

Candidate 6 evidence

Does the length of a theatre performance affect its power to create dramatic meaning and impact?

“Everyone at every minute of his life must feel something. Only the dead have no sensations.”¹ This quote from Konstantin Stanislavski represents how creating and projecting pure feeling onto an audience during every single minute of a performance is something extremely difficult to achieve. Especially when these plays and total stories can be 6 hours long. Such as the National Theatre’s most recent two-part production of *Angels in America*. Whilst other theatre practitioners and directors such as Peter Stein reach lengths of 12 hours, for example, Peter Stein’s version of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Demons*, which was presented in the Lincoln Centre in 2010. Some plays can also be jam-packed with emotion and feeling within minutes. Such as the production of *What if it Only* which was shown at the Royal Court. Being only 17 minutes long. However, extreme length provides an opportunity to captivate an audience, to fill their minds with endless fruits of emotions and feelings, to completely immerse themselves in a play and its story. Yet creating a play with extreme length also risks completely wasting this opportunity, making a boring play, with the audience scratching at the seats eager to leave. So, the question is, must we consistently risk this? Or continue a pattern of short plays, quickly and untidily packed with redundant and rushed emotion? Which allows us to come back to the question; Does the length of a theatre performance affect its power to create dramatic meaning and impact?

A theatre performances ideal length begins with the idea of a good night out, this ideology surrounds the idea of a play simply being good entertainment, not too short or long, just a good laugh so that people can leave satisfied with their afternoon as their night begins. However, the question rises, when is a play too short or too long? Most people, following

¹ Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013

the ideology, believe that good plays are from 45 minutes to an hour long. As much as this may have a good impact on an audience, giving them a Saturday night's entertainment. This idea is supported by 'Lyn Gardner' of 'The Corner Shop' who wrote "For many young theatre-goers, the one-hour Edinburgh slot fits their idea of a good night (or afternoon) out that can be slotted around their other activities or hangovers"². However, this can take away the meaning of a play and its effectiveness in inspiring and creating true feeling, rather than a simple laugh. Nevertheless, plays at this length do have the option in which they can choose to create a performance with true emotion, although most often, simple entertainment is chosen for these performances, allowing people to have a simple night out and a time with their friends and loved ones. This idea is also supported by the fast-growing rise of 'A Play, a Pie and a Pint'. This began at the Oran Mor in Glasgow, it consists of a ticket for a lunchtime show, a pie of choice and a pint of beer / 125ml soft drink or glass of wine. This deal and event which has been replicated in theatres across Scotland such as the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh and the Aberdeen Performing Arts Centre. This allows the experience of Theatre to be a memorable experience that can fit into people's day to day lives.

Playwrights such as Peter Stein, believe that seeing a play should be an experience, where people can connect and grow off what they have just witnessed, where the audience becomes connected to the actors, the play and its story, as it becomes increasingly more intense. A connection so powerful is believed to only be accomplished with length, creating a connection with length and emotional endurance. This introduces us to Peter Stein's production of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Demons*, performed on Governors Island in New York City, during the Lincoln Center Festival in 2010. This play ran for 12 hours with four 15-minute breaks and 2 long breaks for lunch and dinner, these pauses were put in specific parts of the plays such as climaxes, in order to keep the audience interested and

² Gardner, *The Long and Short of it*, The Corner Shop, 2019

enticed by the performance, whilst also decreasing audience exhaustion. 'Demons' is a novel which is an allegory of the potentially catastrophic consequences of the political and moral nihilism that were becoming prevalent in Russia in the 1860s. Fyodor Dostoevsky, in achieving this, created a fictional Russian town in which everything descends into chaos, making the town a focal point for revolution. 'Demons' is a story with significant meaning, which provides opportunities for it to be adapted in such ways to present this meaning on stage. Peter Stein's theatrical adaptation of the novel aimed to immerse the audience, so that the length could have meant nothing to the audience but subtly make the performance much more effective. Peter Stein states: "A play this long, changes the style of perception"³. Essentially saying that the length is forgotten when it is calculated, cut through and performed correctly. Creating true and deep connection within a performance and thus, allowing an audience to be truly and significantly impacted by the work at hand. However, the length of this adaptation was also used in order to amplify the story's meaning, as Peter Stein used length to fully present what he believed to be the more important areas of the novel. This is revealed when he states "This novel with 950 pages needs a different kind of adaptation. It needs time to get it in the grip of the really important things of the novel."⁴, presenting his aims to accentuate the many different symbols of the story and what it presents. The effectiveness and creation of unity this production had produced is shown by a review from the guardian by theatre critic Alexis Soloski where he states "On the ferry ride back, people leaned across the aisles to share their observations and judgments, and when the cast arrived, they applauded and high-fived. Suddenly, all was community and commonality."⁵ This represents exactly what Peter Stein aimed to achieve when producing this play, a sense of community within an

³Stein, *Lincoln Center Festival: Peter Stein's The Demons comes to life on Governors Island*, YouTube, 2010

⁴Stein, *Lincoln Center Festival: Peter Stein on Adapting The Demons and the Meaning of the Title*, YouTube 2010

⁵Soloski, *Confronting Demons: the play that forces theatregoers to talk to each other*, 2010

audience as they all share their thoughts on the experience after a long and exciting day. This reveals how extreme length can accentuate meaning and impact, as it diminishes social boundaries through its ability to create an unforgettable experience that people must discuss. Thus, creating true meaning and impact, by creating togetherness and community through the length of the production and accentuating the true meaning of the original text by Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Some believed that this plays length and message created an elitist sub-culture surrounding its audience, as many, if not most audience members were depicted to go for merely the idea of seeing a 12-hour performance. Tickets for this performance ranged from \$175 to \$225, creating an elitist audience as only very few people could afford tickets for a play of that length. This created a very small group of very specific types of audience members who could appreciate the play despite its length without experiencing anything new or different. This, unlike shorter, more affordable, and at times, more entertaining performances with snappier messages, reduces the encouragement of people from different types of audiences to watch theatre and be moved by it. Shorter plays that cost less however, tend to give greater opportunities for different people of different backgrounds to experience theatre. This opinion was shared by Patrick Healy who wrote for *The New York Times*, as an audience member he interviewed stated "I don't want to be elitist, but the fact is there's an elitism to self-education."⁶ This reveals the fact that long events such as these can be considered elitist due to their lack of opportunities for casual theatre goers. However, it can be considered that an increased length and a separation in audiences can separate the people who go to the theatre for the idea of a good time and those who go for an artistic, reflective experience. This introduces the philosophy that a plays length may only affect audiences through different expectations of a performance rather than whether they can be disengaged by a play's length.

⁶ Healy, *A 12-Hour Play, and Endless Bragging Rights*, *New York Times*, 2010

The effectiveness of long plays was also tested by Peter Brook in his production of *The Mahabharata* (1985). This play was split into three parts of three-hour performances, making the entire story 9 hours long. This play was able to tour the world for four years, revealing its great success through its ability to do so. Its success despite its length was also shown through the many critical acclaims it received during its time in showing. This is proven by an article from Margaret Croyden of *The New York Times* written in 1985 as it states that the play “did nothing less than attempt to transform Hindu myth into universalized art, accessible to any culture”.⁷ This further proves the play's universal acceptance despite its length, which was a topic consistently ignored in relation to the play. Which further proved its ability to create dramatic meaning and impact despite its extreme length. This play contained an immersive story of the Clashing of Indian Gods and intended to remove audiences from reality with its epic portrayal of the story. This play also intended to bring together many different audiences and different cultures through its 21 actors from 16 different countries, creating a stronger sense of unity and representation especially during its time of release. This gave audiences a refreshing immersive and very long experience, as they were immersed in unfamiliar cultures and their spectacular stories. This play featured five musicians who were able to play different oriental instruments from different cultures, further immersing the audience into the play and its story. The *Mahabharata* was incredibly intricately put together and studied, as multiple trips to India were taken by the cast and crew in order to truly present the different philosophies, scriptures, ways of dressing and forms of music. The three parts of the play were used as ways to slowly create a flowing play, which was split by key plot points such as part 1 being used to introduce the characters, part 2 being used to create an idea of existence within this world and part 3 acting as the climax of the play, filled with war and action. This splits the play into three varying parts, allowing the audience

⁷ Croyden, *PETER BROOK TRANSFORMS AN INDIAN EPIC FOR THE STAGE*, *New York Times*, 1985

to be immersed slowly into this world. The play's ability to completely immerse audiences into its incredibly imaginative and intricate world presents the fact that length in theatre can be used to an advantage. This was achieved through Peter Brook's extreme attention to detail when creating this play, as he studied the different cultures involved in this film, making it representative and refreshing. This allowed audiences to be completely immersed in the world Brook created in a sense, allowing them to become increasingly encouraged to see the following parts. This reveals the advantage that long theatre has in order to create extreme dramatic meaning. Which is greatly shown through Peter Brook's brilliantly ahead of its time portrayal of *The Mahabharat*.

This leads us to move onto the effectiveness of extremely shortened plays. Many believe that a lack of length in a play can reduce the emotion projected and its effectiveness as a performance but plays with short lengths could also create more meaning with less time. As emotion is packed in short and sweet messages that the audience can understand in a simpler manner. Which does give plays of much shorter lengths the opportunity to create meaning and impact. The benefits of shortened theatre can be found in many different places, such as the Royal Court's production of *What if if only*. This production was all of 17 minutes long and received widely great reviews, as people seemed to find the play entertaining and moving, with its short and snappy yet deep messages being spread greatly throughout audiences. *What if if Only* follows the story of a young man referred to as *someone* who is grieving the death of his girlfriend, and his desperate wishing's to see her again, he is met by different spirits of the past, present and future which provide him with knowledge and wisdom, all of which, are played by Linda Bassett. The intentions of both Caryl Churchill and director James Macdonald were very clear. These intentions were to create production filled with meaning about grief and moving forward, as the words and the many monologues from the characters vividly present these themes, allowing audience's to further understand the play's meaning and symbolic intentions. Some believed this play to successfully present its messages through symbolism and its ability to

give opportunity to the actors due to its lack of length. This was a view shared by many reviews such as Nick Curtis from the Evening standard stating, "Less formally experimental than much of her work, it has a crystalline beauty, sly humour and boundless imagination."⁸. This presents the fact that the play's length is a choice made by the playwright and the director, making the story as long as it needs to be in order to express what they believe to be the truly most important segments of the play, creating an experience that can be shared and fully understood by different audiences. The play's clear presentation of an imaginative way of creating symbols of fear and death alongside themes of loneliness and its effects reveals its raw effectiveness in spreading symbolic, thoughtful and emotional messages to audiences. The lack of length in the play also gave opportunity for actors to present their strengths and adaptability for different performances. This was widely recognised within Linda Bassett's portrayal of the ghosts of the past, present, and future. This allows Linda Bassett to switch between characters, performing heartfelt and meaningful monologues which discuss topics ranging from life's meaning to different realities and outcomes for the future. Her performance as the ghosts was agreed to be fantastic by many journalists such as again, Nick Curtis of the Evening Standard, as he states, "It's a testament to Bassett's virtuosity as a performer that she seems, briefly, to contain multitudes." Whilst also giving performance opportunities to younger more budding actors such as Samir Simon-Keegan who is viewed by some such as Paul Seven Lewis from 'One Minute Theatre Reviews' to have played the character "Confidently, who may be well be part of the future of acting"⁹. Overall, *What if if Only's* lack of length gave strengths and individuality to the play through its ability to project meaning through its script. Whilst also allowing actors to portray their strengths through the importance of their lines and performances. The messages and meaning of the play

⁸Curtis, *What if if Only review: an audacious theatrical miniature from Caryl Churchill*, Evening Standard, 2021

⁹ P.S. Lewis, *What if if Only by Caryl Churchill – review*, YouTube, 2021

are well displayed through the performances and packed symbolism which is thrust upon an audience within the space of 17 minutes. Which allows audience members to be enthralled by thought, thus, presenting the ability that shortened plays must create impact and project dramatic meaning.

Shortened plays also create opportunities of encouragement to get younger audiences more interested in theatre. This is witnessed vividly in the Philippines, as the 10 minute becomes increasingly popular due to its ability to increase diversity in the Filipino audiences.¹⁰ This reduces the prices of normal plays in these areas and allows people to educate themselves on the benefits of theatre, giving safe spaces for budding directors, playwrights, actors and artists. Short, ten-minute, one act plays are also giving opportunities for playwright groups to grow and educate, such as the 'Writer's Bloc' Playwright group who host an annual competition entitled 'Virgin Labfest' which showcases untested one-act plays. This further proves the benefits of shortened plays, and their meaning within theatre. However, the rise of 10-minute plays in the Philippines, does not completely diminish usual length, expensive plays, as most people with the money will pay to see a real, five act play. This can encourage people to see the best of both worlds and produce their own full-length plays. This presents the impacts, and the many positives that short-length plays have for different audiences and how it can create meaning and opportunities for some, creating true meaning and impact within their lack of length.

Since the majority of lengthy plays risk disengagement in audiences, different ways to entice audiences and keep them increasingly interested must be created. This allows plays to retain their meaning and for the length of plays to no longer become a distraction for audiences, increasing the effectiveness in their ability to create true dramatic meaning

¹⁰ Palanca, *Snap Performance: The Rise of the Ten-Minute Plays in the Philippine Theatre and Performance Industry*, (Date not included in article)

and impact. This is presented vividly in the National Theatre's production of 'Angel's in America' which was split into two parts in order to decrease the full length and provide the audiences with a break between the events of the play. These parts had a week split between them with Part 1 being performed on the 20th of July 2017 and Part 2 being performed on the 27th. This allowed the audiences to have a break in between each part of the play, with the total length of the play being about 7 hours and 45 minutes long. Part One was 3 hours and 30 minutes and Part Two was 4 hours and 15 minutes. This gave mass priority to the actors and the directors, with the actor's having to remain energetic throughout the entirety of each of their performances and the director having to find different ways to entice the audience. This was achieved greatly through the extremely technical yet visually stunning set filled with lights and symbolism. An incredibly striking aspect of both performances is the use of neon-lights around different structures of the set such as statues or walls. This provided brilliantly individualistic visuals for the play, which further enticed the audience by subtly placing 1980's visuals into many of the scenes whilst also acting as foreshadowing and symbolism, thus, making the play have artistic meaning and impact despite its length. This is presented in act 5 scene 2 (Part Two) during the ladder scene where we see a brightly coloured and lit up ladder descend to prior for him to climb on his way to heaven. This moment creates a visual spectacle for the audience, making the scene and its meaning incredibly powerful and touching. This further increases the plays impact as the stunning visuals of the play, used to keep the audience enticed, are also used to increase emotional impact and dramatic meaning in different scenes.

Angels in America's ability to create interest and dramatic meaning and impact despite its length presents how the length of a play, if done correctly and made interesting, can vividly affect its ability to create dramatic meaning and impact. This production presents the highly positive version of this notion, as it follows a unique and touching story, supported by fantastic performances from actors such as Andrew Garfield, and brilliant

visuals. This was supported by the many brilliantly received reviews of the performance following its release, such as Susannah Clapp from *The Guardian* stating “theatrical to the very tips of its gilded wings. Flaunting, gaudy and unflinching, it does something only the stage can do”.¹¹

In conclusion, length in theatre can vary in effectiveness in its ability to project dramatic meaning and effectiveness unto an audience, as interesting and individualistic choices must be made in order to justify a specific plays length. This allows opportunities to be given to different people in order to grow theatres popularity and prevent it from becoming a dying art form. Diversity in the length of plays also creates diversity in audience groups, separating an artistic experience from a fun day out. This provides space for theatre to be a diverse and adaptable artform, providing experiences, opportunities, inspiration and fun for people all over the world. Which creates a truly beautiful perspective on a plays length and how it can change its effectiveness.

¹¹ Clapp, *Angels in America* review – Kushner’s epic ‘gay fantasia’ flies again, *The Guardian*, 2017

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