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Theatre in Suspension: Staging the Epoché in Beckett, Churchill, and Kane

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of postdramatic theatre and phenomenology. It utilizes the Husserlian concept of the *epoché* and connects it with postdramatic theatre as theorized by Hans-Thies Lehmann, following the analysis of Zsolt Benedek: theatre as a suspension of quotidian intentionality. The study incorporates a practical application of its analysis within the selected works of Samuel Beckett, Caryl Churchill, and Sarah Kane. It explores how these playwrights employ the *epoché* to suspend familiar patterns of perception and rethink meaning by disrupting traditional performative structures on two levels, performance and text. The discussion will then examine how Lehmann's 'joint text' and Goethe's 'productive imagination,' within these works in focus, impact spectators' engagement in meaning-making. This phenomenological mode of perception is further grounded in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception and his concept of the 'gaze'. In this regard, this framework enables the analysis to position the theatrical experience as a co-constituted, embodied event, where meaning unfolds through the spectator's corporeal presence and perceptual engagement. For the most part, this study argues that postdramatic forms compel a radical shift in spectatorship, urging a phenomenological attitude that transcends passive viewing and fosters active and reflective participation.

Keywords: Husserlian *epoché*, phenomenology, postdramatic theatre, perception, the gaze

Introduction

Drawing on Edmund Husserl's (1859–1938) concept of *epoché*,[1] this paper considers how the suspension of habitual perception is mirrored in the theatrical experience, particularly

[1] The word *epoché* (ἐποχή) originates from Ancient Greek Skepticism, it referred to the suspension of judgment regarding the truth of non-evident matters. For Greek skeptics, this practice aimed to achieve *ataraxia*—a state of mental tranquility. "It is traditionally translated as 'suspension of judgement." See Daniel Vazquez, *Suspension of Belief* (n.p.: Cambridge University Press, n.d.). Then, Husserl adapted the concept of suspension not for the sake of skepticism or tranquility, but to focus on conscious experience. For Husserl, *epoché* involved bracketing or setting aside judgments about the external world in order to examine the structures of consciousness and how phenomena present themselves to us. This approach aimed to overcome assumptions rooted in scientific realism or naturalism, allowing experience to be analyzed from within, on its own terms. Husserl's *epoché* became a cornerstone of phenomenological methodology, profoundly influencing philosophers such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and later Levinas. It is now fundamental to continental philosophy and existentialism, and has extended into fields such as performance studies, where it is employed to examine how phenomena are experienced in real time—particularly in contexts like art and theatre that foreground

in relation to spectators' engagement. It begins by establishing a theoretical framework that links postdramatic theatre[2] as outlined by Hans-Thies Lehmann (1944–2022) and phenomenology[3], positioning the stage as a unique site for embodied experience. This analysis will be contextualized through Zsolt Benedek's perspective of postdramatic theatre as a medium for reflection and philosophical inquiry, as articulated in *The Phenomenology of the Theatrical Performance* (2020) where he writes that "theatre suspends the quotidian intentionality of being-in-the-world."[4] To illustrate this framework in action, close readings of selected works[5] by Samuel Beckett (1906–1989), Caryl Churchill (b. 1938), and Sarah Kane (1971–1999), will be conducted to examine how these playwrights engage with the phenomenological suspension of everyday perception through their innovative strategies.

The discussion then shifts to Lehmann's concept of the 'joint text' and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's idea of 'productive imagination,' both explored in relation to the same works. By prioritizing imaginative engagement, these performances position

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lived experience and perception. For the purposes of this paper, I will utilize Husserl's concept of *epoché*.

[2] The concept of postdramatic theatre was introduced by German theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann in his work *Postdramatic Theatre* (2002). "Lehmann's theory of postdramatic theatre is testament to a new emphasis on performance in European and North American theatre and art from the 1960s onwards, which consequently led to a paradigm shift in the study of theatre and to the emergence of Performance Studies as a discipline." Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* (London/New York: Routledge, 2006), 4. "The adjective 'postdramatic' denotes a theatre that feels bound to operate beyond drama, at a time 'after' the authority of the dramatic paradigm in theatre." See Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre,* 27.

[3] Phenomenology is a philosophical movement and research methodology that focuses on the study of conscious experiences from the first-person perspective. It seeks to explore how individuals perceive, interpret, and understand their experiences. Originating in the early 20th century with thinkers like Husserl, he writes, the task of phenomenology is "to go from words and opinions back to the things themselves, to consult them in their self-givenness and to set aside all prejudices alien to them," 35. Taylor Carman analyzes Husserl's definition of phenomenology in his foreword to *Phenomenology of Perception*, "Husserl meant not real (concrete) objects, but the ideal (abstract) forms and contents of experience as we live them, not as we have learned to conceive and describe them according to the categories of science and received opinion. Phenomenology is thus a descriptive, not an explanatory or deductive enterprise, for it aims to reveal experience as such, rather than frame hypotheses or speculate beyond its bounds" see Taylor Carman, *Foreword* to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), xxxxv. Phenomenology has influenced various fields, including psychology, sociology, and the arts. Moreover, the methods and definitions within phenomenology have been the subject of extensive debate among philosophers, with discussions about its core principles continuing to this day. This ongoing debate is reflected in the diverse approaches of subsequent philosophers, such as Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) Simone de Beauvoir (1929–1980) Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) Alfred Schütz (1899–1959) and Don Ihde (1934–2024).

[4] Zsolt Benedek. "The Phenomenology of the Theatrical Performance." *Acta Universitatis Carolinae. Interpretations. Studia Philosophica Europeanea* vol, 10, no. 2 (2020): 187–206, 191.

[5] In this paper, the focus will be on the following texts: Samuel Beckett's *Collected Shorter Plays* (1984) and *Waiting for Godot* (2006), as well as Caryl Churchill's notable pieces such as *Cloud 9* (1989), *Far Away* (2000), *The Skriker* (1994), and *Top Girls* (2008). Additionally, I will examine Sarah Kane's impactful plays, including *Blasted* (2011), *Crave* (1998), *Cleansed* (2000), and *4.48 Psychosis* (2000). I will be referring to several examples from these works to support the discussion.

spectators[6] to become co-authors, actively shaping their interpretations within the rich layers of meaning that challenge conventional narrative structures.

Finally, the analysis is grounded in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1908–1961) phenomenology of perception and his concept of the 'gaze' as the initiating point of perceptual experience. He posits that perception is not a passive reception but an active engagement of the body, influenced by the gaze and shaped by the body's situatedness in the world[7]. This interconnectedness of gaze, perception, and body is crucial to understanding how meaning is created in Beckett's, Churchill's, and Kane's performances.

Postdramatic theatre as phenomenological experience

Within the framework of postdramatic theatre, instead of engaging in a self-referential game of signs, theatre invites the spectator to immerse themselves in their own perception, imagination, and experiences. This immersion allows for the possibility of rediscovering their connection to intersubjective reality—the shared social and emotional landscape of human experience. The foregoing statement implies that the performance space has the capacity to disrupt everyday perceptions that ordinarily structure the spectator's worldview. Benedek articulates that theatre offers more than mere entertainment; it becomes a site for deep personal reflection and existential inquiry. He states that:

> Theatre performance can be perceived as a unique occasion for a special phenomenological practice, rather than a self-referential hermeneutic game with self-referential signs. It performatively suspends the quotidian intentionality of being-in-the-world of the spectator. By putting the spectator's imagination, perception, and recollection into play, theatrical performance grants the possibility for the spectator to re-discover and to reflect on their embedding in their intersubjective reality. [8]

This idea, however, hinges on the quality of the performance and its ability to resonate authentically with the spectator. If a performance becomes too self-referential or detached from lived experience, it risks alienating the spectator rather than inviting them into a

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[6] In theatre theory, 'audience' refers to the collective group attending a performance, while 'spectator' emphasizes the individual's active, perceptual engagement; I will be using the latter, as it aligns more closely with the phenomenological focus of this study.

[7] See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

[8] Benedek, "The Phenomenology of the Theatrical Performance," 191.

transformative engagement. Benedek underscores theatre's potential to function as a unique phenomenological practice, urging the spectator to move beyond conventional modes of perception and engage with their intersubjective reality. In a similar vein, the editors of *Performance and Phenomenology: Traditions and Transformations* (2015)[9] note that:

If the Husserlian phenomenological approach invites us to take a distance from direct involvement with the world, this same distance will replicate the purported distance between what happens on stage and audience members. [They contend that] theatre provides a staged representation of the *epoché*, as both phenomena [theatre and the concept of *epoché*] allow for a form of perception that exists apart from the quotidian [everyday experiences].[10]

This connection underscores the way theatre can function as a space for profound reflection and interpretation, mirroring the distancing effect intrinsic to Husserlian phenomenology. Husserl articulates the concept of *epoché* in the second volume of his work, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (1912). He describes the *epoché* as a process that allows the "suspension of judgment, from taking any position predicatively toward being and being-thus and all the modalities of being which pertain to the spatiotemporal factual being of anything 'real.'"[11] This methodology encourages individuals to set aside the 'natural attitude'—the usual way of perceiving the world and its objects—in favor of a focus on pure consciousness.

Building on Husserl's concept of *epoché*, Derrida highlights that Husserl's concept of phenomenological reduction can be associated with a theatrical setting: "[p]henomenological reduction is a scene, a theatre stage."[12] Derrida's analogy draws attention to the inherent performative nature of the phenomenological approach—where both performers and spectators navigate a space that encourages a step back from direct reality. Based on this, theatre might be seen as a dramatized portrayal of the *epoché* that involves modes of perception exceeding everyday encounters.

Husserl's phenomenology, when linked to theatrical contexts, provides a valuable framework for examining the intricate relationship between perception, reality, and performance. This intersection between theatre and phenomenology highlights a profound shift in the spectators' engagement, particularly within the tradition of postdramatic theatre. Such performances reconfigure the spectator's role as an active participant in meaning-making. In

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[9] The editors of this book are Maaike Bleeker, Jon Foley Sherman, and Eirini Nedelkopoulou.

[10] Maaike Bleeker, Jon Foley Sherman, and Eirini Nedelkopoulou, eds., *Performance and Phenomenology: Traditions and Transformations* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 2.

[11] Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*, 61.

[12] Jacques Derrida and Newton Garver, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 86.

contrast, traditional dramatic forms aim to construct an illusion of reality that encourages emotional identification with characters, positioning the spectator as a passive observer.

This paradigm is grounded in the phenomenological practice articulated by Benedek, who suggests that theatre serves as a platform for suspending everyday judgments and embracing an intersubjective reality. Thus, it aligns closely with the principles of Husserl's *epoché*, thereby deferring immediate interpretations and fostering critical reflection. As Lehmann notes, "[h]ere everything depends on not understanding immediately. Rather one's perception has to remain open for connections, correspondences and clues at completely unexpected moments, perhaps casting what was said earlier in a completely new light. Thus, meaning remains in principle postponed."[13] This departure from conventional hermeneutics encourages spectators to assume multiple roles—those of readers, theorists, and participants—ultimately transforming their experiences into an interactive exploration of complex themes rather than a passive consumption of content.

In this framework, the dynamics of performance become a site for in-depth engagement with the intricate interplay between perception, reality, and the immersive potential of theatre itself. Spectators assume an active role in the theatrical experience, where their individual perspectives shape both their interpretation and engagement with the narrative, performers, and thematic content presented on stage. This participatory dynamic facilitates a critical form of engagement, encouraging them to reflect not only on the performance itself but also on its broader implications within societal, cultural, and theoretical contexts. As they navigate between roles as readers, theorists, and critics, they contribute to co-authoring the text. This interplay creates a disruption of the traditional hermeneutic experience, manifested in the conversation between performance and spectators, where "the emission and reception of signs and signals take place simultaneously."[14] This dynamic engagement ultimately transforms the spectator's experience, inviting a deeper reflection and exploration of the complexities inherent in the performance.

The space between: *epoché* in Beckett's abstraction, Churchill's dislocation, and Kane's fracture

In this section, I will explore how Beckett, Churchill, and Kane employ the *epoché* to create 'a space between' the performance and spectators by challenging conventional theatrical

[13] Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 87.
[14] Robert Leach, *Theatre Studies: The Basics*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 17.

norms, inviting spectators to introspect the intricate relationship between performance and reality. Beckett's use of abstract and minimalist settings serves to strip away familiar structures and to bring the spectator to confront the essence of existence amidst a backdrop of ambiguity. Similarly, Churchill uses dislocation in her theatre as a key dramaturgical strategy that disrupts fixed notions of identity, temporality, and spatial coherence; through cross-casting, non-linear structures, and surreal aesthetics, Furthermore, Kane takes this a step further with her deconstruction of reality and transforming her settings into surrealistic landscapes. In this context, familiar environments crumble into chaos, reflecting deep existential anxieties, prompting spectators to question their own understanding of human experience. Together, these playwrights create a dynamic interplay between the stage and the spectators, cultivating a reflective space that challenges them to rethink their (spectators) interpretations and the very nature of reality itself.

Within the framework of Beckett's non-naturalistic technique, the minimalist and abstract settings in his works serve as crucial tools for destabilizing the spectator's aesthetic experience. Beckett's departure from the detailed realism typical of naturalistic theatre invites a multitude of interpretations. In *Waiting for Godot* (2006) the setting is minimal, it is described simply as "[a] country road. A tree."[15]. Nathaniel Davis argues in his paper "Not a Soul in Sight: Beckett's Fourth Wall" (2015) that "with *Godot*, we are presented with a stage, a plot, and characters that are all so extremely reduced as to barely register as theatrical, let alone real or natural. With *Godot*, we are neither here nor there, and thus the fourth wall separating the audience from the stage takes on a strongly ambiguous character."[16] In this sense, *Waiting for Godot* challenges traditional notions of theatre, transforming the experience from a naturalistic play into an abstract exploration of existence. This minimalist setting, stripped of clear context or grounding, serves as a crucial mechanism in subverting traditional representations of reality, positioning *Waiting for Godot* as a seminal work that questions and destabilizes the very notion of reality and representation.

The same tendency is also present in *Play* (1964), where the characters—two women and a man—are encased in large, urn-like structures: "front centre, touching one another, three identical grey urns about one yard high. From each a head protrudes."[17] In *Not I* (1973), the setting is similarly minimalistic and abstract: "stage in darkness but for mouth."[18] In *That Time* (1976), the character is only visible through a spotlight on their face: "stage

[15] There are other objects used by the characters, including a rope or belt used by Estragon, a bag or basket carried by Pozzo, and a pocket watch. See Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), 1.
[16] Nathaniel Davis, "'Not a Soul in Sight!': Beckett's Fourth Wall," *Journal of Modern Literature* 38, no. 2 (2015): 86–102, 97. https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.38.2.86.
[17] Samuel Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 147.
[18] Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays*, 216.

in darkness. Fade up to listener's face about 10 feet above stage level mid stage off centre. Old white face, long flaring white hair as if seen from above."[19] The backdrop is devoid of any other elements, reinforcing introspection and temporal displacement. In *Quad* (1984), a television play, Beckett also presents a similarly abstract environment: "[a] piece for four players, light and percussion."[20] The setting is undefined and abstract, devoid of any specific location. The space is simply a square or quad, offering no extraneous details to distract from the action and movement of the characters. Moreover, in *Rockabye* (1981), the setup is equally minimal, featuring a single character: "subdued on chair. Rest of stage dark."[21] *Footfalls* (1976) continues this stark approach, focusing on the character's minimal movement and the recorded playback of its own voice. The stage is nearly completely dark, with only a narrow strip of light illuminating a corridor-like path[22] along which May paces back and forth in measured, rhythmic steps. There is no furniture, no detailed backdrop—only the sound of May's footsteps and the disembodied voice of her unseen mother, which emanates from offstage.

These minimalist environments strip away familiar theatrical structures, focusing the spectator's attention entirely on the symbols and gestures presented. Beckett's works are densely layered with signs, inviting a multiplicity of interpretations. As meanings shift and evolve, spectators are compelled to confront their own readings, fostering a contemplative and active engagement with the performance. This symbolic richness creates fertile ground for analysis but also installs a sense of instability, reflecting the existential uncertainties central to Beckett's vision. His non-naturalistic style subverts traditional theatrical expectations, blurring the boundary between reality and performance. Without a stable representational framework, spectators are prompted to question perception itself, engaging in a reflective process that transcends passive viewing. Yet this very destabilization often generates discomfort, as Beckett's theatre forces confrontation with unsettling themes of isolation, fractured identity, and the inexorable passage of time.

To the same extent, Churchill constructs a theatrical space charged with ambiguity and complexity, prompting spectators to move beyond passive observation and actively participate in the creation of meaning. This engagement unfolds within the intermediate space between the performance and the spectators' personal experiences, fostering a dynamic environment open to multiple interpretations.

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[19] Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays*, 228.
[20] Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays*, 291.
[21] Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays*, 273.
[22] Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays*, 239.

Cloud 9 (1989) for example, explores the intersections of sexual and colonial oppression by disrupting traditional gender roles, racial hierarchies, and societal expectations. The play is set in two distinct time periods—Victorian colonial Africa in Act I and 1979 London in Act II. Churchill uses cross-gender and cross-racial casting to underscore the absurdity of these imposed identities and to reveal how such roles are performed rather than inherent. Churchill critiques imperialism and patriarchy by highlighting how systems of power shape personal and political relationships. The casting choices are central to this critique: having a male actor portray Betty, as she "has no respect for women … and wants to be what men want her to be,"[23] is to emphasize the constructed nature of femininity, framing it as a learned performance rather than a biological essence. As a result, Churchill collapses the boundaries between sex and gender, suggesting that "the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all."[24] Similarly, "for Edward to be played by a woman is within the English tradition of women playing boys; for Cathy to be played by a man is a simple reversal of this."[25] Moreover, the black servant, Joshua played by a white actor reflects the internalized racism of colonialism, as he is "aspiring to be what white men want him to be."[26] Victoria, represented by a ventriloquist's dummy, becomes a striking symbol of female passivity and the suppression of voice under patriarchal structures, embodying her lack of agency within the system. These casting choices are not merely theatrical devices but deliberate strategies to complicate the spectator's understanding of identity. By unsettling assumptions about gender, race, and power, Churchill in *Cloud 9* invites spectators to confront the performative and constructed nature of these categories, transforming spectatorship into a space of critical interrogation.

In *Top Girls* (1982), the blending of historical and contemporary figures alters spectators' perceptions of history and time. "Marlene hosts a dinner party in a London restaurant to celebrate her promotion to managing director of 'Top Girls' employment agency. Her five gusts are women from the past."[27] By positioning Marlene alongside notable women from

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[23] Caryl Churchill, *Cloud 9* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1989), viii.

[24] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 9.

[25] Caryl Churchill, *Cloud 9* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1989), viii.

[26] Caryl Churchill, *Cloud 9* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1989), viii.

[27] "In order of arrival, the characters are Isabella Bird (1831-1940), who lived in Edinburgh and travelled abroad extensively between the ages of forty and seventy; Lady Nijo (b. 1258), Japanese, who was an Emperor's courtesan and later a Buddhist nun who travelled on foot through Japan; Dull Gret, who is the subject of the Brueghel painting Dulle Griet, in which a woman in an apron and armor leads a crowd of women charging through hell and fighting devils; Pope Joan, who disguised as a man, is thought to have been Pope between 854-856; and, arriving late, patient Griselda, the obedient wife whose story is told by Chaucer in the Clerk's Tale of *The Canterbury Tales.*" See Caryl Churchill, William Naismith, and Nick Worrall, *Top Girls* (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008), vii.

different periods, Churchill disrupts the conventional linear progression of history, creating a space where past and present converge. This temporal collapse encourages spectators to "bracket" their prior assumptions, suspending preconceived notions in order to engage more deeply with each character's narrative. As Marlene converses with historical women each of whom has endured significant personal and societal struggles—the spectator is prompted to reflect not only on the progress of women's rights but also on the unresolved issues that continue to shape contemporary gender politics.

While the historical and contemporary figures in *Top Girls* reshape our understanding of time and history, *The Skriker* (1994) deepens this exploration through an experimental and symbolic approach that blends mythology, fantasy, and the contemporary world. The grotesque figure of the Skriker and its encounters with earthly women blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy. Churchill disrupts linear time and space by merging the supernatural underworld with contemporary life, creating an unsettling, unreal reality. At its center is the Skriker, described as "a shapeshifter and death portent, ancient and damaged."[28] This elusive figure constantly transforms through its shifting disguises, as an old woman, a motherless child, or even inanimate objects like a sofa: "Josie and Lilly are sitting on a sofa … The Skriker is part of the sofa, invisible to them."[29] The 'space between' in the play becomes a liminal realm where the boundaries between human and other, real and imagined, dissolve. Through this constant shifting between forms, times, and realities, Churchill's use of dislocation destabilizes any fixed sense of identity or place, immersing the spectator in a world where meaning must be continually renegotiated.

Churchill's use of dislocation extends beyond cross-gender casting to the very structure and aesthetic of her theatre. In *Far Away* (2000), she destabilizes perception by staging death as spectacle. The parade of executors is intended to be brutal and violent, is juxtaposed with the hats—designed for a fashion show or carnival—that appear beautiful. "*Far Away* manipulates perspective and illusion to bring into view the 'far away' social and political landscape that people fail to see or overlook."[30] In this regard, Churchill shifts the focus to the hats, drawing attention away from the human bodies themselves. Through this dislocation, she creates a distance between the spectator and the performance, highlighting the way harsh realities are obscured and beautified. "The hats of *Far Away* manage to be, grimly, both dislocational and marvellous. They are extravagant creations."[31] In this statement, Una Chaudhuri highlights Churchill's use of dislocation to create a space where

[28] Caryl Churchill, *The Skriker* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1994).
[29] Churchill, *The Skriker*.
[30] Elaine Aston, *Caryl Churchill*, 3rd ed. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 116.
[31] Una Chaudhuri, "Different Hats," *Theatre* 33, no. 3 (2003).

beauty and violence collide, forcing the spectators to confront uncomfortable truths about societal structures. Therefore, "[t]he hats are 'beautiful' [a]nd 'sad' [a]s dislocations are [a]nd marvellous, as dislocations are."[32] The hats symbolize a contrast between superficial beauty and the harsh realities of exploitation, embodying both allure and sorrow in their dislocated representation. This 'space between' invites reflection on how harsh realities are obscured, offering a disorienting, critical lens through which spectators can reconsider their perceptions of the world.

In a similar manner, Kane creates reflective space between spectators and performers; she invites critical engagement from the spectators to reconsider their preconceived notions about reality. Her plays often begin with a semblance of reality, only to deconstruct it and reveal underlying horrors, absurdities, and existential crises. *Blasted* (2011), for instance, is notable for its deconstruction of a naturalistic world to create complex, often surreal, and fragmented new reality. The play opens in a rundown hotel room in Leeds, England: "[a]very expensive hotel room in Leeds—the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world. There is a large double bed. A mini-bar and champagne on ice. A telephone. A large bouquet of flowers. Two doors-one is the entrance from the corridor, the other leads off to the bathroom."[33] However, by scene three, "[t]he hotel has been blasted by a mortar bomb. There is a large hole in one of the walls, and everything is covered in dust which is still falling."[34] Kane shifts the setting from a seemingly naturalistic one—a hotel room in Leeds—to a horrific, war-torn landscape, thereby shattering any illusions of normalcy. Initially, the play presents a domestic scene with realistic dialogue and interactions between Mark and Ian. The hotel room is depicted with mundane details, creating an illusion of a familiar, relatable setting. As the play progresses, the reality collapses into chaos as a soldier enters, and the violence of war invades this sheltered space. The graphic imagery and brutal actions that follow strip away any pretense of safety, collapsing the naturalistic facade. This transition emphasizes the brutality of human existence and reflects the chaos of contemporary society.

Another example of this reflective, deconstructive approach can be found in *Cleansed* (1998), where Kane similarly destabilizes the boundaries of reality to create a space for visceral, emotional, and critical engagement. Set in an institution that vaguely resembles a university but functions more like a torture chamber, Kane deliberately blurs the line between the real and the surreal. The stage directions themselves defy conventional logic—characters undergo extreme physical transformations; limbs are severed and reattached and

[32] Una Chaudhuri, "Different Hats," *Theatre* 33, no. 3 (2003).
[33] Sarah Kane, *Blasted* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 3.
[34] Kane, *Blasted*, 37.

acts of violence and love coexist in ways that challenge naturalistic representation. The play opens with a clinical, almost sterile atmosphere, "The White Room - the university sanatorium. Tinker enters … He fills the syringe."[35] Yet, as the narrative unfolds, the university transforms into a site of psychological and physical trauma. In one scene, after "Carl's tongue is cut out. Rod appears and dances with Carl."[36] These surreal and harrowing shifts rupture the spectators' expectations and mirror the phenomenological encounter, encouraging a suspension of habitual perception.

The joint text: imagination and interpretation in postdramatic theatre as 'a theatre of perceptibility'

Lehmann argues that "theatre performance turns the behaviour onstage and in the auditorium into a joint text, a 'text' even if there is no spoken dialogue on stage or between actors and spectators."[37] Lehmann's concept of 'joint text' is constructed by the spectator who bridges gap between the world of theatrical performance and their own pre-existing world. This process enables spectators to perceive alternative variations and potentialities beyond what is immediately presented to them. However, this would not be possible without the element of imagination, which plays a crucial role in transforming the spectators experience from mere perception to analytical deduction. In this context, Goethe's concept of 'productive imagination' becomes relevant.

This phase of cognitive transformation through imaginative engagement is also highlighted by Lehmann, who describes a style of theatre that transcends traditional realism and "manifests itself in poetic and visual ecstasies of the imagination."[38] Goethe's concept of 'productive imagination' emphasizes that the impact of a performance lies in how spectators engage and interpret it. Theatre encourages spectators to expand their perspectives and explore new possibilities, freeing them from conventional thinking. As Goethe says, "this process of constructive imagination enables us to see alternate versions and possibilities outside of what is immediately preset."[39] Building on this idea of collaboration, I argue in this section that Beckett, Churchill, and Kane engage the spectators' imaginations by

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[35] Sarah Kane, *Cleansed* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 6.
[36] Kane, *Cleansed,* 12.
[37] Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre,* 17.
[38] Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre,* 117.
[39] Iris Hennigfeld, "Goethe's Phenomenological Way of Thinking and the Urphänomen," *in Goethe Yearbook*, vol. 22, ed. Adrian Daub and Elisabeth Krimmer (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2015), 143–168.

embracing minimalism, ambiguity, and fragmentation to construct alternative interpretations and realities beyond the confines of the scripted text.

Starting with Beckett's economical language and stripped-back stage, spectators are compelled to delve into the subtext and emotional undercurrents of the piece, creating space for imaginative interpretation. The absence of clear resolution allows for multiple perspectives, prompting spectators to project their own meanings onto the work. For example, the ending in *Waiting for Godot* encourages the spectators to imagine futures and realities beyond the existential waiting that defines the play. Similarly, in *Not I*, the visual appearance and physicality of the character—often referred to as mouth, are deliberately left ambiguous. This intentional vagueness invites spectators to envision the character's physical attributes and the specific positioning of its body. By leaving the character's visual details open to interpretation, Beckett makes the experience of *Not I* deeply personal and resonant for each one of the spectators.

In *Footfalls*, May engages in a dialogue with an unseen figure, referred to as Mother. The minimal stage direction, combined with May's physicality—her pacing and the sound of her footsteps—urge the spectators to interpret the emotional significance behind her interactions. The ambiguity surrounding her mother's presence creates a surreal quality, prompting spectators to imagine the relationship dynamics and the psychological undercurrents that shape May's existence.

In *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), Beckett masterfully evokes a range of characters in the minds of the spectators, even though they remain absent from the stage. The play centers on Krapp, a sixty-nine-year-old man, who listens to an audio recording of his thirty-nine-year-old self, reflecting on life and love. Over the course of more than four decades, Krapp has recorded annual tapes, capturing what he considers the most significant moments. The tape recorder itself becomes a live actor/character that communicates with Krapp. Miller notes, "media that is used as storage for experience, sensation, and emotion. *Krapp's Last Tape*, which turns tape recordings into a kind of character that interacts with Krapp,"[40] As Krapp listens to the recordings, the voices of his younger selves—his thirty-nine-year-old and middle-aged self—interrupt and converse with him, creating a dialogue between past and present. Remarkably, in the recording each "voice cannot be entirely claimed or owned by its speaker; it has autonomy."[41] Despite originating from a single individual, these voices

[40] Edward D. Miller, "The Performance of Listening: Samuel Beckett's 'That Time'," *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 3 (2012): 3, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23253899.

[41] Jacques Derrida, "Economimesis," trans. Richard Klein, *Diacritics* 11, no. 2 (1981): 3–25, quoted in Edward D. Miller, "The Performance of Listening: Samuel Beckett's 'That Time,'" *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 3 (2012), 5. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23253899.

exist as distinct entities, each with its own identity. The voices on the recorder represent different stages of Krapp's life, underscoring the fragmentation of his identity over time and the disconnection between the man he was and the man he has become.

Moving forward, Churchill in *Far Away* presents a different yet equally compelling narrative, where the ambiguity and surreal quality of the conversation between Joan and her aunt, Harper invites spectators to reflect on and interpret the deeper implications of their discussion. Their exchanges hint at a world filled with chaos, conflict, and unsettling truths. As they converse, fears about the world emerge, along with the lies Harper tells Joan. For instance, Joan says, "there was a light on. That's how I could see the blood inside the shed. I could see the faces and which ones had blood on."[42] Harper responds, "That's from before. That's because they were attacked by the people your uncle's saving them from."[43] She continues with an inconsistent justification: "it's nothing bad, that's just friends of your uncle was having a little party with."[44] These contradictions prompt the spectators to question the authenticity of Harper's reasoning, leaving it up to their imagination to fill in the gaps regarding the causes of these lies.

Kane's plays often explore challenging themes such as trauma, mental illness, and existential angst. In *4.48 Psychosis* (2000), she breaks with traditional narrative structures inviting spectators to piece together emotional and psychological experiences. This fragmentation encourages spectators to use their imagination, envisioning alternate interpretations of both the narrative and the characters' psyches. Moreover, the number of the characters is not specified, and its ambiguous endings and non-linear storytelling create space reflection on the possibilities that lie beyond the text. Kane pushes viewers to envision alternative realities and emotional truths that transcend the immediate performance. *4.48 Psychosis* unfolds as a one-hour and twelve-minute exploration of major depressive disorder through multiple voices. Productions range from solo performances to versions featuring three actors, as in the original staging, symbolizing the fragmentation of an individual into victim, perpetrator, and bystander simultaneously[45]. Some productions feature only two actors, with the doctor character engaging in dialogue with the patient and references to other physicians like "Dr This, Dr That, and Dr Whatsit."[46] By leaving the number and identities of characters undefined, Kane invites

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[42] Caryl Churchill, *Far Away* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2000), 139

[43] Churchill, *Far Away,* 140.

[44] Churchill, *Far Away,* 137.

[45] *4.48 Psychosis* first staged at the Royal Court's Jerwood Theatre Upstairs on 23 June 2000, directed by James Macdonald. This production featured three actors: Jason Hughes, Marin Ireland, and Jo McInnes. See Steve Earnest, "4:48 Psychosis (Review)," *Theatre Journal* 57, no. 2 (May 2005): 298–300, https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2005.0058.

[46] Sarah Kane, *4.48 Psychosis,* (London: Methuen Drama, 2000), series Modern Plays; Bloomsbury Publishing, 209.

diverse interpretations, allowing both directors and spectators to shape the performance. Consequently, the text in *4.48 Psychosis* does not hold absolute authority; Kane subverts the conventional control of the script by leaving it open to multiple interpretive possibilities. She allows both directors and spectators to exercise their imagination by determining key aspects of the performance, such as the number of actors on stage.

This fluidity exemplifies the concept of the 'joint text' in postdramatic theatre, emphasizing the transformative role of imagination in the collaborative process of meaning-making. Through the works of Beckett, Churchill, and Kane, minimalism, ambiguity, and fragmentation emerge as techniques that not only invite but also challenge spectators to engage actively with the material presented. They empower spectators to envision alternate realities and construct personal meanings that resonate beyond the confines of the scripted text. This transforms the theatre experience from passive observation to an active, participatory journey.

Achieving a final stability remains elusive to the spectators in Lehmann's theatre. The spectator of post-dramatic theatre experiences an 'altered state of mind'. Lehmann employs the term as a method of analytical; one's eyes must stay wide open to associations, resemblances, and hints that may provide previously spoken information in a totally different context or at entirely unexpected times. However, in her discourse, Erika Fischer-Lichte (b. 1943) highlights the observer's 'altered state of mind' brought about by the performance serves as a potent instrument for generating diverse meanings. As a result, the spectators experience a sense of uncertainty, which is mainly marked by feelings of instability. She writes:

The attempt to generate meaning hermeneutically proves a Sisyphean task. The shifts leave the perceiving subjects in a state of instability. The aesthetic experience here is largely characterized by the experience of destabilization, which suspends the perceiving subjects betwixt and between two perceptual orders. A permanent stabilization lies beyond their control. [47]

Elaborating on Fischer-Lichte's point, the spectators find themselves suspended between different interpretations or 'perceptual orders.' They are unable to fully commit to one interpretation because they are aware of others that might conflict or coexist. This liminal state adds to their feeling of instability. Hereafter, she concludes that the nature of this aesthetic experience—rooted in ambiguity and fluidity—precludes any lasting resolution or control over the meaning the spectators seek.

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[47] Erika Fischer-Lichte and Saskya Iris Jain, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, 1st ed. (London: Taylor & Francis E-Library, 2008), 157.

While Fischer-Lichte emphasizes the spectators' oscillation between perceptual frames and their desire for coherence, Lehmann challenges this inclination. His goal, however, is not to achieve a definitive understanding, but rather to embrace the fluidity of meaning and recognize that the journey of interpretation itself is as valuable as any conclusion one might draw. In this light, the aesthetic experience can become a powerful catalyst for personal growth, inviting to navigate the complexities of existence and the multiplicity of perspectives that art can evoke. For Lehmann, postdramatic theatre is "a theatre of perceptibility,"[48] challenging traditional views on narrative for deeper explorations of how spectators perceive and interpret the performance.

Thus, postdramatic theatre has a close affinity with phenomenology. Clearly as postdramatic challenges ingrained perception—a phenomenon that occurs before any predictions are made—it shares common ground with phenomenology. The goal of phenomenology is to accurately depict human experience that is guided by perception, "all knowledge takes its place within the horizons opened up by perception."[49] Phenomenologists consider perception the primary source and the foundation of experience since human beings are inextricably linked to the way they see the world. Merleau-Ponty grounds his philosophy on what he sees as the false premise that the world is experienced passively subjected to pre-given determinative structures and introspections. Through this philosophical perspective, he promotes a fresh approach to perceiving the world, similarly, Lehmann in his postdramatic theatre endeavors to explore the various ways in which spectators would observe theatre—from a distinct standpoint.

This capacity for theatre to provoke thought and reflection is further underscored by its inherent nature, which emphasizes the importance of attentive engagement. While everyday occurrences are most probably designed to pass over with a minimum attention, performances in theatre are meant to be read, appreciated, and attentive. According to Leach, "the exceptional power of theatre performance comes from its aesthetically inspired nature. It appears that the aesthetic experience is not only about what is shown to the recipient, but also about how the recipient processes it.[50] When the spectator is required to perceive something as both real and unreal, it gives rise to a creative and imaginative tension. This tension allows spectators to transcend the ordinary aspects of real life and fosters a sense of playfulness.

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[48] Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 99.
[49] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 241.
[50] Leach, Robert. *Theatre Studies: The Basics.* 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2013, 4.

Merleau-Ponty and the act of seeing in postdramatic theatre

Perception, as emphasized by Merleau-Ponty, is not a detached, purely visual or intellectual act but one deeply rooted in the body's engagement with the world: "to perceive something is necessarily to be related to it by means of the body."[51] Therefore, the body itself becomes a site of knowing and perceiving —a notion further developed in his book *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012), which grounds experience in the body and shows how it conditions perception and action across various domains, especially in the act of seeing. This understanding implies that the gaze is not simply a matter of looking with the eyes—it's an embodied, relational act. Seeing is rooted in the lived body and is always shaped by how we are situated in the world, physically and experientially. In this context, the act of seeing becomes central to the formation of understanding. As stated by Merleau-Ponty, the acquisition of knowledge is a "passing from 'seeing' to 'knowing.'"[52] Moreover, Derrida also contributes to this understanding, stating that "the act of seeing is at the outset a respectful knowledge."[53] Thus, seeing is not passive observation but an active process of meaning-making.

This phenomenological understanding of embodied perception can be integrated into Lehmann's theory of postdramatic theatre as he emphasizes that the performance is "addressed to [the spectators], to their gaze as corporeal creatures."[54] The term 'corporeal creatures' portrays spectators as bodily beings who respond to theatre not just intellectually, but through sensation and presence. This makes their gaze a tool of interaction—active, participatory, and responsive—rather than a mode of passive observation. Moreover, Benedek's suggestion to replace Lehmann's poststructuralist approach with a phenomenological one introduces the concept the 'boundless Leib'[55] in theatrical performance, in contrast to the semiotic model of a static 'joint text.' Benedek explains, "[a]s a Leib, theatrical performance is a living, breathing, and pulsing phenomenon, rather than a joint text, a readable, dead corpus (Körper), as Lehmann would suggest."[56] This shift emphasizes the dynamic, embodied nature of theatre, where both performers and spectators actively shape the experience.

Another point of articulation lies in Merleau-Ponty's assertion that "[w]e must - precisely in order to see the world and to grasp it as a paradox—rupture our familiarity with it."[57] He invites a break from habitual ways of understanding the world—an approach that resonates

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[51] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 20.
[52] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 44.
[53] Derrida and Garver, *Speech and Phenomena*, 96.
[54] Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 148.
[55] The 'boundless Leib' is a German term referring to the lived, felt body (distinct from the physical Körper).
[56] Benedek, "The Phenomenology of the Theatrical Performance," 193.
[57] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 277.

with postdramatic theatre's emphasis on *presenting* rather than *representing* experience: "the postdramatic theatre does not represent; it presents. It does not show; it lets the spectators see. It does not communicate meaning; it releases energy. And it does not create visual images; it offers the opportunity for seeing."[58] In this context, the gaze of the spectator is dispersed, fragmented, and constantly shifting, allowing the spectator to engage with a multiplicity of visual and sensory stimuli simultaneously.[59] This mode of perception is not purely intellectual or detached; it is grounded in the body. The act of seeing becomes an embodied experience, as the spectator's physical presence, sensory awareness, and emotional responses all contribute to meaning-making within the theatrical space.

These theoretical insights are reflected in the works of Beckett, Churchill, and Kane. They invite spectators to engage in a highly embodied and intersubjective experience, where the act of 'watching' goes beyond intellectual interpretation to encompass visceral, emotional, and physical responses. In the following section, I will highlight how these playwrights use the concepts of embodied perception and intersubjectivity to create immersive experiences that actively involve the spectators' body, mind, and emotions.

In *Not I* and *That Time* by Beckett, the action transcends conventional physicality and instead delves into the complexities of inner experience, memory, and existential reflection. Throughout the performances the spectators experience an unsettling sense of presence, as mouth in *Not I* seems to navigate the very space it occupies. This movement through darkness blurs the lines between the performer and the spectators. They sense the disembodied part moving around them, appearing beside them whenever they turn their heads. Lisa Dwan, who plays mouth in *Not I*, reflects on her experience in a talk for 5x15, one of London's leading cultural events organizations. She notes that "the spectators experience a kind of group hallucination; they start to see that the mouth roam and travel across the stage, and it is individual for every single member of the audience."[60] Thus, the action does not simply occur on the stage; it extends throughout the entire theatre space, challenging the boundaries of where the performance truly resides. The darkness enveloping both the performance and the spectators' area creates an immersive environment where perception is altered. As the spectators, immersed in darkness, focus on the unfolding performance, they rely on their bodily senses to engage with it. This phenomenon intensifies emotional engagement, turning the spectators into a cohesive community and enriching the overall impact of the experience.

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[58] Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 146.

[59] Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 157.

[60] Lisa Dwan, *5x15 Stories. Playing Beckett's 'Not I' | Lisa Dwan | 5x15*, YouTube video, March 12, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxlsruHcfP0&t=21s.

Voyeurism in Churchill's *Far Away* becomes an embodied act shared among characters and spectators alike. According to Trémouilhe, "the representation of terror leads to another related issue: the position of characters and spectators who acquire the status of voyeurs."[61] The play features trials that are supposedly broadcast throughout the night. Churchill provides little information about the object of trials. but one might hypothesize that the accused are prisoners, some of whom are executed after the processions. Furthermore, the parades themselves suggest that a crowd, or at least a jury for the hat contests, is watching. This raises the question, '[w]ho are the voyeurs?"[62] As characters like Todd obsessively consume the nightly trials— "I stay up till four every morning watching the trials"[63]—spectators are pulled into this same act of watching, mirroring the characters' fixation. In the parade scene, where processions of prisoners make their way to trial,[64] spectators become complicit in voyeurism. By watching the spectacle unfold alongside the characters, the spectator blurs the line between observer and participant, making them, in a sense, voyeurs themselves.

Kane often depicts graphic and brutal violence in her plays. Sarah Kane's theatre—often described as in-yer-face or postdramatic—relies heavily on provoking visceral, bodily responses from the spectator. Rather than offering a safe distance from the stage, her work collapses the boundaries between the performance and the spectators, engaging their physical presence and embodied perception. The extreme imagery, raw emotion, and confrontational staging draw the spectators' gaze into moments of intense discomfort, making them feel the weight of what they see not only intellectually, but viscerally. In this way, Kane's theatre transforms the act of watching into a fully embodied experience. For example, in *Blasted*, the brutal and graphic scenes of violence—such as the rape of Cate and the shocking moments of war violence—are not just witnessed by the spectators; they are felt, causing them to embody the terror and physicality of the scene. Moreover, the spectators are confronted with the act of consuming human flesh; first when the soldier eats Ian's eyes, and later when Ian devours the dead baby. The violence on stage forces spectators to confront not only the horrific content but also their own reactions as Tuba Ağkaş Özcan puts it:

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[61] Julie Trémouilhe, *Caryl Churchill's Aesthetic of Silence: Terror and Language in 'Far Away' and 'Escaped Alone'* (Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres, Université catholique de Louvain, 2019), 66. http://hdl.handle.net/2078.1/thesis:21431.

[62] Trémouilhe, *Caryl Churchill's Aesthetic of Silence*, 67.

[63] Churchill, *Far Away,* 145.

[64] "A procession of ragged, beaten, chained prisoners, each wearing a hat, on their way to execution. The finished hats are even more enormous and preposterous than in the previous scene." Churchill, *Far Away*, 149.

> The uncomfortable experience of the audience in these particular scenes, where different bodily sensations are awakened at the same time destructing the boundaries between the performer's body and the audience's body. It is the audience's body's being extended to the stage by means of such sensual scenes that creates the interaction between the spectator and the actors.[65]

Based on this, the portrayal of visceral scenes compels the spectator to confront the raw and brutal realities presented on stage, provoking both physical and emotional responses. Kane's use of shocking imagery and intense dialogue intensifies this reaction, blurring the lines between the spectator's experience and the trauma and violence faced by the characters.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the intersection of postdramatic theatre and phenomenology, highlighting how the application of the Husserlian concept of the *epoché* disrupts habitual modes of perception within theatrical experiences. By analyzing the works of Beckett, Churchill, and Kane, it has shown how these playwrights use the suspension of quotidian intentionality to challenge traditional performative structures and invite the spectators to engage in the co-creation of meaning. The study has also examined the concept of Lehmann's 'joint text' and Goethe's 'productive imagination,' further linking these ideas with Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception and the embodied nature of the gaze.

Postdramatic theatre, with its focus on embodied and perceptual engagement, calls for a radical shift in spectatorship, positioning spectators not as passive observers but as active participants who shape the performance's meaning through their corporeal presence and perceptual involvement. This phenomenological approach redefines the spectators' role, transforming viewing into a reflective, dynamic process where meaning unfolds and is co-constructed

[65] Tuba Ağkaş Özcan, "Uncomfortable Seats: 'Enactive Spectatorship' Explored through Sarah Kane's Blasted," *Folklore & Literature* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2023): 305, https://doi.org/10.22559/folklor.2263.

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