

## A Weekend with the Imperial Theatre

Lindsay Greer

*The performance workshop “My Augusta: A Workshop in Community Engagement” was organized and lead by Dr. Gretchen Stein Rhodes during the Patti Pace Performance Festival, February 2014. This essay weaves together snapshots and memories of the weekend, culminating in our collaboratively devised performance based upon community and cultural memory.*

### Excursion<sup>1</sup>:

*“It smells like the rusted harp that lived in my Grandmother’s garage for most of my childhood” — my notes from the excursion*

The Imperial Theatre smells like a jewelry box full of heirlooms. The theatre smells of polished, ornate treasures that would have crumbled years ago if they hadn’t been delicately attended to. It smells that dusty smell of history that you find in old books with age spots and worn covers. The Imperial Theatre is an old book: it tells a history of vaudeville, cinema, and performance. It contains a rich history that I want to be invited into.

My group enters the theatre. The air is thick with awe and panic. The panic belongs to me because we are already supposed to be back at the vans. The tour guide, gracious in his delivery of the theatre’s history, makes jokes and delights in his role as storyteller. All of this is wonderful . . . except we are running behind. It’s probably my fault. We enjoyed a long leisurely lunch before finding our way to the theatre. I don’t recall the name of the restaurant we dined at. It was Asian fusion cuisine, offering everything from sushi to pho. I ordered something with tofu. Joanna Lugo and I are co-facilitating a group of students whose task is to devise a performance based on community and memory of Au-

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gusta, Georgia. Our first task: tour a cultural/historical site in the community. The Imperial Theatre is casually mentioned by one of the students from Augusta. A little about me: I love film history. Especially when it involves pre-cinema and/or early cinema. As she begins to recount how the theatre started as a vaudeville venue and transitioned into a silent movie house, I try not to lose my cool. I keep it together sufficiently as the other students come to consensus that yes, the Imperial Theatre will be our site of cultural and historical memory. After making the decision, we pay our bills and walk briskly (we are already cutting it close) to the theatre. Upon reaching the space we are told that we need to schedule a tour ahead of time, and would we like to schedule one for later in the week? No, we would not. Deflated, we hold a group meeting beneath the theatre marquee. A minute later, the door to the theatre opens and a man walks out, inquiring about whether or not we are available to take a tour right now. He is an alumni of the college and wants to help us out. "We would love a tour," I say, amidst the other thankful cries of agreement. "But we need to make sure it's on the shorter side."

### **Photograph:**

Walking towards the theatre, my phone suddenly dies. It's horrible timing since I've just glimpsed a sign for Kodak Kodachrome that I understandably want to celebrate on Instagram. Kodachrome is a color-reversal film that had been used in both still photography and cinematography until it was discontinued in 2010. The sign pricks me with nostalgia and the knowing wink of Kodachrome being a thing of the past, not a product the shop currently sells. I ask the students if someone can take a photo with their phone. A student from Georgia State College graciously snaps a shot and mails it to me. A student from Kennesaw State tells me she recently inherited her grandmother's 35mm film cameras and has been learning darkroom processes.

### **Performance:**

The final performance contained multiple narratives emerging from the technological and performance histories we found haunting the space. Writing about narratives of community and devised performance in the book *Making a Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices*, Emma Govan, Helen Nicholson and Katie Normington write: "narrative inhabits the space between fiction and reality. Or, to put it another way, narrative inhabits a space between how life is usually constructed and perceived, and how it might be reconstructed and re-imagined for the future" (Govan, Nicholson, Normington 75). Our performance emerges from this space between fiction and reality. The students from Augusta fill in the gaps in the rest of our knowledge of the town's history, creating a much richer and perhaps truer representation of the Imperial Theatre, a

space that serves as a historical marker for the triumphs and tragedies experienced by the town over the past century.

The performance starts as a silent film might, with the opening chords of “The Mighty Wurlitzer”, the name given to the pipe organ sitting towards the entrance to the theatre. The students became enamored with the instrument, and one man in particular decides to embody the musician who played the organ during the silent era. As he presses each key, he describes the emotion it evokes in the crowd. The other members of our weekend troupe wait for his cues and respond with appropriate “oohs” and “ahhhs”. One of the women in the group approaches the stage from the audience, looking around the theatre. She marvels at what we imagine must be a large screen filled with the stars of silent film. Another woman enters, eating popcorn and marveling at the advent of sound. A couple screams during the screening of *Jaws*. The final two students enter, speaking excitedly about the auditions for the upcoming production put on by the “Augusta Players”, the local theatre troupe currently occupying the Imperial’s stage. With every performer now on stage, they form a tableau and take turns performing a gesture and a sound. One by one, they begin chanting: “You can’t tear our theatre down.” Like so many other historical movie theatres, the Imperial performs the space between ruination and renovation, circulating between forgotten and rediscovered as generations and technologies shift.

*“You can’t tear our theatre down.”*

Immersed in the history of Augusta for only a short time, the Imperial allowed us to explore community memory through the lens of spectator and performer, splicing together the multitude of film and performance histories held within the space. Making performance allowed us to experience a part of Augusta that ties it to so many larger histories, and embeds our histories within it. I carry the memories with me like a precious artifact.

## Work Cited

Govan, Emma, Helen Nicholson, Katie Normington. *Making a Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.



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