On: 06 April 2013, At: 03:53
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK

Contemporary Theatre Review
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gctr20

Booing

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Version of record first published: 18 Mar 2013.

To cite this article: Dan Rebellato (2013): Booing, Contemporary Theatre Review, 23:1, 11-15

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2013.765102

Contemporary Theatre Review
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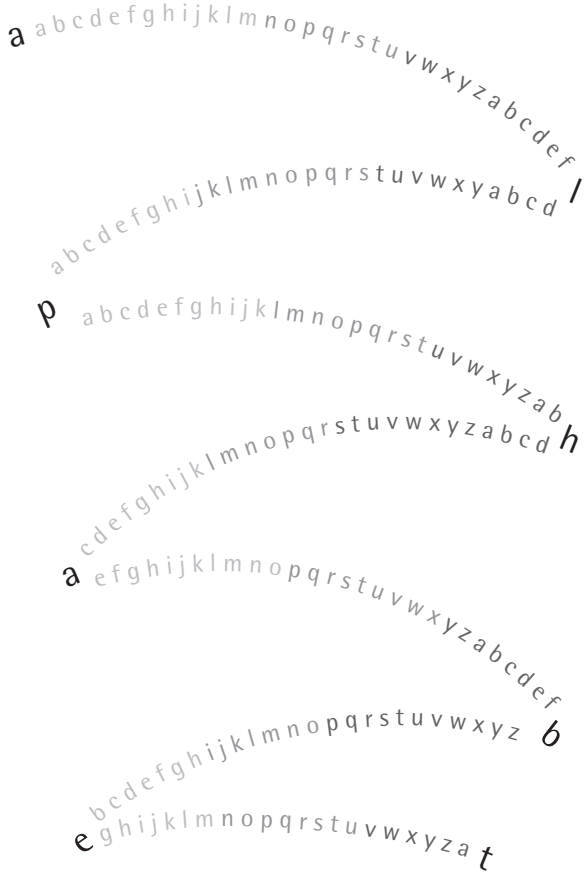
as the final resting place of papers, digital technology has radically altered the nature of the archive and the quest. Neither have to be physical anymore. The quarry can be pursued online through digitised documents, databases, exhaustive descriptions and transcriptions or at least, not as physical. The archive can be born digital: recordings, photographs, emails, websites. Documents used to be rare (like the medieval records Jenkinson cherished) and were evidence of things that had been done (like modern minutes). Now documents exist on meta-level as well as an executive one. In the performing arts we create documents that document a performance and the process of making it because we can't file the thing itself. But that's ok, we never could. We never filed a war, or a disease in the National Archives, only the documents that followed its progress and noted the decisions and measures taken. The documents have expanded, as Le Goff reminds us, but the impulse is the same.



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Booing

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Three cheers for booing! C'mon people, put your hands together for the little bit of theatre you love to hate! It's about time booing got a round of applause - usually booing is jeered off the stage. Plato in *The Laws* observes a change from silently respectful audiences to the noisily opinionated audience of his own time, referring to 'catcalls and uncouth yelling'. These baying crowds, he suggests, by privileging their own pleasure over the purity and refinement of musical form, have established a 'theatrocracy', a mob relativism about artistic standards which will lead in turn to the disregard of laws and parental authority, a slow decline into moral chaos, and 'a wretched life of endless misery'.[1]

The word 'theatrocracy' carries with it a sense of the audience as a dictatorship, a view echoed throughout the centuries. In the early nineteenth century, the actress and playwright Elizabeth Inchbald lamented that 'the novelist is a free agent. He lives in a land of liberty, whilst the Dramatic Writer exists but under a despotic government [...] he is the very slave of the audience [...whose will] is the law, and execution instantly follows judgement'.[2] Booing is a metonym for a range of different audience behaviours and is, in fact, a fairly

1. Plato, *The Laws*. ed. by Trevor J. Saunders (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 700c-701c.
2. Elizabeth Inchbald, Letter to *The Artist*, 13 June 1807, Qtd. in Lilla Maria Crisafulli, and Cecilia Pietropoli, *The Languages of Performance in British Romanticism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 215.

recent invention. Until the nineteenth-century, there is no evidence of booing: hissing and whistling are generally preferred. Booing is now widespread in Britain and the United States, but less common elsewhere.[3] 'Boo' begins in the sixteenth century as a means of vocally surprising someone (as in jumping out and shouting boo!), shifts in the following century into an image of standing up to someone or something (as in saying boo to a goose), and by the nineteenth-century becomes a means of challenging political speeches and theatrical performers.

These kinds of semantic shifts can be revealing. 'Heckling' is a metaphor derived from a term for combing out the fibres in hemp and thus originally implied that the heckler was submitting a speech to minute scrutiny. Only later did it come to suggest something unruly. Similarly, the kind of noisy audience behaviour that Plato laments in the theatre he also lamented in the courtroom where the 500 jurors 'far from keeping silent when they hear a case [...] make a tremendous disturbance as though they were in a theatre'[4]. But Victor Bers has argued that this kind of noisy interruption was a form of deliberation, a means of testing witnesses and arguments, of helping the jury form a common understanding of the trial.[5] Is the same not true of the theatre audience? Laughter, applause and silence can help form an audience into a unity, so why not booing?

Booing is often seen not just as over-mighty but really dumb. This insinuation lurks there in the animal imagery that surrounds booing and its neighbours: booing itself is thought to derive from an imitation of the sound of cattle; hissing suggests geese and snakes; there are catcalls, wolf whistles, hooting, giving a performer the bird. Greek theatres sometimes resounded to the sound of *klozein,* often translated as 'clucking'.[6] Henry James wrote angrily of the 'roughs' who brought his play *Guy Domville* to an early end, describing the total effect of their 'hoots & jeers & catcalls' as '*roars* (like those of a cage of beasts at some infernal "Zoo")'.[7] In *Every Man Out of His Humour*, Ben Jonson has Asper warn his onstage audience to watch out for the type of gallant who 'Cries *mew*, and nods, then shakes his empty head'[8] In connecting the 'mew' with the 'empty head', Jonson foreshadowed the views of the logical positivists in the early twentieth century: philosophers like A. J. Ayer thought that moral and metaphysical statements, having no empirical referents, are literally meaningless, and to express just how idiotic they were reached for a theatrical metaphor, calling them 'boo-hurrah' statements, an appellation that assumed that both booing and cheering were philosophically empty, simple-minded activities.

But they were wrong. Booing isn't empty, and even if it could be ejected from the theatre, which it can't, should be cheered, because booing is a moment where the audience represents the theatre to itself by dramatizing and drawing attention to the fault-lines of performance. It is a kind of liminal activity that throws theatre into sharp relief and asks profound questions about performance. Booing troubles the edges of theatre. Is it a response prompted legitimately by performance and therefore contained within it? Or is it a disruption of performance from performance's outside? Booing is theatre at its most philosophical and its most theatrical.

3. Marinetti's 'The Pleasure of Being Booed' [reprinted variously, including F. T. Marinetti and Doug Thompson, 'Refusals, Exhortations, and Announcements', *New England Review,* 27 (2006), pp. 56-80] is actually a translation of 'La voluttà d'esser fischiati' which literally translates as 'The Pleasure of Being Whistled'. Eric Csapo and William J Slater in *The Context of Ancient Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) cite Cicero talking of an actor being 'hissed and booed' off the stage (p. 312), but this is again a loose translation of 'exsibilatur, exploditur' which more strictly suggest being 'whistled and clapped' off (*Paradoxa Stoicorum*, 3.26, http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/cic.html [accessed 16 July 2012]).
4. Plato, *The Laws*, pp. 700c-701c.
5. Victor Bers, 'Dikastic *Thorubos*', in *Crux: Essays Presented to G.E.M. De Ste. Croix on His 75th Birthday*, ed. by P. A. Cartledge and F. Harvey. *History of Political Thought* 6.1-2 (1985), pp. 1-15.
6. Csapo and Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama*, p. 303.
7. Henry James, Letter to William James, 9 January 1895, in *The Correspondence of William James*, ed. by. Ignas K. Skrupskelis, Elizabeth M. Berkeley, and John J. McDermott, 12 vols (Charlottesville and London: The University of Virginia Press, 1992-2004), II, p. 337.
8. Ben Jonson, *Every Man out of His Humour*, ed. by Helen Ostovich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 121, my emphasis. A 'mew' is thought to be either the sound of a gull or a kitten (as in meow).

B

Modernism was a moment of considerable anxiety around booing in the theatre. Many early Modernist performance were disrupted by booing, hooting, whistling audience: *Ubu Roi, The Wild Duck, Murder, Hope of Womankind, The Rite of Spring, Playboy of the Western World* are just some of the most famous cases. In response, the Modernists tried to incorporate booing and draw its sting. Marinetti's pamphlet 'The Pleasure of Being Booed' (1910) expresses no real pleasure in booing but instead suggests that it is, at best, a sign of a theatre in transition. The problem with the stage has been that actors listen too much to the audience and the aim of the Futurists is to 'subordinate [actors] to the authority of writers and to rescue them from thralldom to a public that urges them, fatally, to look for easy effects, thus preventing them from seeking any deeper interpretation. Booing is bad, because it expresses an audience's irrelevant opinion of the work (Marinetti is at his most Platonist here), but at least it is an indication that the theatre that is turning its back on the audience. The ultimate aim of Futurism is to 'abolish the grotesque custom of applauding and booing'.[9] The fourth act of Breton and Soupault's surrealist performance text *If You Please* (1920) scripts the audience dissenting from the play, leaving and causing 'tumult'.[10] Luigi Squarzina, in a 1961 revival of Pirandello's *Each His Own Way*, played the sound of an audience booing and jeering at the end of the first act.[11] John Osborne wrote audience disruption and walk-outs into his script for *A Sense of Detachment* (1972) and at the end of his script for *Déjàvu* (1992) advises that in the event of audience dissent 'the loud playing of martial music can be effective'.[12] Each case pre-empts – or tries to pre-empt – audience disruption to neutralise it.

It's important for these artists to banish the audience and diminish its power because the idea of the artwork as complete in itself prior to its reception by the audience is key to Modernism. The art critic Michael Fried, in 'Art and Objecthood', cites Robert Morris to claim that for the Modernists 'what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it]'.[13] For Fried, this key achievement is under threat by minimalism (he calls it 'literalism'), because minimalist artworks are there to ask questions of their viewers (how do I look at this? Where should I observe it from? What do I supply to make sense of the object?), and as such 'literalist work *depends* on the beholder, is *incomplete* without him [sic], it *has* been waiting for him'.[14] For Fried this represents a disastrous turn towards 'theatricality'. A performance is only fully realized when there's an audience watching it whereas when the painter finishes a painting, it's finished, even if it hasn't left her studio. Minimalist art requires completion by an audience and so it has become theatrical. Fried's essay inadvertently helped invent performance art so might be considered one of the less unsuccessful interventions in art history, but it raises a further problem: if Modernism is to be defined as the defeat of Theatre, Modernist Theatre must contain a deep contradiction, and that contradiction is revealed by booing.

This is obvious when we observe that all of these attempts to exclude the audience from the performance actually meant inscribing the audience *in* the performance. This paradox is not restricted to Modernism. Ben Jonson was perhaps the first British playwright to think of himself an artist, and this, for him, seems to have involved a belief that his plays are most perfectly realized not when performed, but when published: the 1600 publication of *Every Man Out His Humour* declared itself to be 'as it was first composed by the author [...] containing more than hath been Publickely Spoken or Acted'.[15] *The New Inn*, declared the first published edition, was 'neuer acted, but most negligently play'd, by some, the Kings Seruants'.[16] Jonson was exasperated by actors, who he seems to have considered a distraction from (rather than collaborator in) his plays, but his

9. F. T. Marinetti and Doug Thompson, 'Refusals, Exhortations, and Announcements', p. 69. Translation modified.
10. André Breton and Philippe Soupault, 'If You Please' in *Dada Performance*, ed. by Mel Gordon (New York: PAJ, 1987), pp. 111-29 (p. 129).
11. Luigi Squarzina, and Gino Rizzo, 'Directing Pirandello Today: An Interview with Luigi Squarzina', *The Tulane Drama Review*, 10 (1966), 76-85 (p. 83).
12. John Osborne, *Déjàvu* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 102.
13. Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), pp. 116-47 (p. 125).
14. Ibid., p. 140.
15. Ben Jonson, *The New Inn* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 36.
16. Ibid., p. 97.

George Osborne, UK Chancellor of the Exchequer realising he is being booed by the crowd at the Paralympic Games, 3 September 2012. Photo: Press Association.

real ire is reserved for the audience. The charge sheet is long: audiences don't sit still;[17] they pull faces;[18] they try to influence each other[19] and *are* influenced by each other;[20] they find unintended political meanings in plays;[21] they keep trying to guess what's going to happen;[22] they spit[23] and eat nuts loudly;[24] they hiss plays they don't understand;[25] they hiss plays they do understand, if they feel got at;[26] they watch rather than listen;[27] they're ignorant;[28] they're childish;[29] they judge plays by irrelevant rules.[30] His response is to try to train them. The audience are admonished directly in most of his plays; *Bartholomew Fair* begins with a scrivener announcing some 'Articles of Agreement' between author and audience, covering dissent, judgment, expectation and interpretation.[31] *Every Man Out of His Humour, The Staple of News,* and *The Magnetic Lady* have scripted on-stage audience members whose opinions are voiced and then corrected by representatives of the author. After *The New Inn* was booed off, possibly before even completing a single performance, Jonson published the play together with a large number of commendatory verses, praising the play and damning the audience, including Jonson's own modest effort 'Ode to Myself'. In each case, Jonson's belief that the audience was, or ought to be, exterior to the play ends with the audience and its wayward interventions permanently inscribed in the text.

17. Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979), p. 9.
18. Ben Jonson, 'The Case is Altered' in *The Works of Ben Jonson*. ed. by W Gifford, VI (London: Bulmer, 1816, Vols I-IX), pp. 361. Many thanks to Martin White for drawing this to my attention.
19. 'The Case is Altered', p. 362; *Every Man Out of His Humour*, p.123.
20. *Bartholomew Fair*, p. 10;
21. *Bartholomew Fair*, p. 12; Ben Jonson, *Epicene, or the Silent Woman*. ed. by Richard Dutton, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 118; *Every Man Out of His Humour*, p. 214; *Epicene*, pp. 126-28.
22. *Bartholomew Fair*, p. 11; Ben Jonson, *The Magnetic Lady*. ed. by Peter Happé, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 184; *The New Inn*, p. 63;
23. 'The Case is Altered', p. 361.
24. *The New Inn*, p. 71.
25. 'The Case is Altered', p. 361; *The Magnetic Lady*.
26. *Every Man Out Of His Humour*, p. 120;
27. 'Second Epilogue', *The New Inn*, p. 204; *The Staple of News*, p. 71.
28. *Every Man Out of His Humour*, pp. 124, 376; *The New Inn*, p. 49; *The Magnetic Lady*, pp. 70, 129.
29. *Every Man Out of His Humour*, pp. 376-77.
30. *The Staple of News*, pp. 108-12
31. *Bartholomew Fair*, pp. 9-13.

B

In *Every Man Out of His Humour*, Jonson invites Cordatus and Mitis, his onstage audience, to 'Observe what I present, and liberally / Speak your opinions upon every scene'.[32] This might seem a risky invitation but the text keeps the audience interventions apart from the text with a prophylactic pair of lines, perhaps hoping to prevent any mixing of audience and artwork. These moments of mild heckling are also given a label, 'GREX'. The Latin word can mean 'flock' or 'crowd' and captures Jonson's ambivalent view of the audience as unthinking animal or informed social group. This takes us back to the question of booing's interiority or exteriority. Some booing – for example at pantomime – is part of the performance and in such cases the booing is determined beforehand, the audience simply playing its part as dumb animal. But at other times the choice of animal noises might be a paradoxical assertion of free will, a parodic representation of the performance's belief in its own completeness. It acknowledges the stage's view of the audience and repeats it back as excess.

At times, this excess becomes a detailed act of collective commentary. In September 1934, *Young England* opened at the Victoria Palace Theatre, London. It was intended to be, in the words of its author Walter Reynolds, 'a solid three hours of clean and wholesome entertainment'.[33] The audience did not share Reynolds' estimation of his preposterous and old-fashioned melodrama, with its one-dimensionally wicked villain, its impossibly saintly heroes, and its bizarre hymns of praise to the 'picturesque and practical *Boy Scouts and Girl Guides* movement'.[34] Rather than merely boo the production to a close, however, the audience performed its ideological role to excess: the play became a cult hit with audiences returning again and again, anticipating and amplifying moments in the ludicrous plot. When the wicked scoutmaster stole from the safe the house shouted in unison 'Don't forget to wipe the handle!' just before the hapless actor performed the act. The play featured a Boy Scout song 'Away we go, a cheery, jolly Scout band' in which the entire audience would vigorously join. 'Once I am elected to Parliament,' the poor villain explained each night, 'the shares in my companies will go up and up and up,' the prediction habitually taken up by the audience: 'and *up* and *up* and *up* and *up* and *up*...'[35] The mocked author sat in a box at every performance glaring in helpless fury at the revellers. The play ran for almost nine months and, rewritten much more entertainingly in the auditorium, became one of the oddest hits of the 1930s, a testament to the irreducible interiority of audience at shows from which they were meant to be excluded.

This is not to repeat the silly but persistent idea that theatre is entirely created in the minds of the audience. The theatre artists shape, for the most part, the performance object and these decisions are crucially important; however, the audience determines its significance, meaning, affect, resonance, understanding, reach, function, ambiguity, playfulness, profundity and power. These functions should not be considered in themselves secondary but complementary and essential. Jacques Rancière, in 'The Emancipated Spectator' (2004), makes the point that all the attention paid in Modernism to engaging the spectator was really just about turning the audience into theatre-makers, as if only theatre-makers are valid participants in a theatre event. (This is why, when a comedian says 'and now for some audience participation' there is annoyance mixed into the tension – aren't we participating *already?*) Rancière doesn't mean that every single audience response is equally significant – no one's going to approve of the 'Disgusting Man' described by Theophrastus who 'claps when others stop, and he hisses at those which the rest of the audience watch with pleasure. When the audience is silent, he stands up and burps in order to make them turn around and look at him'.[36] Instead Rancière insists on the equality of *types* of intelligence on the stage and in the auditorium and it is booing when that equality is most plainly expressed.[37]

32. Ibid., p. 121.
33. J. C. Trewin, *The Night has been Unruly* (London: Robert Hale, 1957), p. 238.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., pp. 241-42.
36. Quoted in Csapo and Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama*, p. 303.
37. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), p. 10.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2013.765103

Applause, on some level, is always anticipated, already internal to the event. Booing, on the other hand, announces the independence of the audience's knowledge, the autonomy of its tasks, the freedom of its will, and its internal exteriority to performance. It can never be excluded from the theatre. Let's hear it for booing!

C

Contemporary

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Contemporary: The present, the here and now, the experience of the current moment. Such are terms we might use to define the contemporary as shared by a community living in the same era. Steve Connor, notes that the 'claim to know the contemporary is [...]a kind of conceptual violence, a fixing of the fluid and formless energies of the urgently [...] present *now* into a knowable and speakable form [...] by [...] acts of critical choosing.'[1] Whilst many cultural critics talk of the difficulty of understanding the contemporary because it cannot be viewed from a historical position, there is in fact no other position from which it can be viewed. If as Karl Marx suggested, 'all that is solid melts into air',[2] then the contemporary too is a fleeting, immutable thing which we can to some extent only view in its passing or by its having passed. So too the idea of a shared community is problematic. Communities are made up of numerous and diverse groups, all with vastly different experiences, locations within and understandings of the present, for whom the contemporary will signify as much about our past as it does about our present.

Situated in the immediacy of the present moment, the contemporary connects through similarity and distance: it is bound by that which marks it as being

1. Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005 [1989]), p.3.
2. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Middlesex: echo-library.com), p. 8.