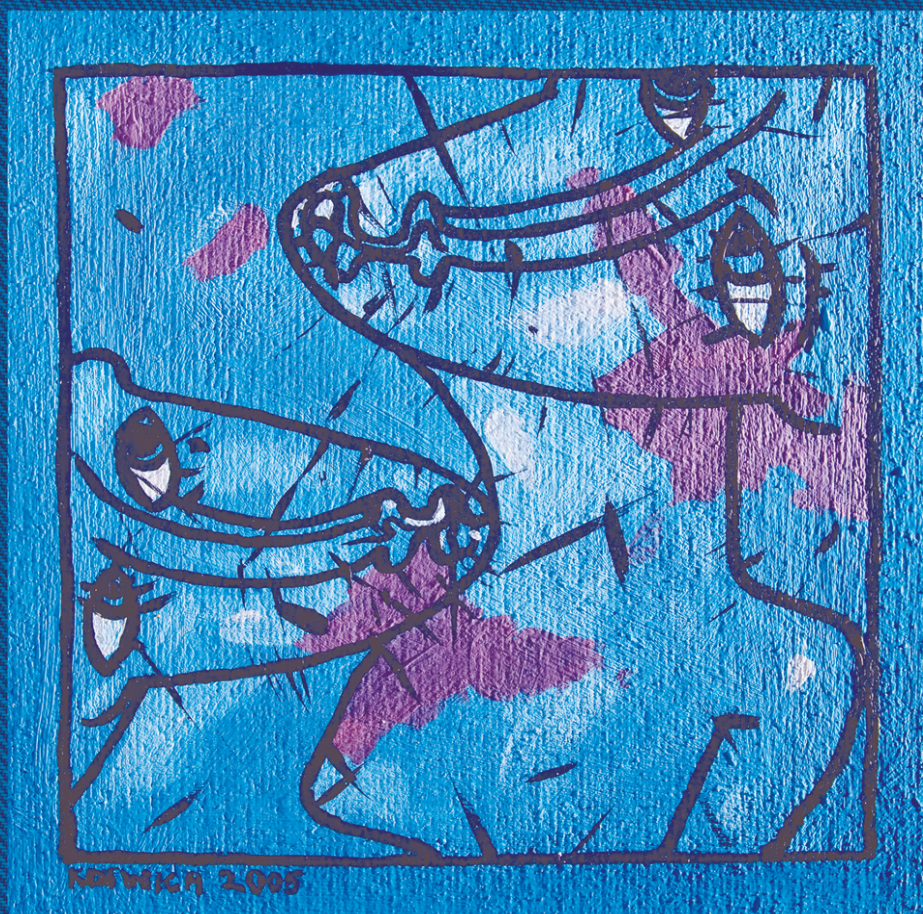
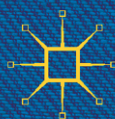


# WORDS, SPACE, AND THE AUDIENCE

THE THEATRICAL TENSION  
BETWEEN EMPIRICISM  
AND RATIONALISM



**MICHAEL Y. BENNETT**



## WORDS, SPACE, AND THE AUDIENCE

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*Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter*

*Refiguring Oscar Wilde's Salome* (editor)

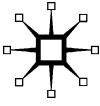
*Eugene O'Neill's One-Act Plays: New Critical Perspectives* (co-editor)

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EMPIRICISM AND RATIONALISM

Michael Y. Bennett

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To my sister, Anna, who taught me the wonder of expressing art through music, and my grandmother, Doris, who taught her family the wonderment of words.

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# INTRODUCTION: WORDS, SPACE, AND THE AUDIENCE

In traditional Western theatre meaning typically emerges from the interaction of words and movement in the given space. Diction, intonation, and other paralinguistic features of the actors' delivery are obviously important factors in inflecting the meaning conveyed, but even more important is the spatial organization of the action for this can give specific meaning to the words spoken. With a different spatial organization the same words can be endowed with radically different meanings. Actors exploit possibilities arising from the position of speaker and listener(s) in the fictional world, movement or the lack of it, orientation, and the objects and elements around them in the presentational space in order to create meaning in relation to the words they speak.<sup>1</sup>

—Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance*

To be or not to be—that is the question . . .<sup>2</sup>

—Hamlet, William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

. . . an act hath three branches—to act, to do, to perform . . .<sup>3</sup>

—Gravedigger, William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

IN A LARGE SENSE, Gay McAuley summarizes my entire book in the above paragraph. McAuley's extensive look at space in performance (as his book is also aptly titled) makes the elements of the theatre speak to one another: how do words and space, for example, affect one another and the meaning of the performance? To a degree, my book simply goes deeper into the issues that McAuley raises. However, my book is also concerned with how we—the audience—*process* the juxtaposition of theatrical elements.

Especially since Bert O. States' *Great Awakenings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of the Theatre* (1985), many theorists of the theatre (including McAuley) have turned to phenomenology to facilitate meaning. My book does not dismiss phenomenology—a type of empiricism—in favor of rationalism, for example, but suggests that the very nature of the theatre forces the audience to use *both* empirical and rational approaches to understand a play. I argue that some extremely influential modern plays not only force both the empirical and rational approaches, but actually take up their contemporary empirical versus rational debate: that the very plays are, to a large degree, philosophical inquiries into the age-old epistemological empirical versus rational debate.

Hamlet delivers one of the most famous lines in all of literature: “To be or not to be—that is the question . . .” The question of *being* and the idea of the essentialist characteristics of humanity come to the forefront of this soliloquy (and maybe the entire play). However, it is equally important to juxtapose the Gravedigger's philosophy about *action* (which he uses to suggest that Ophelia wittingly committed suicide and, thus, should not have a Christian burial). The idea that Ophelia's act somehow defines her and that she is a sinner in the eyes of others, casts the actions of *doing*, *acting*, and *performing* as determining existence: where, to use Sartre's idea, *existence precedes essence*. *Hamlet* is a play not just about being and doing, but how being and doing are understood (epistemologically) from the eyes of a beholder. Every one of the main characters is an observer, watching, trying to understand someone else: all of the main characters watch (or have another character watch) Hamlet, and Hamlet is watching Gertrude and Claudius. Thus, one through Hamlet and the other through the Gravedigger, Shakespeare presents the two sides of the age-old debate between the sense of *a priori* and of *a posteriori* knowledge, respectively.<sup>4</sup>

Some of the most influential plays of modern drama, I argue, continue this debate. These plays—*The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *Waiting for Godot*, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*—all take up this almost-universal epistemological question. However, their engagement with the debate is thoroughly couched in their own contemporary history and philosophical debates. Thus, these plays are decidedly products of their time, which adds a new layer of thought to McAuley's

above analysis. By exploring the Actor-Audience Relationship, how the four elements of the theatre interconnect, and two major philosophical frames (i.e., empiricism and rationalism) through which to interpret a play, this book delves deeply into one of the most fundamental, illuminating, and complex questions of the theatre: how does meaning get made?

### SMOKY JOE'S CAFE

I would like to start with a personal story, if I may, about seeing *Smokey Joe's Cafe* on Broadway sometime in the mid-1990s, when I was in my mid-teens. My *reaction* to this performance, though years later, served as the impetus for writing this book. I was born in New York City and grew up in West Hartford, CT. Living two hours from the city and having relatives on the Upper West Side, I was fortunate to grow up seeing plays and musicals on Broadway and "Shakespeare in the Park." On our way to see *Smokey Joe's Cafe*, not knowing what it was about, I asked my mom to tell me about the show. As I recalled at intermission, I thought that she told me it was a "typical musical." (My sister is four years younger than me and loved musicals, so we saw many of them.)

I remember us having great seats (not always typical since we usually bought our tickets at half price based upon availability at TKTS in Times Square): almost dead-center about ten rows back. I played the guitar (at the time, rock and blues) and, so, when the show started, I immediately loved it. Pretty soon into the show after one or two songs ended, one or two characters left the stage, one or two stayed on, and a couple of new characters came on. I was trying to follow the movement of the characters. I was having trouble establishing character because they kept coming and going on and off the stage. "The character development is horrible," I remember turning to my dad and saying after about 20 minutes. He agreed. About ten minutes later, I turned to him again and said, "this has a horrible plot." Again, he agreed. (These were about the most sophisticated observations I could make in my teens.)

At intermission, my mom asked what I thought of the show. I told her that I hated it: I loved the music, but there was no character development and no plot. She was a bit confused. "What kind of plot would there be in a musical revue?" she asked me. "Revue?

I thought you said it was a musical! I would have liked it if I had known that it was a revue!" I replied.

This event stuck with me throughout college, all of graduate school, and even now, as a modern drama faculty member at a university. How could I have hated the first half and loved the second just because the word "revue" was added to my consciousness? I watched two different shows that night: a horrible, undeveloped musical and a light, fun musical revue.

It is easy to pass this off as a simple misunderstanding. But I watched the same reality that my mom watched sitting just to my right. My experience was entirely different. My understanding of the show was entirely different. But, again, we saw and heard the exact same show. I have been trying to make sense of these two hours of my life ever since. This book is the product of this search.

#### **THE THEATRICAL TENSION BETWEEN RATIONALISM AND EMPIRICISM**

Within the "four walls" of the theatre, an age-old philosophical question plays out nightly in theatres around the world: what is brought by the audience to the theatre and what is learned at the theatre? This is a question as much for the scholar of theatre and drama as it is for the philosopher. The philosopher of epistemology puts this question in terms of *a priori* knowledge (rationalism) versus *a posteriori* knowledge (empiricism). The scholar of the theatre, on the other hand, sees the question as explorations of archetypes and human nature versus explorations of experientiality.

Because viewing a play seems to be such an *experience*, in order to complicate the notion of traditional theatre, it is imperative to ask a counterintuitive question: when does the "play" start and when does it end? Much like Lacan's "mirror stage," where there is misrecognition of the "I," it is naïve to think that a play is so rigidly an isolated, individual endeavor. In a sense, there is a similar misrecognition of the beginning, middle, and end of a play. It would appear, without further scrutiny, that the play begins when the curtains rise (should that be the mode in which the start of the play is to be announced) and ends when the curtains fall. However, I believe that thinking the play, especially one like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, begins and ends within the span of a few hours is a *misrecognition*

*of theatre*. In order to demonstrate the philosophical and theatrical conundrum in the question as to when a play begins and ends and the question of *a priori* versus *a posteriori* knowledge, I would like to take you through a typical visit to the theatre: say, for argument's sake, a production of *Hamlet* at a well-regarded regional theatre (i.e., a well-done professional production).

The scene: *Enter Barnardo and Francisco, two sentinels*. The words: "Who's there?" And with that *Hamlet* begins . . . correct? In a sense, yes. In another sense, no.

Let us rewind back, say, ten minutes. You have already made your way to your seats after driving to the theatre, picking up your tickets at will call, and stopping at the bathroom (in hopes that you can make it through the entire play to avoid waiting in the long line at intermission). You have ten minutes to kill. You open your Playbill, flip to read a few bios (how many of the actors have been in an episode of *Law and Order*? you wonder), see which restaurants are advertising, and close the Playbill again. There are still five minutes left. Your eyes start to wander: you look at the Proscenium Arch (wow, quite impressive, you think), then you look up at the ceiling to see the chandelier, and then you start people watching. What an outfit! I would not be caught dead wearing that! Oh, it is nice to see some teens in the audience with their parents. Oh, please no, I hope that really tall man walking in is not going to sit in the empty seat right in front of me! Oh no! He is coming closer. Phew, he is sitting across the aisle! Oh, the lights are dimming. The play is starting!

Let us now rewind back, say, two weeks. You open your city or state's newspaper and, if you are reading this book, you probably check the Arts section. Oh, so-and-so, the newspaper's drama critic, is reviewing the new production of *Hamlet*. Ah, she likes it! She thinks that the acting is fine, especially the actor playing Horatio, and that staging the play in the "Wild West" is a novel concept, but one that works for highlighting the lawlessness of power and royalty. We should definitely get tickets to this production, you think. You call this ticket office and are presented with a choice of seating options: all the way in the back, where you can see the whole stage well, but not the actors' faces too well; right in the middle of the orchestra section; or on the far left, but pretty close to the stage, where you can see the actors' expressions very well.

Let us now rewind back, say, X years, back to junior year of high school, to English class. You are reading *Hamlet* for the first time. Honestly, you understand little of it at the time, except for the Cliff Notes. Still, you now have at least encountered the words of the play you have heard so much about for years. You have a sense of the play, from trying to wade through Shakespeare's language, from what your teacher taught you, and from the fact that it is a Shakespearean tragedy and you know that at the end of Shakespeare's tragedies, everyone dies.

Shall we go further back, say, to the first time you remember one of your parents acting seemingly rash, to the first time you spurned the love of that second grader who you were not sure you were in love with or you despised, or to one of your wild temper tantrums? What if we go back to the natural connection when you were a baby to your mother and how you, as a baby, must have felt when she stopped breast-feeding you?

Starting with the scenario of you as a baby, the question is, do we already know the themes of *Hamlet* just because we are human or do we learn them from a very early age? Is the concept of motherly love (to a child) something innate, or does the baby learn this through the constant reinforcement of being breast-fed and held? Does the baby innately understand concepts of (perceived) betrayal (by the mother) when stopped being breast-fed, or is this how the child learns that concept? Are we wired to spurn love at a young age, or is this a socially and culturally learned phenomenon? Do we understand rashness because we ourselves are born with our own unique thresholds for acting rash, or do we only understand it because we perceive it in others?

In high school, most of us have a basic understanding of *Hamlet* before we even read the play. When we first encounter Shakespeare's arguably greatest tragedy, are the tragic twists and turns of the play something culturally learned or is tragedy something we innately understand? Do we have to learn that murder is wrong? Or do we have basic ethical principles wired into our brain to ensure the preservation of our species, and therefore, murder goes against our human nature? You had begun the process of understanding the unique facts of *Hamlet* in high school, but considering (most likely) that the play is still elusive to you (and it still eludes the greatest of all scholars on a regular basis, and hence, its deserved status as one

of the world's greatest plays), what kind of conception do you have of the play? If you only understand some of the lines, then surely the *Hamlet* you understood in high school is not the same *Hamlet* you understand now.

When we read a review of a play such as *Hamlet*, or simply hear who is directing it, how might our newly formed preconceived notions of the production affect our first viewing of it? What if you hate the "Wild West" because, psychologically, the arbitrariness of lawlessness does not sit well with your need to follow rules? What if, on the other hand, you love the "Wild West" because you grew up watching Westerns on television? Our conception of the "Wild West" is surely learned, but our *understanding* of it may well be innate because although the social situation was different, humans still acted like humans.

Finally, before the show begins, we begin to take in the place and our fellow audience members because we subconsciously have to understand the little room in which we will witness this great reckoning. In a sense, we need our bearings before we suspend our disbelief.

The play now ends and the curtains fall. The play, as I hope you can see from the above, of course, is not exactly over. The actors come out and we are gently torn from this alternate reality back to our everyday lives. We talk about the production after the play, its merits and maybe what the director meant by this production. If meaningful in any way, the production stays with us the rest of our lives. However, our memory is selective and we highlight certain parts: parts that maybe affected us during the performance for their novelty, or parts that we so thoroughly understood at the time of the performance because they hit a particularly human tone. We know *Hamlet*, but how?

But in another way, the performance does not end when the curtains fall because theatre demands the eyes of an entire audience. One audience member has no ability to see theatre panoptically (nor does the soldier see the prison panoptically either, for it takes a network of soldiers to see all around the entire prison space that Foucault describes, as the single soldier still only takes in one angle of the circle).<sup>5</sup> Because of this, approaching the full totality of the theatre can only happen to the conglomerate of an *entire* audience (as each audience member only experiences a very specific



side of the performance). Because of our own limits of experiencing a play, it is one reason why the audience member feels so compelled to continue discussing it. In a sense, the totality of the performance does exist during the performance, but *the totality of the performance is only epistemologically revealed after the performance* (i.e., through after-performance discussions, reading/writing reviews, reading/writing academic articles, not just from the audience, but from the participants in the theatrical even, too). The more that is written and discussed about the performance—from as many vantage points as possible—the more that the totality of the play is revealed and understood.<sup>6</sup>

### OVERVIEW

The case of the schizophrenic is actually of vital interest to the theatre scholar. To the schizoid, he or she believes that something else happened/transpired (i.e., experiences a “reality” different from the same reality of a “healthy” human). To themselves, schizophrenics are defined by their action (what they believe took place.) To assert otherwise, is to assert the presence of some outer judge (i.e., God-like observer of absolutes). This, ultimately, becomes of interest for the theatre scholar because one cannot take in *all* of a play. Theatre becomes the gauge of phenomenology: the great tension of the theatre is that of Sartrean existential experience versus Camusian reasoning and meaning making. There are “objectively” identifiable elements in the theatre—dialogue, gesture, and space—but the combination of them creates a schizophrenic reality, in that essence—what is defined by one’s or something’s action (via existentialism)—becomes totally phenomenologically relative when in the presence of an audience. (Herbert Blau aptly notes in *The Audience* that “there is a fantasy of the public.”) However, considering that the “reality” of the theatre is phenomenologically relative, how then do we make *meaning* out of the theatre without the use of reason and rational thought?

The central epistemological argument that this book puts forth is that in order to generate meaning in the theatre, there is an inherent, ever-present *tension* between empirical and rational ways of understanding a play; a tension between contingency and universality; a tension between context and the innate; and a tension

between what is brought to, created at, and taken away from the theatre and what of the play still remains. It, then, becomes impossible to understand a play without understanding that the tension between empiricism and rationalism is inherent both in the theatre and in making meaning out of a play. Productions and their contemporary contexts come and go, but there exists some residual element of a play. Three productions of, let us say, *Godot* may look, sound, and mean something different, but they are all, nonetheless, productions of the play *Godot*. This book examines both the contingent historical and philosophical contexts to produce new readings, but it also deconstructs these contexts to see what innately remains, what is essential in the text.

In a sense, this book is a story about a centuries-old philosophical debate: rationalism versus empiricism. This debate, and the tension it has created for those in the theatre and those interpreting the theatre, traces its roots back to Greek drama (though Greek drama will be beyond the scope of this present investigation). Not exactly a history of the theatre, this book examines the twists and turns of the history of theatre and juxtaposes them with, most especially at its pinnacle, the contrast between Sartre and Camus, which, in some ways, brought rationalism and empiricism into their greatest relief (even though most educated people still conflate the two thinkers).

I will examine four of the most *influential* plays ever written—Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (also using *Salome*), Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*—and read them alongside their contemporary debates between rationalism and empiricism to show how these monumental achievements were a product of their time, but also universal in their epistemological quest to understand the world through a rational and/or empirical model. Though I will not go so far as to argue such, one possible implication here is that these plays may very well have been influential precisely because they (probably subconsciously) engaged in their contemporary epistemological debate.

There are a number of wonderful, seminal books that investigate some of the above-named individual aspects of the theatre (i.e., words, space, gesture, and the audience): Herbert Blau's *The Audience* (1990); Stanton B. Garner, Jr.'s, *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology*

and *Performance in Contemporary Drama* (1994); Una Chaudhuri's *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (1997); Gay McAuley's *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (2000); and maybe the greatest book ever written on the theatre, Bert O. States' *Great Awakenings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (1987). Unlike these other drama/theatre books (that examine, say, one element of the theatre through, say, phenomenology), this book does not attempt to read these plays through one or the other philosophy, but, instead, contends that these plays, themselves, through juxtaposing the four elements of the theatre, engage in their contemporary epistemological debates. This book examines, then, the most basic *tension* of the theatre: how is meaning in the theatre made?

This introduction is not intended to answer the above question: it merely attempts to bring up the issues that will be discussed in the following four chapters and the conclusion (i.e., the chapters are where the rational-empirical debate will play out in more detail). I am trying to elucidate the epistemological difficulties present in the theatre. Because theatre is made up of words, space, and gesture in front of an audience, I am looking at how these elements modify one another and how the gathering of knowledge is fraught with problems. The most basic example of this is when someone goes into a room before you do and says, "the room is dark." Considering that the overhead lights are off, but not noticing the fact that a few pole lamps are on, you will most likely agree with the other person because it was framed as "dark." The word "dark" modified the reality of the room, creating a relative, perceptual reality. The epistemological quandary becomes, then, did you reason it as dark (or viewed it as such because of your innate understanding of darkness) or did you experience it as dark? Some of theatre's most influential plays, I argue, contemplate the audience's relationship to the rational-empirical mode of processing words, space, and gesture.

In order to understand the rational-empirical debates that will play out in each chapter and the conclusion, it is necessary to contemplate some of the nuanced facets of understanding external stimuli. In the following section, I attempt to show how words, space, and gesture have a very *real* effect on each other and that juxtaposing these elements, colors "reality." I argue that this