

To See or Not to See: Questioning the Essence of Theatre in Javier Daulte's *¿Estás ahí?*

Sharon Magnarelli

Centuries ago Shakespeare, via Hamlet, mused aloud, “To be or not to be” and proposed that therein lies the basic question. More recently, in *¿Estás ahí?* (2004) Argentine Javier Daulte tweaks that question and implicitly suggests that the issue might actually be, “To see or not to see.”¹ In many ways, *¿Estás ahí?* not only echoes (in the words of Carlson, is “haunted by”) *Hamlet*, but it also reflects on the fundamental nature of theatre as a visual art by foregrounding the matter of how theatre makes us “see” what is not there and inversely not see what is there. If we accept Diamond’s premise that “seeing is never a neutral act” (261) and Dolan’s that “ideology is implicit in perception” (15), then Daulte’s exercises in the visual will have some far reaching ideological implications.

In the process of exploring this aspect of theatre, Daulte (as both writer and director) utilizes scenic space in some very interesting ways as both visible and invisible characters occupy and in many ways compete for control of the same spaces. In this paper I would like to address the question of how Daulte uses space as a tool to generate meaning and reveal those aspects of theatre that have traditionally remained “invisible.” At the same time, I will argue that the issues of space and visibility function, both inside and outside the fictional world portrayed here, as comments on theatre and representation in general as well as on human interpersonal relationships and the construction of knowledge(s). I will also examine the philosophical, existential issues the play raises, issues that are implicit in the title and ultimately linked to and addressed by the spatial and the visual insofar as existence is generally, if indeed simplistically, predicated on notions of space and visibility: that which to our minds “exists” occupies space and can be seen. Indeed, two of the most significant props that populate the stage are a

blackboard and a mirror, both instruments of the visual and one (the mirror) that specifically provides a tool to reassure us of our visible, spatial presence (existence). The fact that, according to the written text, the two are positioned in such a way that our final image in the play is the reflection in the mirror of words written on the blackboard (words that are thus provisional and, by implication, infinitely erasable and replaceable) leads the audience to doubt (as we do in so many Daulte plays) what is “real,” what is simulacrum, what is merely a reflection of a reflection, ad infinitum, both inside and outside the theatre. The question then is how does the manipulation of the scenic space contribute to this query? Although the title of the play simply asks, “Are you there?” that question implicitly expands to include, who is “you,” who is “I” (there can be no “you” without an “I”),² where is “there,” where is “here” (again one cannot exist without the other), and most importantly, how will we know?

But, first a synopsis. *¿Estás ahí?* revolves around two characters, Fran, a magician, “a performer skilled in sleight of hand, illusions, etc.” (*Webster’s*), and Ana, who is studying ophthalmology, not irrelevantly, the very science that deals “with the structure, functions, and diseases of the eye” (*Webster’s*). Revealingly, then, the vocations of both characters center on what and how we do or do not see. The couple has just moved into a shabby apartment (an aspect that Ana does “see” but which Fran seems not to notice).³ Unlike most apartments, however, this one comes equipped with some sort of a ghost, Claudio, who has the potential to be of use in Ana’s research. The audience cannot see Claudio, although Fran can, if and when he squints his eyes just right. Much of the first act is devoted to Fran’s assorted monologues, as he chats with various characters that are invisible to the audience: Claudio for one, but also Ana, his mother, and the neighbors, all of whom are invisible to us because Fran speaks to them not face to face but on the telephone. As we shall see, this unusual technique of positioning of characters so that they do not face each other as they speak is fundamental to the production and reception of meaning here. Toward the end of the act, Ana appears and embarks on her own monologue as she talks to an absent Fran, whom she believes to be on the other side of the door.⁴ In a doubling (or perhaps tripling) of dramatic irony, we know that Fran is not there, and we can see Ana although Fran cannot when he finally does return, because, as he knows and we do not, she has died in an auto accident on the way home, shortly after their last phone conversation. Revealingly, then, in spite

of the fact that we can see her physically, we do not immediately “see,” comprehend, that she is dead.

Act 2 finds Fran, Claudio and Ana “living” together, as it were, in relative peace. Again, we can see Ana, but not Claudio, and Fran can sometimes see one or the other of them, although at significant cost to his eyesight. Ana and Claudio communicate with Fran by means of a “pizarra mágica” and a blackboard as well as a small bell that draws his attention (and sometimes the spectator’s) to what they have written on the blackboard on those occasions when he is oblivious (blind) to their desire to communicate with and be recognized by (i.e. “exist” for) him. Fran now uses Ana to assist him in his magic act: since she is invisible, the audience (for his show) cannot see her (although the play’s audience can). Thus, his tricks depend upon her elevating and moving objects as he feigns to control them, in what I read as a subtle reminder to the audience that everything we “see” in this play, indeed in theatre and representation in general, is dependent upon “magic,” a sleight of the hand, not seeing what is there, or vice versa. Fran is about to hire a real, “live” assistant, Renata, and Ana fears that he is having (or will have) an affair with her. As a result, when Renata comes for an interview, Ana enters her body. Fran, of course, is not initially aware of the trick (although we are). Still, it is a trick that Ana cannot sustain for long, and during which we see Ana but not Renata, while Fran “sees” Renata but not Ana. Act 2 ends after Fran’s telephone conversation with Renata’s boyfriend raises his suspicions and prompts him to ask Ana/Renata, “¿Quién sos vos?” (57), not irrelevantly the same question that Ana asked him in her monologue in Act 1, a question that underscores the issue of identity and “seeing,” knowing the other.

A very brief Act 3 begins where Act 2 left off, just seconds later with the repetition of the question. At this point, both Fran and Ana seem to have recognized, independently, that the “living” and the “dead,” the visible and the invisible, cannot continue to live together and that all must “move on.” Fran had expressed his feelings about this earlier to Renata/Ana: “Yo estoy necesitando terminar con esto, pasar a otra cosa... Dar vuelta a la página. Olvidarme. Olvidarme. Terminar con esto” (55). Shortly after, Ana and Claudio each write “Adiós” on the blackboard and walk out the door, presumably disappearing from Fran’s life. The lights go down as Fran gazes into a mirror, sees the reflection of the words written on the blackboard, and turns around as if looking for something.

The play's emphasis on vision and seeing is even more apparent in the production than in the play text. There, not only do the characters repeatedly talk about seeing, but their actions frequently underline their efforts to do so. Etymologically, the word "theatre" derives "from the Greek term '*theatron*,' which means literally 'a place for seeing' (Lidell and Scott 1889)" (McAuley 36), a definition that calls attention to the interdependence of space (place) and vision in the theatre. In fact, the play opens by underscoring this correlation. As the lights go up, the protagonist, Fran, squints and stares at the audience intently as if trying to bring into focus or comprehend something that is just out of his range – a gesture I read as a variation on the final one of the play as he turns away from the mirror and seems to be looking for something.⁵ In this respect, the play is framed by similar gestures and efforts to see. Specifically, in the opening moments Fran appears to be trying to see into a space (the auditorium) that, in the representational economy of the play, does not exist, should be invisible. As we discover, however, the "something" he is trying to see is, in fact, Claudio, the ghost, the (to us) invisible character. Nonetheless, we do not know this at the beginning and initially conclude that the "something" he is trying to bring into focus is us, the audience, the entity that, like Hamlet's ghost, literally and figuratively compels the theatrical event, but whose "presence" (be it the figurative one on stage or the literal one of the audience), when acknowledged, destabilizes theatrical convention and threatens to topple the theatrical apparatus. As a result, the play's initial effect is a one of disorientation. After all, we generally go to the theatre to see what is happening on stage, not to be seen by the actors/characters who traditionally accept our panoptic, voyeuristic position and pretend not to notice us. Here, however, quite the contrary occurs, and it is as if we are the spectacle and that our "space" has been incorporated into the fictional world. As McAuley has noted, "In the theatre a look is very much a spatial act. [A look] directs the spectator's attention within the space and is one of the performer's most powerful strategems [sic] in activating the whole space" (114). As a result of Fran's gaze, the audience space is definitely "activated," and spectators are forced to "see," recognize ourselves and the others around us as spectators, observers. In this way, our spectatorial powers are simultaneously affirmed (we are most conscious of our position) and undermined (to the extent that we are overtly "exposed" as voyeurs, made visible by the spectacle).⁶ At the same time Daulte literalizes (makes visible) Blau's theory that the audience does not preexist the play "but is *initiated* or *precipitated* by it; it is not an entity to begin with but a

consciousness constructed" (25) and underscores the fact that it is not just the character who is a theatrical construction, but that the spectator is equally so, brought into being by the production and the invisible hand of the playwright.

On the other hand, of course, this opening scene of Fran's intense effort to see functions as a literalization of Peter Brook's conviction that the two inseparable, defining elements of theatre are precisely space and concentration (*Shifting* 150). Surely Fran's exaggerated stare draws attention to his concentration and forces us to focus on space (our space that is being drawn into the spectacle via his stare) and specifically on the barrier (the imaginary fourth wall), which has typically separated our space from his but which seems to be missing here.⁷ At the same time, Fran's opening gesture evokes the effort and concentration exacted of the "ideal spectator," who is required to concentrate intently in order to be able to see, literally and figuratively, to grasp both the theatrical event in and of itself as well as the playwright's point or message and eventually take them both to another (implicitly "higher") level of meaning.⁸ At any rate, in the stage production this effort on the part of Fran, to "see" as it were, was so prolonged and hyperbolized that it eventually resulted first in nervous titters from the audience (an indication of the sense of dis-ease created by this violation of theatrical convention, that is, by the disruption of the gaze of the spectator and the erasure of discrete spaces) and finally in outright laughter (a reaction that one might not have expected from reading the text).⁹ When we finally learn that what Fran is "seeing" is not us at all, but rather the invisible ghost, on the one hand, we experience a sense of relief – it appears that theatrical mores are being respected after all. On the other hand, however, our sense of disorientation is perhaps even greater. Again, although we have gone to the theatre specifically to see, to exercise the voyeuristic prerogatives for which we have paid (along with the pleasure implicit in those prerogatives), we cannot see what is supposedly there, what Fran can see, Claudio. We see only the blank, empty space where Claudio should be. In this way, the play undermines the hierarchy of presence and absence as it foregrounds the tension between the two that is at the heart of theatre.

Fran's stare functions to elicit and simultaneously to disrupt our gaze, with the result that we are denied both spectatorial power and pleasure. That disruption continues insofar as what we the audience do see is patently a stage and one whose set overtly draws attention to, rather than away from, this fact. Although the play was performed on a proscenium stage, the placement and design of the set served to underline the stage as such, theatre,

a place to see, but in this case one that demanded that we re-evaluate that very definition and question exactly what it was that we were seeing.¹⁰ In many ways, then, Daulte took a domesticated space (what Brook has called a “tame” space [*Empty* 65]) and undomesticated it not only by making the setting dirty, unpleasant, and unappealing, but also by making it notably smaller than the stage. Instead of providing the illusion of an unsutured space, the set clearly called attention to the seams and to itself as set (fiction or illusion) as it made visible the space(s) – the stage per se – that traditional theatre tries to disguise. Specifically, the outer limits of the set here, the apartment walls, did not fill the scenic space, nor were the proscenium curtains closed enough to suggest that no other space existed (see diagram 1). On the contrary, the set overtly left empty (“en blanco” or perhaps better expressed, “en negro”) the unused scenic space so that the audience continually “saw” and was reminded of the illusion. Although Elam has noted, “Conventionally, the stage depicts or otherwise suggests a domain which does not coincide with its actual physical limits” (67), I would submit that most conventional theatre has tried to downplay, erase as it were, that lack of correspondence.

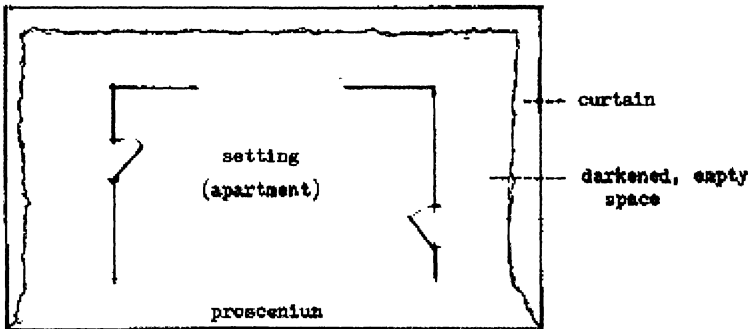


Diagram 1—view from above

Traditionally, the set fills the stage and encourages the audience to forget that it is indeed a stage. In fact, in his article, “Trabajar con las paredes,” Daulte himself proposes, “el espacio de la ficción pretende devorar el espacio real de la sala” (28). In reference to the proscenium stage, he continues, “se cuenta con la inapreciable complicidad del espectador que acepta, ya antes de entrar al teatro la superposición de esos espacios. El escenógrafo debe encargarse apenas de disimular la presencia real de la sala, ya semiborrada convencionalmente de la mente del espectador” (28). The Teatro del Pueblo

production of *¿Estás ahí?*, however, did quite the opposite: rather than masking the “real” stage, the production called attention to the stage as such. Daulte thus foregrounds the provisional nature of the scenic space on more than one level. First, by calling attention to and forcing us to see and acknowledge the stage as such here, Daulte reminds us that this play, this specific production of knowledge(s), might have been different. We might have “seen” something else: a different play or another production of the same play, either of which might have utilized the scenic space in quite a different way and resulted in different audience reception. Thus, the dramatist simultaneously accentuates and undermines theatre’s spatial conventions in a way that challenges basic notions of theatre and representation, foregrounds the constructedness of theatrical representation, and reminds us that this is definitively not Hamlet’s “mirror of nature” but, on the contrary, a framed, ideological construct, dependent upon a specific point in time and space. Second, that space is provisional within the fiction insofar as the characters’ move to the apartment is so recent that they have not yet unpacked: baggage and boxes are strewn throughout the set. If, as theorists have proposed, one’s sense of self is closely tied to space (where one is or lives, etc.), then Fran and Ana might be viewed as identities in flux or even at risk, insofar as they lack a relationship to (identification with) their new apartment. They have yet to occupy (in the militaristic sense of the word) the space, possess it, and thereby identify with it, just as the set fails to fully occupy (in both senses of the word) the stage itself. Because their space (context) is provisional or temporary at this point, both or either could easily move on to a new space, a new identity. Indeed, given Ana’s monologue at the end of Act 1 where she expresses her dissatisfaction with their relationship (a relationship now necessarily marked by the space of the apartment they are to share), it seems she might well have moved on to a new identity (one not linked to being a couple) even if she had not died. Conversely, her death, of course, compels a new, “uncoupled” identity for Fran.

In addition, just as Claudio’s (non)presence and Fran’s stare mark empty spaces, the audience’s gaze is led to focus on yet another blank, empty space – center back stage. Like much else in the play, the back “wall” of the apartment is incomplete and ultimately frames a blank, darkened space, something of a black hole as it were, into which we gaze. Elam has observed that theatre has traditionally employed the “*pictorial* codes at work in the visual arts,” adding that “the increasing influence of Italian single-focus perspective sets established an essentially painterly mode of visual

representation” (67-68). Such a mode of representation would, of course, direct the spectator’s gaze to a specific focal point, one generally located near center. But, at the center of the “painterly” set of *¿Estás ahí?*, we find a hole, a blank space (see diagram 2). As a result, the audience literally looks through the set (much as we look “through” the invisible Claudio). An analogy would be a painting with a blank center that would allow us to see the canvas on which it was painted, thus calling attention to the very materials and techniques, the representational apparatus, used to produce it.

Even more disconcerting, if we continue with the metaphor of the painterly and view the stage as we might view a work of art, is that this “painting” is demarcated by means of a triple framing. To be sure, any proscenium stage, by definition, frames the representation, and, as Carlson notes, for theatre to happen, Brook’s “empty space” is not enough: there must also be “a certain perceptual contract... an agreement that this action will be ‘framed’ as theatre” (132).¹¹ But here that frame is multiplied (see diagram 2). First, the outer limits of the proscenium (frame 1) border the

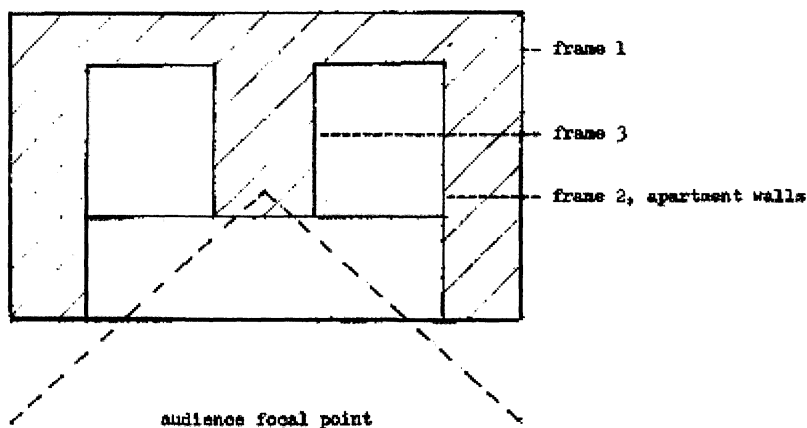


Diagram 2—frontal view

blank space that surrounds the apartment, the no-man’s-land that forms part of the stage but not part of the fiction. In turn, the lateral walls of the apartment (frame 2) frame the inside of the apartment, the locus of much of the action we witness, while the back walls of the apartment (frame 3) mark another blank, open space at their center, as discussed above. The result of this compound framing is double. First, by tripling the frame of representation,

Daulte calls attention to it and demands that the spectator acknowledge it, question (implicitly, to be sure, and perhaps only in retrospect) why depict, centralize, frame and make visible this specific space and not another of the spaces alluded to in the production. Second, as a result of this compound framing and the play's subversion of the "painterly" elements of a naturalistic set, spectators' eyes are drawn to precisely that empty space at center back stage. By reminding us here that the representation is representation (construction), caught up in a network of cultural and ideological codes, power, and artifice, Daulte undoes the power of representation in general and of theatre in specific and draws attention to the ideological underpinnings of any theatrical event, underpinnings that more often than not are left out, displaced, relegated to a darkened and/or invisible background. Here, however, Daulte reveals those "invisibilities" – the "emptiness" and specifically the sleight of hand, the illusionist utilization of space, involved in feigning to fill that emptiness with presence. Thus, the play reconsiders, reframes, if you will, the essence of theatre and representation along with the ideology that sustains them both in a double gesture of doing and undoing in which presence and space itself become unstable figures. By hyperbolizing the frame, drawing the attention to it and to the empty spaces it frames, Daulte not only subtly reminds the audience that any representation is inevitably framed (in both senses of the word) but also and perhaps more importantly, that it is framed by the invisible hand of someone, a someone motivated by some (perhaps invisible) ideology.

In *Bodied Spaces* Garner talks about "the perceptual magnetism of center stage, and the secondary attraction of the stage edges that border on this center" (77). The arrangement of the stage in *¿Estás ahí?*, however, resists this "magnetism," and generates a constant tension between center and periphery, and by implication, between inside and outside as it, again in the words of Garner, "violates traditional principles of visual composition" (78-79). I personally was distracted and disconcerted by the blank spaces and found my eyes being continually drawn to them, to the back and sides of the stage, outside the realm of the visible action and fiction, sensing that somehow there was something uncanny, weighty with meaning. Surely, my sense of the uncanny was due to the fact that the stage arrangement sapped some of the power, attraction and weight of center stage by making visible and bringing into play the periphery, the theatrical spaces that are conventionally relegated to the invisible fringes and whose power is thus, while certainly not eliminated, unquestionably disguised, hidden, and thus

unchallenged. Because the production's deployment of space fell somewhere between what we label traditional, naturalistic theatre and what we call avant-garde theatre (where the total disregard for the conventional use of space in some sense becomes another convention in its own right), the sense of disorientation was perhaps even greater. Furthermore, the no-man's land at the outer edges of the stage that the play brings into our visual range functions as something of a trope for that space of neither here nor there that we must cross on our way into the theatre, through the lobby, and on to actor production and spectator reception.¹² Or, perhaps we might read it as a physical indicator of our willing suspension of disbelief. In this way the play undermines that suspension of disbelief. Continually reminding us of the theatrical "contract" to which Carlson refers, it denies us the position of "innocent" spectator. For this spectator at least, the issues of space, frame, and seeing could not be ignored in the staging.¹³ The suggestion seemed to be that not only is any representation already framed by the invisible hand and ideology that produce and/or stage the play, but it is also reframed by the spectators as it passes through the filter of their mind set – the previous knowledge and perhaps unacknowledged ideology that they bring to the theatre with them. Implicitly then the theatrical event becomes the face-off of two ideological positions, sometimes compatible, sometimes not.

In this respect, *¿Estás ahí?* in many ways evokes Marvin Carlson's image of the haunted stage (a stage filled, as it were, with the invisible) as it echoes traces of other theatrical works (perhaps most specifically *Hamlet*, as noted) while simultaneously challenging those works and traditional theatrical conventions. Not irrelevantly, as Carlson reminds us, this "haunting" or recycling of various elements from other works and previous performances foregrounds the constructedness of the play (130) and, implicitly, of theatre in general. These echoes of haunting, of a ghostly presence, are not only underscored by the "ghosts" on stage (Claudio and Ana), but they are also apparent in the tension between the visible and invisible scenic space. The oxymoronically invisible presence of Claudio, who, although disembodied, still occupies scenic space, as we are reminded when Fran trips over him, calls to mind all the other actors who have walked this stage (or any other), whom both actors and spectators must necessarily, if indeed metaphorically, "trip over" on their way to the production and reception of this new theatrical event. Similarly, the apartment walls display traces of previous occupants (grime, damage, wear and tear). Fran and Ana (and probably even Claudio)

are clearly not the first to inhabit the represented space either literally or figuratively.

The issues of space and seeing (and particularly the concept of haunting) are also related to the more philosophical, existential themes of being and identity as is underscored in the title question, "Are you there?" Such a query, implicitly, foregrounds issues of space and vision. If the question needs to be asked, then the embedded message is that I do not see you, be it literally or figuratively: literally, you do not occupy space, and specifically space that is within the range and perhaps control of my gaze; figuratively, I do not "see" or comprehend you, know who "you" are. Surely one of the plays most obvious points on the anecdotal level is the notion that one's identity is necessarily in a continual state of flux, always in process of becoming; today's "I" is but the ghost or shadow of yesterday's "I." Yet, as we try to comprehend the other, like Fran, we "trip over" the ghost of yesterday's other. The traces remain, but yesterday's other is no longer "here" in quite the same way. Indeed, the baggage that the characters have not yet unpacked in the new apartment might well be understood as a metaphor for the "baggage" we all carry around with us, sometimes consciously, sometimes not: the baggage or traces of yesterday's desires, experiences, that is, memory and yesterday's identity, both of which weigh heavily on (haunt) today. At the same time that baggage evokes the "baggage" of previous theatrical experiences – the memories, desires, expectations that the spectators bring to the theatre with them, that "body of thought and desire" (Blau 25) that the audience is unable to check at the door, and will necessarily impose on or trip over on the way to the present experience.

Revealingly, just as our theatrical experience is frequently dependent on our not seeing the stage as such, in this play knowing, metaphorically "seeing" the other, is also predicated on a certain misrecognition, blindness, not seeing. Early in the play, Fran elucidates on how he is able to see Claudio: "Si se queda quieto y vos juntás los ojos como **desenfocando** la imagen, ahí medio que aparece..." (22, emphasis added). The suggestion is that we can only "see," comprehend the other, by "desenfocando," distorting the image. Fran further notes, "Lo veo así un momento pero se me va enseguida" (22). As soon as we do see that distorted image, which as the term suggests, is already our creation insofar as we have inevitably altered it, it adapts, moves on, disappears. And, as he comments later in the play, specifically in regard to interpersonal relationships, "Uno sólo ama al que estuvo, no al que está"

(55). Since the identity of both self and other is inherently unstable, continually in flux, it continually eludes the perceiver.

The play thus proposes that all perception of identity (and perhaps all knowledge) is predicated on parallel mis-seeing, misunderstanding. This notion is subtly dramatized at several points in the play, most of which might easily be overlooked by the spectator (or reader). In what evokes our (willing, complicitous, acquiescent) blindness both inside the theatre (our willing suspension of disbelief) and outside (as we readily overlook this obstacle to identity and knowing either the self or the other), Daulte does not overtly insist on, hammer home these misunderstandings or potential errors in perception within the play but allows the audience to turn a blind eye, just as the characters do. Indeed, there are numerous points in the play where details are left in limbo or contradicted by the characters with the result that we are never quite sure exactly where the "truth" lies. For example, it is never clear if Fran and Ana are or are not married (surely a detail relevant to the perception of identity). Although Fran refers to Ana as "mi mujer" (14) and "mi esposa" (20) when talking to others, she comments, "tal vez mudarnos juntos no haya sido la mejor idea" (28), suggesting that they are not married and that perhaps his terminology is misleading. Later, Ana (in the body of Renata but presumably in reference to herself) says that she is not married (52). She quickly corrects herself, "Bueno, en realidad sí," but adds that they do not see each other very much, in a most literal description of their situation since she is now dead and for the most part invisible to him. Similarly, although Ana indicates in her monologue to the absent Fran that she was talking to his mother when the fatal accident occurred, later in the play when Fran talks to his mother about how he "saw" the car in the news report, he asks her, "¿A vos también te pareció ver el auto?" (31), which leaves in doubt not only the question of what they did or did not see but also the question of whether his mother knew about the accident because she was talking to Ana at the time or because she saw the aftermath (the traces) on television. In any of the mentioned cases, it seems clear that Daulte is subtly dramatizing the difficulties involved in knowing anything (but perhaps particularly who and where one is) with any degree of confidence.

At still other times, the audience is indeed privy to the misunderstandings. For example, as Claudio tries to communicate with Ana about where Fran is, we understand from his arrows that the latter is downstairs in the neighbors' apartment. To be sure, our comprehension of his message is facilitated by the fact that we had seen Fran leave for that

destination (that is, based on what we “saw,” our earlier experience / perception). What we “saw” (or thought we saw), however, does not negate the possibility that he went elsewhere instead and that our knowledge, comprehension of Claudio’s message, might be erroneous. Similarly, we know that Ana is in Renata’s body although Fran does not. This mixed technique of sometimes privileging the audience with superior knowledge and other times withholding it surely evokes our ability to see, know, or understand outside the theatre. Sometimes we do in fact know; at other times we only think (albeit erroneously) that we do.

Nonetheless, the most revealing “misunderstanding” comes early in the play as Fran first meets Claudio and tries to bring him into focus, get to know and identify him. To facilitate communication, Fran offers Claudio a “pizarra mágica” on which to write.¹⁴ On that magic pad Claudio scribbles a word that Fran has trouble deciphering: “¿‘Cuatro’?... ¿‘Cuarto’?... Cuarto, cuatro... ¿cuarto qué?” (16). He continues as he tries to make out the words: “¿Cuarto? ¿Cuadro? ¿Claudio? ¿Claudio dice? ¿Usted se llama Claudio? Bien. Muy bien. Claudio.” Identity, and by implication knowledge, is established, but can we be sure it is correct? Moments later, Claudio again writes, only this time Fran is not even sure if the scribbles are letters or doodles (“dibujitos”). Nevertheless, he concludes from them that Claudio wants to go to the bathroom. That Claudio does enter the bathroom (presuming that the opening and closing of the bathroom door signals the same; remember we cannot see him), coupled with the fact that later Claudio’s drawings are completely accurate as he attempts to communicate with Ana (as discussed above), suggests that perhaps the initial word he wrote on the “pizarra mágica” was indeed “cuarto.”¹⁵ If such is the case, then his entire “identity,” beginning with the most basic aspect, the name, is a mis-identity, based on a misunderstanding. In the figurative sense then, one still looks through or beyond (fails to see, identify) the other.

But, perhaps we should consider further this seemingly insignificant prop, the “pizarra mágica,” an apparatus that, like Fran’s magic show, reflects the “now you see it, now you don’t” aspect of theatre and is, not irrelevantly, linked, if indeed indirectly, to perception and thus seeing, knowing the other – identity. Early in the play, as Fran describes the apparatus to Ana, she apparently replies that Freud had written an essay about a similar device (18). That essay is, of course, “Note sur le bloc magique” (1925). The audience is later reminded of the connection between the “pizarra mágica” and Freud when Ana refers to the device as “El Bloc Maravilloso” (28). Not irrelevantly,

for Freud, the child's toy served specifically as a metaphor for the process of perception and the traces that remain from that perception, traces that influence future perceptions and reactions. Thus, the prop is impressively, if indeed subtly, instrumental in the production of meaning here as it evokes that "baggage" that I discussed above, yesterday's dreams, desires, self, that today are merely a ghost or memory and which, while "invisible" as it were, nonetheless have a significant impact on the present. Indeed, as the play suggests at several points, although the traces remain, one is different according to one's context, and, of course, a major aspect of context is precisely space.¹⁶

It is worth noting, too, that although the "pizarra mágica" provides a visible trace, Freud employed the apparatus as a "visual metaphor" to explain the invisible, perhaps even unconscious, traces (imaged by Freud as a type of writing) that experiences and perceptions leave on one's mind. Thus, again, there is a certain slippage between visible and invisible, presence and absence, present and past. This slippage is apparent in the play as the aural is often substituted for the visual. At several points in the play we can hear what is happening, but we cannot see it because it is occurring offstage, outside of the range and mastery of our gaze. Because we cannot see the action, the validity of our conclusions about what is happening is inevitably placed in doubt (although ironically, as the play underscores, what we see or think we see is not necessarily valid either). Similarly, while we cannot see Claudio, his traces remain (are present, if you will) to the extent that we can sometimes hear him (not unlike how Hamlet hears his father's ghost and is led to speculate and draw conclusions in regard to the latter's desires). Inversely, although Fran is visible throughout much of the play, at one point, when Ana, encouraged by Claudio, turns on the tape recorder, we hear his disembodied voice, a voice that is overtly an echo, a trace or ghost from the past. The apparatus has captured and now repeats Fran's earlier words, but since the context is not the same, Ana fails to grasp their significance, or perhaps they have no significance once disembodied and out of context (place).¹⁷

This theme of identity and being, being specifically in time and space and as perceived by the other, is proxemically and kinesically embodied/dramatized throughout the play by the fact that the characters rarely communicate or are positioned face-to-face, eye-to-eye (again literally and figuratively). The notable exception to this is the scene between Fran and Renata, both of whom do face each other and speak directly to each other, but, and let us not forget, this ostensible meeting of the eyes, is still predicated

on mis-seeing, for Renata is not Renata, but Ana, once again underscoring the fact that even when the other is physically present, occupies space, one does not really see (or for that matter, hear) that other. Nonetheless, this emphasis on not facing the other has multiple thematic implications. If I do not face you, look at you, acknowledge your occupation of space (again in the militaristic sense), I erase you, your power, and by implication your identity to the extent that identity, sense of self, is predicated to a large degree on a certain (re)negotiation with the other, adapting (or inversely refusing to adapt) to the desires (the invention, imaginary construction) of the other. If I fail to face you, you cannot renegotiate your identity, renovate it, and recontextualize it according to the present circumstances and company. Not irrelevantly, in this work the importance of face, generally considered the distinctive sign of identity, is replaced with a focus on the hand and writing, and most specifically, by the sleight of hand. Ana and Claudio must depend on writing, on “hand work” as it were, to communicate with and exist for Fran. If as Butler has argued, what we label identity is merely the citation of prescribed texts of which one is unconscious, then, like the magic show and theatre itself, identity here is shown to depend on a sleight of hand, a rewriting, reciting of which we are unconscious but which in many ways is imaged in the “pizarra mágica” as Freud understood it.

This sleight of hand on which theatre and being depend is perhaps most dramatically depicted at the conclusion of the play when first Ana and then an invisible hand (presumably Claudio’s) write “Adiós” on the blackboard. But, the question that the play implicitly poses (if indeed never answers) is who controls that hand, either literally (what stage apparatus, sleight of hand, produces the writing here?) or figuratively, within the fiction, what desires, motives, history, prior citations, have moved Claudio (like all other characters, the playwright, and even the audience) to this point, to this gesture?

In conclusion, although theatre has generally staged presence, the confluence of characters (if indeed a confluence marked principally by conflict), in *¿Estás ahí?* Daulte takes a more difficult route, and one that presents major challenges to both actors and the director, in order to stage absence, the spatial and psychological dis-encounters on which human relationships, theatre, and even knowledge in general are constructed. From the very first moments as Fran stares into the audience and then frantically searches for the telephone as well as other “misplaced” objects, one very much has the sense of things being out of place here. The final image of the

play evokes that out-of-place quality insofar as the words framed on the blackboard are in turn reflected and reframed in a mirror. At the same time the image evokes the multiple frames staged in this production as discussed above. Furthermore, as Fran turns around as if looking for something, he is positioned and physically “caught” between the mirror and the blackboard, two metaphors perhaps for theatre and the production of knowledge, not sure which way to turn, where his (and by implication our) proper place is. I would further propose that the “something” Fran looks for at the end is implicitly the invisible hand(s) that wrote and framed (staged) the reflected words, created this representation or production of knowledge rather than another – the hand(s) of that invisible “other” whose ideology will inevitably modify spectators in some manner. Spectators may leave the theatre questioning just exactly what it is we have seen, but, whatever it is, we have surely been impacted by that “vision.”

Quinnipiac University

Notes

¹ Javier Daulte (1963) is the author of more than two dozen plays and has won numerous prizes. Considered a representative of “teatro emergente” in Argentina today, he is arguably one of the nation’s most prolific and successful playwrights. His works have been successfully produced in Buenos Aires in venues of “alternative theatre” as well as in some of the most important “conventional” theatres of the city. Many of his plays have been produced outside of Argentina (New York, Barcelona, London, Madrid, Rennes, and Caracas, among other places).

² As Benveniste has noted, “*You* is necessarily designated by *I* and cannot be thought of outside a situation set up by starting with *I*” (197). More recently, theorists, perhaps particularly postcolonial theorists, have proposed that the inverse is equally true, that identity, subjectivity, the sense of *I*, is a product of and dependent on a process of “othering” (a term coined by Spivak), establishing alterity or, in linguistic terms, establishing a *you* and separating it from the *I* (see Ashcroft, et al).

³ While the stage directions of the published text never specify what the apartment looks like, it is patently grimy, rundown and unappealing in the stage production, and even in the text Ana does refer to it as “horrible,” adding that “lo mejor para vos es para mí una mierda” (27), drawing attention to the fact that they “see” things differently.

⁴ Indeed, Alejandro Cruz characterizes the work as “dos especies de monólogos cruzados y complementarios.”

⁵ My discussion of the staging of the play is based on the 2004 production in Buenos Aires at the Teatro del Pueblo in the Sala Carlos Somigliana. Directed by Daulte himself, the production starred Gloria Carrá and Hector Díaz. This version (the second) premiered in Buenos Aires at the Teatro Nacional Cervantes in February 2004 and moved to the Teatro del Pueblo in April of the same year.

An earlier version of play, which included only the male character, was produced in the Old Vic Theatre in London in 2002 and later in the Blue Elephant Theatre (also in London) in 2003.

⁶ Carlson has noted, “There is a certain ironic element, as Sedgewick suggests, in the basic situation of being an unobserved and unparticipating observer, but the irony is much sharpened and focused when the observer, by whatever means, is put in possession of knowledge that concerns the action being observed but which is not accessible to the participants” (29).

⁷ A special 2001 issue of *Funámbulos*, dedicated to the topic of space in theatre and dance, includes not only an article by Daulte (“Trabajar con las paredes”) but also a translation of some of Brook’s writings, including his comment on space and concentration that I quote here.

⁸ I employ the term “ideal spectator” in much the same sense as the term “ideal reader” is used in narratology. Nonetheless, as Iser reminds us, that ideal narrator is “a purely fictional being [which is what] makes him so useful.... He can be endowed with a variety of qualities in accordance with whatever problem he is called upon to help solve” (29).

⁹ Having read the script before seeing the play, I was quite surprised by the humor of the production, particularly in the first act. With certain notable exceptions, the script did not seem (to me at least) particularly comical. The stage production definitely was. I suspect that the humor helped to draw segments of the audience into the play in a way a more serious staging might not have. It also functioned as a significant contrast to the very somber sections of the second and third acts.

¹⁰ As Daulte notes in “¿Estás ahí? Su proceso de producción: un malentendido,” which is included in the published edition of the play, the work was originally produced “en el legendario Old Vic, un teatro inmenso donde entran unas nueve mil personas, allí donde Lawrence Olivier y Vivian Leigh presentaron el mítico y existencial *Hamlet*” (66). Thus, one must wonder to what extent the original theatrical space influenced both the theme of the play and the specifics of the set. To what extent did the traditional and mammoth space of the Old Vic lead Daulte to question and/or challenge theatrical space in general and call attention to its nature as space, visible space?

At the same time, Daulte notes in the article that the version of the play produced in London was the product of a basic misunderstanding about what the festival’s organizers were asking of him. It is interesting then that the plot of this version of the play is based precisely on a series of misunderstandings that underscore the difficulty of comprehending, with any degree of accuracy, exactly what it is that the other wants from us, as I discuss below.

¹¹ Carlson refers specifically to Brook’s opening premise in *The Empty Space*: “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (9).

¹² See McAuley for a discussion of the transition from exterior to interior of the theatre and through the foyer with its impact on the spectator.

¹³ That said, it needs to be acknowledged that I am probably not a typical spectator. To the best of my knowledge, no one else has made reference to this aspect of the production. However, my sense is that, although most spectators might not have found this unique arrangement of the scenic space meaningful, even the most “desocupado espectador” (to borrow from Cervantes’s notion of “desocupado lector”) would have initially felt somewhat annoyed or put off by the fact that the stage was not naturalistic, most likely attributing it to financial exigencies.

¹⁴ For anyone who might have forgotten what the “pizarra mágica” or Magic Tablet is, it is a device that resembles a pad of paper and whose top “sheet” is a piece of plastic. One writes on the pad with a pointed piece of wood and then lifts the plastic to erase the writing.

¹⁵ As a result of the earlier scene between Claudio and Ana the audience understands that Claudio is perfectly capable of providing appropriate information if only the other would interpret correctly.

¹⁶ Specifically, as Fran and Ana talk on the phone early in the play, she apparently observes that that he is “distinto” (12), and at the end of the play, Claudio apparently tries to convince her that Fran is “cambiado” (40). In both cases the major change is that of physical space: first the new apartment and later the absence of Ana within that space.

¹⁷ In addition, here, as elsewhere, characters simply do not listen very well. Obsessed with their own agendas, they fail to really listen to the other.

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