

**Original Research Article****The Autopoietic Feedback Loop,  
Rethinking Performer–Audience Interaction in Theatre, from Bharata  
and Zeami to Erika Fischer-Lichte\***Morteza Ghaffari<sup>1</sup>, Majid Sarsangi<sup>1\*\*</sup>, Behrooz Mahmoodi Bakhtiari<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**

Audience studies remain one of the most challenging fields within theatrical theory. Despite the expansion of this field in recent decades and the sustained efforts of contemporary theorists to redefine the role of the audience in the performance process, a significant portion of classical Eastern approaches has received comparatively limited attention in cross-cultural and comparative scholarship. The present study aims to examine the concept of the autopoietic feedback loop in Erika Fischer-Lichte's aesthetics of performance and to compare it with audience-oriented communicative models articulated in major theoretical texts of classical Eastern theatre—namely the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (attributed to Bharata Muni) and the treatises of Zeami Motokiyo, including *Fūshikaden* and *Kakyo*. The central question of this article is to identify the points of convergence and divergence between the communicative approaches proposed by Bharata and Zeami, and Fischer-Lichte's concept of the autopoietic feedback loop. This qualitative study adopts a descriptive–analytical methodology and examines the three fundamental components of the autopoietic feedback loop—reversal of roles, community formation, and touch—in relation to audience-centered approaches in Indian Sanskrit theatre and Japanese *Nō* theatre. The findings reveal deep affinities among these theatrical systems, particularly in their shared emphasis on live, community-forming interaction between performers and spectators. At the same time, notable cultural differences emerge: while Eastern traditions foreground inner transformation and the spiritual dimension of performance, Fischer-Lichte's framework focuses on the ephemeral, unpredictable, and processual nature of performative interaction. By bringing these distinct theatrical systems into dialogue, the study facilitates a convergent exchange between Eastern and Western traditions and opens a new horizon for rethinking performer–audience interaction within a global context of theatre studies.

**Keywords:** *Theatre, Autopoietic Feedback Loop, Bharata, Zeami Motokiyo, Erika Fischer-Lichte.*

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**Introduction and Statement of the Problem**

In one of the most recent studies on theatre audiences, Matthew Reason and his colleagues (Reason et al., 2022, 3) refer to “the pleasures that come from grappling with the frequently evasive,

often ineffable and sometimes even paradoxical nature of audiences and audiencing,” while simultaneously drawing attention to the challenges inherent in engaging with this field of inquiry. This distinctive quality may itself account for the longstanding lack of sustained scholarly attention to the spectator as a central object of research. Audiences are, at once, both accessible and elusive, and rigorous academic engagement with such a domain requires analytical criteria that are carefully articulated and, crucially, flexible. In response to this challenge, theatre audience studies have gradually gained a more secure position within scholarly discourse over the past few decades. A notable example is *Theatre Audiences* (Bennett, 1997) by Susan Bennett, which initially foregrounded the marginalization of the audience within theatre studies. More than two decades later, this work is widely regarded as a foundational text in the study of spectatorship, no longer viewed as one of only a small number of pioneering contributions in the field. Despite the steady expansion of audience studies in recent decades—and ongoing debates over whether it constitutes a distinct discipline or an interdisciplinary field<sup>1</sup>—the role of the audience in Eastern theatrical traditions has remained conspicuously underexamined. The authors of the present article align with the argument advanced by Steve Tillis (Tillis, 2003), who proposes that it is time to move beyond rigid East–West binaries and ideologically charged divisions, and instead adopt a convergent approach aimed at expanding our conceptual understanding of theatre. Accordingly, this article seeks to conceptualize and comparatively analyze points of convergence between Western and Eastern approaches to theatre audiences. To this end, the influential ideas of Erika Fischer-Lichte concerning the relationship between performance and spectatorship are brought into dialogue with the theories of Bharata and Zeami Motokiyo, two foundational figures and theorists in classical Eastern theatre theory<sup>2</sup>. In *The Transformative Power of*

*Performance: A New Aesthetics* (2008), Fischer-Lichte introduces the concept of the “autopoietic feedback loop” as a framework for understanding the dynamic interaction between performers and spectators. By contrast, Bharata and Zeami Motokiyo, in their respective treatises, develop modes of audience engagement through carefully articulated and systematic technical principles. The central question guiding this study is, therefore, as follows: in what ways do the communicative approaches articulated by Bharata and Zeami Motokiyo converge with or diverge from Fischer-Lichte’s concept of the autopoietic feedback loop?

## Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive–analytical approach and is based on library research. Given that classical Indian and Japanese theatre traditions developed rich and systematic practices of documenting theatrical theory, the present article relies primarily on primary sources. These include the complete text of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the earliest known treatise on theatre in India traditionally attributed to Bharata, as well as key theoretical writings by Zeami Motokiyo, most notably *Fūshikaden* and *Kakyo*.

## Literature Review

From a historical standpoint, research on theatre audiences is deeply indebted to literary criticism. Within this intellectual lineage, reception theory and reader-response criticism may be regarded as foundational frameworks that later informed scholarly engagement with the theatre audience. From the 1980s onward, however, scholars working in performance studies and semiotics began to address the issue of spectatorship more explicitly, as evidenced by the influential works of Richard Schechner and Patrice Pavis. A decisive turning point in theatre audience studies can be identified in *Theatre Audiences* by Susan Bennett. In this work, Bennett adopts a comprehensive analytical approach,

examining both the production and reception of performance from the spectator's standpoint. Despite the undeniable importance of Bennett's book, a serious basis for critique lies in its insufficient attention to live performance and the dynamic, in-the-moment, and embodied interaction between actors and audience. The book focuses much more on the issues before and after the performance event than on the event of the performance itself.

Following Bennett's contribution, several prominent theorists—including Marvin Carlson (2001), Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008), Bruce McConachie (2008), Jacques Rancière (2008), Helen Freshwater (2009), Gareth White (2013), Carolyn Heim (2016), and Matthew Reason (2022) —have explored questions concerning the position and lived experience of audiences in theatre. Nevertheless, the majority of these studies have focused primarily on contemporary European theatre—particularly in Britain, Germany, and France—as well as North American contexts, leaving other theatrical traditions comparatively underexamined.

Alongside these works that have, in a sense, established a hegemony in theatre audience studies, there are also other valuable books and articles that address the position and role of the audience in Asian theatres. For example, Ralph Yarrow's *Indian Theatre: Theatre of Origin, Theatre of Freedom* (2001) emphasizes the vital role of theatre in activating and liberating the audience, and offers a contemporary reading of ancient Indian performance traditions. Philip Zarrilli, in *Kathakali dance-drama: Where gods and demons come to play* (2000), highlights the active approach of the audience in Indian performance. Richard Schechner also dedicated a chapter of his reference book, *Performance Theory* (2003), to the aesthetics of *rasa*. According to Schechner, unlike the common Western tradition where the process of reception is limited to seeing and hearing, in other cultures – including India – theatre is understood as a phenomenon that engages

other senses as well. This represents the audience's holistic engagement in the performance. Mandeli Narayanan, in *Space, Time and Ways of Seeing* (2022), examines Koodiyattam, the only surviving Sanskrit theatre. From Narayanan's perspective, Koodiyattam is not merely a theatrical form but a complete cultural ecosystem encompassing rituals, social rules, knowledge passed down through generations, and deep interaction with audiences.

J.K. Balbir (1962) essentially considers Sanskrit drama elitist, believing this art form was designed for a sophisticated audience. In contrast, Mallika Chattopadhyay (2013) views ancient Indian theatre as a communication tool that served even lower classes, considering the *Natya Shastra* a text that encourages innovation in relation to the audience, in addition to outlining performance rules. Kathleen Marie Higgins (2007) introduces the theory of *rasa* as the foundation of Indian aesthetics and the central axis of the performer-audience relationship. Uttara Asha Coorlawala (2010), with a practical description of the *rasa* experience, demonstrates the interactive core of *rasa* theory, seeking to understand what she calls the “an ongoing dialogue between performer and audience.” Shikha Rajpurohit (2019) examined the audience classification system in classical Indian theatre from the perspective of Bharata and Abhinavagupta, concluding that “audience response” was a primary aspect of the success or failure of a Sanskrit performance. Goutamali Goswami (2021) considers the audience an inseparable part of the world of Sanskrit performance. Vishakha Rajurkar Raj and Dev Vrat Singh (2021), by re-reading the *Natya Shastra*, present a comprehensive map of its communication patterns in relation to audiences.

Finally, in *The Routledge Companion to Audiences and the Performing Arts* (2022), only a limited portion of a single chapter—Which Global? Which Local? *Aucitya*, *Rasa*, *Development*, *Āśā*, and *Other Demands on the Audience*—is devoted to Eastern and Indian theatre. The authors demonstrate

how audience expectations are shaped not only by traditional values but also by cultural policies and contemporary socio-political forces.

With regard to Zeami Motokiyo's communicative approach and his views on the audience, one of the earliest studies to address this topic is Benito Ortolani's article *The Aesthetics of Noh from Zeami's Point of View and Audience Participation* (1972). Through a meticulous examination of central aesthetic concepts in Nō theatre—such as *yūgen* and *hana*—Ortolani foregrounds the inherently communicative dimension of these principles.

Similarly, Tom Hare, in *Zeami's Style* (1986), demonstrates how Zeami consistently sought to respond to the horizon of expectations of his audiences. Michiko Yusa (1987), in her article, examines one of the central concepts in Zeami's thought—*riken no ken* or seeing from the perspective of another—as a relational theory.

A chapter in Shelley Fenno Quinn's *Developing Zeami: The Noh Actor's Attunement in Practice* (2005) is devoted specifically to the relationship between actor and audience in Nō performance. Quinn argues that a subtle process of attunement between performer and spectator constitutes a core feature of Nō theatre. In addition, reference works such as *A New History of Medieval Japanese Theatre* (2019) by Noel John Pinnington address the historical evolution of audiences and their role in the production of meaning within Nō performance. Pennington reminds us that performances could acquire allegorical readings among audiences depending on the political and social contexts. From a critical standpoint, however, the majority of these valuable studies remain largely confined to the examination of Bharata's and Zeami's theoretical systems in isolation, without proposing new pathways for relating these classical frameworks to contemporary performance theory. The present article seeks to address this gap by establishing a dialogue between classical Eastern theatre theories and modern concepts in performance aesthetics.

## Theoretical Framework

### • The Autopoietic feedback loop

In the third chapter of *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, Erika Fischer-Lichte elaborates the concept of the autopoietic feedback loop and delineates its defining characteristics. The loop designates an interactive, dynamic, and inherently unpredictable process unfolding between performers and spectators. Within this process, actors and audiences alternately assume the positions of subject and object, continuously traversing permeable boundaries, so that the distinction between performer and spectator remains in constant motion. As Fischer-Lichte states: "Through their actions and behavior, the actors and spectators constitute elements of the feedback loop, which in turn generates the performance itself" (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 116). With the advent of the twentieth century and the transformations of modern theatre, the feedback loop moved to the center of theatrical discourse. In contrast to the bourgeois theatre of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the West, the relationship between performance and audience came to be understood as an essential dimension of the theatrical event. From Fischer-Lichte's theoretical standpoint, the interaction between performance and spectators is autopoietic. She adopts this term from biological theory<sup>3</sup>, where autopoiesis refers to a system capable of producing and regenerating itself from within, without reliance on external inputs. Accordingly, the relationship between performer and spectator may be understood as a self-generating system, continuously produced and reproduced through an embodied and generative process within the performative space. For Fischer-Lichte, performance constitutes an event whose trajectory cannot be fully predetermined or exhaustively rehearsed in advance. Performance may be understood as an experiment designed to examine the mutual effects between actor and spectator, and to identify the factors that determine the course and outcome of the feedback loop. She further identifies

three closely interrelated processes that remain in constant relation to the feedback loop and that serve as key analytical dimensions for understanding and examining autopoietic feedback. These three processes will be discussed in the following section.

#### • **The Reversal of roles**

The reversal of roles constitutes one of the central criteria in Fischer-Lichte's conception of the autopoietic feedback loop. To clarify this phenomenon, she draws on the performance *Dionysus in 69*, directed by Richard Schechner. At the outset of the performance, spectators are invited to participate in the celebration of Dionysus's birth. Once this invitation is extended, however, control over—or prediction of—subsequent developments becomes difficult, as the positions of performers and spectators may be exchanged. This dynamic is precisely what unfolds in Schechner's production. As a result, the physical presence of both actors and spectators becomes equally significant, jointly propelling the progression of the performance. As Fischer-Lichte states, "role reversal is particularly pertinent to the analysis of the autopoietic feedback loop between actors and spectators because it spurs the dynamic and multiple shifts in the subject-object relationship" (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 99). Role reversal thus produces an additional consequence for performance: transformation. Fischer-Lichte regards this transformation as a fundamental element of the aesthetics of performative action. In contemporary theatre, therefore, the primary concern is less the transmission of meaning than the creation of a transformative experience for both performer and spectator.

#### • **Community**

Another factor that plays a central role in the autopoietic feedback loop is the emergence of a community formed by performers and spectators through their shared bodily co-presence. In this context, Fischer-Lichte refers to a statement by Georg Fuchs, who maintains that "according to their

nature and their origin, player and spectator, stage and auditorium are not in opposition. They are a unit" (Fuchs 1959, 46, cited in Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 51). Within the community that takes shape during performance, aesthetic and socio-political dimensions converge and become inseparable, dissolving the boundaries between them. Indeed, community formation appears to be one of the most decisive aspects of Fischer-Lichte's concept of the autopoietic feedback loop. As she implicitly suggests in elaborating her theory, the feedback loop may persist even in the absence of role reversal or touch.

#### • **Touch**

Touch constitutes the final factor that Erika Fischer-Lichte identifies in the formation of the autopoietic feedback loop. She refers to a mode of touch whose possibility arises from the bodily co-presence of performers and spectators within a shared community. Fischer-Lichte, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, understands touch as a component of shared bodily presence that gives rise to a liminal and transformative experience. At the same time, Fischer-Lichte acknowledges that touch may not originally have been a defining feature of theatre as such; rather, one can only formulate hypotheses regarding historical contexts—such as medieval theatre or the theatre of William Shakespeare—in which physical contact between actors and spectators may have occurred (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 136-137). Taken together, by articulating a communicative framework and outlining criteria for its analysis, Fischer-Lichte proposes a systematic approach for understanding and examining interactions between performers and audiences within a theatrical event. In the following sections, each of the three key factors of the autopoietic feedback loop will be examined in relation to the works of Bharata and Zeami Motokiyo, to clarify points of convergence and divergence between their respective approaches and Fischer-Lichte's theoretical model.

## Discussion

### • Rasa and Hana, or ideas on the formation of community

Bharata and Zeami Motokiyo appear, each within their own theoretical systems, to have been concerned with shaping a dynamic and powerful communicative cycle between stage and audience. Since the formation of community within the process of performance constitutes the most crucial dimension of Erika Fischer-Lichte's concept of the autopoietic feedback loop, a substantial portion of the present study is devoted to examining this aspect in the thought of Bharata and Zeami. In this context, Leonard Pronko (Pronko, 1968, 427), referring to the participatory spirit of Eastern theatre, writes: "The power of communion in Asian forms is immense—communion, and not necessarily communication." By communion, Pronko gestures toward a deep, poetic attunement to performance; this mode of engagement may be understood as the emergence of a shared community between performers and spectators. This idea finds its most fully articulated expression in two overarching concepts central to Sanskrit theatre and Nō theatre: *rasa* and *hana*.

### • Rasa: the shared taste of performance

*Rasa* constitutes the foundational principle of Sanskrit theatrical aesthetics. The sixth chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is dedicated to the topic of *rasa*. For this reason, this chapter has been the most closely studied by scholars—both ancient and modern (Pollock, 2016, 47). Bharata famously states that "there is no *nāṭya* without *rasa*" (Bharata 2016, 54) a declaration that occupies a pivotal position in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The term *nāṭya* encompasses dance, theatre, music, and, more broadly, the performing arts as a whole. Consequently, without *rasa*, performance itself cannot exist.

In Chapter Six of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, verses (śloka) 31– 33 articulate the theory of *rasa* as follows: "Sensitive spectators, after enjoying the various emotions expressed by the actors through words,

gestures and feelings, feel pleasure, etc. This (final) feeling by the spectators is here explained as (various) *rasa*-s of *nāṭya*. Here are two verses handed down by tradition." (ibid., 55) *Rasa* may thus be understood as a mode of spectatorial reception and pleasure that emerges through performance. Although Sheldon Pollock, in his important book *A Rasa Reader* (2016), points out that in Bharata's view, *rasa* resides in the actors and the characters they represent, as well as within the playwright. However, a critique of this view can point to the visual aspect of *rasa*. Pollock himself confirms that the visual aspect was the primary condition of *rasas* in the early stages of its development in Indian aesthetics. If *rasa* exists solely in the actor or the writer, why must it necessarily be seen? And who is supposed to see it?

According to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, there are eight primary *rasas*, or fundamental aesthetic-emotional states: love and desire (*śṛṅgāra*), joy and laughter (*hāsyā*), sorrow (*kāruṇa*), anger (*raudra*), heroism (*vīra*), fear (*bhayānaka*), disgust (*bībhatsa*), and wonder (*adbhuta*)<sup>4</sup>. Each of these aesthetic states may be communicated to the spectator at different moments of a performance and experienced accordingly. Every *rasa* arises from a corresponding stable emotional disposition, known as *sthāyī bhāva*. The *sthāyī bhāva* constitutes a latent affective potential within the spectator, and each *rasa* is associated with its own specific *sthāyī bhāva*. For example, the *rasa* of *śṛṅgāra* (love) emerges from the *sthāyī bhāva* of *rati* (love). The task of acting—referred to as *abhinaya*—is to awaken this stable emotional disposition in the spectator, or, in other words, to transform the *sthāyī bhāva* into *rasa* within the audience. Significantly, Bharata defines *abhinaya* in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as the act of bringing the performance toward the spectators (Bharata, 2016,78). Through the awakening of the spectator's affective state, it is as if the performer draws the performance closer to the audience. At the same time, the spectator moves toward the performance in return. Susan

Schwartz, in her re-reading of Richard Schechner's views on the aesthetics of *rasa*, understands its aim as the attainment of a third identity shared between performer and spectator (Schwartz, 2004, 97). The formation of such a third identity requires effort and intentionality on both sides of the stage and calls for the active engagement of performer and spectator alike. They inspire one another and are, in turn, inspired by each other. The emergence of this third identity clearly bears the marks of a shared community formed between performers and spectators—one that, in accordance with Erika Fischer-Lichte's perspective, is grounded in their bodily co-presence. Fischer-Lichte's emphasis on bodily presence resonates strongly with the central role of physicality in classical Eastern theatre. Ralph Yarrow (2001,8) identifies physicality as one of the most significant potentials of Indian theatrical forms—an aspect that has drawn sustained attention from theatre directors worldwide. Classical Indian theatre thus constitutes a domain of embodied performance, in which performers mobilize the full expressive capacities of their bodies in an effort to shape a harmonious and empathetic community. The realization of such a community ultimately depends on the perception and experience of *rasa* on both sides of the stage.

• **Hana: the blossoming of performance in togetherness**

The dynamic and interactive exchange between performers and spectators occupies a central place in Japanese *Nō* theatre as well, where it finds its most distinctive expression in the concept of *hana*. In *Fūshikaden*, Zeami Motokiyo writes: “The Flower represents the principle that lies at the deepest recesses of our art. To know the meaning of the Flower is the most important element in understanding the *Nō*, and its greatest secret.” (Zeami, 1984, 29) Here, Flower translates the Japanese term *hana*, which functions as a core aesthetic concept throughout Zeami's theoretical writings. Literally meaning

“flower,” *hana* operates as a powerful metaphor and is closely associated with the freshness and vitality of performance. Zeami emphasizes that, in *Nō* theatre, *hana* signifies precisely the avoidance of stagnation. A close reading of his treatises reveals a sustained concern with interaction and communication with spectators, a concern that is directly reflected in his repeated emphasis on *hana*. What Zeami seeks is the emergence of an extraordinary moment—one that can arise only through a specific mode of interaction between actor and audience. Zeami further maintains that *hana* is inherently situational: only that which responds appropriately to the demands of the moment can be considered effective. When such moments are successfully realized, a profound connection is established between spectator and performance, and *hana* comes into being. Recognizing and responding to the demands of the moment is the task of the accomplished performer—one who, in Zeami's terms, has attained the “permanent flower” (*makoto no hana*)<sup>5</sup>. In this sense, *Hana* becomes the key through which a coherent and unified community shared by performers and spectators is formed. Benito Ortolani, in his elucidation of the concept of *hana*, writes: “*Hana* conveys, in one word, the idea of successful audience participation. The flower blossoms when the audience is taking an active part in the performance of the *Nō*, when it is, in a very real sense, performing the *Nō* with the actor. It refers to the miracle of communication achieved when actors and spectators unite in a spiritual community experiencing together the celebration of the *Nō*. Obviously, this does not mean a physical singing or dancing together; the audience is, at the height of participation, sitting or squatting motionless. The effectiveness of the performance brings the spectators together with the actors in recollection, mutual receptiveness, and response in the unique communication of beauty. This achievement is the flower.” In Ortolani's interpretation, particular emphasis is placed on the formation of a community within *Nō* theatre—one

that arises through an autopoietic feedback loop unfolding between performers and spectators. The loop to which Zeami refers, however, possesses a distinctive quality of its own: it emerges within a mist-like, poetic, indeterminate space, closely bound to notions of impermanence and transience intrinsic to Japanese philosophy. Zeami instructs the *shite* to turn toward the audience while simultaneously refraining from direct eye contact with the spectators (Zeami, 1984, 82). At this moment, a specific form of ambiguity is produced within the act of communication—an ambiguity that arises from the oscillation between subjectivity and objecthood. From this standpoint, Zeami establishes a distinctive mode of community in *Nō* theatre, one characterized by an atmosphere markedly different from that found in other theatrical traditions. The concept of *yūgen*, one of Zeami Motokiyo's most frequently invoked terms for articulating the aesthetics of *Nō*, places particular emphasis on this very ambiguity. It denotes a form of fragile beauty, a beautiful sadness, or, as Waley aptly describes it, “what lies beneath the surface” (Waley, 1921/1998, 22). This mode of communication seeks to deepen itself as far as possible. Within such a theatrical framework, identifying an autopoietic feedback loop between performer and spectator is by no means straightforward—and this difficulty constitutes an essential aspect of the nature of *Nō* itself. *Nō* aspires toward an unattainable mode of interaction, one whose ultimate aim is a state of “action through non-action.” In this process, spectators become engaged in apprehending and sensing the essence of the performance, or *kokoro*. Architecturally, the *Nō* stage incorporates the *hashigakari*, a bridge through which spirits enter the world of the living. Yet one may also imagine another bridge extending from the stage toward the spectators—one upon which, through the dissolution of boundaries between acting and spectating, a ritual encounter unfolds. Zeami employs the term *kenshō-dōshin* to describe this fusion of boundaries

between performers and spectators, a notion that may be translated as “becoming of one mind with the audience.” As a professional performer, Zeami was acutely aware that the creation of a communicative cycle within performance is paramount; indeed, for him, it constitutes the very essence of theatrical practice. Erika Fischer-Lichte places particular emphasis on the unpredictability of the feedback loop (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 113). This unpredictability may likewise be regarded as an intrinsic quality of *hana*. Zeami similarly seeks such unpredictability in performance and repeatedly stresses that *hana* must be capable of surprising the spectator. As Zeami writes, “The Flower of the actor is possible precisely because the audience does not know where that Flower may be located” (Zeami, 1984, 59). From this perspective, *hana* remains an inherently unpredictable phenomenon within the interaction between performer and spectator

#### • Community, rhythm, and the socio-political dimension

In examining the community-forming potential of theatre, Erika Fischer-Lichte draws attention to two additional foundational aspects. The first concerns the role of rhythm in shaping the autopoietic feedback loop, and the second involves the convergence of aesthetic and socio-political dimensions within this loop. A closer consideration of the theoretical frameworks of Bharata and Zeami Motokiyo reveals that both thinkers likewise place fundamental emphasis on these two aspects, albeit within distinct cultural and performative contexts. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *tāla* denotes “temporal rhythm,” and Bharata explicitly states that “*nāṭya* depends on *tāla*” (Bharata, 2016, 270). This rhythm sustains a bidirectional coherence between the stage and the spectators, maintaining continuity across both sides of the performative event. Within Zeami Motokiyo's thought, rhythm occupies a similarly central position. He refers to *jo-ha-kyū*, the rhythmic structure underlying every performance, which

may be translated respectively as “introduction or slow beginning,” “development,” and “accelerated conclusion.” Through this triadic structure, Zeami does not merely designate an external formal pattern, but rather an inner rhythm that must be observed at all levels of performance. For Zeami, performance is nothing other than the proper realization of this rhythm. From this perspective, the autopoietic feedback loop may be understood as a fundamentally rhythmic and respiratory cycle—one that binds the bodies of performers and spectators within a shared, living atmosphere, animating the theatrical event through a common temporal and corporeal pulse. Furthermore, with regard to the alignment of aesthetic and socio-political dimensions emphasized by Erika Fischer-Lichte, clear manifestations of this overlap can be observed in both Sanskrit theatre and Nō theatre. Through the experience of *rasa* and *hana*, spectators participate not only at an aesthetic level, but also at a social and even political level, insofar as both concepts foreground active presence, collective awareness, and full audience participation. From the perspective of Ralph Yarrow (2001, 125), the *Nāṭyaśāstra*—in which the text itself functions as performance—seeks to establish the highest possible condition of receptive and participatory engagement on the part of the audience, aiming to activate the full spectrum of meaning-making. The issue at stake, therefore, is not merely an aesthetic one. By the same logic, *hana* in Nō theatre affirms a mode of collective perception and shared sensorial experience through which aesthetic engagement is transformed into a social and community-forming practice.

• **Different communities: from spiritual experience to attention**

Thus far, it has become evident that the formation of community in the course of performance constitutes a fundamental objective in the theatrical thought of Bharata and Zeami Motokiyo. The question that follows, however, concerns how the communities envisioned by these thinkers differ from the model of community

formation proposed by Erika Fischer-Lichte. The community outlined by Fischer-Lichte is inherently ephemeral: it dissolves shortly after the performative act has taken place. Moreover, this form of community does not require its members to share stable or enduring beliefs and convictions (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 125). Neither of these characteristics, however, appears to apply to the communities formed within Sanskrit theatre and Nō theatre. In most cases, spectators attending these performances are what Richard Schechner describes as “integral audiences”—that is, spectators whose presence is essential for the completion of the performance itself (Schechner, 2003, 220). A community composed of such spectators does not simply disintegrate once the performance ends. Rather, these spectators seek an experience that unfolds within a shared cultural and intellectual framework—one that links them both to the subject matter of the performance and to one another. Consequently, performers and spectators within these traditions tend to share a constellation of common beliefs and values, allowing the community to persist beyond the temporal boundaries of the performance event. Erika Fischer-Lichte speaks of a form of transformation that occurs for both spectators and performers within the autopoietic feedback loop. The transformation she theorizes, however, differs fundamentally from the *telos* of *rasa* and the experience of *mokṣa*<sup>6</sup> in the Indian spectator, or from the Zen-like illuminative experience<sup>7</sup> associated with the spectator of Nō theatre. It is precisely this divergence that distinguishes her conception from Eastern theatrical traditions. Fischer-Lichte is concerned with a mode of attention that is distinct from profound spiritual or illuminative transformation (Perić, 2016). From her perspective, transformation leads toward an open-ended and indeterminate horizon, marked by effects that remain fundamentally unpredictable. By contrast, Eastern theatrical performances typically orient themselves toward a spiritual objective. The *waki*’s prayer in the second act of a Nō play brings about a state of calm and

resolution for both the shite and the audience, while the experience of *rasa* signifies a movement toward the divine (Odom & Raghunathan, 2022, 101). In another observation, Erika Fischer-Lichte (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 126) argues that the theatrical communities that emerged within avant-garde theatre after the 1960s are “not the result of clever staging strategies, as was assumed at the beginning of the twentieth century. Instead, they occur due to the specific turns the autopoietic feedback loop takes.” By contrast, as demonstrated above, community formation in traditions such as Nō theatre and Sanskrit theatre is shaped explicitly and systematically through carefully articulated strategies. The Nāṭyaśāstra may be regarded as a paradigmatic example of this approach, insofar as it codifies precise performative principles designed to cultivate and sustain particular modes of audience participation and communal experience. Moreover, traces of an impulse toward domination and coercion can be discerned within some of the community-forming theatrical movements that emerged after the 1960s. In many such performances, spectators are in effect pressured to participate in collective actions in order to gain entry into these communities. Although Erika Fischer-Lichte maintains that these performances imposed nothing upon their audiences, she herself repeatedly refers to groups of spectators who left the performance space dissatisfied. As Fischer-Lichte notes, “A ‘real’ community thus only existed for those involved in the collective actions” (ibid., 123). What remains unaddressed, however, is the question of how the remaining spectators related to the performance. By contrast, it is difficult to imagine circumstances in which a performance in Nō theatre or Sanskrit theatre would exert comparable pressure upon its audience. Indeed, the extended duration characteristic of these classical forms already presupposes that spectators may, at different moments and according to their own inclination, choose whether or not to align themselves with the communal experience. Both Bharata and Zeami Motokiyo explicitly emphasize in their writings the necessity of

adjusting performance to environmental conditions and to the disposition of the audience. For example, the concept of “*pravṛtti*” in the Nāṭyaśāstra confirms that a performance should be sensitive to the characteristics of audiences in different regions.

#### • The Reversal of roles, or seeing from a separate perspective

The reversal of roles constitutes another key factor in understanding the autopoietic feedback loop. Through role reversal, the conventional subject–object relationship is destabilized, and the clear boundary between spectator and performer is rendered porous. This raises a crucial question: does such a reversal occur physically in Sanskrit drama and Nō theatre, in a manner comparable to what took place in Dionysus in 69? In Nō performances, spectators never step onto the stage. Similarly, Sanskrit theatre does not envisage the physical presence of spectators within the performance space. Neither Bharata nor Zeami refers to such spatial displacement in their treatises. This absence of physical role exchange, however, does not imply that performers and spectators remain fixed within rigid positions. Rather, in both Sanskrit theatre and Nō theatre, the acts of spectating and performing appear to undergo a continuous and subtle process of exchange—one that unfolds as an inner and perceptual transformation over the course of the performance. The concept of *riken no ken* constitutes one of the key notions in the work of Zeami Motokiyo. This term appears across several of Zeami’s treatises and acquires different nuances depending on its context (Yusa, 1987, 332). In *Kakyo*, Zeami employs this expression to describe a particular form of role displacement. *Riken no ken* literally means “seeing from a detached perspective,” that is, “an actor must come to have an ability to see himself as the spectators” (Zeami, 1984, 81). Accordingly, the actor does not assume the position of the spectator in a physical sense; rather, through disciplined practice, concentration, and imaginative

awareness, the actor places himself in the position of the audience and becomes, at the same time, a spectator of the performance. He thus occupies a dual position, functioning simultaneously as subject and object. In this sense, the Eastern performer must also cultivate the capacity of a skilled spectator. Indian performers undergo a comparable process in their practice. Richard Schechner draws attention to this dimension of Indian performance when he notes that “the first spectator is the performer herself. If the self-who-is-observing is moved by the self-who-is performing the performance will be a success” (Schechner, 2003, 356). Uttara Asha Coorlawala similarly refers to a distinctive form of spectatorship in Indian dance, identifying a spectator who observes the work of the dancer from within the act itself. This spectator is none other than the dancer herself, who remains fully engaged in performance while simultaneously maintaining a reflective distance. Coorlawala characterizes this position as “inner seeing while doing” (Coorlawala, 2010, 133). Furthermore, Narayanan, in his analysis of Koodiyattam performance, points out that in Koodiyattam, the actor becomes the first spectator, and transmits this experience of seeing in an embodied way to the audience (Narayanan, 2021, 118). But do spectators, in turn, also come to occupy the position of the performer? Zeami Motokiyo, in *Kakyo* (1984, 97), refers to moments in performance during which nothing appears to happen on stage. In *Nō* theatre, such moments of non-action are known as *ma*—intervals of complete stillness between two actions. During these intervals, performers sustain the highest degree of tension and concentration without executing any physical movement. These luminous moments may be understood as moments implicitly reserved for the spectators. The suspension of action and movement allows spectators to enter the scene through mental and imaginative engagement. At this point, spectators may come to experience themselves

as present within the performative space, placed under the gaze of performers who are themselves engaged in an indirect act of watching.

#### • Touch and the classification of audiences

The issue of touch constitutes the final criterion for examining the autopoietic feedback loop. This question has been addressed even within Western avant-garde practices. Erika Fischer-Lichte emphasizes that theatre has never been grounded solely in physical contact between spectators and performers. Nevertheless, the quality of touch—though not necessarily in a physical sense—has consistently played a significant role in Eastern theatrical traditions, a concern that finds clear expression in the classification of audiences. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Bharata identifies three types of spectators: *sāmājika* (the general audience), *prekṣaka* (the ideal spectator), and *praśnika* (the arbitrator audience) (Rajpurohit, 2019). The *prekṣaka* apprehends the emotions of the performance in depth, and if the spectator’s mind is satisfied, the performance is deemed successful (*ibid.*, 8). Such a spectator is required to possess a pure and intuitive heart, literary knowledge, and the ability to grasp the subtle theoretical nuances of poetry. Bharata thus singles out a specific group within the audience as the primary addressee and the criterion for evaluating performance. The *praśnika*, occupying the role of judge, serves as a point of reference for the performing ensemble in technical matters (*ibid.*, 9). Furthermore, Abhinavagupta—the most influential commentator on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*—introduces a group of cultivated spectators under the term *sahr̥daya*: those who possess a “sympathetic heart” and are capable of attuning themselves to the message and affect of the work (*ibid.*, 12). The *sahr̥daya* may therefore be regarded as the spectator most fully prepared to enter the autopoietic feedback loop. Zeami Motokiyo likewise develops his own approach to the classification of audiences. In *Kakyo*, he writes: “There are spectators of discernment who do not really understand the art of the *Nō*. On the other hand, there are those spectators who possess a true grasp of the essential nature of the *Nō* but who cannot

observe subtle differences. Those who have both a practical and a theoretical understanding of Nō represent the highest level of spectator” (Zeami, 1984, 101). In a treatise written specifically for his own theatrical troupe, Zeami Motokiyo addresses the question of which spectator may be regarded as ideal. This emphasis, however, does not imply indifference toward other audience members. Zeami repeatedly and explicitly states that Nō performance aims to generate satisfaction and joy among all spectators, and that the emotions and customs of the people in each region must be taken into consideration in performance (*ibid.*, 41). Like Bharata, he thus acknowledges the differing capacities and tastes of spectators.

This approach recalls the concept of the “horizon of expectations” in reception theory. According to Hans Robert Jauss, the reader—or, in this context, the spectator—approaches a work equipped with presuppositions, knowledge, values, and cultural, social, and historical expectations, on the basis of which interpretation takes place. Both Zeami and Bharata demonstrate a clear attentiveness to the horizons of expectation of their respective audiences. Uttara Asha Coorlawala encapsulates a crucial dimension of reciprocal contact between performer and spectator in a striking formulation: “each body performing today bears on its surface a history of audience readings” (Coorlawala, 2010, 133). This observation also resonates with Wolfgang Iser’s view that meaning emerges through the interaction between reader and text, and closely aligns with Hans-Georg Gadamer’s position that a text is not confined to authorial intention but continues to unfold through successive acts of reading. The convergence between reception theory and audience-centered approaches in classical Eastern theatre is therefore not accidental. Rather, it underscores the importance of interaction and the quality of contact between the two sides of the stage in Eastern theatrical traditions. From the perspectives of Bharata and Zeami Motokiyo, the endurance and depth of the feedback loop become possible only through such contact—a mode of

engagement in which the boundary between seeing and being seen collapses, and meaning takes shape within the horizon of a shared performative experience.

## Conclusion

In recent decades, audience studies have become one of the central and most contested areas within theatre research. Nevertheless, a substantial portion of this scholarship has been shaped primarily by Western theatrical models of communication, while paying comparatively limited attention to the theoretical and experiential traditions of Eastern theatre. This is despite the fact that key texts such as the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the treatises of Zeami Motokiyo clearly demonstrate that the relationship between performer and spectator has long constituted a fundamental concern within Eastern theatrical thought. In this study, Erika Fischer-Lichte’s central concept of the autopoietic feedback loop—understood as a communicative mechanism between performers and spectators—was examined in comparison with the communicative systems articulated by Bharata and Zeami Motokiyo. Fischer-Lichte conceptualizes the feedback loop as a dynamic, flexible, and unpredictable process structured around three core components: the reversal of roles, the formation of community, and touch. The comparative analysis presented here has shown that all three components are likewise present within Eastern theatrical systems, albeit articulated through distinct cultural and epistemic frameworks. With regard to community formation, Bharata and Zeami Motokiyo explicitly address the emergence of a shared collective between performers and spectators through specific aesthetic concepts. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the bond between actor and audience is constituted through the experience of *rasa*, resulting in a collective revelation and the formation of a third identity shared by performers and spectators. Zeami, in turn, articulates the concept of *hana*, which blossoms at moments of shared understanding between performer and spectator.

From this perspective, the formation of community in Nō theatre may be understood as an achievement of hana. By contrast, closer examination of the other two components reveals that the approaches of Bharata and Zeami Motokiyo diverge more substantially from the ideas proposed by Erika Fischer-Lichte. Within Eastern theatrical traditions, the reversal of roles and touch do not occur in a physical sense, but rather at non-physical and perceptual levels. Concepts such as *riken no ken* in Nō theatre require the actor to view himself from the position of the spectator, thereby simultaneously inhabiting the roles of performer and audience. Moreover, the systematic classification of spectators in the works of Bharata and Zeami indicates that both thinkers acknowledged differing degrees of contact among audience members—degrees that arise from uneven modes of aesthetic reception and perceptual engagement. This differentiation underscores the notion that contact in Eastern theatre is not uniform, but varies according to the spectator's capacity for understanding and experiential participation.

From a broader perspective, classical Eastern theatre conceives the ultimate aim of the communicative cycle as the attainment of a spiritual and transformative experience. By contrast, in Erika Fischer-Lichte's theory, the feedback loop places greater emphasis on generating moments of attention, presence, and unpredictability within the performance process itself. Eastern and Western approaches, therefore—each articulated through distinct aesthetic languages and conceptual logics—offer different yet complementary ways of understanding the relationship between performance and audience. Seen in this light, bringing these approaches into dialogue can open new horizons for contemporary theatre practitioners, enabling fresh modes of experimentation in encounters with spectators. Among Indian performers, it is often said that “a performer is only as great as her or his audience.” This remark once again underscores that theatre is nothing other than what takes place between actor and spectator.

## Endnotes

1. This issue has been the subject of extensive debate among theatre scholars. Susan Bennett (1997) notes that audience studies cannot constitute a discipline in its own right, since the concept of the audience may vary according to cultural context and medium. Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008) likewise emphasizes that the audience is part of the performance itself rather than an independent object of study. For further discussion, see Matthew Reason et al., “The Paradox of Audiences,” pp. 4–6, in *The Routledge Companion to Audiences and the Performing Arts*. (2022)
2. When employing the term “theorist” in reference to Bharata Muni and Zeami Motokiyo, it is necessary to remain attentive to important historical and conceptual distinctions. Bharata is a largely semi-legendary figure in Indian theatre history: the dates and place of his birth and death are unknown, and some scholars argue that “Bharata” is not a historical individual but rather a generic name meaning “actor,” under which the *Nāṭyaśāstra* was authored or compiled. Zeami, by contrast, was not only a theorist but also the originator of Nō theatre, as well as a prominent playwright and actor of his time.
3. This concept was first introduced in biology in the 1970s by two Chilean scientists, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela.
4. Later, Abhinavagupta added the ninth rasa, tranquility (*Śānta*), to this set.
5. *Makoto no hana* stands in contrast to *Jibun no hana*: two distinct qualities in the work of the Nō actor. *Jibun no hana* arises from outward beauty and the freshness of youth, whereas *Makoto no hana* is attained only after years of sustained and disciplined practice.
6. *Mokṣa* is a profound concept in Indian philosophy, referring to the ultimate liberation of the soul from suffering, ignorance, and worldly attachments.
7. Zeami Motokiyo was deeply indebted to Zen Buddhism in the formulation of his ideas (see Nafziger-Leis, 2008; Ghaffari & Fereshteh Hekmat, 2019).

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