

## The Experiential Theatre of Anthony Neilson and *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*

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### Abstract

Experiential theatre goes beyond the boundaries of dramatic theatre by allowing the audience to experience the event performed on stage and create their own meaning and interpretation of conflicting phenomena, such as security and violence. As one of the important representatives of this type of English theatre in the 1990s, the playwright Anthony Neilson, has attracted substantial critical attention for his trenchant portrayal of violence in all its bareness that inevitably comes out within the practices of daily life. With one of his most important plays to date, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2004), Neilson portrays experiential theatricality of states of mind while exploring the connection between the internal and external reality of a self. By doing so, Neilson pushes the framework of experiential theatre to a new extreme. This paper scrutinizes his contribution to the practice of experiential theatre within the context of violence and identity politics.

**Keywords:** Anthony Neilson, experiential theatre, violence, identity politics, The Wonderful World of Dissocia.

### Anthony Neilson'un Deneysmsel Tiyatrosu ve *Disosya Harikalar Dünyası*

#### Öz

Deneysmsel tiyatro, izleyicilere sahnede temsil edilen olayı deneyimlemelerine, onların güvenlik ve şiddet gibi çatışan olaylarla ilgili kendi anlamlandırma ve yorumlama süreçlerini oluşturmalarına olanak tanıyarak dramatik tiyatronun sınırlarını aşmaktadır. 1990'lı yıllar İngiliz tiyatrosunun bu türdeki önemli temsilcilerinden Anthony Neilson, kaçınılmaz olarak günlük yaşam deneyimlerinden kaynaklanan şiddet olgusunu bütün çıplaklığıyla ve keskin biçimde betimleyişi yönünden önemli eleştiriler almıştır. Neilson, en önemli oyunlarından *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* ile (2004), bireyin içsel ve dışsal gerçekliği arasındaki bağıntıyı incelerken, akılsal durumu deneysmsel bir teatrallikle resmeder. Bu yolla yazar, deneysmsel tiyatronun kavramsal çerçevesini yeni bir boyuta taşır. Bu çalışma, Neilson'un deneysmsel tiyatro pratiğine olan katkısını şiddet olgusu ve kimlik politikası bağlamında incelemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Anthony Neilson, deneysmsel tiyatro, şiddet, kimlik politikası, Disosya Harikalar Dünyası.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Experiential theatre aims at creating a space in which the borders between the spectators, actors and the play melt. Despite it has many shared aspects with traditional theatre, experiential theatre rejects some of the established conventions of traditional theatre. As Mary LaFrance observes, in experiential theatre the distinction between reality and fiction may seem uncertain, actors may engage in direct verbal or physical interactions with audiences, the actors improvise large portions of the performance based on the audience response, audience number tends to be much smaller, experiential theatre-audiences often have no idea what to expect when the performance begins, in experiential theatre the audience member is no longer a relatively passive observer as would be in traditional theatre. Instead audiences become active participants (2013: 509, 513, 514, 515). According to Aleks Sierz, experiential theatre is “the kind of drama, usually put on in studio spaces, that aims to give audiences the experience of actually having lived through the actions depicted on stage. Instead of allowing spectators to just sit back and contemplate the play, experiential theatre grabs its audiences and forces them to confront the reality of the feelings shown to them” (2017). Experiential theatre uses violent subjects, taboo words and surreal images which disturbs people. In this regard, it is possible to situate Anthony Neilson’s *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* at the edge of the theatrical tradition. Especially in the first part of the play Neilson consciously reacts against the representational theatre. Instead he puts the audience in direct contact with feelings of Lisa, the heroine of the play. In this sense, the play is experiential; because Neilson wants the audience to live the events and ideas depicted on stage in a short time and he confronts the audience with disturbing subjects. This article aims to explore the experiential quality of Anthony Neilson’s *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*.

## II. ANTHONY NEILSON AND EXPERIENTIAL THEATRE

Anthony Neilson has been a controversial figure in the field of new writing for the British stage. His work is characterised by a vision of society as a place of social decline, injustice and imminent violence. But he uses violence not just to shock but to provoke self-awareness by experience. He expressed in an interview with Caroline Smith that he “*tended to notice the extremities of life: the extreme brutality and sweetness of it...Drama is the most interesting when people are at their most brutal and at their most generous*” (Smith 2008: 78). Neilson argues that, together with emotional experience, his plays should constantly provoke, engage and enrage his audience through experience. His work offers a deep experience of discomfort and madness. As a “*rehearsal-room baby*” (Sierz, 2000: 65), Neilson learned through experience how theatre should be. His parents were both Scottish actors; thus, he learned much about theatre naturally. Reid also notes that Neilson “*learned in childhood ‘to think of personal, political, emotional as intricately entwined’, substantially through the experience of watching his parents rehearse Donald Campbell’s plays*” (2012: 162). Thus, Neilson’s childhood experience of watching Campbell’s *The Jesuit* had a great impact on his playwriting and on his notion of experiential theatre. As the writer underlines:

*I was eleven when I saw it at the Traverse. There’s a moment when the women find out that their husbands have died at the sea, and my mother let out this horrendous scream. I was absolutely chilled. Because she was my mother, the emotional force was doubled. Since then I’ve always struggled with the idea that theatre should be like that, that it really has to have that very direct, very basic force. (qtd. in Sierz 2000: 66)*

Even at an early stage in his career, Neilson was absolutely sure of his theatrical voice. That voice has become most influential ones on the British stage. Since the production of his earliest plays *Normal* (1991), *Penetrator* (1993) and *The Censor* (1997) Neilson has been associated with a new generation of provocative British playwrights of the 1990s whose experiential theatre addresses contemporary issues. His earliest plays deal with violence, cruelty, barbarity, oppression, catastrophic annihilation of humanity, psychic alienation, isolation and trauma.

According to most references, Anthony Neilson is one of the major voices of what critics like to label 'in-yer-face theatre'. During the 1990s his name became synonymous with the cruelty of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*. As Ian Brown asserts, Neilson's plays are "associated with a new internationalist movement in contemporary theatre, the so-called 'in-yer-face'" (Brown 2007: 322) but the playwright himself is not of the same opinion. Neilson does not like being categorised under that label because he thinks that the term in-yer-face does not adequately define his theatre. As a writer in search of new forms and aesthetic expressions Neilson prefers 'experiential' as a key term to describe his "truly theatrical theatre" (Foreword 2007). On this issue Neilson said:

*I will presume that you know about the "In-yer-face" school of theatre, of which I was allegedly a proponent. I suppose it's better to be known for something than for nothing but I've never liked the term because it implies an attempt to repel an audience, which was never my aim. In fact, the use of morally contentious elements was always intended to do very opposite. Given that one's genuine morality (as distinct from the morality that we choose for ourselves) tends to be instinctive rather than cerebral, engaging a receptive audience with such issues is a useful way of scrambling the intellectual responses that inhibit/protect us from full involvement with what we're watching. Engage the morality of an audience and they are driven into themselves. They become, in some small way, participants rather than voyeurs. That's why I prefer the term "experiential" theatre. If I make anything, let it be there. (Foreword 2007)*

It is clear from his remarks that experiential is the key term Neilson himself uses for the theatre he wants to make. Like the works of Crimp and Kane, Neilson's work deliberately incorporates and offers the experience of feeling the emotions depicted on stage. It should be a theatre that has a visceral impact putting its spectators in contact with feeling in a way that forces them to confront the grim realities of life. In 2002 Neilson said of his work, "I've always felt that theatre should have a visceral effect on the audience. I'm not really interested in being known as a great writer. I'm more interested in ensuring that people's experience in the theatre is an interesting or surprising one" (qtd. in Reid 2007: 489). According to Doris Mader, as an experientialist playwright, Neilson creates his own artistic principles:

*He is never shy to avow to some personal and biographical essence to his writing, and his having practically been born into the world of theatre and having been brought up in a rather 'alternative' environment have apparently opened up for him the possibility to allow for the primacy of experientiality to govern the production process as well as the inherent aesthetics of his plays. As he intends to provoke emotional participation rather than intellectual distance, his 'energetic' approach to drama also concerns his very writing and working with actors. (2010: 1)*

In experiential theatre spectators experience the play both mentally and emotionally. Neilson's theatre is experiential in the way it asks spectators to experience what is shown on stage psychologically and emotionally. For Neilson to achieve this aim in creating a story and narrative has great importance. As Neilson expresses in the introduction of his *Plays 1*:

*The story is the route by which your subconscious finds expression in the real world. Preoccupying yourself with the mechanics of a narrative frees you from your ego and allows something more truthful to come through. And when it is done, it will surely 'say something', because character is action: the choices you make for your characters will reflect your personality, your take on the world, honestly and without cliché. In short, you will produce a truly dynamic thing: a play that speaks both to its audience and creator. A two-way dialogue of creation and response. (1998: ix)*

Neilson's plays are exemplary of the experiential style in form and content, that requires equivalent reply from artists in the process of production. What Neilson looks for are "ideas, reactions, inspirations, challenges, personal insights, accidental moments" (Lane 2010: 89). Neilson tracks his own artistic beliefs while creating a play. Since he aims at provoking an emotional reply from the spectators and their contribution to the play, Neilson co-creates the text with performers during the preparation process. As a result, his experiential theatre activates a visceral appreciation in both performers and spectators. This assumption is supported by Neilson himself:

*I would have less and less of the script finished by the time we went into rehearsal...And it got to the point when I was making it up as we went along...take bits in and try them with the actors and see whether they worked... They were always getting the last part of the script very close to opening... actors normally temper their playing because they have a view of how the whole play will develop, and the audience can guess where the play is heading by the way the actors behave at the start...The actors get the chance to make a journey during the run; they haven't rehearsed the play to death; they still take risks; they still have an edge. (qtd. in Sierz 2000: 67)*

In a playwriting career of nearly twenty years Neilson's plays demonstrate a remarkable maturity and growth. In the early part of his career Neilson's plays deal with sexual violence primarily as a tool utilised to affect the audience to achieve an experiential goal, but in his later period he focuses on states of mind, trauma and traumatic identities. In this vein, while examining the poetics of trauma in Neilson's experiential theatre, a key factor is the way in which the notion of sexual politics and the question of identity differ from traditional story-telling and more comfortable certainties of the dramatic theatre. Trish Reid draws attention to this aspect of identity politics in Neilson's plays. She observes that

*[a]t first glance Neilson's engagement with questions of identity appears more personal than political, more concerned with subjective than social experience, and certainly not explicitly related to national identity politics... But it is also clear Neilson shows no particular interest in Scottish settings. He is, however, consistently concerned with characters that occupy the margins, whether between sanity and insanity, or acceptance and exclusion. (2011: 197)*

If viewed from this perspective, it is clear that Neilson's theatre discredits national identity and focuses on personal identity, traumatised minds and personal issues rather than public ones. Reid strengthens this notion as follows:

*Neilson privileges a political identity that transcends narrow or fixed definitions, or at least insists lived experience must, and should, take precedence over definitive or essentialist identity construction. To this end, the palpable quality of lived experience, whether highly pleasurable or intensely painful, is determinedly and consistently placed at his work's centre. (2011: 198)*

In Neilson's dramatic world individual identity is impossible. His characters have no real personality and this becomes problematic. As an experiential playwright, Neilson reveals the impossibility of absolute identity in the postmodern context. One of his new millennium plays, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2004), demonstrates such a tendency. The play introduces some dominant characteristics of Neilson's work that are present in all of his plays: namely the experiential quality of offstage and linguistic violence, poeticising madness, and trauma through the use of language.

### III. THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF DISSOCIA

Often depicting scenes of madness and mental illness, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* aroused much acclaim. The play was first staged at the Tron Theatre in Glasgow and at the Royal Lyceum Theatre as a part of the Edinburgh International Festival in 2004, and in 2007 it was performed at the Royal Court Theatre and toured London theatres. Since the play has an experiential style, critics were largely positive about the play. They readily appreciated the play's attempt to stage madness experientially. Rachel Halliburton from *Time Out London* praised the play's experiential quality saying "Shatteringly original, infuriating, rebelliously playful, and as intelligently experimental as any drama you'll see, it takes the audience member on a journey where it's impossible to feel control" (2007). Mark Ravenhill, pioneering playwright of British theatre in the 1990s and also a close friend of Neilson, commented in *The Guardian* that "Dissocia is an ambitious piece, a vast dreamscape with mental illness as its central theme. Neilson is keen not to suggest that it is a direct attempt to stage mental illness. That would be presumptuous... In many ways, it's an experiment in form" (2004).

One notable feature of Neilson's work is to show and explore the internal life of the mind. Experiencing his theatre takes audiences into the disturbing territory of mindscapes. In *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* he maps the darkest internal sides of a dysfunctional brain and portrays a psychologically complex character in an intensely romantic relationship set against social and political backgrounds in dramatically compelling ways. *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* is an exemplary instance of what Neilson called experiential theatre, which sets out to make the audience feel what has been presented on stage. The play does not just represent scenes of madness and mental collapse of a broken mind, but makes the audience experience the scenes of trauma and mental illness.

Directed by its writer, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* is a play with two distinct halves, which results in two contrasting acts. The play is about a young woman, Lisa, who suffers from dissociative identity disorder and is in search of her one lost hour on a transatlantic flight. In order to maintain her psychological balance, she has to visit Dissocia which means "the life" that Lisa's lost one "hour generated" (Neilson 2007: 67). The first act of the play takes place in Dissocia, a colourful, funny, exciting, brutal and surreal landscape where a polar bear sings a song, a scapegoat talks, a goat rapes a woman, and Lisa travels with a flying car. But this country exists only in Lisa's head. The second act is set in the psychiatric unit of a hospital, a real place where Lisa is being treated.

Dominic Dromgoole in his book titled *The Full Room: An A-Z of Contemporary Playwriting*, which offers a comprehensive survey of contemporary British drama, defines Neilson's theatre as "scorchingly dark" (215) and he even goes further to claim that

*[a] sense of threat, of potential violence, sexual and otherwise, hovers over all his work. Sex is a weapon constantly wielded, often by women against men. There is no end of shocking incidents, defecation, anal rape, hand relief, the whole kit and kaboodle but the word shock seems inappropriately trivial in the context of his work. Shock is a tool of manipulation, and Neilson is far too personal a writer to manipulate. (215-216)*

This is certainly the case in *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*. Neilson's use of offstage violence and abuse is noteworthy. It is obvious that Lisa's childhood memories highlight the question of trauma, the issue of the end of innocence and the loss of her trust in the concept of family and friendship. This traumatic breakdown explains the play's depressing mood. Judith Herman's observation about this kind of traumatising experience is an appropriate example for reading the play through its experiential quality:

*Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis. (51)*

In *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*, Neilson "wanted to find a form that would enable people to participate and enter into the psychological space of protagonist" (Smith 2008: 79). The spectators are experiencers of this brutal process and Lisa's efforts to gain her lost hour in order to balance her life. The play begins with Lisa's encounter with Victor Hesse, a therapist who "bears more than a passing resemblance to how we imagine Sigmund Freud" (Neilson 2015: 26) in the play and her colourful journey through a dream-like world which is similar to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. As a child Neilson reads *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* many times and has influenced Carroll's depiction of the inner life. He draws attention to this similarity in an interview with Mark Brown. Neilson mentions that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is "really just the transcript of something that was made up as he went along... It was that way of telling a story where your subconscious speaks quite freely. That's what I try to do when I'm writing plays" (2016).

Neilson adapts Lewis Carroll's story into theatre but there is a significant difference: He converts the Wonderland to a Troubleland that is full of violence and sex. Neilson tries to show the audience the loss of identity and traumatic childhood memories of abuse. In this context, the play also depicts a world of 'disconnectus erectus' identity. With these traumatic events, the audience confirms the cycle of a traumatic vertical hour through the eyes of a trauma victim. Lisa, the heroine of the play, sets out on a quest to find her lost hour which poisoned her past, present and future. She initially believes that her watch is an hour slow, when in fact she herself in the process of creating her own reality has deleted an hour from her life. In the course of this search which is a search for identity she delves into the deepest darkness of psychiatric breakdown which can be seen in Act One of the play:

**Victor** *Your hour has been traced to a country called Dissocia. Arrangements have been made for you to travel there immediately. On the back of my card you will see a number. Once I have gone, you must dial it and follow the instructions you are given. When you*

*arrive in Dissocia, you must take your quest known. Our agents will find you and assist you in your task.*

*Lisa* Wow... *it's like a spy or something!*

*Victor* *This is no game, Miss Jones. A stray hour is a source of tremendous energy. In the wrong hands, its properties could be exploited to the most devastating ends. There are those who will not take kindly to your efforts to retrieve it; they will do what they can to obstruct you and mislead you.*

*He adapts the air of a hypnotist.*

*Just remember- the hour is yours. Never doubt it, never deny it. This will be your protection. (Neilson 2007: 11)*

According to John Bull in *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*, spectators are the experiencers of two kinds of awareness: “[T]he world as magically conceived by Lisa in her disturbed and untreated state and the mundane realities of a material world that intersects and interacts with the world of Dissocia but never succeeds in denying its existence” (355). Traveling in Dissocia, Lisa meets a number of different surreal characters which are the symptoms of her madness. For instance, Jane, whose presence in *Dissocia* is “to be beaten and anally raped” (Neilson 2007: 42), in place of Lisa, sheds light on the possible reasons behind Lisa’s traumatic personality. Jane is anally raped in the play by a goat and Lisa watches this action helplessly. When Jane begins to scream, louder and louder, Lisa cannot bear watching. This scene reminds the audience of Lisa’s probable experience of being raped and abused in her childhood. In Act One of the play, the audience also experience Lisa’s madness when she encounters a polar bear that has an unfinished song for her titled ‘Who’ll Hold Your Paw When You Die?’. The lyrics of the song also give some clues about the causes of Lisa’s madness and draws a real picture of her mental breakdown:

*Who’ll hold your paw when you die?*

*Who’ll hear your whisper goodbye?*

*Who’ll be beside you when brain death is declared?*

*Who’ll think about you and all we have shared?*

*Some people call themselves friend*

*But will they be there when you end?*

*Life’s full of clatter*

*But none of it matters*

*Only who’ll hold your paw when you die. (Neilson 2007: 46)*

Neilson’s theatrical vision is an apolitical one ambivalently realised. His works address the most basic questions of how humans organise and govern themselves in modern societies. The writer uses theatre as a powerful tool of public and private discourse. He deploys character, plot and language to explore the most existential questions raised throughout the play. One of the most important questions in the play is on the human condition. As the writer puts it, “I’ve become increasingly interested in how you theatricalise people’s internal workings, the insides of their heads because a) it’s a subject that interests me b) it’s a challenge and c) it allows you to go anywhere and do anything you want” (qtd. in Clark 2007). So, in *Dissocia* the realism of the portraits combined with Neilson’s empathetic eye is very clear. Aggressive and eye-catching tactics were both employed within the text. As Neilson states,

*Dissoocia was a breakthrough for me in that (I believe) I managed to achieve with form what I had previously only achieved with content, in that the entire structure of the play was designed to force the audience into at least analogous identification with the protagonist, Lisa. Hopefully, when she is asked in the second act why she doesn't take the medication that will suppress the symptoms of her mental illness, the audience having been deprived of the spectacle of the first half and of any conclusion to its narrative- will understand on a visceral level why she is drawn to her condition. (Foreword 2007)*

Besides theatricalising madness, one of the most important issues raised throughout the play is the double standard of the mental health system. Cramer, in the programme for *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* highlights Neilson's criticism of the health system as follows:

*The main problem with the mental health system is it lacks subtlety; we're only beginning to find that. We're working our way to a situation where we can understand that each case is very individual and many elements need to be weighted up. If any system needs to be taken out of the hands of politicians, it's the mental health system. There's no big policy initiative or eye-catching idea that can take on the whole problem. (8-10)*

In light of these ideas we can read the second act of the play as the polar opposite of the first act. Contrary to the colourful settings and surrealist actions of the first act, the second act of *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* takes place in a colourless hospital room with a window and is naturalistic in style. The setting is a sterilised psychiatric clinic where Lisa is 'imprisoned' and forced to take prescribed medicine every few hours. She receives some visitors including her sister Dot who talks about Lisa's egoism and her boyfriend Vince who is very angry because of Lisa's resistance to taking medication. Although Lisa says "I do want to get better" (Neilson 2007: 87), and for the first time in the play smiles, she rejects taking medication. Just "a few pills, twice a day and that's all you've got to manage" says Dot and adds, "if you don't care about yourself, then at least do it for mum and for Mark and for me. I mean how do you think I feel, knowing everyone thinks my sister's a loony?" (Neilson 2007: 83). In this scene Vince and Dot "are presented as patient and basically sympathetic figures, struggling to cope with Lisa's repeated lapses" (Reid 2017:82). At the end of the play "Lisa is asleep. She looks at peace. In her arms she holds a small polar bear. We hear music at last. Coloured lights play on her face, swirling around her head. Dissocia still exists, caged within her head. There is little doubt that she will return to her kingdom. The music ends. Lights down" (Neilson 2007: 89). These final stage directions remind the audience that Lisa has a potential to return her wonderful world of dissocia.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Experiential theatre requires the audience to join the event and provide their own meaning and understanding to contradictory information and phenomena. Neilson's theatre is experiential in the sense that it wants the audience to experience and recognise what is seen on stage not only intellectually but also viscerally and emotionally. Thus, his theatre makes the audience feel as if they have experienced what has been presented on stage and react to the issues raised in the course of the play. As one of the concrete examples of experiential theatre in Britain, the power of *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* comes from its surreal setting and disturbing scenes. Through creating an experiential space in Act One of the play, Neilson destroys the borders between audience and actors. Act Two stands for a key to open the door to Lisa's kingdom. In this context, this act contains no colourful objects, no surreal images, no fantastic journeys or absurd elements. Instead, Neilson takes audiences into a naturalistic hospital scene and forces them to take a position along with Lisa. As a result, in *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*, Neilson portrays the experiential theatricality of violence and identity crisis through Lisa's wonderful and tragicomic journey into Dissocia. Throughout the play, Neilson explores the elements of Lisa's personal life, shows her psychological hell, maps the darkest internal sides of her madness and portrays a dramatic representation of traumatic aporia. This intense focus makes the audience feel, breathe and experience the fragile mental state, extreme emotions, violence, inner world and traumatic internal journey of the heroine as a probable domestic abuse victim.

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