding principles of materiality, mediality and ostension.

Task 5: To Understand the Significance of Practice, Including Scenography and the Primacy of the Visual in Prague School Analysis. Any act of ostension draws attention to the ocular aspects of both noticing and interpreting; *but* in theatrical contexts, this is always guided by skilled practitioners adept at creating and manipulating systems of reading and the signs they contain. Jaroslav Malina's paper thus reinforces for us the fact that theatrical meaning is inevitably created in psycho-plastic spaces that are established to aesthetic *and* connotive effect by theatre artists (such as scenographers) who know that space can be and is shaped by theatre professionals in order to evoke in audiences shifting feelings of tension and resolution between reason/emotion and plasticity/concreteness. Once again, in such a formulation the *functionality* of theatrical presentation is key. In action scenography, any object can take on a meaning in relation to how the actor places himself (or herself) in relation to it. Malina states that functionalism lost its importance in the 1990s, so how can Prague School theory bring back to theatre practice an understanding of theatrical space as a metaphorical canvass on and in which objects assemble to create a non-descriptive world in which poetry and metaphor can be used to suggest illusive/allusive and non-prescriptive meaning?

Freddie Rokem's paper similarly provides an application of Prague School theory as a way of analysing the complex relationship (and the essentially scenographic one) between the theatrical site, or theatre building, and the fictional place of performance. In an intriguing re-evaluation of the relationship between the material conditions of theatrical production and the mimetic world that drama presents, Rokem uses Prague School theory to ask whether we can claim that the physical space of theatre informs what can take place on stage? Thereby obtaining a theoretical focus on the difficult-to-define borderline between any specific theatrical world and its environment, Rokem moves outwards from Honzl's essay on the dramatic function of the sign, and uses Structuralist principles to outline the ways in which the theatricality of any object is ineluctably located in its double signification (it really *is* both the object it is *and* what it is being called upon to represent). Thus the development of specific types of theatre architecture and theatrical space throughout history can be used to demonstrate that in all theatre, the non-mimetic elements eventually become mimetic. With a focus on the application of such an approach to particular scenographic considerations, Rokem demonstrates that theatre's deliberate, materially-inflected playfulness with two and three-dimensional techniques can be used to foreground the significance of the human as the central philosophical (and in Rokem's view theological) object of inquiry, what Rokem terms: "the hermeneutical processes that invite audiences to consider what it means to be human...".

Task 6: To Identify and to Target Intended Audiences who can Benefit from Prague School Analysis, both Practitioner-based and Academic. In this category, Henry Bell's paper brings home very forcefully the applicability of Prague School theory to a variety of very modern contexts (always still political), and its ability to render live, embodied and theatrical the performative elements of 'literary' dramatic texts (such as Shakespeare), which have sometimes been taken hostage (to ideological ends) by those who wish to suppress alternative, oppositional thought and undermine the radical potential of theatre to create engaged, empowered, critically astute and interrogative 'readers' of performance (and its social and political implications). One of the most radical aspects of theatre (as Rokem also teaches us) is its placing of the human centre stage in an analysis of how social and philosophical issues have impact(s) upon individual and collective identity. As Bell's paper also so vividly conveys: theatrical experience is based on visceral/temporal engagement with the optical, aural, acoustic, olfactory and tactile world of human subjectivity and material reality. Bell's primary subject matter: children as theatrical spectators, understand the potential of the shifting signifier because they also actively embody it. This is because one of their primary modes of engaging with the world (and thereby of learning about it) is through a hybrid existence between their real identity and an imagined para-theatrical existence (that is achieved in the activity of 'play'). Far from infantilising the procedural processes of theatrical representation, then, Bell's application of Prague School theory to theatre-in-education acknowledges this dynamic, and proposes a method of producing Shakespeare in schools that frees up teachers and theatre-in-education practitioners to exploit early modern English theatre's corporeal theatricality not as an illustration of textual truth, or as illusory entertainment, but rather as a mode of embodied cognition.

Task 7: To Honour our Duty to Represent with a Sense of Ethics and Integrity Individuals who Cannot Speak for Themselves, whilst at the Same Time not Glossing Over What is Problematic to Us About Their Work. The papers presented here by Martina Musilová, and Barbora Příhodová and Šárka Havlíčková Kysová deal in sensitive ways with the necessity to historicise, but also the requirement that we, as scholars, should have to humanise the work of individual theorists and practitioners. In Musilová's case, Jindřich Honzl; for Příhodová and Havlíčková Kysová, Miroslav Kouřil. Musilová outlines in her paper the reasons for which it is necessary to locate Honzl alongside Michael Chekhov and Konstantin Stanislavski, and to acknowledge also his own theatrical innamorati: Meyerhold and the Poetists and Constructivists. This is standard historiography; but she *also* points out that we must somehow find a way to critique and make manifest the suppressions, ellipses and omissions that occur in his (or any other writer's) work. Both of these sophisticated historiographical papers point out very openly and honestly that if there are issues to do with the trustworthiness of published texts (particularly in their relation to unpublished manuscripts and letters that can be seen to show political forces at play in decisions as to whether or not to tell the truth), as scholars, we should be both

rigorous and ethical in deciding how and when we intervene as a result of our privileged position as more modern observers and interpreters in order to foreground the ways in which supposedly aesthetic theoretical questions transform into political propaganda (or even those instances in which they are, from their very nascence, subject to overarching, trans-historical political and cultural forces that render their analytical worth secondary). As Příhodová and Havlíčková Kysová demonstrate in their chronological account of Miroslav Kouřil's output as a scholar and his position as a highly successful institutional bureaucrat, these questions become more sharply focussed when we move into the Communist period and begin to study the institutionalisation of theatre theory (and particularly Scenographic theory) in state-sanctioned and at least partially state-funded institutions – such as Miroslav Kouřil's Institute of Scenography. Perhaps the greatest legacy of Prague School theory is the development in Czech and Slovak contexts of a clearly definable aesthetic and material approach to the study of scenography as a primary theatrical medium, together with a consistent use of Structuralist-derived terminology, deployed in attempts to analyse the tensions that exist in the interplay between stage space, dramatic space and live, embodied action; but such an achievement was negotiated in theatre-practical and academic environments in which the power and status required to produce theatre, to publish, or to control institutional bodies was not available to all, and often came at a significant price.

Task 9: Consistently to Figure the Theatrical Event as a Complex Phenomenon Involving both its Creators and its Receivers. Both Yana Meerzon's and Martina Musilová's papers raise several important questions about the interrelation of performers and their audiences. Several significant questions arise: (i) how can we foreground the spectator (other than the established critic as spectator) whilst at the same time paying attention to current trends in theatre studies, particularly in relation to intentionality and affect? (ii) how significant in this process is the perspective of physicality and embodied distance? and (iii) how, methodologically, do we do this? In other words: how is audience response (as it is evoked through Mukařovský's concept of the 'sematic gesture' and its built in dichotomy of intentionality versus unintentionality) useful in modern examinations of theatre as an exercise in physicality and embodied existence (currently popular in the humanities and social sciences)? Equally, in what ways does the embodied nature of the communication between actors and audiences contribute to its power as a social, persuasive and cohesive phenomenon? Musilová's interrogation of this topic, in her analysis of the work of Honzl concerning the differences between gesture as social form and gesture as crafted performance, leads her to an investigation of improvisation and spontaneity in theatre and the assertion that "we can produce spontaneous gestures, but when we repeat them, they become a sign...". This truth speaks not just about acting processes, but to the intricacy of the series of transitions through which performed gestures go from being real (when first found in rehearsal) to being crafted, repeatable signs (in performance). Thus implicit in Musilová's

analysis is a significance of movement, speech, and performance that slowly becomes codified when and as a result of the fact that it is directed towards an audience, rather than produced spontaneously as part of rehearsal, or everyday life.

Task 10: To Bring Historical Theory to Modern Performance in order to Illuminate Key Aspects of the *Function* of Theatrical Representation. David Drozd's paper on the surface seems to exploit a temporal wormhole in order to juxtapose theory created during the early twentieth century's period of flourishing Avant-Garde theatre, with its application in relation to several examples of contemporary twenty-first-century Czech Avant-Garde performance practice. Drozd asks throughout his paper whether theatrical metaphor is an analytical tool or a rhetorical strategy? – and he maps out a genealogy of notions of 'theatricality' (a current buzz term in theatre and performance studies) that links such definitions to the Avant-Garde manifestos of the 1920s and 30s in which evocations of lyricism and poeticism operate in artistic ways that can easily be seen as cognate to theorisations of aesthetics such as those of Otakar Zich. Juxtaposing Zich's conception of theatre as an essentially poetic medium against the notion of metaphor as a rhetorical trick (as it is formulated in the work of E. F. Burian and others), Drozd outlines the ways in which metaphor and metonymy can at first be seen as incompatible with semiotic analysis; but how, in reality, they fittingly also lie at the heart of most of the theatrical product that Structuralist theorists attempted to analyse. Finding a way to short circuit an apparent impasse, and to overcome intellectually lazy or sloppy uses of the term "metaphor", Drozd draws attention to the way in which theatrical metaphor represents an embodied shift in meaning and is therefore an active force that can be connected to notions of theatrical *function*: moreover, because theatrical metaphor is connected to materiality (through its reliance on reification and metonymy), despite its apparent slipperiness as a term, theatrical metaphor can usefully be decoded through analysis of various dramatic fulcra or tipping points of signification (i.e. moments of theatrical performance in which the meaning of visual signifiers can be seen to change in significant ways). Thus the utility of theatrical metaphor can be considered through a structural analytical approach that is applied in specific close-reading case studies.

Task 11: To Stress the Applicability of Prague School Theatre Theory to Other Performance-Related, or Performance-Inflected Fields. In this regard, Galit Hasan-Rokem's paper poses yet another question, this time one that seeks to explore the connections between performance, folklore and anthropological studies. She asks: How can an understanding of the intellectual contexts and methodological processes of Prague School semiotic analysis help modern scholars to apply cognate theories and methodologies in order to read traces of performance in documents that have now become essentially literary, and which bring with them no material artefacts that can be usefully used to evoke their original enactments? Taking as one focus of her paper the dialectical relationships between *langues*

and *paroles*; and proverbs (related to social norms and expectations) and quotations (in which a source is acknowledged and authority is given to canonical or non-canonical provenance), Hasan-Rokem outlines the ways in which folklore emerged from anthropological studies as an intermedial exercise in relation primarily to processes, rather than product. Moving away from a nineteenth century tendency to focus on an anthropological archaeology of the artefact, folklore studies grew up at the same time that Structuralist semiotics was developing; and in its focus on poetics (which brings together both myth and science) the structural elements of the poetics of performance can be seen in the poetics of folklore. The epic laws of folk narrative are not natural, rather they are deeply embedded in social processes; thus folkloric approaches to Ancient texts can reveal not so much how performance is 'encoded' in documents (such as the Hebrew Bible's *Lamentations* [of *Jeremiah*], her prime example), but rather how these surviving texts can subsequently become the subject of an interpretative archaeological dig that looks not for (arte)factuality, but rather that can, in many instances, reveal the human performative agency that led to such textual traces surviving.

Moving our attention from Hasan-Rokem's focus on lament in the sixth century BCE to the Oscar winners of recent years, Andrés Pérez-Simón's application of one particular element of Prague School theory leads us to consider its utility in analysing and interpreting complex performative relationships in which the fame of an individual actor, the historical significance of his subject, and the ability of audiences to read their interrelation coincide. In Prague School semiotic terms, this relates closely to the concept of the "Stage Figure". Arguing that in the case of acting celebrities, the ability of the performer to efface his/her fame as an actor is not great enough to enable the creation of a Stage Figure, Pérez-Simón reads critical responses to recent Oscar-winning biopics (in which claims of success are rooted in critics' assertions that actors seem somehow to 'become' their subjects) in order to consider the ways in which Structuralist theory can help us to understand concepts such as "personality" and "performative truth". Asking: (i) why the mimetic paradigm is so central to the production and reception of biographic filmmaking? and (ii) why the hegemonic Hollywood world legitimises the desirability of the invisibility of its own medium, Pérez-Simón's analysis of the concept of the Stage Figure reveals several important truths about the nature of a film-going audience's appetite for an art form that pretends to avoid almost entirely any notion of its status as 'dramatic art' or its presentation of 'characters'.

In focussing on the categories of application, the historiographical processes, the genealogies of thought and the individual theoretical case studies that appear above, I hope to have demonstrated here the fact that Prague School Aesthetics/Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre are still very much alive and kicking. Despite recent trends in the English-speaking world to overwrite Structuralist thought with dismissive allusions to now-negatively-received Positivist and Formalist approaches, Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre should not simply be a subject of historical interest, catalogued as a set of incomplete theories that emerged as a result of a pressing need to deal with the early twentieth century's explosion

of Avant-Garde theatre and its relation to more Classical forms of performance; Prague School theory should rather be a significant resource to the modern scholar of theatre, to students of dramatic and post-dramatic theatre and performance, to theatre makers, and to any theorist who wishes to interrogate performative social phenomenon and literary texts that relate to the engagement of any type of performer with their audiences.

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