



Purgatory as Explored in Live Theatre Spaces

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This article discusses how the idea of Purgatory is explored in three stage plays: Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit*, Peter Tarsi’s one-act play, *Tracks*, and contemporary musical, *Ride the Cyclone*. All three plays take place in a version of Purgatory that shows characters interacting with both space and the other people in the space. Reading the plays in connection with Edward Soja’s theory of Thirdspace and Stanley Vincent Longman’s “The Spatial Dimension of Theatre,” the author examines how the liminal Thirdspace of live theatre helps audiences grapple with the concept of Purgatory.



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Theatre is a space that has actors, sets and props working together to bring abstract visions to life, allowing a crowd of people to experience an idea in an embodied reality. When multiple versions of the same script are performed, there will inevitably be differences among them. For each run of a show, a different cast is brought into the process, resulting in a brand-new interpretation of the original work. Being able to physically see and hear that difference manifest is something unique to live performance. Live theatre has the capacity to present imagined worlds in a realized way. In this manner, theatre is what Edward W. Soja defines as a Thirdspace: a space that combines real and imagined worlds. As a Thirdspace, theatre has the potential to physically manifest abstract concepts.

One concept that has received frequent focus in live theatre is the idea of Purgatory. Purgatory is the in-between, the space of possibility

or stasis between what came before and what comes after, regarding what happens when we die. When we bring a space like this to life on stage, we explore how humans might behave in it. Theatre makes us feel, and it makes us think about how we would interact with that space. In this paper, I consider the exploration of Purgatory in theatre as an example of just how important live theatre is to the realization of abstraction. This paper compares three plays that bring audiences into an experience of Purgatory: Peter Tarsi's one-act play, *Tracks* (2006), Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist one-act play, *No Exit* (1944), and *Ride the Cyclone* (2009), a musical by Brooke Maxwell and Jacob Richmond. Through this comparison, I show how the use of space is central to a play's engagement with complex ideas.

Live theatre is a space that makes use of separation. The audience is physically separated from the actors on stage, becoming

spectators of the story. A theatre is a space where the real world, the audience, meets with the imagined, the stage. American performing arts educator, Stanley Vincent Longman, talks about this separation in his article, "The Spatial Dimension of Theatre." Longman describes two points of contact between the show on stage and the audience. The *locus*, as he defines it, is "the meeting point between the signs of the actual stage activity and the audience's imagination, producing of course imagined activity" (49). Through set design, lighting, sound, and the actors, theatre physically embodies the abstract. The audience's perception of how familiar the space is to their reality also factors into the audience's ability to engage with it. For example, a play that is set in a modern world similar to our own will require less imagination on the audience's part, while a play set in a fantastical world would require more imagined activity from the audience to fill in any gaps one would face from being introduced to a new world.

The second point of contact, the *sensation*, is defined as "the effect roused in the audience as the play's experience produces a correlation between its inner life and reality"

(Longman 49). For a space like Purgatory, the audience is likely to empathize with the characters, lamenting their deaths that brought them to this in-between space. The *sensation* is always more likely to be heavily related to the characters and their stories, as that is what the audience will feel connected to. Just as the familiarity of a setting factors into audiences' ability to connect, humans tend to easily empathize with stories and experiences that are like their own. A play that explores depression is more likely to deeply affect those who have experience with it compared to those who do not. The goal of theatre is to create conditions in which the audience can see different stories and relationships and form a connection to them.

Longman's ideas of *locus* and *sensation* are applicable to the Thirdspace that is theatre. The *locus* is most applicable to what we perceive as real, so things such as the set or props are going to aid in the audience's experience of *locus*. The characters of a show all have their own stories, whether we see them on stage or not. When a show's characters share their stories as the main storyline is moving along, the audience is likely to experience *sensation* in

relation to what is shared. Longman explains, “theatre contrives to provoke an image of reality. It gives us actuality in the form of carefully prepared and staged actors who with a willing audience create an imagined existence and, finally, usher in a sense of reality” (48). Theatre combines the reality of relationships, stories and people with the imagined stories and experiences of all of that combined. It is an artform that allows audiences to experience new realities and reimagine old ones.

Purgatory exists as its own kind of Thirdspace. It combines what we know from reality with what we imagine or hope to be true. According to Roman Catholic and medieval Christian beliefs, Purgatory is a space that the dead must visit to cleanse themselves of their sins before entering heaven (“General Council”). It is liminal in the sense that it is the transition or boundary between two points in time and space—in this case, the boundary between life and death. It is a point of contact between what is known from life on earth and what is envisioned about life after death.

On Stage

The three texts examined here,

Tracks, *No Exit*, and *Ride the Cyclone*, all explore the idea of Purgatory in some way. The sets, props and characters in a show are always important but especially so when the concepts being explored are not concrete. *Tracks* is the most physically realized version of Purgatory, taking place in a subway station with tracks going in two directions, representing two potential destinations. *No Exit* is similarly physical, taking place in the physical space of a drawing room. While *No Exit* is canonically set in Hell, the option to leave and move on is presented in the form of a door, thus making it a liminal space closer to Purgatory than to hell. *Ride the Cyclone* has the most abstract take on Purgatory out of all the shows. The set is minimal, wide open, and empty, embodying a concept of Purgatory that many people imagine when thinking of the concept.

All three of these works make use of at least two aspects of theatre to bring the imagined space of Purgatory to life on a stage. One particularly powerful tool in theatre is character work. The background of the character, the archetype, and the acting choices made by the actors all work together to flesh out a character on stage. All three

pieces have a variety of characters. When a show has characters with familiar stories, traits, clothes, humor, and so on, less imagination is required of the audience, bringing them to a *locus* that is like the real world and allowing them to be more focused on the *sensation* rather than the imagined reality that is being formed on stage.

When theatre explores abstract concepts, concrete markers in a set can be helpful to the audience as they are forced to use less imagination to make sense of the story. *Tracks* is a depiction of Purgatory on a live stage that employs physical symbols to ground the narrative. In *Tracks*,

A group of strangers meet in a dirty subway station. They have arrived with limited personal belongings, their watches have stopped and they all claim to be in different cities. Soon they learn there is no way out of the station, and the unfortunate truth is told to them: they are all dead. (Dramatic Publishing)

The space of the subway station simplifies for audiences the concept of Purgatory as a suspension between two potential destinations: heaven and hell. The central tension of the play is in the characters' uncertainty about which platform

they are on. Characters take turns reflecting on their lives in order to understand which platform is which:

As the subway train finally approaches, they must decide whether to stay and ponder their actions further, or to have faith and climb aboard to their final destination. (Dramatic Publishing)

By setting the play in a subway station, the play makes use of a setting that people are likely to be familiar with, whether that be through in-person experience or through television and media. The station gives the audience a version of Purgatory that they can very easily imagine. *Locus* is heavily realized through this approach, as the physical set of a subway station grafts the abstract of Purgatory onto a physical reality.

Tracks explores concepts of life and death, good and bad, heaven and hell. It focuses on the stories of the characters and less on the setting that the characters are in. As such, the audience is much more likely to experience *sensation* more than *locus*. With a cast of ten characters, the play has many stories for the audience to relate to and resonate with. For example, the story of High School Boy and

High School Girl is one that the audience is likely to feel deep sympathy for. By the time these two characters show up at the station, the audience already knows that those in this space have died. As the characters come to the realization for themselves, the audience learns that the two were coming home from an anniversary date when they got caught in the rain, causing their car to roll down a hill and ultimately leading to them arriving at the station. Because no character is named, the audience members are able to relate to the characters through archetypes. The anonymity of two students allows the audience to imagine themselves in their place, facilitating their experience of *locus*. An audience's ability to place themselves in the subway station through their connection to the characters also increases their chance of experiencing a strong form of *sensation*. As the characters share their stories, the audience comes to know their personalities, the actions they've taken, and how they've ended up in this space.

Similar to *Tracks*, *No Exit* takes place in a setting that is close to reality: while *Tracks* brings its characters to a subway station, *No Exit* brings all of its characters into a drawing room.

The play's famous line, "Hell is other people," suggests that *No Exit* takes place in Hell, rather than Purgatory. However, many readers consider the setting of the play to be a liminal space that better resembles the concept of Purgatory. Sartre's *No Exit* follows three characters as they find themselves in a windowless drawing room, in which they interact with one another and reveal their pasts. Like most stories that take place in Purgatory, the characters have all died and been brought to this unknown in-between. Due to the nature of the room, the setting of *No Exit* feels like a waiting room of sorts. This is especially true considering that the characters ultimately have the option to leave through a newly opened door.

This idea of Hell as a waiting room is heavily supported by the purpose of drawing rooms in the real world. Historically, people of wealth and status typically had at least one room in their home whose purpose was to host guests as they waited to be seen by the owner of the house. In *No Exit*, the characters are brought to the room and then wait for the chance to move on to something unknown. As they serve the purpose of waiting rooms, drawing rooms are inherently

liminal. Sartre's choice to set the play in a drawing room increases the reality of the *locus* for the audience. The parallel between the setting of the play and the purpose of drawing rooms in reality is a great example of theatre's ability to turn anything into a Thirdspace. The setting is an imagined space even though the idea of a drawing room was pulled from the real world.

No Exit makes use of a very simple set design, with the play itself having no scene changes, and all the action taking place in a single room. The room has no windows and only one door that is closed and, presumably, locked from the outside. Inside the room are three couches, each one a different color and style. They are believed to represent the three characters, a claim supported by the fact that all three claim a couch at some point in the play. The setting of this play is still close to real life and so the audience uses little imagination. Like *Tracks*, this play allows the audience to experience more *sensation* than *locus*. This is because the characters in Sartre's *No Exit* are extremely human in their actions and interactions. At first, they try to stay civil, being on their best behavior around

strangers. Over time, they begin to let their true natures show. Joseph Garcin, a Brazilian journalist, claims to be in hell due to the treasonous views he wrote about. Estelle Rigault, a young woman from France, claims to be in hell for having an affair. Inez Serrano, a lesbian postal worker, calls the other two out on their lies. As Nasrullah Mambrol writes in their literary review,

Inez is attracted to Estelle, who has long depended on men to validate her self-worth. Drawn to the formerly womanizing Garcin, Estelle (and Garcin) will be continually frustrated by the scorned and man-hating Inez.

No Exit is a piece where the interactions feel very real and human, reducing the need for the audience to experience *locus*, and increasing the experience of *sensation*. The liminal space of the drawing room is located in hell where the hell is the people around you. The characters argue and bicker but even when faced with the choice to leave, to venture into the unknown, they all decide to stay in fear of finding something worse on the other side of the door. This play depicts Purgatory as its own kind of Hell, in which dread

paralyzes characters. The liminality of the drawing room exposes the characters' inability to act.

What happens when the space of the stage does not provide a link to the physical world (like a subway or drawing room) for characters to inhabit? The empty stage of Richmond and Maxwell's *Ride the Cyclone* shows how theatre can create connections for an audience, even without the *locus* of an allegorical setting. The play follows the stories of six choir students who are involved in a freak rollercoaster accident. The six students find themselves in an empty space where they must plead their case for a chance to go back to just before the accident and become the sole survivor. Instead of the more traditional take of a judge in Purgatory, the children themselves are tasked with making the final choice. Their Purgatory is not a choice between heaven and hell, but a choice between life and death. The musical doesn't focus on what happens after the choice is made, but on the chance for a life to be saved by the decision the students make.

Ride the Cyclone tackles the concept of Purgatory in the most abstract way of the three texts. The Purgatory of the play is what

people typically imagine it to be: an empty space with nothing in it except the people being judged and the person doing the judging. That emptiness gives the children a chance to comment upon the space at the end of the song, "Uranium Suite." They sing, "Earth is sky and sky is ground / did we finally leave our town?" The implication is that the place they've come to is a space of nothing. Because of its extremely abstract physical form for the concept of Purgatory, this musical illuminates the meeting of the Thirdspace of Purgatory within the Thirdspace that is theatre. The set is simple, making the most use of lighting, sound, and props to give the audience some form of a reality-based *locus*. Since the setting of the musical is so bare, the audience is forced to use more imagination. The stories that the children share must be explored differently than they would have been had the *locus* been more realistic.

Ride the Cyclone has six characters for people to latch onto, and each child could be considered a caricature or part of an archetype. Ocean is the Type-A overachiever, Noel is the only gay man in their hometown, Constance is the "nicest girl in town," Ricky is the shy introvert with an

overactive imagination, Mischa is a Ukrainian exchange student and the resident bad boy, and Jane Doe is a mysterious figure with no memory of her life before. She is the only unidentified body from the accident (Richard). The familiarity of the characters' stories gives the audience the realistic *locus* that the setting lacks. The intimacy of the characters' stories gives the audience *sensation*, the ability to imagine themselves in the space of the characters. Audience members empathize with the children's situations, specifically the fact that the children are forced to choose who gets to live when all of them have had their lives cut tragically short.

The musical takes the initial concept of Purgatory and makes something new for each character. Like most musicals, *Ride the Cyclone* has a variety of songs that are used for storytelling during the show. Each child has their own song where they either talk about their dreams or regrets. These songs are where *locus* becomes the most real for the audience. These songs make use of props to aid the storytelling. Take the song, "Space Age Bachelor Man," as an example. This song is sung by the character Ricky Potts, who is an introvert

with a big imagination. It tells of a world that the character imagined while still alive. In this song, Ricky sings about being visited by alien cat women whose galaxy is at risk of collapse without his help. He is asked to save the Zolarian race through the act of repopulation. Although quite bizarre, the story comes to life on stage through the use of props such as cat ears and tails. Another example is the song, "This Song is Awesome," sung by the character Mischa Bachinski. This song is about Mischa's dream of being a rapper. For this song, the children make use of props such as fake gold chains, sunglasses, and handheld microphones to bring Mischa's dream to life in a liminal space. The use of props such as these are important for shows that make use of abstract settings. The audience hasn't been given anything physical to attach their reality to, so props are used to let the audience experience some form of realistic *locus*. The idea that an empty space can somehow conjure up these items is another way that *Ride the Cyclone* makes the concept of Purgatory into a Thirdspace. The props bring the children's hopes and dreams to life through the smallest reality marker possible. The audience can then attach their

own interpretations to those items and experience *sensation* through the character's interactions with it. As an effect of that, those props end up taking on a bigger importance than they may have had in real life.

Theatre gets to take on the challenge of physically embodying the abstract. The exploration of Purgatory on stage shows how we take what we know and are familiar with from the real world and fit it in with an imagined world. Imagining Purgatory is the perfect example of humans trying to make sense of what they don't know. The many different versions of Purgatory can both comfort and disturb, asking us to consider whether we would hope for something better or be content with waiting.

Theatre is a wonderful artform for expression. Its capacity to explore difficult concepts and find ways to physically manifest them for an audience is something that is unique to the art form. Plays allow audiences to experience their biggest questions brought to life through the imagined life of a character on stage.

The exploration of abstract concepts such as Purgatory will always be important to the human experience. Humans are questioning and curious and will

find ways to explore the unknown. Purgatory in live theatre is so important to this process. It not only demonstrates the effectiveness of theatre in realizing the abstract; it also allows us to explore important questions about life beyond death, providing a comfort that people may not know they need.

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