ISSN 3030-2234

PORTA UNIVERSORUM

Vol. 2 No. 3 (2026) · Kovas

March

Porta Universorum
Editor-in-Chief: Hasan Alisoy
E-mail: editor@egarp.lt

Vol. 2 No. 3 (2026): Kovas
ISSN 3030-2234

DOI: https://doi.org/10.69760/jczx5t94

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Frequency: 12 issues per year (monthly)
Format: A4
Language: Submissions are accepted in English.
Registration: Officially registered and published in Lithuania.

All submissions undergo a rigorous double-blind peer review process to ensure academic quality and integrity.

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Original research article / Originalus mokslinis straipsnis
Vol. 2 No. 3 (2026): Kovas

Modern Conceptions in Theatre: From Dramatic Representation to Performative Event

[1] Gulxare Ahmedova

Accepted: 01.25.2026
Published: 03.06.2026
https://doi.org/10.69760/portuni.26030001

Abstract. This article explores modern conceptions in theatre by examining the theoretical foundations and contemporary practices that have reshaped performance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Drawing on the ideas of influential practitioners such as Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, and Augusto Boal, the study analyzes the transition of theatre from text-centered realism toward participatory, postdramatic, and multimedia-oriented forms.

Through qualitative analysis and comparative historical review, supported by selected examples of experimental and immersive theatre companies, the research identifies four dominant contemporary conceptions: theatre as political practice; theatre as a postdramatic and multimedial event; embodied minimalist performance; and expanded performance ecology. The findings indicate a redefinition of spectatorship, a decentralization of authorial authority, and an increasing integration of digital technologies.

The discussion highlights ongoing tensions between experimentation and accessibility, technological mediation and live presence, as well as radical political engagement and commercialization (Kershaw, 1992). Ultimately, modern theatre emerges as a dynamic and adaptive cultural laboratory that reflects and interrogates contemporary social realities while preserving the essential actor–audience encounter.

Keywords: *Modern theatre, postdramatic performance, political theatre, immersive staging, spectatorship*

Introduction

Theatre has continually evolved in response to shifting social, political, philosophical, and technological contexts. From the ritual performances of ancient civilizations to the structured dramaturgy of classical tragedy and the realism of the nineteenth century, each historical period has redefined the purpose and mechanics of performance. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, this transformation intensified significantly, giving rise to what scholars describe as "modern" and "postmodern" conceptions of theatre—approaches that critically question representation, authorship, space, and the role of the spectator.

The foundations of these developments were established by influential theatre practitioners and theorists. Bertolt Brecht challenged Aristotelian catharsis through Epic Theatre, introducing the Verfremdungseffekt (alienation effect) to promote critical reflection rather than emotional immersion (Brecht, 1964). Antonin Artaud proposed a "Theatre of Cruelty" intended to confront the senses and awaken subconscious energies, redefining theatre as an intense ritual experience rather than a purely

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literary form (Artaud, 1958). Jerzy Grotowski advanced the concept of "Poor Theatre," reducing performance to the essential relationship between actor and spectator (Grotowski, 1968). Meanwhile, Augusto Boal reconceptualized theatre as a participatory and democratic arena through his Theatre of the Oppressed, empowering audiences to become active agents of social change (Boal, 1979).

Scholarly discourse has further expanded these ideas. In *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook famously asserted that theatre exists whenever "a man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him," emphasizing relational presence over elaborate scenography (Brook, 1968). Later, theorists such as Hans-Thies Lehmann introduced the notion of "postdramatic theatre," referring to performance practices that move beyond text-centered drama toward visuality, fragmentation, and simultaneity. These perspectives underscore a decisive departure from linear narrative structures and unified dramatic action.

Contemporary theatre also reflects broader intellectual movements, including postmodernism, feminism, postcolonial theory, and performance studies. Influenced by thinkers such as Richard Schechner, theatre is increasingly understood as performance in an expanded cultural sense—extending beyond scripted drama to encompass ritual, social behavior, and digital mediation (Schechner, 2002). The diversification of performance venues—from proscenium stages to warehouses, streets, and virtual platforms—illustrates a reconceptualization of theatrical space as fluid and socially constructed.

Technological innovation has further transformed theatrical practice. Multimedia scenography, projection mapping, virtual reality, and live streaming blur the boundaries between stage and screen. Companies such as The Wooster Group integrate video and fragmented narrative structures, while immersive theatre innovators like Punchdrunk dissolve the traditional separation between performer and audience. These developments reflect a broader cultural shift toward interactivity, hybridity, and experiential design.

Thus, modern conceptions in theatre cannot be defined by a single stylistic tendency but rather by a constellation of innovations that interrogate representation, embodiment, politics, and spectatorship. Theatre is no longer perceived merely as scripted drama performed on a fixed stage; instead, it functions as an evolving laboratory of social imagination and embodied exploration.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative and interdisciplinary research design to investigate modern conceptions in theatre, integrating historiographical inquiry, performance theory, and practice-based analysis. The methodological framework consists of six interrelated components.

1. Literature Review and Theoretical Analysis

A systematic review of primary and secondary sources was conducted. Primary materials include theoretical writings and manifestos by Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, Augusto Boal, and Peter Brook. These texts were examined through textual and conceptual analysis in order to identify central themes such as alienation, ritual embodiment, the actor–spectator relationship, and participatory dramaturgy.

Secondary scholarship, including postdramatic theory articulated by Hans-Thies Lehmann and performance theory developed by Richard Schechner, was analyzed to situate contemporary developments within a broader academic framework (Lehmann, 2006).

2. Comparative Historical Framework

A diachronic comparative approach was applied to contrast modern theatrical conceptions with classical and realist traditions. Aristotelian drama and nineteenth-century naturalism served as baseline models, enabling the identification of structural transformations in narrative organization, scenography, audience configuration, and authorship. This comparative perspective clarifies the ways in which contemporary practices depart from, reinterpret, or critically revise inherited theatrical conventions.

3. Case Study Selection and Analysis

Purposeful sampling was employed to select representative theatre companies and productions that exemplify modern innovations. Organizations such as The Wooster Group and Punchdrunk were selected due to their significant contributions to multimedia and immersive theatre practices.

Each case study was examined according to the following criteria:

- Spatial configuration (proscenium, site-specific, environmental)
- Degree of audience interaction and agency
- Integration of technological elements
- Dramaturgical structure (linear versus fragmented)
- Thematic orientation (political, identity-based, experimental)

Archival recordings, production documentation, critical reviews, and interviews were consulted to ensure interpretative triangulation.

4. Performance Observation and Spatial Analysis

Where documentation permitted, performances were analyzed using established performance analysis frameworks within theatre studies. Particular attention was given to actor physicality and vocal technique, scenography and multimedia usage, proxemics and spatial dynamics, as well as modes of audience–performer interaction.

Spatial analysis further examined how alternative venues—such as warehouses, urban environments, found spaces, and digital platforms—reshape the structure and experience of the theatrical event.

5. Thematic Coding and Pattern Identification

Data derived from theoretical sources and case studies were subjected to thematic coding. Recurring motifs—including participation, hybridity, minimalism, political engagement, and technological mediation—were identified and organized into conceptual categories. This process enabled the articulation of four dominant modern conceptions presented in the Results section.

6. Limitations and Scope

The study focuses primarily on selected Western and globally influential practitioners, acknowledging that modern theatre is culturally diverse and cannot be comprehensively represented within a single

analysis. Furthermore, the research relies on documented materials rather than direct ethnographic observation, which may influence interpretations of audience reception and experiential dimensions.

By integrating theoretical analysis, comparative historiography, and case-based evaluation, this methodological framework provides a systematic and academically grounded examination of modern conceptions in theatre.

Results

The analysis identifies four principal modern conceptions that collectively redefine contemporary theatre practice. These findings are grounded in established theoretical frameworks and substantiated through case study observations. Together, they demonstrate a fundamental transformation in narrative structure, spatial organization, authorship, technological integration, and the role of the spectator within the theatrical event.

1. Theatre as Political and Critical Practice

Modern theatre increasingly operates as a platform for political critique and social intervention. Influenced by the principles of Epic Theatre developed by Bertolt Brecht, contemporary productions deliberately resist emotional immersion and instead cultivate critical distance. Devices such as direct address, exposed lighting equipment, textual projections, episodic composition, and the deliberate disruption of the fourth wall undermine theatrical illusion and highlight the constructed nature of performance.

In a related vein, Augusto Boal's participatory framework reconceptualizes spectators as "spect-actors," inviting them to intervene directly in the dramatic process and rehearse responses to real-world forms of oppression. Within this paradigm, theatre functions not as passive entertainment but as an active rehearsal for social transformation (Gulkhara & Farzaliyeva, 2025).

The analysis reveals several recurring characteristics:

- Fragmented and episodic dramaturgical structures

- Explicit engagement with socio-political issues
- Audience empowerment and interactive participation
- Reduced emphasis on psychological realism

Collectively, these tendencies reflect a broader transition from theatre understood as representation toward theatre conceived as critical praxis (Carlson, 2018).

2. Theatre as Postdramatic and Multimedial Event

Another significant outcome of the study is the emergence of postdramatic and multimedia theatre, conceptualized by Hans-Thies Lehmann. Within this framework, performance moves beyond text-centered drama toward visual composition, simultaneity, and heightened sensory experience. Narrative continuity is frequently replaced by montage, repetition, juxtaposition, or discontinuity, shifting emphasis from storytelling to performative structure.

Companies such as The Wooster Group incorporate video projection, recorded sound, and fragmented scripts, thereby destabilizing conventional linear narration. Similarly, immersive theatre innovators such as Punchdrunk dissolve spatial boundaries, enabling spectators to navigate performance environments independently and construct individualized pathways through the event.

The analysis identifies several defining characteristics:

- Hybrid integration of live and digital performance elements
- Non-linear or fragmented dramaturgical organization
- Audience mobility within the performance space
- Strong emphasis on atmosphere and sensory immersion

These findings indicate that contemporary theatre increasingly privileges experiential design over traditional plot-driven development.

3. Theatre as Embodied and Minimalist Practice

Influenced by Jerzy Grotowski's philosophy of "Poor Theatre," modern performance frequently minimizes reliance on elaborate scenography and instead foregrounds actor-centered expression (Ahmadova, 2025). The performer's body becomes the primary expressive instrument, and rigorous physical and vocal training forms the methodological foundation of production.

This conception is characterized by:

- Sparse or minimal staging
- Intensified, ritualistic performance dynamics
- Close proximity between actor and spectator
- Precision in vocal delivery and physical articulation

The findings suggest a re-centering of theatrical essence upon presence and embodiment rather than visual spectacle.

4. Theatre as Expanded Performance Ecology

Building upon performance theory articulated by Richard Schechner, contemporary theatre increasingly intersects with installation art, digital media, activism, and community-based practice (Sadikhova & Babayev, 2025). In this expanded conception, theatre is understood not solely as staged drama but as part of a broader cultural network of performative acts.

Key features include:

- Site-specific and environmentally responsive staging
- Fluid boundaries between rehearsal and performance
- Collaborative and devised creative processes
- Integration with social media platforms and digital streaming

Synthesis of Findings

Across these four conceptions, several consistent transformations can be identified:

1. From illusion to reflexivity – theatre foregrounds its own constructedness.
2. From passive spectatorship to participation – audiences acquire increased agency.
3. From fixed text to fluid event – dramatic literature no longer dominates performance structure.
4. From spectacle to presence (or hybrid spectacle) – staging oscillates between minimalist embodiment and technologically mediated immersion.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that modern theatre is defined less by a singular aesthetic style than by a structural reconfiguration of performance, spectatorship, and spatial organization. Rather