

# [sensas]

THE SENSORY THEATRE

## ***The international conference “Politiche del teatro. Attuali e future strategie transnazionali di formazione e incentivo alla fruizione teatrale”***

The international conference *Politiche del teatro. Attuali e future strategie transnazionali di formazione e incentivo alla fruizione teatrale* (Milan, 28-29<sup>th</sup> November 2017) promoted a debate among institutions, theatre personnel, and scholars on the strategies of audience building, with a perspective that confirmed the theoretical and historical premises at the core of *Senses*.

Not only that, the conference opened up new perspectives. The policies of audience building cannot neglect that from the *Dionysiaca* to Brecht and Piscator, theatre has always had a political character, inherent in the essence of the audience as a theatre community. It is impossible to separate the *socio-political* consideration of theatre from its *artistic* consideration. This was one of the aims of *Senses*, as has become increasingly clear while carrying out the project.

Political theatre here means a performative dimension that maintains a chronologically and ideologically close relationship with the reality familiar to the spectator, above all through that sensory involvement that is the first aim of the project. Therefore, we could say “from senses to society; from society to politics”.



Far from attempting a production with ideological purposes as in the theatre of the 1960s-1970s, we were close to a kind of production (as was the case with our performances) that puts in the foreground the “biodiversity” of senses, languages, approaches and ideas. Out of this context sprang “Les yeux fermes” – a play loosely based on “The blind” by Maurice

Maeterlinck – in which the senses of touch, hearing and smell are explored through four characters standing for four different dimensions of blindness: the blindness of those who have lost their eyesight, of those who have never had it, of those who don't want to have it back, and of those who don't want to lose it. Extensive work has been done with young people: at the University and at the high-schools. What does it mean not to see? Or to lack a sense? What is the world created out of eyesight, what is the world concocted through the sense of hearing? Do these worlds share any affinities?



Through *Solaris*, on the other hand, we explored the old question (that informs the history of philosophy) of the deception of the senses. To what extent can we trust them? Let us think, in a context like ours, in which virtual reality is increasingly undermining the role of senses, how this issue is relevant. In this case as well, the work with the youth has enabled the audience to go beyond the limits of the plot and to grasp the problematic density of the representation.



Finally, in the case of the opera “Re cervo”, we worked relying on a closer relationship with spectators, enhancing the two senses of opera *par excellence*: sight and hearing. Making teenagers approach contemporary opera has been an amazing feat under several aspects. For instance, we soon realised that the music dimension (the stimulus of hearing) is the heart of enjoyment for the young.







As a rule, in theatre, the most stimulated senses, as said before, are sight and hearing. *Senses* aimed to involve all the senses, working on touch, smell and taste. In the making of the show, therefore, the focus has been on the spectator's perception and on the questioning either the senses or the perception itself. Thus, in the two prose performances, the space of the event often turned out to be labyrinthine and polymorphic. On the contrary, the opera "Re cervo" has worked on an increasingly active sensoriality, that is the sensoriality of sight and hearing, by means of both catchy scenes and costumes and a refined use of music and singing. We might conclude by saying that *Senses* has certainly devoted a productive attention to micro-policy, to the mix of diverse and stratified sensorial languages, and hence to audience reception.

The conference was held on the 28-29<sup>th</sup> of November 2017, in a hall crowded with young people, mainly from the university and the high schools, who had witnessed all the stages of the process of *Senses*.

It was divided into two sections. The first section was a multidisciplinary platform of dialogue among institutions, theatre personnel, critics and researchers, on the enjoyment of theatre in the public sphere. The debate and discussion with the theatre personnel came to endorse our conclusions, whereby the role of the spectator is placed at the centre of performing arts. The discussion also aimed to devise transnational strategies of theatre audience development. This is the reason why the first section investigated the relation between theatre, spectator and the public sphere in the context of current gradual dematerialization of performative and participatory practices.



The second section was based on the acknowledgement of the issues raised by *Senses* also from a philosophical and historical point of view. Since the beginning of the Eighteenth century, the popularity of theatre has drawn the attention of philosophers and critics aware that to shape the taste of a wider and diversified audience was no longer sufficient to advocate the norms of "good taste", but it was necessary to educate the potentialities of reception, increasing or decreasing the sensations' intensity. From this point of view, the senses play a crucial role.




Unlike sensory theatre (which implies the active participation of the spectator), the work of *Senses* moved in the direction of research and complexity, through plays in which the element of sensoriality was enhanced and, at the same time, questioned. The result was a greater involvement of the audience, highly conscious of their role. A true policy of the awakening of sensoriality.

Our project has therefore led us to deal with many realities operating in the sensory theatre (for example, *Il Teatro del Lemming*, which has formed a very close relationship with *Senses*), but, unlike *Senses*, they involve spectators not prepared for the performative event.

With the project *Tempo* (the Observation-centre on the impact measurement of theatre shows among young people and for the elaboration of new theatrical contents), *Senses* acted politically on public awareness in a sort of democratisation of reception. This is one of the strengths we are proud of. Democratisation in the sense that it has allowed an enlargement of the audience and a levelling upwards of a complex and engaging consumption.



**Projet SENSES TEMPO**



**Vous avez entre 15 et 19 ans ?**  
**Vous souhaitez participer à une grande aventure,**  
**soutenue par l'Union Européenne ?**

**Alors le projet Senses est fait pour vous !**

Ce projet européen sur trois ans s'intéresse à la question de la sensorialité au sein du théâtre avec des créations artistiques menées par trois compagnies de théâtre, dans chaque pays partenaire (France, Italie, Roumanie). Il s'accompagne aussi de conférences et de recherches conduites dans les universités ; et d'initiatives investigatrices qui associent les jeunes & les institutions culturelles et politiques.

Et votre rôle dans tout cela ?

1. Dans le cadre de ce projet, vous pouvez tout d'abord visiter le site (<http://www.sensesproject.eu/index.php>). Qu'est-ce que TEMPO ?
2. Par la suite, nous vous attendons nombreux ce jeudi **23 mars à 17 heure (salle 1W18 Site universitaire Sainte Marthe)**: Vous aurez la possibilité de vous mesurer à l'offre culturelle avignonnaise et de participer à des ateliers dont **VOUS êtes les acteurs !**

Culturellement vôtre!  
**FEEL YOURSELF AND THINK WHAT YOU DO!**  
 (Pour toute question, contactez-nous par mail à l'adresse [marine.pedehour@hotmail.fr](mailto:marine.pedehour@hotmail.fr))

Therefore, the project *Senses* has had an impact at the production and social level, in view of audience development, while maintaining strong links with stratified areas of culture: the historical, the philosophical, the social. This guarantees the scientific rigour of the most experimental elements of the project. The analysis of the new sensory languages and the modes of representation of reality has been put into practice in order to increase the awareness of the young spectator, with excellent feedback. Our goal was not to revolutionise theatre but to revolutionise the mind of the young consumers by bringing them, through a conscious enjoyment at the sensorial level, closer to a form of performance (theatrical and operatic) that is alien to their sensitivity.

The technological age that we are living has transformed the way the younger generation

perceive and express emotions, even if theatrical experiences are less concerned in general. Nonetheless, social media and medias in general are affected by continuous change and both online and offline research are used to keep the masses informed on theatrical performances/reviews.

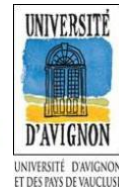
This consideration goes to confirm that today, the cultural democratization process and the cooperation between government and the educational system are only partially achieved.

In addition, there is a substantial gap that divides the idea of a valorisation of “popular theatre” and reality with a lack of interest on cultural practices largely diffused among students.

We do believe that the model developed by *Senses* (*Tempo*, multicultural performances – from prose to opera – sensory awareness) has contrasted and can really counteract the contraction of theatre audience, in spite of the progress of forms of hyper-reality (video platforms, social channels, etc.) that increasingly challenge the relationship between reality and fantasy.

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