



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### What is the impact of theatre and performance?

Bala, S.

**Publication date**

2019

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Thinking through Theatre and Performance

**License**

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Bala, S. (2019). What is the impact of theatre and performance? In M. Bleeker, A. Kear, J. Kelleher, & H. Roms (Eds.), *Thinking through Theatre and Performance* (pp. 186-199). (Thinking Through Theatre). Bloomsbury.

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## 13 What Is the Impact of Theatre and Performance?

SRUTI BALA

### Thinking the Question of Impact

'Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it': this well-known adage, commonly attributed to Brecht, captures the complex relationship between theatre and performance practices, the societies from which they emerge and to which they respond. It suggests that art can, indeed *ought* to, impact upon and transform reality, rather than seek to simply depict and re-present reality in a verifiable manner. It seems to contest the possibility of any simple, mimetic portrayal of reality altogether. For not only are there as many realities as there are ways of perceiving them, but something can only become a reality if we are able to first imagine its possibility. The adage invites us to reflect on who wields this hammer, and how it might be used to impact upon reality. The foundational question of theatre's social, cultural, political or ecological impact continues to productively preoccupy artists, scholars and critics. What are the ways in which we can think through theatre's impact on the world?

The notion of impact in conjunction with the arts remains an imprecise and unwieldy one, yet it seems to command significant power in the way it is repeatedly summoned in justifying the necessity of the arts. This can be explained by the way in which the idea of impact has become a core feature of determining the cultural value of the arts by policy makers and public and corporate funding bodies. This chapter addresses the question of impact in relation to theatre and performance by investigating the assumptions around it, as well as the critical and methodological challenges it poses in our field. Using the example of one performance, namely the 2012 Spanish-language production *Afuera: lesbianas en escena* (Outside: Lesbians on Stage) by the theatre collective Teatro Siluetas from Guatemala and El Salvador as a point of departure, the chapter will focus on a number of debates in theatre and performance scholarship pertaining to assessing and evaluating impact. In closing, the chapter offers a number of points of orientation and aspects to take into consideration when undertaking a study of theatre's impact.

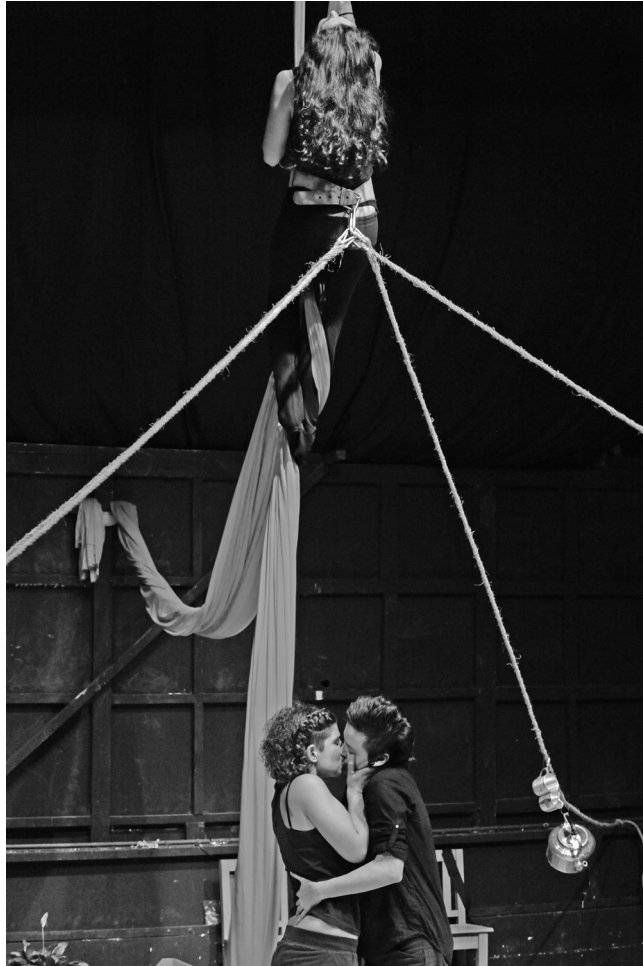
Let us begin by examining the underlying premises of the question, 'what is the impact of theatre?' The notion of impact (from the Latin verb *impingere*, i.e. to 'press closely', 'fix firmly' or 'forcibly thrust') suggests that something leaves a perceptible mark or trace on its environment or surroundings. When used in relation to theatre and performance, impact seems to imply that they remain and resonate in some way with the world, that they have a palpable effect on those who partook of their making and presentation, especially after



Fig. 13.1 *Afuera* performance for students at the University of Mexico, 2012. Photo: Carla Molina.

they are over. This is hardly surprising, given the ephemerality of theatre, and the medium-specific difficulty of preserving or reproducing theatrical works. Precisely because theatre seemingly vanishes the moment it is performed in the here and now (unlike a book that can be reread and stored, or a film that can be copied and distributed, or even a piece of music that can, to some extent, be preserved in the form of a recording) it seems to repeatedly prompt the question of impact in manifold ways. What remains of theatre when the show is over? When someone claims that a certain performance had a great impact on them, they might be speaking of its lasting (positive or negative) impressions: images, movements, scenes, moments that left a mark on their memory, that resonated with them, or triggered visceral or emotional responses that extended well beyond the duration of the performance itself. Aristotle's conception of catharsis comes to mind as one of the earliest ideas in Western philosophy in which the relation between art and its (positive) effect on the viewer by way of a process of inner cleansing or purification is emphasized.

To ask of theatre's impact might equally imply wanting to understand what a certain production has achieved by way of contributing to public opinion, or in shaping the discourse around a possibly controversial topic. What discussions has it triggered, how has it thrown open new angles of interpretation? Impact might also suggest that a performance has a specific target audience who might be treated as beneficiaries (i.e. they benefit in certain ways from the performance), that it has ripple effects on their lives, attitudes or social relations. What are its consequences in other spheres of life? Has it contributed to or influenced any level of societal transformation? And if so, how? Impact could equally relate to those who are involved in the creative process, thus implying that the very act



**Fig. 13.2 Lesbian subjectivity brought centre stage. Photo: Mathieu Hutin.**

of participating in a theatrical production, regardless of the outcome, might serve an educational or other purpose.

Here it is important to note that the idea of impact is largely, but not necessarily always, positively connoted. One might, for instance, speak of the negative impact of a certain performance in its propagation of an aggressive masculinity or its misogynist representations of women. In situations of crisis and violent conflict, theatre may play a part in fortifying cultural stereotypes and thus have a negative impact, serving to polarize rather than de-escalate a latent conflict. (Consider, for instance, the role of radio plays in inciting violence during the Rwandan genocide. More recently, the use of blackfacing on stage has been heavily criticized in Germany and the Netherlands, pointing to the negative effects of caricaturing blackness and making its racist and discriminatory gestures invisible [Hoving and Essed 2014].) However, when we ask the question of theatre's impact, we tend to assume that there will be (or ought to be) one, and that it makes a positive

difference, hopefully bringing about some desirable change in our lives. This assumption is wrought with its own contradictions. By emphasizing impact, theatrical practices may sometimes be valued only in terms of their so-called 'usefulness' in other spheres, and not in their own right. Does it promote social cohesion? Does it raise awareness about problems?

Such a reduction of theatrical art to its benefits for society is a false estimation of its potentials. Firstly, it is extremely difficult to trace any direct or causal link between a certain theatrical practice or event and its positive or negative social outcomes. Indeed, it would be more accurate to claim that no peace accords have been signed or ecological disasters been prevented due to the direct influence of theatre. Secondly, and more importantly, the potentials of theatre, like all art forms, are not calculable according to the logic of a benefit analysis. Rather than judging theatre and performance by the same standards of assessment that apply to, say, the impact of drinking water supply on public health, it is the very model of impact which needs to be attuned and realigned to the specific qualities of theatre and performance. We therefore need to think of the impact of art in less quantitative or effect-based and more qualitative and affective terms. As James Thompson points out, in concentrating on output or function 'we are in danger of losing sight of the art practice. We are becoming target not process orientated' (2000: 101–4). We need to rethink the assessment of impact in order to be able to pay attention to subtle, ambiguous and delicate indicators, which may not make sense in cost-and-benefit or utilitarian terms. The tools of gauging impact available to theatre and performance scholars ought not to be governed by a narrowly economic or technocratic, evidence-based rationale. Thirdly, and following from this, we can observe that even within the field, different traditions of performance practice entail different understandings of impact, which vary historically and regionally. Classical opera productions and participatory theatre workshops with children with autism operate in vastly different environments and reveal distinct interdependences between artistic and socio-political domains. Thus, when the question of the impact of a certain theatre practice is asked, it is important to examine the assumptions implicit to the question and its possible claims around usefulness, applicability, causality and measurability, in order to determine a working understanding of impact that is befitting to the practice.

Notwithstanding the various assumptions surrounding the notion of impact in relation to the arts, it continues to be an idea that holds the heady promise of transformation and affective force in the world. The artistic and cultural life of a society is often regarded as the 'barometer' of its well-being, maturity and, indeed, degree of civilization. This widely held orthodoxy, as Belfiore and Bennett point out in their study *The Social Impact of the Arts*, tends to assume that the study of impact is therefore about measuring and finding evidence for its existence, rather than interrogating its claims (2008: 7). How can we speak about the impact of theatre and performance, without falling prey to the tyranny of evidence and numbers, making use of the methods of the interpretive Humanities? This is all the more relevant given the growing necessity for artists to demonstrate and quantify the impact of their artistic ideas in order to avail of arts funding. A critical approach to impact could thus serve as a means to respond to funding policies from the grassroots level, as well as expand and shape the conception of impact in a manner that is adequate to the diversity of the arts.

## Case Study: Teatro Siluetas

In order to think through this question I will introduce, by way of illustration, a performance case in point, namely the independent Latin American theatre group Teatro Siluetas from Guatemala and El Salvador, and specifically, their 2012 production *Afuera: lesbianas en escena* (Outside: Lesbians on Stage). This case invites us to reflect on several dimensions of theatre's impact. The focus in this analysis will primarily be on its social, cultural, affective and political dimensions.

Teatro Siluetas was founded in 2011 by four women from Guatemala and El Salvador, who self-identify as lesbian-feminist activists and formed a theatre collective under the name 'Siluetas' (Spanish for 'silhouettes') with the aim of using theatre as a means to reflect on the experiences of lesbian subjectivities in Central America. The members of the group were affiliated to and involved in various ways with autonomous feminist social justice movements in the continent. Following their participation in the activist initiative 'The Lesbian Feminist School' in Guatemala, they came together with the idea to continue their activism using the modalities of theatre, with which all four were familiar, or in which they were formally trained. To that extent, the formation of the theatre collective itself may be regarded as one indicator of the productive impact of their involvement in the feminist movement. Which is to say that the notion of impact is multidirectional; it is not only about theatre's impact on society but also about the way in which theatre is impacted upon by social developments.

Two characteristics of Teatro Siluetas are pertinent in relation to the question of impact: on the one hand, the choice of the organizational form of a collective and on the other hand, the foregrounding of a lesbian subjectivity in the artistic practice. Latin American experimental theatre and performance has widely embraced the tradition of autonomous theatre collectives (*creación colectiva*), often traced to the influence of theatre reformers such as Enrique Buenaventura in Colombia in the 1980s. The *creación colectiva* movement in Latin American theatre, which began in the 1950s, had a landmark impact on the way theatre groups approached their processes of working. This includes practices such as creating scripts through collective improvisation processes, modalities of establishing dialogues with audiences, feedback loops in the dramaturgical process and community outreach activities (Cortes and Barrea-Marlys 2003). The choice of the structure of a participatory collective, rather than that of a theatre company headed by an artistic director, with actors, assistants, designers, technicians and others in hierarchically lower positions, is indicative of the impact of democratic ideals on institutional practices and structures. For the members of Siluetas, it was important to organize the day-to-day practices of theatre in a way that questioned and changed the ways in which creative processes tended to be hierarchically organized, with predominantly male directors and playwrights having the voice of authority and actresses merely executing and embodying their ideas. Siluetas therefore collectively wrote and directed and produced the play through a process of experimentation and dialogical interaction, which not only included a horizontal communication between the four members of the collective, but also involved training with invited guests, including dancers, choreographers and theatre directors like Jesusa Rodriguez, and her singer-songwriter partner Liliana Felipe, with whose input they completed the final version of the play *Afuera*. Rodríguez and Felipe are known both for their lesbian-feminist performance

activism and for their long-standing engagement with current political themes pertaining to the Latin American continent.

The second characteristic is the choice of foregrounding lesbian subjectivity in the work of the theatre collective. One might regard the launch of a theatre group that specifically addresses the needs and lives of subjects regarded as marginalized and underrepresented in the mainstream as an identitarian or minoritarian formation, with the purpose of gaining more visibility and acknowledgement in the public sphere. While this is true to some extent, for *Siluetas* the motivation in founding a lesbian collective extends beyond an identity-based politics. Rather, the category of 'lesbian' presents for the theatre collective an intersectional lens through which all systems of oppression and inequality can be approached. Thus, it is possible to sharpen one's understanding of racism, ableism or other forms of social discrimination through paying attention to the mechanisms by which women attracted to women are oppressed; for not only are different forms of oppression intertwined, but also conversely, the unique experiences of identifying with the figurations of 'lesbian' in a Central American context offers a different perspective on mainstream society, politics and public culture, and sheds light on the construction of categories such as 'homosexual' or 'heterosexual'. The theatrical representation of lesbian lives in *Afuera* can thus be read not as a direct correlate to some authentic reality or indigenous identity, but as a means of imagining and setting the terms of this reality.

The play *Afuera* addresses a range of issues, from lesbophobia, sexual violence and the role of religious institutions in the governance of sexual mores, to the prominent presence of religious conservatism in public affairs, in tandem with the strengthening of neoliberal economic policies put in place after the end of the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1990s. It also examines the lives of lesbians who challenge or try to escape from the binary gender construction with humour and lightness. It speaks of questions of loneliness, the absence of role models and popular cultural points of reference. In dramaturgical terms, it consists of a sequence of short scenes that combine a range of formats, from fragments of daily life experiences, monologues, dialogues, choreographed interludes, to humorous episodes, or elaborate *tableaux vivants*. The scenes sometimes involve conventional role-play, with four actresses playing characters such as a nun or a couple in love, shifting between *femme* and *butch* roles, well-wishers or people who ridicule lesbians. But there are also moments when they step out of their roles and address the audience directly in their own voices as members of the theatre collective and citizens of society. This makes it difficult to view 'the lesbian' as merely a fictional character on stage, but urges audiences in a non-didactic and non-confessional manner to acknowledge a personally experienced reality on and offstage. Layers of prejudices and unquestioned assumptions about what the idea of sexual orientation implies, are gradually peeled off, revealing the vulnerabilities and ambiguities of human existence.

The production *Afuera* toured across Guatemala and was performed not only in theatre venues, but also in schools, universities, community centres and female prisons, covering both urban and rural sites. These performances were accompanied by question-and-answer sessions with audiences, and workshops with young adults. A documentary film was made in 2013 about the performance with the financial support of the Dutch international development agency, HIVOS, and in collaboration with the network of Latin American artists *Trasbastidores* (Backstage). All these aspects of a performance's (after-) life are also pertinent to the assessment of its impact.

## Critical and Creative Challenges

Having briefly sketched a performance example, a number of critical and creative challenges may be identified in discussing the impact of a performance. What counts as impact, under which conditions? How can impact be evaluated and what are the methods available to Theatre and Performance scholars in this quest?

*On impact studies:* In thinking through the question of impact in the arts, a brief note on the prominent influence of social and economic impact studies is in order. This domain of research gained currency in the 1980s, at a time when urban regeneration programmes in Europe, the United States and other industrially developed regions of the world increasingly looked to arts and culture to fill the gaps that were emerging from the decline of industries in cities. Artistic and cultural activities gradually came to be regarded as an 'expanding economic sector' (Reeves 2002). This led to the commissioning of studies that demonstrated how investment in the arts effectively led to greater economic growth or job creation in other sectors. Such advocacy-oriented studies departed from the premise that the arts are economically beneficial to cities and looked for evidence for the same in order to advocate public investment in the arts and in cultural activities and institutions. As Belfiore and Bennett point out, impact studies is motivated by an evidence-based approach to policy making, whereby pragmatism and an orientation towards 'whatever brings about the best results' serves as a guide to policy making rather than ideals or principles that are derived from constitutional or long-standing culturally rooted grounds (2008: 5).

The problems of such an evidence-led, economic approach to studying impact have been widely criticized in cultural policy studies. All kinds of claims can be made about the benefits of the arts, and the search for impact can end up as a search based on indicators that are likely to produce the desired findings. In the logic of viewing the arts as an economic sector, the study of impact becomes often a matter of arguing that the arts generate employment, enhance social cohesion or reduce crime, which in turn indirectly supports economic growth. Thus, despite a rationale of searching for evidence for art's social or economic benefits, deep-seated, unquestioned cultural norms and values pertaining to what counts as beneficial or has a positive transformative potential inform the way impact is argued. Conventional impact studies tend to be commissioned by organizations that support or fund the arts, which implies that the findings of these studies tend to advocate various benefits and economically viable qualities of the arts, thus serving as advocacy reports rather than as research. A further problematic aspect of the domain of impact studies is that it tends to predominantly value the arts along instrumental lines. The problem is not, as Belfiore convincingly argues, that a certain instrumentality is applied to the arts. Rather, she argues, the problem 'lies in the way in which the attribution of value to the outcome of aesthetic encounters has become part of the technocratic machinery of cultural policy-making' (2015: 96). Mostly, quantitative understandings of value tend to determine whether or not a certain artistic practice is worth investing in. Thus, even within the economic logic, a very narrow understanding of 'more is better', underwritten by governmental policies of austerity and privatization, remains largely unquestioned (Fotiadi 2017). Economic understandings of 'impact' thus



assume far more policy-related influence and importance than other, less utilitarian and more interpretive, subjective approaches.

In her study *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, political philosopher Wendy Brown argues that neoliberalism is 'an order of rationality', that is not only a set of economic policies or an ideology, but also a political imaginary, an order of reason that seeps into all human domains in the most unexpected ways and in manifold forms of articulation (2015: 10–11). Every human need and desire becomes valued in economized terms, which doesn't necessarily only mean monetary terms, but a logic of profit, benefit, growth and expansion, and this also extends to those spheres that were historically governed by different values, such as the arts, interpersonal relationships, children's upbringing, education, health and well-being, ecology or spirituality. Impact studies in the arts, particularly those that seek to prove and rationalize the benefits of the arts and demonstrate them as worthy of receiving structural or financial support, face the risk of succumbing to a neoliberal logic, even while they may claim to be championing the arts.

In the present chapter, I take distance from such an evidence-based, economically rationalized understanding of impact, towards a more ambivalent, open-ended notion of impact, encompassing diverse dimensions and modes of interrelations between artworks and the societies they emerge from and respond to. The study of impact cannot be separated from the conditionalities and agendas of who is interested in theatre's impact and to what ends. The evaluation of impact is not an end in itself (Isar and Anheier 2007: 4). Further, impact need not only be perceived as the effect of the big on the small, the powerful on the weak, or of institutions on individuals, but can also be meaningfully addressed from a multidirectional, systemic perspective, that is how non-institutionalizable acts and collective bodies in turn transform the structures into which they are placed, and by which they may be restricted or empowered, but which never fully, entirely constitute or define them. Impact need not be only positive and beneficial, and it is also the critical task of scholars to pay attention to such negative aspects. It does not necessarily imply that it is a rejection of an artistic practice or its efforts altogether. In many senses, it may be argued that the theoretical division between the seemingly symbolic space of the theatre and the presumably real space of social and political coexistence is itself restrictive, as if the former were a mere service provider for – or pet animal offering solace and entertainment to – the latter; or as if the latter by definition could safely exclude the unruly realms of imagination and the impractical dimensions of the aesthetic (Bala 2017).

*Specifying the scale and scope of the study:* One of the critical challenges in the study of theatre's impact therefore lies in determining its scale, scope and intensity by paying attention to the particularities of every specific instance. We could start by asking what exactly we refer to when we speak of theatre: a single performance, a theatre group, a tour or festival, a play script, the acting skills of one actress, or a certain genre of performance? When we speak of impact, what are the time and geographical ranges we seek – or are able – to address? Are we interested in individuals or communities, in the short or long term, in the local or regional or transnational? Being explicit and specific about the grids of our frameworks is crucial, simply because different understandings of the arts, of communities and of the scope of impact will lead to different outcomes (Guetzkow 2002). In the case of Teatro Siluetas's show *Afuera*, the framework of analysis might be restricted to a single

performance, or its entire production history, that is all the performances in different locations, or additionally, include the documentary film that can be viewed online (see Further Reading). If one is interested in addressing the impact of the process of performance making on the actresses and their social environments, the framework might be extended to the entire process of conceptualizing, rehearsing and producing the performance. It can be further expanded to include the ways in which the performance circulated to other parts of the world, through donor agency reports, or by way of invitations to the theatre group members to LGBTQ events, and academic scholarship. This selection depends on what we can access in depth and what we are interested in finding out. If we ask the question of the impact of Latin American lesbian feminism on the practice of collective, collaborative dramaturgy, we obviously need to attend to the rehearsal and conceptual processes as well as to the specificities of lesbian feminism in Guatemala and El Salvador far more than to audience responses. If we are interested in the impact of the performance on attitudes towards sexuality among young adults, we must look for ways to access and communicate with young adults who have seen the performance, independently from, or in addition to, what may be available to us via the documentation or reports by the theatre group.

*The problem of aggregation:* The next critical challenge is that of aggregation, namely how to interconnect the micro with the macro levels. How can we claim with any certainty that there is a connection between the successful ticket sales of the show and a growing acceptance and liberal attitude towards homosexuality in society? Causality is a tricky principle when it comes to studying the arts. It is a fallacy to claim, for instance, that urban audiences in Guatemala were more receptive to the topic of lesbianism than rural audiences *because* there was more laughter and applause in the former than in the latter. There is no direct causal link between applause for a show and the social openness towards a taboo topic that is the subject of the show. On the contrary, it is well known that what is widely accepted and appreciated by audiences within the imaginative space of performance may equally meet with hostility and violence on the streets (Butler 1988). Audience laughter during a scene when two women kiss on stage may well be an expression of embarrassment, ridicule or even of a sense of disgust, just as the laughter of teenage school pupils at a performance in a high school may be an indicator of a healthy emotional receptiveness and curiosity towards sexuality and love, or indeed a mix of emotions. It requires heightened caution and sensitivity as a viewer and researcher to distinguish between appreciative and disapproving responses and draw conclusions based on them.

*Institutional impact:* One of the possible ways to resolve the problem of aggregating the relation between the performance and society at large, is to define and delimit the analysis to specific societal institutions, and examine the points of contact between the performance and these institutions. These could include artistic and cultural venues but also community centres, schools, universities, prisons or church-run institutions. Such institutions can be regarded, in the sense of Louis Althusser, as ideological state apparatuses, which reinforce the dominant ideology without using state repressive force or violence. In an influential essay originally published in 1970, Marxist philosopher Althusser argues that the state and its subjects share not only a legal or territorial relationship, but also a psychological one, marked by ideology. A state controls its subjects not

only through law-enforcement institutions and agents, like the police or the courts, but equally, and in a far more heterogeneous and decentralized manner, through cultural apparatuses, such as schools, religious bodies, the social institution of the family and the media. These so-called 'ideological state apparatuses' ensure that citizens comply with and subjugate themselves to state control by willingly and unquestioningly believing that their position within the state and its structures is a natural one. Althusser argues that through these ideological state apparatuses, subjects are hailed into being, they learn to recognize themselves and others and acquiesce to the place allocated to them, a process he terms 'interpellation'.

The performance *Afuera* premiered on 26 January 2012 in the Teatro de Bellas Artes theatre in Guatemala City, a cultural institution under the aegis of the Guatemalan Ministry of Culture and Sports. Laia Ribera Cañénguez, a member of Teatro Siluetas, describes in an interview the difficulties in finding a venue that would be willing to host this particular performance, because theatre halls did not want to risk their reputations by hosting a group that openly talked about lesbianism (2015: 256). The fact that Teatro de Bellas Artes did host the event might be interpreted as a mark of a critical capacity of the institution. In showing its support to an independent lesbian-feminist production in the face of widespread institutional caution and conservatism, it effectively took a public stance in support of reflecting on the social issues that the performance addressed. Who made the decision to include the performance in the programme? Were there prior connections to members of the theatre collective? Perhaps it lost some of its regular audience members in the process, perhaps it accessed a different public, or perhaps it led to new international connections. All these aspects might form the focus of an investigation.

Similarly, we can enquire into the impact on those institutions that hesitated or categorically refused to host the performance. Was there an internal discussion prior to the decision, how were the hesitations regarding the play formulated, how did the institutions perceive their own social responsibility? Since the performance toured to various other countries and was shown in venues such as universities, schools and church centres, the institutional responses and afterlife of the performance offer possibilities for analysing the social impact of the performance by examining the impact on institutions with which it came into contact. Since these institutions make it possible for people who would presumably never buy a ticket to go and see the show in Guatemala City to view the performance in a familiar environment, it is no exaggeration to claim that the outreach of the performance expanded greatly by virtue of being shown under the purview of these institutions. The performance also triggered some discriminatory responses from institutions. In Costa Rica, the performers were asked to leave a café, where they gathered after a show, since the owners felt that the presence of lesbians would be a bad influence on children (Cañénguez 2015: 247). In anticipation of protests or objections to the play, the theatre group took security measures at the performance venues, to prevent damage to property or personal injury. One of the performers was asked by her family to leave Guatemala, in order not to blemish the family's reputation. This indicates that performances (or public perceptions and projections of what a performance is about) can trigger very real social repercussions, which are enacted by institutions. These could come from strangers as well as from families and close networks. These impacts can consist of a motley of negative and positive responses, ranging from sentiments of moral outrage and offence on the one side to accolade and

praise from the press on the other side. In all this, the performance realistically constitutes but one of several factors that impact on institutional attitudes, policies or practices.

*Impact on individuals:* Yet, while it might be possible to gather some statistics on the demographics of the audiences, and make qualified observations on the ways in which a performance influences, critiques or interacts with institutions, it still leaves the question open as to how to qualitatively approach a performance's impact on individuals. Audience responses have served as the primary route to assessing the individual dimensions of impact (Bennett 1990). While this chapter does not have the scope to address the methodological and theoretical complexities of audience and reception research, I would like to underline one point, at the risk of overstating the obvious: every utterance about a performance and the impact it has on an audience member needs to be carefully contextualized. It cannot be taken at face value or viewed as a validation for an external, objective reality. Precisely because our access to these contexts is likely to be limited, great caution is called for in deriving generalizations. In the case of *Afuera*, the overwhelmingly positive and supportive responses of audience members towards the performance stands in contrast to a social and political climate that is extremely hostile to those who do not conform to the norms of heterosexuality. How to make sense of this disjunction? To find an answer to this question, it is worthwhile examining some of the individual responses more closely.

The interaction with audiences, specifically with young people and women from working-class and indigenous backgrounds, was an important motivating factor for Teatro Siluetas. The performances thus regularly featured after-talks with the public. They also offered the possibility for audience members to write down their questions on a piece of paper anonymously, in case they did not feel comfortable to ask something directly. One such note they received, asked the unassuming question: 'Es bonito ser lesbiana?' (Is it nice, agreeable to be lesbian?) Cañénguez appropriately cautions against reading this remark as an indication of an innocent response from a simple, good-hearted, rural woman (2015: 249). Rather, she suggests contextualizing such positive responses against the backdrop of a society recovering from a protracted civil war, where self-pride and respect for a community's identity become important means of recovering from violent conflict. The play's choice to deliberately not depict lesbians as victims, and not to speak with echoes of self-pity and resentment, allowed for diverse forms of audience empathy and identification. This also explains responses such as the following: 'I thought I was coming to see a lesbian play and I wanted to show my solidarity, but through the play I ended up thinking about my own relations, my construction of gender and I felt that it spoke to me very personally' (Cañénguez 2015: 245). Instead of serving an identity politics, that is speaking primarily to those (few) who might self-identify with the protagonists of the performance, and thus treating lesbian subjectivity as a state of exception, *Afuera* relates to the audience through an inclusive approach. The specific loneliness that the figures in the play experience might thus be accessed as a universal, human emotion. One struggle for human dignity and recognition is not equivocal to, but also not separable from, another. When audience members say they are *touched* or *moved* by witnessing the vulnerability of another body or by the life story of another person, we are compelled to widen our understanding of impact to include not only social, political or economic *effects*, but equally also psychophysical *affects*: those forces

other than or complementary to rationality, linearity, causality and cognition, which propel us in various directions in our lives and worlds (Gregg and Seigworth 2010). These cannot be measured or valued in any empirical manner, but require an interpretive register that can encompass subjective, visceral, emotional, experiential and sensorial traces.

## Conclusion: Making Thinking

In thinking through the challenges of what the impact of theatre and performance might be, and how to critically approach it, I have argued against a purely policy-oriented notion of impact that is underwritten by a rationale of utility and profitability. Instead, I propose studying impact in its varied dimensions as well as in its unique contexts, while making as transparent as possible the objectives that inform us as researchers, and specifying the scope and scale of what one can realistically make claims of impact about. Such an interpretive approach also requires methodological experimentation and a stretching of disciplinary horizons. To speak of the impact of a performance such as *Afuera* in Guatemala and El Salvador requires a heightened sensitivity towards and awareness of the socio-political context, and an openness to discuss issues and events that take place outside of the theatre in the strict sense. This involves a combination of a performance analysis, supplemented by ethnographic research and audience research, as well as a close contextualization of the events that happen around and beyond the performance itself: from after-talks to press criticisms to public interventions to everyday events.

Given the extensive critique of the term 'impact' and its evidence-based positivist foundations, one wonders whether 'impact' is, after all, the best term, and whether it might better be discarded altogether in favour of a less controversial concept? Indeed, there are several related concepts in the vocabulary of theatre and performance studies, ranging from a more empirically grounded idea of 'reception' in audience research, to a philosophically argued idea of 'performative force' or 'efficacy', to sociologically cadenced terms, such as 'outreach'. Yet I am convinced that the problems related to a utilitarian, economic interpretation of impact would not go away by simply replacing the term with something else. And the question of how theatre or performance remain beyond the moment of their presence and how they might contribute to historical transformation processes will continue to be asked by practitioners, scholars and critics. The problem is thus not just a matter of terminology. Rather, the concept of impact insists on being rethought and newly formulated in as much as the discontent with it seems inseparable from the possibility it offers.

## Performance Details

*Afuera: lesbianas en escena* (Outside, Lesbians on Stage) by theatre group Colectiva Siluetas (co-produced with Trastastidores). Premiere: 26 January 2012 in Teatro de Bellas Artes of Guatemala City. Performers: Tatiana Palomo, Camila Urrutia, Laia Cañénguez, Lu Robles. Advisors: Liliana Felipe and Jesusa Rodriguez. Documentary film: Documental sobre la gira centroamericana de la Colectiva Siluetas con AFUERA (2012). <https://youtu.be/zlym8PxUbkA>. Direction: Carla Molina, Editing: Pepe Orozco, Carla Molina.

The presentation of the case study *Afuera* in this chapter is based on an interview I conducted with Laia América Ribera Cañénguez from Teatro Siluetas, as well as documentary material (Cañénguez 2015).

## Further Reading

Belfiore and Bennett (2008) approach the question of the impact of the arts from a historical perspective, i.e. what has impact meant in different times and contexts? Their book also examines differences between artistic disciplines, including music, literature, theatre and the visual arts. Thompson (2009) is a critical reflection on current interventions by theatre practitioners, particularly as therapeutic or reconciliatory efforts in zones of violent conflict. It argues that effects of performance need to be considered together with their affects. Schechner (2003), especially the chapter 'From Ritual to Theatre and Back', elaborates a spectrum of effects of performance, from entertainment to efficacy. The book looks to cultural anthropology and the study of ritual and festival, in particular, to develop a theorization of impact. Etherton and Prentki's (2006) special issue consists of a number of contributions from different parts of the world that critically examine and challenge what impact assessment means in relation to applied theatre and performance. The articles reflect on the relationship between context, method and outcome in different artistic practices. Schneider's study on theatrical re-enactment (2011) theorises impact in terms of theatre's afterlives and self-referential traces.<sup>1</sup>

## References

- Althusser, Louis ([1970] 2014), *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, London and New York: Verso.
- Bala, Sruti (2017), 'The Art of Unsolicited Participation', in Tony Fisher and Eve Katsouraki (eds), *Performing Antagonism: Theatre, Performance and Radical Democracy*, 273–87, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bala, Sruti (2018), *The Gestures of Participatory Art*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Belfiore, Eleonora (2015), "'Impact," "value" and "bad Economics": Making Sense of the Problem of Value in the Arts and Humanities', *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 14 (1): 95–110.
- Belfiore, Eleonora, and Oliver Bennett (2008), *The Social Impact of the Arts: An Intellectual History*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bennett, Susan (1990), *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Brown, Wendy (2015) *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, New York: Zone Books.
- Butler, Judith (1988), 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal* 40 (4): 519–31.
- Cañénguez, Laia América Ribera (2015), 'Outside and Onstage: Experiences of the Lesbian Feminist Theater Collective Teatro Siluetas from Guatemala and El Salvador', in Ashley

---

<sup>1</sup>An extended version of this chapter is published in Bala (2018).

- Tellis and Sruti Bala (eds), *The Global Trajectories of Queerness: Re-Thinking Same-Sex Politics in the Global South*, 241–62, Leiden: Brill/Rodopi.
- Cortes, Eladio, and Mirta Barrea-Marlys (2003), *Encyclopedia of Latin American Theater*, Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Etherton, Michael, and Tim Prentki, eds (2006), Special Issue on Applied Theatre and Impact Assessment, *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 11 (2).
- Fotiadi, Eva (2017), 'Von Autonomer Zu Allgemein Anwendbarer Kunst', in Matthias Warstat, Florian Evers, Kristin Flade, Fabian Lempa and Lilian Seuberling (eds), *Recherchen* 129, *Applied Theatre: Rahmen Und Positionen*, 251–73, Berlin: Theater der Zeit.
- Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds (2010), *The Affect Theory Reader*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Guetzkow, Joshua (2002), 'How the Arts Impact Communities: An Introduction to the Literature on Arts Impact Studies' (Working Paper 20), Princeton, NJ Available online: <https://www.princeton.edu/~artspol/workpap/WP20 - Guetzkow.pdf> (accessed 7 May 2018).
- Hoving, Isabel, and Philomena Essed, eds (2014), *Dutch Racism*, Leiden: Brill/Rodopi.
- Isar, Yudhishthir Raj, and Helmut Anheier, eds (2007), *Conflicts and Tensions*, Cultures and Globalizations, Vol. 1, London: Sage Publications.
- Reeves, Michelle (2002), *Measuring the Social and Economic Impact of the Arts*, London: Arts Council of England.
- Schechner, Richard (2003), *Performance Theory*, revised edn, London and New York: Routledge.
- Schneider, Rebecca (2011), *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Thompson, James (2000), 'It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing: Some Questions on Participatory Theatre, Evaluation and Impact', *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 5 (1): 101–4.
- Thompson, James (2009), *Performance Affects: Applied Theatre and the End of Affect*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.