

Look It Up in Your Program:

The Conversion of Audience into Participant in Contemporary American Musical Theater

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Abstract

Live performance is a constantly evolving mode of discourse, shifting and changing to meet the needs of the show being performed. In recent years, live theatrical performances have begun to explore unique interactional spaces, blurring the lines between performer, character, and audience through various means of engagement and audience participation. But why? What is the benefit of engaging the audience in this way? What does it do to the audience?

This paper will examine three different ways contemporary American musicals pull audiences into the fiction of the story, converting them from observers to participants. Starting with the method which focuses on immersion of specific audience members into the fiction and concluding with method which gives the audience control over the ending of the show, I will examine the use of spoken dialogue tags, direct interaction with the audience, and the audience determining who dies at the end of the story. With the help of these methods, the performances are able to turn passive audiences into active participants, in turn creating a more immersive and engaging experience, and form stories which put the audience in a position to find power within the performance.

1.0 Introduction

Theater needs an audience. Without someone to perceive what is happening on stage, a performance is no longer a performance. As Elizabeth Sakellaridou states, “[t]he theater is by definition a physical space teeming with life. It badly needs the human presence with its rich and diverse live experiences. If it loses its people, it dies” (Sakellaridou 2014, 35). Historically seen as passive and disconnected from the performers, some more experimental musicals of the past several decades turn the audience into active participants within the script itself. Audiences will react and engage cognitively in the performance regardless of their influence on the story (White 2024), so these shows choose to bring those reactions into the world of the fiction, allowing the line between character and viewer (and character and performer) to blur, “breaking the fourth wall” and creating an inclusive discourse space in which the audience is an interlocutor in the story. This paper seeks to examine three ways performances break the fourth wall and pull the audience into an active, participatory role, going from the methods with the least participation and influence on the performance’s story to the methods which fundamentally alter the performance and its resolution. Specifically, I will examine use of dialogue tagging within the dialogue, direct interaction with the audience through on-stage seating, and the audience being made to determine the ending of the story, in that order. In utilizing these methods to shift the role of the audience from passive observer to active participant, these shows immerse the audience in the world of the performance, keep people engaged, and ultimately produce a more impactful story. In this paper, I will take some time to address the experiential aspect of immersion, as understanding the experiential aspects of the event of watching a performance is important in being able to then understand what value it adds from a communicative perspective.

The experience and the interaction are not isolated from each other; the communicative interaction is part of the experience.

In offering the audience the invitation to participate, the realm of performance is made into a more dynamic communicative space, in turn creating a more memorable and valuable theater-going experience for the audience. A story that leaves you wondering if your actions could have changed the fate of characters has the potential to feel personalized, as if the performance that you went to go see is utterly unique and could not be replicated, and the feeling that your experience was performed in this way for your audience only is more likely to leave a lasting impact. Of course, different forms of theater have explored different ways to answer this question, but by turning the audience into an active participant, a new domain is created for performer, audience, and performance to negotiate power, stance, and value.

2.0 Background

Current literature on the subject of audience and its role as observer, participant, or some combination of the two exists both within linguistic disciplines and outside of them, ranging from discussions of cultural and literary analysis to anthropology and sociological inquiry. The main piece I will discuss here, Elizabeth Sakellaridou's "'Oh My God, Audience Participation!': Some Twenty-First-Century Reflections," breaks down many of the key aspects of the current landscape on the subject of audience, the role of the participant, and the interaction between performance and consumer. "A brief recourse to the history of Western theater reminds us of the gradual shift from total congregational ritual to the segregation of the audience, a change both linguistically encoded—theatron meaning "what we see"—and institutionally reinforced through

the rigid structure of the Greek amphitheater" (Sakellaridou 2014, 13). Anne Ubersfeld suggests, "The function of the spectator depends on his/her place in the theater space... the relationship of the spectator with space [is] decisive for the perception of the spectacle" (Ubersfeld 1981, 307). This physical and psychological positioning remains critical in contemporary theater, particularly as modern interactive forms work to dismantle these traditional separations and reestablish the spectator as an active participant in the performative experience. For the sake of being able to discuss not only the linguistic and communicative aspects of what it means to be an audience or a participant, but also the experiential aspects of taking these roles in a performance context, I will take time to examine the leading perspectives. Much of the literature in this field builds upon foundational research done by academics such as Goodwin (1986), whose work examines the interactive nature of audience response, and others who have explored the ways in which meaning is co-constructed between performer and spectator. Yet, as Bennett expresses in her work *Theatre Audiences: a Theory of Production and Reception*, there remains "the need for new spectator-oriented critical discourses" (Bennett 1997, 15; Sakellaridou 2014, 15), which, as Sakellaridou also recognizes, is an opinion echoed in Denis McQuail's *Audience Analysis*. While earlier theatrical conventions, discussed by Sakellaridou, such as "the aside, the soliloquy, the use of a chorus, and the presence of a narrator" sought to counteract the alienation of the audience, the radical transformations in contemporary theater have gone further, "[collapsing] spatial and temporal barriers" to reintegrate spectators into the performance itself (Sakellaridou 2014, 14). Bennett and McQuail's foundational works are certainly valuable, and I will call attention to some of the concepts established both by them and other figures in audience-focused studies from this era, however I intend to focus more wholly on contemporary analyses of modern theater, particularly in light of the significant evolutions that have occurred in the past

two decades. As Elizabeth Swift notes, contemporary performance—especially immersive, participatory, and intermedial theater—requires the audience not as passive observer but as an active partner in the artistic process (Swift 2016, 135). The spectatorial role, she argues, is no longer a static one; instead, audience members become implicated in a complex web of meaning-making, wherein their involvement both shapes and is shaped by the structure of the performance itself (*ibid.*, 143). Thus, while much of the older writing on the subject remains useful in a theoretical sense, its application to modern interactive theater requires reframing in light of these newer developments.

While there are still many critics and businesspeople within the world of theater who maintain the historically passive view of the audience, much of the literature on the subject acknowledges the necessity of the audience as an active force within performance. Anne Furlong underscores this shift through a relevance-theoretic perspective, arguing that the audience's interpretive process does not end when the curtain falls; rather, theater's communicative act extends beyond the immediate performance as playgoers construct meaning through inference, contextual enrichment, and post-performance reflection (Furlong 2020, 6). This aligns with the broader understanding that the audience does not merely receive a performance but co-produces it through their interpretive engagement (Swietlicki 1999), which is then even further reinforced by discussions of audience participation in both traditional and experimental performance settings. Even in conventional theater, as Furlong suggests, the audience brings their own cognitive frameworks, assumptions, and experiences, which shape their reception of the performance in ways that can be neither entirely controlled by the production nor fully anticipated by the playwright (Furlong 2020, 15). In this sense, theater's ephemeral nature is not simply a limitation but a defining characteristic, one that hinges upon the interplay between actor

and audience in real time (ibid., 7; Marsden 2017). Whether in the structured interactivity of immersive theater or the inferred participation of traditional spectatorship, the audience remains central to the theatrical experience, actively constructing its meaning in ways both expected and unforeseen (Swift 2016).

With all of this in mind, my focus will be on contemporary works that engage with these shifts, particularly those exploring the dynamic interplay between audience and performer in modern interactive theater. As Ubersfeld warns, “desiring the performer means renouncing one’s position as a spectator; it is denying the theater” (Ubersfeld 1981, 343). This tension—between spectatorship and participation, presence and distance—underscores the challenges and possibilities inherent in redefining the role of the audience today. Even as the digital age introduces new avenues of engagement, I align with those who, as Sakellaridou’s “Audience Participation” suggests, remain committed to a theater that thrives on the immediacy of real bodies and live experience; however, I do not agree with the threat of a “phantasmatic, posthuman, virtual cyberstage” (Sakellaridou 2014, 35), and would argue that online forms of theatrical performance can represent those real bodies and live experiences. A live body does not necessarily need to be a physical body, nor does a live experience necessarily need to be a physical experience. This goes beyond the purview of this paper, though, so I will not dive deeper into this subject.

As mentioned above, I will be focusing on three musicals, all of which engage with the audience to different degrees and in different ways. There are three “levels” of audience engagement I will be discussing, each best represented by one of the musicals—although there is some overlap in multiple shows participating in multiple kinds of audience engagement. In the

following sections, I will describe these three phenomena from least involved with the audience to most involved.

3.0 Analysis

In the following subsections, I will discuss the three levels of audience engagement mentioned above. Each level is representative of a different degree of audience involvement and engagement, and is discussed through at least one specific example. In every case, I will begin with background information on the show I will be discussing, followed by a description of the phenomenon seen in that show. First, I will examine dialogue tagging, used most frequently in Dave Malloy's *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812*, but is also seen in other theatrical mediums such as children's theater. This is the least committal kind of interaction that will be discussed. Following this, there will be a discussion of on-stage seating and audience engagement through being seated physically on the stage with the performers. This will refer back to *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812* before going on to discuss William Finn and Rachel Sheinkin's *25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. This is the second level of audience interaction, in which the audience is able to interact with and talk to the characters within the canon of the world, but still have no real agency over what happens in the story. The final subsection will focus on the idea of the audience having legitimate agency over what happens in the story, exemplified through Team StarKid's *The Trail to Oregon!*. This is the most intensive kind of participation that will be addressed in this thesis, not only making the audience conversationally involved in the performance, but giving them control over significant aspects of the plot and the way the performance will proceed.

In order to examine these phenomena, standard definitions of meaning and agency must be established for the purposes of this paper. These are both exceptionally abstract concepts, and thus creating concrete definitions for either term will necessarily exclude certain interpretations of both terms. For the purposes of this analysis, I will be defining meaning as the mutual understanding of the context of the performance and the frame in which it exists, and the concept of constructing meaning as the act of performer and audience working together to form a shared mental framework through which to understand the content of the show. I will be defining agency as an ability to act on and influence events occurring within the performance frame. Therefore, agency would directly correlate to the amount of say the audience has in the story and its resolution, because the ability to act on the events occurring would inherently change the outcome of those events. To conceptualize this a bit more concretely: while an audience member can react to the performance they are seeing, and thus naturally participating in the construction of meaning by engaging in the space and interpreting what they are watching, that reaction may not necessarily be indicative of that audience member having agency, because their reaction may not actually change the course of events unfolding before them. Using these definitions, I will discuss how these shows construct a discourse space that includes both performer and audience.

3.1 Dialogue Tagging

The first kind of inclusion of the audience is the least direct: the use of dialogue tags within the spoken (or sung) texts. Dave Malloy's *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812* employs this method, using dialogue tags within its sung lines as a storytelling method. *Great Comet*, as it will be called from this point on, is an "electropop opera" (Arvada Center 2024)

retelling an approximately 70-page portion of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*; “[i]t is based on Part 8 of Tolstoy's novel, focusing on Natasha's romance with Anatole and Pierre's search for meaning in his life” (ibid.). The show was first premiered off-Broadway in October of 2012, then was brought to Broadway in November of 2016 and nominated for 12 Tony Awards in the 2017 cycle. However, it only won two (Best Scenic Design for Mimi Lien and Best Lighting Design in a Musical for Bradley King) and the show's Broadway run ended less than a year after it started in September of 2017 (Tony Awards 2017).

As a sung-through musical, *Great Comet* does not utilize any spoken dialogue. Therefore, in this analysis, while I specify that the lines are sung, there is no spoken alternative to them at any point in the show. When using dialogue tags, a performer will sing their lines, then a second character will sing a dialogue tag. For example:

Natasha: “My cheeks are glowing from the cold”

Sonya: “She said, gazing at Marya with kind, glittering eyes” (Malloy 2016, “Moscow”)

Or,

Natasha: “Is that the truth? I think it is not convenient to speak of that now, Dear Princess”

Mary: “She said, With such dignity and coldness” (ibid., “Natasha & Bolkonskys”)

This dialogue tag only has a purpose when considered outside of the in-universe discourse, entirely made for the audience and not portrayed as actually being said by any of the characters. In short, it addresses the viewer directly. *Great Comet* creates an audience-to-character or

audience-to-story dynamic in this way even in “Prologue,” the opening number of the show, which is almost entirely built on a “fourth-wall break,” or self-aware sequence, by introducing the characters with one key personality trait and self-aware comments throughout, seen in lines like the following:

Natasha: “Natasha is young / she loves Andre with all her heart”

Ensemble: “She loves Andre with all her heart / Natasha is young and Andre isn’t here.”

(ibid., “Prologue”)

These lines all call to personality traits indicated within *War and Peace* itself, although few of them are actual direct quotes. Both the lines in “Prologue” and the narrative lines throughout the musical seem to be separate from the narrating character’s in-universe perspective and thoughts, instead being similar to stage directions for actions or dialogue tagging that would be read in the actual novel. By having performers step out of their role as their characters to provide a narrative line, the show explicitly acknowledges the audience and integrates them into the performance, telling them that they are seen as observers, which in turn has the potential to transform the audience role into something more participatory than pure observation. This concept is also seen in the chorus of “Prologue,” in which the ensemble collectively speak directly to the audience outside of the world of the show:

“This is all in your program / you are at the opera. / Gonna have to study up a little bit if you wanna keep with the plot. / ‘Cuz it’s a complicated Russian novel, / everyone’s got nine different names. / So look it up in your program, we appreciate it, thanks a lot. / Da-da-da / da-da-da / da-da-da.” (ibid.)

We see similar phenomena to this in other theatrical forms as well, such as children's theater. One or more characters will often serve as a narrator in this medium, who may explicitly say "[character] said" before or after a line of dialogue. Far more often and far more interestingly, however, rather than being a plain dialogue tag, these types of shows include interactions between the characters from outside of the world of the show, serving as an explanation of what is occurring on stage. For example, in the Miner's Alley Playhouse production *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp*, audiences see the following interaction between Aladdin's mother (who serves as both a narrator outside of the story and a character within the story) and the Djinni of the Ring:

“Aladdin: Mother, I would like you to meet...

Ring: We've met.

Mother: No, we haven't.

Ring: (*aside to Mother*) But... I thought... at the beginning of the story...

Mother: (*aside to Ring*) That was when I started telling the story, I already knew you then. But, this is the first time I meet you in the story, so I don't know you yet.

Ring: (*to herself*) Ah... I get it. (*confused*) I think.” (Pierce 2025)

Or, in the case of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, also from Miner's Alley Playhouse, the audience watches the narrator Diedrich Knickerbocker bickering with his wife, referred to as Dame Knickerbocker, on how best to present the story:

“Knick: Well then, to the story. On the eastern shore of the Hudson River, there was once a small market-town called Greensburgh . . .

Dame: Don’t you think we should tell them who is in the story?

Knick: I’ll get to that, but as any good storyteller knows, a story must begin at the beginning.

Dame: But, don’t they need to know the characters?

Knick: Of course they do and if you’ll give me the opportunity I will tell them in the *course* of the story.

Dame: *(to herself)* I just think they really need to know who the people are.

Knick: *(giving up)* Alright, alright! The main character in this tale is . . .

Dame: *(taking over)* . . . a scrawny wisp of a fellow named Ichabod Crane. But, skinny as he is, he has an enormous appetite. He can eat more than any three people I’ve ever known.” (Pierce 2024)

In this context, the purpose is twofold: it keeps children engaged in the story and provides the younger audience with a sense of agency and involvement, even if it is only superficial. In an interview I had with current children’s theater director Rory Pierce from Colorado’s Miner’s Alley Playhouse, he explained some of this value in greater detail to me.

“Speaking from the vantage point of writing shows for young audiences, breaking the fourth wall helps keep the audiences engaged. It lets the kids know we know they are there, that they are an important part of the story (without them there, we have no need to

tell the story) and it helps them pay more attention to the story. When they pay attention they get a lot more out of the story.” (Pierce 2025)

Rory Pierce has been writing plays and performing for young audiences for over thirty years and has written over twenty plays—first for the Heritage Square Music Hall and then for Miners Alley Playhouse. His shows typically involve not only narration, but also involvement and direct participation of the children through narrative elements. For example, kids may be asked to point at which direction a bad guy went off stage or clap to encourage a magical figure to come out. He went on to explain that the dialogue tags not only help them stay interested and pay attention, but can also help them understand things that “may be a little confusing,” and that they may get more out of the performance this way: “I have also found that if you talk directly to the kids in the audience—and sometimes get them to answer back—that they absorb more of the story and stay interested in the show longer” (ibid.).

Of course, generally speaking, adults do not need (and may not want) reminders that a performance they are watching is not real, but all of these other reasons still apply. In fact, the function of reinforcing that the work is not real is in direct opposition to the other methods discussed here, including other methods of immersion used by *Great Comet* itself, so it seems counter-intuitive for it to be aiming to emphasize the fictional nature of the performance. However, if one focuses on the other goals associated with the utilization of dialogue tags: keeping audiences focused, clarifying confusing elements, helping the audience absorb more of the show—then the use of dialogue tags within a musical inspired by a self-admitted “complicated Russian novel” suddenly begins to make more sense.

3.2 On-Stage Seating and Participation

To involve the audience physically, rather than simply incorporating dialogue tags that merely acknowledge their existence with no direct audience-to-character interaction, some shows employ on-stage seating to further immerse portions of the audience into the world. *Great Comet* also utilizes this method, having on-stage seats designed to be the bar and tables in the locations that various party scenes and other big moments in the show take place. Audience members sit in these spaces and are interacted with directly by the cast, partied with during drinking songs, sat beside as fellow audience members during in-universe performances, brought into social interactions between characters by force during sung dialogue—they are invited to join the world of the show and act as if they are in-universe onlookers to the drama occurring in the plot. Unfortunately, because *Great Comet* is a sung-through musical, the actual opportunities for audience participation are somewhat slim. There are very few, if any, down moments in which a performer can walk up to an on-stage audience member and begin to have an in-character conversation with them.

However, William Finn and Rachel Sheinkin's *25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* has plenty of opportunities to have in-character conversations with audience members. Compared to *Great Comet*, *25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* takes things a step further by bringing in a set number of audience members to join the in-universe spelling bee, not only having the characters interact with them in passing like in *Great Comet*, but also having those audience members become performers by calling them up to spell words and play in the role of a speller alongside the actual cast. *25th Annual*, as it will henceforth be called, is a musical comedy telling the story of, of course, a spelling bee in the fictional Putnam County. Other works about the show may alternatively refer to it as *Spelling Bee*—I am choosing not to do this to ensure

there is clarity between when I refer to the in-fiction spelling bee occurring within the story versus the musical itself. The show was first workshopped in February of 2004, and reached Broadway in April of 2005. It ran until January of 2008. *25th Annual* was inspired by *C-R-E-P-U-S-C-U-L-E*, an improv comedy play—a subject that will be addressed again later. The spelling bee serves as a frame around which the audience is able to watch the group of six character spellers (as opposed to the audience spellers) struggle through the issues and angst in their elementary- and middle-school-aged personal lives, all while trying to be the best at the bee and win the competition.

As mentioned above, the show makes use of audience members as extra spellers for the bee. These audience members are given the option to “sign up” for the bee before the show, when a “speller registration sheet” of some kind is traditionally passed through the lobby of the theater. They are then called on stage by Rona Lista Peretti, the in-universe host of the spelling bee, following the opening musical number of the show, placed between the reminder to turn off cell phones and recording devices and the information on how to exit the theater in the event of a fire:

“I’d like to take this moment to ask you to please put away all cell phones and other distracting devices. Oh, and put away all cameras. Sorry, no photos at the bee! Now it seems there are a few spellers who haven’t checked in, so when I call your name please come up the stairs on either side of the stage and meet me up here on the table. I’m missing Abby, Rainbow, Ted, and Jasmine. And before we get started I’ve got a few more quick announcements. First of all, in the rare event of a fire, please proceed calmly and carefully to the nearest exit. Just please keep in mind the door nearest to you may not be the one from which you came. [...]” (Brown University 2018, at 5:10-5:43)

By doing all of these announcements in-character and having it follow a musical number rather than before the story begins, it encourages the seated audience to suspend their disbelief and take their role in the story as being a real attendant of a real spelling bee, and encourages the spelling bee participants from the audience to play along and treat the bee as if it were a real competition, rather than a fictional performance. This is reinforced by other moments of ad-libbed or only partially scripted moments spoken by the characters either directed at or for the benefit of the audience. For example in one performance the performer playing Logainne Schwartz and Grubenierre commenting “have you ever been in a gymnasium with chandeliers before?” (ibid., at 6:52-6:57) shortly following the introduction of the audience spellers. All of the framing created by these comments serves to set the audience up with a mindset of watching a real-world spelling bee, albeit with some comedic self-awareness, so that their role can be established as viewer of (or participant in) a spelling bee, not of a musical. This is in large part for the sake of greater audience engagement later on in the show that converts some randomly selected audience members into side characters in the story, but also serves the more broad purpose of simply immersing the audience in the world of the show.

Returning to the presence of non-character spellers pulled from the audience, the involvement of these non-performers in the actual, on-stage performance means that a small group of audience members are acting as meaningful participants for a not insignificant portion of the show. This includes musical numbers, which they are typically encouraged to participate in by the cast members. Audience members are fully integrated as performers, given basic instructions by the cast members on how to move to match the choreography, and, uniquely, to hold onto the set because it is going to spin (Finn and Sheinkin 2005). This also creates additional material for the cast to prepare for. Because the plot is framed around a realistic

spelling bee, the audience member spellers are only sent off-stage and back to their spots in the audience if they incorrectly spell a word. If an audience member is a particularly good speller, the cast must be prepared to respond in-character to their spelling skills, and prepare increasingly difficult words to try and get them eliminated. In fact, there is a dedicated section of the script with a list of particularly hard words for the performers to use in the event that an audience speller is exceptionally good and needs to be eliminated so the plot can progress, as well as instructions to start ad-libbing with these audience participants (ibid.). This gives certain audience members a certain degree of agency and control over the flow of the story, although it is still ultimately the performers in control of when the audience member is eliminated.

The final audience member to be eliminated gets an especially involved treatment from the performers: “The Prayer of the Comfort Counselor.” This is a song written into the show to be sung to the last audience member to be eliminated. The song has a specific spot in the show it is written into, as the final song before intermission, however there have been cases where the final audience member fails a simple word earlier in the show than intended, resulting in the song having to be bumped up to that earlier point. In other situations where the final audience speller has failed a word too early, there have also been decisions made by stage managers to pull an emergency “bonus speller” from the audience who was “mistakenly forgotten” during the initial call of names, instead of performing the “Prayer of the Comfort Counselor” early, to keep the flow of the plot going the way it is intended. These are both events that occurred during performances of *25th Annual* that I personally was a part of in the summer 2017 with the Rocky Mountain Conservatory Theatre.

Performances will also have to respond in the event that a strong speller is the final audience member to be eliminated, with the script telling the cast to repeatedly call the final

audience speller up to spell words until they get one wrong. This can be seen with the final speller in Brown University's production of the show, as well as being attested in several other performances which brought on, for example, real-world spelling bee champions as on-stage participants. Luckily, this typically results in some comedic value for the audience watching as their final representative on stage gets brought up once, then twice, then three times in a row and so on until they make a mistake. Regardless of what direction is taken in these exceptional circumstances, the overall story proceeds the same way, and no major plot elements are changed. However, this more unique experience given to the final speller to be eliminated can make the show appear to offer the audience a greater degree of agency than they actually have. In addition to having on-stage audience participation, *25th Annual* makes a point to involve those sitting in the regular seats in the audience, too. The actual audience is framed as being the groups of parents, siblings, and friends coming to see the six characters compete in the spelling bee. The characters are not just performing for the audience, they are performing directly to the audience and acknowledging their existence repeatedly. Some particularly stand-out examples of this include William Barfée referring to a woman in the audience as his mom throughout the show, or the infamous "Marigold Coneybear," an age-appropriate woman or man who Chip Tolentino scopes out at the beginning of the show to serve as his crush. From that point, Chip then becomes one of the most interactive characters in the show, because he is sent to sell snacks and refreshments to the audience. The actor playing Chip can choose to speak to audience members, attempting to haggle them for some snacks or asking them what they think about his competitors.

All of these forms of interaction, from minor to major, serve to transform the stage and performance as a more participatory space. Having a character serenade an audience member with a fully choreographed song is equal parts obviously scripted and excitingly unknowable; the

audience is allowed to ponder whether this would have happened if the speller had not lost the bee in the way that they did. Of course, we know from a perspective outside of the fiction that it would have, but this adds an element of faux spontaneity that can further engage and entice the audience into entering the world of the show. In the same way, the smaller, unscripted moments between, for example, Chip and the audience provide spontaneity in an artform that is traditionally regarded as markedly not spontaneous, giving those in attendance something to both engage with in the moment and remember the show by long-term.

3.3 Audience-Determined Outcomes

Both of these shows, while exceptionally involved for the medium, still do not allow the audience to influence the outcome of the story. They are participants, but only if they are lucky (or unlucky) enough to be on the stage or picked out by the performers. And even then, they are only participants on a superficial level; their engagement does not fundamentally change the plot. We cannot save Natasha's reputation if we refuse to pass the letter down the table, we cannot make Chip win the spelling bee if we stand in front of that performance's Marigold (although a particularly good speller can delay the inevitable).

This brings us, then, to the final subject of discussion: the Team StarKid musical *The Trail to Oregon!*. *The Trail to Oregon!* is a musical that was performed in the summer of 2014, and had a proshot uploaded to the Team StarKid YouTube channel in February of 2015. Team StarKid is a theater production company based in Chicago that got its start with the musical comedy *A Very Potter Musical*, a parody of the *Harry Potter* series. From there, the production company has gone on to produce fifteen full-length musicals, among other achievements (Team

Starkid, n.d.). *The Trail to Oregon!* was their eighth full-length musical, and is described by writer Jeff Blim as his life's work (Rosenbaum 2025). The story follows a family on the Oregon Trail, encountering swindlers, bandits, and disease as they try to make it to Oregon as one family unit.

Power is explicitly given to the audience in *The Trail to Oregon!*. In the opening number of the show, the audience chooses the first and last names of the characters, which are then used throughout that performance of the show. Then, later on, the audience is made to decide who dies of dysentery at the end of the musical. This creates an inverted relationship between audience and performer, in which the audience progresses the story and the characters/performers are forced to react to the audience's decisions. This calls to mind other theatrical forms, such as improv. This form of storytelling, in which the audience decides both the characters' names and their fates, was directly inspired by the video game that also serves as the show's namesake: *The Oregon Trail* (ibid.). However, more than just being reminiscent of the video game the show was based on, it gives the audience the greatest degree of control discussed thus far, allowing those consuming the performance to have a tangible effect on the outcome of the plot. In addition, it permits the performers to explicitly acknowledge the audience and speak directly to them, both in improvised moments and in scripted ones. To discuss this, we will look at three examples from different points in the show.

As briefly mentioned previously, in the opening number of the show, "Gone to Oregon," the audience is asked to give the characters their names:

Father: "Now, the show begins... Hey there pioneers! Y'know in the 1840s, folks of all kinds left their homes in the East, traveled down the trail to Oregon? Yep, whether they

were carpenters, bankers, or heck even farmers. All three kinds of people. Yeah, it was America's original cross-country roadtrip. And today, pioneers, you've got the Oregon fever. And now it's time to name your family, and take them down the trail. You excited? I'm excited. You excited? You look excited... Now our journey begins in the 1800s. In a little city in Missouri, before we start, you decide on the names of all the people in your wagon party. You must decide who these pioneers are, are they carpenters or bankers or leaving their farm? It's time to spin a personal yarn!"

Mother: "Carefully choose each name, cuz this is more than a game."

All: "It's more than a game, yeah this is more than a game, no two shows will ever be the same."

[...]

Father: "Alright, Pioneers, what do you say? What would you like to name me, your wagon leader?"

[Audience yells out various names, with the performer choosing one. This continues for the remainder of the characters.] (Team Starkid 2014, at 1:23-2:30 & 3:41-3:59)

This entire song carries a sense of self-awareness, talking directly to the audience and calling for their input. This call-and-response directly involves the audience in a way that acknowledges their existence and has a real impact on the story (these are the names they use for the entire duration of the show!), but this acknowledgement is done in a tongue-in-cheek, performer-to-audience way, rather than actually bringing the audience into the fiction.

Later on in the show, in “When the World’s at Stake (Reprise),” the character of General Store Guy (played by Joey Richter) intentionally fails to hit a high note and the song abruptly ends. After this abrupt ending, Richter then improvises a comedic line related to that note. This can range from comments that are clearly meant to read to the audience as trying to stay in-character, such as “I know that based on what you just saw, you wouldn’t believe it, but I played Tony in Independence Community Theater’s production of West Side Story a couple years back. It’s like- it’s like, big fish small pond, but... I was proud.” (the line used in the professional recording uploaded to YouTube) or lines that are more easily interpreted as out-of-character, like “y’know I- I had a coach once who said yo-you breathe at the wrong times” (ibid.). These scenes are designed, especially due to the ad-libbed line, to make audiences wonder whether the flub was or was not intentional.

In another sequence, the father of the family gets intoxicated off of snake venom, and goes through a strange dream sequence including interaction with “God,” a song, and direct acknowledgement of the audience.

“Faaaaatherrrr”

“Er, yeah?”

“One of your family will die”

“Pff, haha which one? If it’s my wife she might be faking, she does that sometimes.”

“It has been chosen.”

“By who?”

“The watchers?”

“Who are the watchers?”

“They’re- they’re just the ones who watch.”

“Where are they? Show them to me!”

[The lights go up on the audience.]

“OOOOH, EWWW WHAT ARE YOU? What are youuuu? The watchers with a thousand EYES... Why do you wanna watch us die? Will that entertain you? You sick bastards? Tell me, how will we die?”

AUDIENCE MEMBER: “Dysentery”

“Woah! First try, you guys are good people. That’s it, dysentery.” (ibid., at 57:23-58:27)

Despite being the lead-in to a musical number, even this moment is subject to change based on what the audience says and does. In the professional recording of the show, an audience member calls out “dysentery” right away, but during other performances on different days, it takes a few tries for the audience to get there, and you hear the voice tell them things like “try again!” or “not quite!” This effect serves only to exemplify how engaged the performers are with the audience, and how willing they are to change the script according to how the audience responds to these calls for comment. These moments are comparable to the self-aware moments in “Prologue” of *Great Comet*, as discussed earlier; the only difference is that these fourth-wall breaking moments persist throughout the show in *The Trail to Oregon!*, while *Great Comet* shifts all future audience interaction into being in-character and implicitly within the universe of the musical. That is to say, in *The Trail to Oregon!*, these interactions can be read as either

character-to-audience or performer-to-audience, while the interactions excluding “Prologue” in *Great Comet* can only be read as character-to-audience.

Despite being the performance that gives the audience the largest amount of agency, *The Trail to Oregon!* is also simultaneously the least immersive show in this discussion. As mentioned above, it frequently acknowledges its position as a fictional performance, the characters frequently breaking the fourth wall and making self-referential jokes that they would not be able to make if they were keeping up a strict façade of the performance as real. The performers are, of course, playing characters, and those characters don’t seem to have an awareness of their own position as fictional characters, but if the performance is framed as a discourse then the performers themselves are also participants in that discourse, separate from the characters they play. The show creates a relationship between audience, character, and performer, in which all three are participants in the interaction and the story is collaboratively built up by all of them. Once again, this calls to mind improv.

In fact, improv comedy in many ways serves as a good representation of the opposite extreme of audience participation to *Great Comet* and *25th Annual*, alongside *The Trail to Oregon!*. While *Great Comet* and *25th Annual* both aim to fully immerse the audience in the world and turn them into active participants as members of the story, *The Trail to Oregon!* and an improv comedy show both aim to turn the audience into active participants by pulling both audience and performer outside of the story. One method turns audience into a participant of the inner world of the performance, while the other removes performer from the inner world of the performance, turning the entire show into something more like a group story-telling experience, in which the audience has as much agency and influence on the way the story is told as the performers. Of course, true improv more fully embraces this than *The Trail to Oregon!* does,

because the musical is still ultimately scripted, but it seems to be attempting to create a comparable experience for the audience.

4.0 Discussion

Now, by taking the framework of conversation analysis within the realm of interactional linguistics, let us take some time to discuss the balance of power and status of the audience within these more unique audience-performer dynamics. Taking from the ideas of Harold Garfinkel, and the foundations of conversation analysis as established by Harvey Sacks, Emmanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson, we can examine these interactions for their communicative value. For example, taking the concept of “the invitation” from discussions of conversation analysis, we can clearly see that the efforts made by the performers (whether improvised or scripted, in-character or out-of-character) are a form of invitation into discourse. The audience is given an invitation by the characters to join the fictional world of the story, and it is then up to the audience to make the choice to become active participants.

We can also see epistemic differences not only represented but also falsified in a unique way. Epistemic differences are, in essence, differences between which members of an interaction have more knowledge (and often more power as consequence). The on-stage audience members in *Great Comet*, for example, are treated by the characters as being equals in knowledge and familiarity with what is occurring; they are interacted with and depicted as if they live within the world of the story and understand what is happening just as well as the characters. On the other hand, the audience in *The Trail to Oregon!* is framed as having an advantage epistemically,

being treated as an omnipotent or near-omnipotent external force by the characters in the show, despite the fact that the audience knows very little overall of what is going to happen in the story.

So far, I have thoroughly explored how these shows incorporate the audience as a participant, yet I have only thus far alluded to why any of these shows do so. Let us now discuss in detail the way that these methods of incorporating the audience into the show may create a more dynamic discourse within the theater space.

As Elizabeth Swift, among others in the academic discourse, suggests, no two audience members will interpret a show the same way. Awareness of the audience by the in-universe characters makes a space for performers to acknowledge the variety of reactions the audience may be having. Take, as a broad proof of this desire, clips of actors breaking character on stage, or responding in-character to a particularly impassioned audience member. However, audience members may feel “stuck between worlds,” as Elizabeth Swift (2016) and Jean I. Marsden (2017) both describe, leading to a potentially uncomfortable experience. Perhaps this is addressed by the repeated reminders that an on-stage seat necessitates participation in *Great Comet*, and why regular audience seats may not be engaged with and are instead given a traditional experience. To take, for example, Colorado’s Arvada Center’s warnings about the seating of *Great Comet*: “Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812 is an immersive theatre experience where the audience is integrated into the production, and we have different levels of seating depending on just how immersive you want to be” (Arvada Center 2024). How can we reconcile these two seemingly competing concepts: that a more immersive experience may be engaging and meaningful, but also potentially uncomfortable and overwhelming?

To truly answer this question, let us take another brief foray into the experiential before returning to the communicative. When examining any degree of interactional linguistics, one will find that being a participant creates a new experience compared to that of being an observer. Not only this, but being a participant will often create a more emotionally impactful, and therefore oftentimes more memorable, experience. How, then, would an audience most easily become a participant? One would find it unlikely to see a fully booked out theater standing up and joining in the physical aspects of the performance being viewed; the earlier discussion of *25th Annual* implies how difficult it can be to get an audience member to be able to properly perform complex choreography alongside the performers. By far the simplest way to transition from observer to participant is through reactions to what is being presented to you. Of course, these are not inherently verbal reactions, they may be moving around in your seat, shaking your head, covering your eyes—but all of these acts are still fundamentally communicative. They are communicating something to the other audience members as well as the performers, whether explicitly spoken or not. If the performance wanted to then extend the invitation into the discourse to the audience, the simplest way to do so would be to take the reactions audience members are already having, and pull them into the world of the performance.

An engaged audience is inherently a participatory audience. This is true both within the world of theater and outside of it. When giving a lecture, for example, engaged members of the audience will be participants, indicating their participation through communicatory acts either non-verbally (eg., nodding or a confused facial expression) or verbally (eg., questions, comments, laughter) (Heritage and Clayman 2010, 263). The task these shows take up, then, is inviting the audience to leave the position of audience outside of the world of the show, and become a part of the show itself.

Following Alan Bell's idea of audience design, the roles of the audience watching a performance traditionally fall in two places: within the world of the story being told, they are not known, ratified, or addressed by the speaker and would thus be classified as eavesdroppers, while within the real-world context of being the consumers of a performance, the purpose for which the show is being put on, they are known and thus overhearers. The use of dialogue tags, as shown in *Great Comet*, then upgrade the position of the audience from known to both known and ratified, making them auditors under his model. Audience members seated on stage in *Great Comet* or *25th Annual* are then further upgraded to being known, ratified, and addressed by the speakers within the world of the performance, making them true addressees under Bell's theory of audience design (Bell 1984). And, as the most extreme case discussed here, *The Trail to Oregon!* turns the whole audience into an addressee by making the entire crowd known, ratified, and addressed directly by the characters, as well as allowing the audience the opportunity to take its own turns in interactions and act as a speaker.

All of these methods serve to integrate the audience into a role of active participant, either by making them more engaged hearers or making the performance wholly interactive and giving the audience the role of speaker within the performance, which would traditionally not be granted to them. Through this "upgrading" of the audience from the least involved role of eavesdropper into the most involved role of addressee, these productions raise the position of audience from observer to true interlocutor. From this, the performers, audience, and fictional world of the performance then negotiate their new positions and hierarchy through direct interaction. This pushes the audience to immerse themselves in the world to fully integrate themselves into the in-universe communicative hierarchy, and pushes the performers to lower their position in the interaction to allow for acknowledgement of audience reactions and

recognition of the audience's existence within the show, thereby bringing the space the performance occupies to a conversational, casual, and ultimately more real context than it would ordinarily take up.

Now, having discussed the ways that audience interaction fundamentally changes the dynamic between character, performer, performance, and audience, let us return to the question: how do we reconcile the competing ideas of discomfort and impact? In some ways, we cannot. The feelings of discomfort and fear that can trigger when faced with the invitation to participate, as briefly discussed above, is represented well by Sakellaridou in her recollection of a performance that she saw:

“I secretly welcomed it but also dreaded the moment of confrontation. I tried to be cool and interact naturally. [...] I did my best to respond in the way expected of me, and there was a lot of enjoyment in the effort to play my role and play it well. However, the total experience was very mixed and extremely strenuous at the moment it happened, although in retrospect I was very grateful to have gone through it” (Sakellaridou 2014, 34).

There is an inherent risk in engagement; John Heritage and Steven Clayman discuss this in the book *Talk in Action: Interactions, Identities, and Institutions* within the context of political speeches. They explain that there are both benefits and costs to applause during a speech, and the social discomfort created by the fear of being the only one applauding is one of the largest costs (Heritage and Clayman 2010, 265).

The fear and discomfort related to audience participation may very well stem from a similar place, if nothing else than from the sense that it is tied directly to things like social capital and embarrassment. To engage, an audience member must accept that others beside them may

not engage with them, but by engaging they are given connections to the characters within the fiction of the performance. The connections lost by being singled out in the crowd can be regained through the new position of participant within the story. In this way, the transition from audience to participant acknowledges the heterogeneity of audiences, allowing each audience member to step out of the collective position of audience and into a more individual position as a unique participant, all receiving unique experiences through being interacted with directly by characters.

With all of these topics in mind, Now, let us shift the discussion away from the more conceptual ideas of participation, and instead focus on each of the shows I have brought in specifically, examining how their respective methods of participation compare with each other. In many ways, these three shows can be seen on a continuum of participation. More specifically, there seems to be a continuum of methods to achieve the same goal of audience participation and engagement. *Great Comet* chooses to employ methods that remain strictly within the fiction and single out individual audience members, signifying one end of the continuum. *The Trail to Oregon!* makes use of strategies which take the audience out of the fiction and engages them collectively, allowing for anonymity, on the opposite end of the spectrum. *25th Annual* uses methods which keep audiences immersed in the fiction and call out specific audience members, but also makes use of improvised lines and take advantage of real-life comedic moments; in many ways it serves as a middle ground between the two extremes, although it does seem to tip more towards *Great Comet*'s fiction-reinforcing methods than it does *The Trail to Oregon!*'s out-of-universe conversations with the audience.

As mentioned above, *The Trail to Oregon!* permits anonymity to the audience in their decision to participate in the discourse. Where *Great Comet* performances target on-stage

audience members, *The Trail to Oregon!* extends its questions and invitations to the entire audience as one collective beast (remember the description by the father of the audience as “the watchers with a thousand eyes” (Team StarKid 2014)). These opposite methods have significantly different effects: the first pushes the audience into the above-mentioned risk of discomfort, but provides a comparatively more intimate payoff of being an explicit participant, and the other obfuscates the fear of being called on individually, but does not pull any one audience member into the fictional world. Despite these two incredibly different effects, they do seem to successfully serve the same purpose of engaging the audience and more often than not resulting in an accepted invitation to participate.

But what about *25th Annual*? *25th Annual* seems to take pieces from both of these approaches, calling on the on-stage audience members to participate, of course, but also pointing out audience members to call out as friends and family of the characters. Here too, though, we can see anonymizing to lower the stakes of participation. An on-stage audience member has no choice but to participate as themselves, but an off-stage audience member who has been chosen as a parent or sibling can shy away from acknowledging this, they are given the choice to hide from recognition because they are in the same position as every other off-stage audience member. There is nothing forcing them to be participatory, nor is there anything forcing them to be recognized by their peers as invited to participate, comparable to the treatment of the audience as one collective being in *The Trail to Oregon!*. On the other hand, the on-stage audience members in *25th Annual* are highly comparable to the on-stage audience members in *Great Comet*: explicitly called out as one individual, pushed to play in the space with the characters, and made to be recognizable as a member of the fictional world.

Ultimately, as has been repeated already, all of these methods complete the same goal of engaging the audience, albeit in different ways. *Great Comet* puts the audience inside the fiction, inviting them to participate within the world, almost as if they are roleplaying as characters themselves. *The Trail to Oregon!* gives the audience power and agency without turning them into characters, inviting them to participate while remaining more comfortably outside of the fiction. *25th Annual* takes the whole audience into the world, having two clearly separated degrees of participation depending on whether the audience member is on- or off-stage, with one dedicated to both ends of the participation continuum. By employing all of these different strategies and different levels of engagement, within the story or outside of it, independent or collective, these shows provide audiences with a unique experience that inducts them into the performance not only as a viewer, but as a participant.

5.0 Conclusion

The introduction to this paper is a bit of a misnomer. Audiences are not made into participants when they are seated on-stage, nor are they made into participants when they are interacted with by the characters in the performance. Not even when the audience is given control of who lives and who dies are they made into participants. Audiences are always participants, regardless of the amount of control they are given. Without an audience to perceive the performance, it would no longer be a performance. The audience is a fundamental participant in the discourse of theater. What these three shows, along with the many other (and many more extreme) interactive performances across the world, actually do is take those participants out of

their position outside of the story—of which they truly are just observers—and turn them into participants of the inner world, or the "canon" of the story. When you are seated on stage, you do not suddenly become capable of reacting to the events playing out; odds are you were going to be reacting anyway. Instead, being seated on stage permits the characters within the story to notice those reactions, extend the invitation to you to join them, and let you become a character within the performance in your own right.

There are countless other places, especially in new media, where this concept of the audience as an active participant is explored, many of which are wholly unrelated to traditional forms of performance and extremely intriguing for further study. For example, online "Alternate Reality Games," in which the audience is assumed to be a part of the fiction and playing a participatory role in the story rather than one of pure consumption. Experimental art exhibits, too, like Meow Wolf's Omega Mart engage viewers and turn them into participants in the exhibition, rather than simply walking around and consuming the art displayed around them.

"People are not cultural dopes," (Hall 1981, 353) says sociologist Stuart Hall; people are not brainless, passive observers. Consumers are influenced by what they see, and intrinsically are made into participants of the performance of "consumption," whatever that may mean in the given context. Theatergoers are not sitting down in a chair and dissociating for two hours until the end of a performance; they are engaging, they are reacting, they are feeling. Interactive theater simply creates the bridge, or perhaps the opening, that allows the characters to see what they are doing to the audience.

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