

Claire Warden

The democratic stage?: the relationship between the actor and the audience in professional wrestling

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The democratic stage?: the relationship between the actor and the audience in professional wrestling

Theatrical wrestling: two-way actor-audience communication

- 1 7 January 2013, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE)'s flagship Monday night spectacular RAW: the franchise's most prominent heel CM Punk confronts returning hero The Rock. Popular with 'smart marks' ('smarks', that is those fans who are enjoyably aware that behind the polished storylines linger backstage rivalries and promotional strategies), Punk, both as face ('goodie') and heel ('baddie'), has always set himself up as 'voice of the voiceless', a Chicago-native who, in the tradition of legend 'Stone Cold' Steve Austin, rejects the powers of authority in favour of nonconformism. While Stone Cold was a beer-swilling red neck, Punk is an alternative rock-loving, tattooed advocate of a straight edge lifestyle – drug-free, smoke-free, alcohol-free – yet both set themselves up as rebels challenging bigger corporate systems. Punk's promo berates both the fans for their unquenchable desire for entertainment and, seasoned with truth, the WWE business machine where "you don't get noticed until you've moved a couple of t-shirts." (WWE 7 January 2013) Aping Punk's own catchphrase, self-proclaimed 'People's Champion' The Rock responds "here in the WWE universe there's no such thing as the voiceless." (ibid) The Rock orchestrates the audience in a chant of "Cookie Puss", a new addition to his long line of participatory catchphrases, while Punk accuses the crowd of being "the puppets you are." (ibid) The entire scene is infused with comments about the audience and its position in the professional wrestling arena, thereby enabling us once again to read this popular self-proclaimed 'sports entertainment' genre through the parlance of performance studies. For in the theatre the relationship between actor and audience shifts, depending on genre and the spatial arrangement of the arena; it varies between the illusory mimesis of naturalism which compels the audience to sit in silent darkness following a linear story, to the work of contemporary performance artists such as Marina Abramovic whose *The Artist is Present* encourages visitors to sit opposite her at a table, presenting herself as vulnerable and open to interaction. Wherever a performance falls on this spectrum, the relationship between the actor and the audience in the theatre is always a central concern.
- 2 In connecting professional wrestling with theatrical performance I am following a well-trodden path. Roland Barthes claims wrestling as a 'spectacle of excess' and many critics follow his lead. Influenced by the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin in his *Rabelais and his World*, cultural critic John Fiske, for example, reads wrestling as a carnivalesque spectacle, a performance of the grotesque rather than a sport in any traditional sense. (1989, pp. 80-3) In her book, *Professional Wrestling: sport and spectacle*, Sharon Mazer, too, understands professional wrestling as a morality play, ballet, folk drama, vaudeville and even as an example of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. (1998, p. 16) Whether Mazer's comprehensive list of genres is fully justifiable remains open to debate but the accusation of artificiality often levelled at professional wrestling is rendered moot as reading it as performance from the off immediately extricates the form from these allegations, freeing it for new interpretations and analyses.
- 3 Placing my argument in these debates about wrestling and performance, in this article I aim to identify the changing relationship between the wrestling stage and spectators (actors and audience). In this I do not presume homogeneity; wrestling audiences contain a range of different types, all responding to the spectacle in their own ways. There are even remarkable differences between audiences from town to town with some areas (notably New York and the UK) regarded as particularly 'hot' (that is vocally and intelligently engaged with the performance) smark crowds. Over the years, the audience for this type of wrestling has

changed quite considerably, from the working-class Irish exiles of the carnival to the John Cena (most prominent WWE face) T-shirt wearing, multi-media savvy children of the 21st century.

- 4 While attempts will always be made to manipulate the emotional response of the audience, it is the viewer/consumer who ultimately decides how they will respond. This chimes with Fiske's conclusions:

Popular culture always is part of power relations; it always bears traces of the constant struggle between domination and subordination, between power and various forms of resistance to it or evasions of it, between military strategy and guerrilla tactics (1989, p. 19).

- 5 While the autonomy of the spectator is a given on the independent wrestling scene, this 'constant struggle' becomes particularly troublesome and fascinating when we turn to the WWE, a promotion that stands apart from other wrestling companies simply because of its financial clout. At first glance, the relationship between the actors and the audience may appear straightforward. Adept at manipulating the crowd, it might seem that the wrestlers (on behalf of owner Vince McMahon and the shadowy board of directors) lead the dumb spectators by the nose, that they are indeed the "puppets" CM Punk presumes they are. Grounding my argument on the issues raised by CM Punk/The Rock's recent promos, this article will explore the idea of the voiceless crowd, pinpointing moments when even the WWE capitalist juggernaut is unable to quench the voices leading to, what I will claim, are brief moments of radical democracy, potentially presenting professional wrestling as surprisingly one of the most egalitarian contemporary performance spaces.

Influencing the story: the audience as co-creator

- 6 The WWE has many tools at its disposal in order to manipulate (or perhaps 'shape' might be a better word) its audience's viewing experience. The most obvious, given that most spectators consume wrestling predominantly through screens, is the camera. Professional wrestling is fascinating as a moment of live performance constantly conscious of the television audience. This makes for a very different sort of viewing (and performing) experience than going to the London's Globe Theatre to watch *Hamlet*. In recent years, performance studies have sought to understand better the relationship between live performance and mediating forms. Traditionally imagined as a reductive binary, liveness and mediation actually are far more connected and reciprocal than might first be imagined. Nowhere is this clearer than in the relationship between the live event and television. In his 2012 book *Liveness*, Philip Auslander questions conventional wisdom regarding the live event and the mediated event, challenging "the traditional assumption that the live precedes the mediatized." (2012, p. 14) Wrestling is a prime example of Auslander's contention for, often, it seems that the television audience is more prominent than the live audience using close up promos and particular 'spots' which could only be picked up by a well-placed camera. Indeed "the multiple-camera set-up enables the television image to recreate the perceptual continuity of the theatre." (Auslander 2012, p. 19) Televisual mediation actually makes the happening appear even more like a theatrical event. Television, as Auslander illustrates, enjoys the specific benefits of "immediacy and intimacy," two elements essential to the WWE's shaping of its audience's experience.
- 7 Coupled with the on-screen visuals is the commentary team, acting as narrators. Traditionally the commentary team consists of a play-by-play caller akin to a traditional sporting announcer and a colour commentator, often making heelish comments about the babyface wrestler. While these roles have blurred in recent years, the commentators remain an integral part of the mediated performance experience. Unlike traditional sporting commentators, wrestling callers are not so much objective readers of the event than they are actors, even, as with Jerry 'The King' Lawler and Booker T, picking up their boots again and actually getting into the ring.
- 8 However, even in a promotion like the WWE that initially seems to have complete economic and communicative control, the relationship between actor and audience resonates

with tensions and complexities, the audience playing a participatory role in shaping the performance. The burgeoning 'reality' television genre, particularly in the last two decades, has caused the WWE to emphasise audience, particularly through its pay-per-view event *Taboo Tuesday* (from 2004 and later renamed *Cyber Sunday*) and, more recently, the X-Factor-style *Tough Enough*. However, this and other attempts to emulate reality television's 'you call the shots' mindset (particularly the most recent use of Twitter and the WWE-owned video format *Tout*) have met with a lukewarm critical reaction, frequently deemed derivative and half-hearted.

9 Unlike these experiments in the reality genre, promoting a passive audience, moments in WWE history clearly reinforced the power of the spectator. In fact these moments happen on a small scale on a fairly regular basis. As an example, in the theatre silence is (generally though not universally) a requirement; in professional wrestling, silence is the wrestler's most painful experience, second only to chants of 'boring'. More than cheering or 'popping', the wrestling crowd displays its real power when its proclamations are more negative. Then there are the placards in the audience, a regular sight at all WWE events. There are the customary 'Cenation' banners, but there are also 'smark' signs such as the 'Anonymous RAW GM?' sign seen at a taping of RAW in Liverpool in 2011 responding to a WWE storyline that had disappeared without resolution. These placards provide brief moments of democratic expression.

10 However, there remain other more significant moments, which interrupt the well-oiled WWE machine, inadvertently transferring power from the promoters to the audience in interesting ways. This is, I claim, one of the most distinctive and unique aspects of wrestling performance. Live performance, as Auslander informs us, is often predicated on the reciprocal relationship between the actor and the audience. However, "as happy as performers and spectators generally are to be in one another's presence, it is not necessarily the case that the performance itself is open to being influenced by the audience of the audience wishes to assume that responsibility." (2012, p. 66) Certainly there is truth in Auslander's claim. And yet in professional wrestling, a form, it must be remembered, often regarded as empty illusory opium for the masses, we find a theatrical form that shivers with potential actor-audience disruption. Two matches by way of demonstration occurred at the WWE's (and indeed, all of professional wrestling's) flagship event, *Wrestlemania* in 2002 and 2004, and each forced the primary performers involved to adapt their performance in order to meet the expressed preference, and indeed expectation, of the live crowd. That these two examples should have taken place on the greatest stage is surely no coincidence – uniquely high ticket prices for all but the most remote seats and a nostalgia-laden promotional build-up often serve to attract a generally older, more knowledgeable spectator than would in all likelihood be found at regular events.

11 2002's *Wrestlemania XVIII* saw The Rock face off against the recently returned veteran, Hulk Hogan (WWE 2002). A protracted run-up to the event initially saw Hogan attempt to resurrect the contemptuous, egotistical persona he had used successfully in a stint in WCW (World Championship Wrestling), Ted Turner and Eric Bischoff's alternative promotion which, for a number of years, seemed to be beating the WWE in the ratings but ultimately failed after a number of mistakes (Reynolds and Alvarez 2005). Hogan's turn from long-time hero to villain is considered one of the most shocking and, in retrospect well delivered, moments in the history of professional wrestling. His 'heel turn' was in itself a response to audience reaction. His 'Real American Hero' persona had become rather stale confirmed by numerous instances of audiences booing him as a face throughout the 90s; Royal Rumble 1992 (where Sid Justice eliminated Hogan by creeping up on him from behind, leading to cheers from the crowd despite Justice's heelish tactics) and, after his move to WCW, Nitro of November 20th 1995 (where the crowd cheered for his competitor Sting) being two cases in point. It was clear that he needed a change in character direction. Following a near two year hiatus from television, however (and a near decade-long break from the WWE), the audience rejected Hogan as a heel, responding with cheers even when, during the March 2002 lead up to *Wrestlemania XVIII*, his gang the New World Order beat up unsuspecting faces. Despite increasingly desperate attempts by WWE writers to emphasise his cowardliness (normally a defining characteristic of a wrestling villain), such as having him repeatedly drive a semi-truck into an ambulance purportedly

containing The Rock (WWE 18 April 2002) the crowd continued, largely, to demonstrate their adulation.

12 And so to the match itself. The Rock was the most popular break-out star to emerge from the WWE in recent times, and a career as a film star was about to take off in a more successful way than any before him including, ironically, 'Hollywood Hogan', whose heelish persona involved making outlandish claims about the success of his cinematic career. Subsequently the WWE had no desire to significantly weaken or undermine the heroic standing of the man they hoped would, through success as an action star, act as a global promotional tool for the business that had made him. The WWE has tended to take the approach that any mainstream publicity its performers can attract through their other talents is to be encouraged, albeit wherever possible being done within the rigid confines of WWE contracts. This has been seen more recently in the promotion of John Cena's music by the WWE's own record label, and the output of the WWE's own film studio, heavily featuring WWE superstars. Therefore in the weeks before the event, while some concessions were made regarding Hogan's character (such as having him advise his fellow heel stablemates not to get involved in the outcome of the match in order that victory may be fairly gained), The Rock remained the clear face positioned against the heel Hogan.

13 Through the course of the match, however, overwhelming fan reaction in the Toronto Skydome left attempts to maintain these personae redundant. Hogan reflected "it didn't seem to matter what I said or did, or how badly I treated them. They still cheered for me and booed my opponent." (2002, p. 3) His regular offensive moves leading to howls of derision rather than the normal cheers, The Rock began to engage with the audience, first in visually expressing his shock (which Hogan mirrored), then his anger at the fans' betrayal. Eventually he began to adopt the heelish tactics of his opponent, delivering multiple knife-edge chops and even going as far as to (illegally) whip Hogan with his own weightlifter's belt. Even in the era of the anti-hero (a role, embodied by Steve Austin, that The Rock had not firmly adopted at any time) this was the behaviour of a villain. Hogan, in turn, largely began to re-adopt the fan favourite persona, encouraging their cheers with poses and challenging The Rock to "listen to the fans." Despite Hogan's iconic veteran status he admitted that the "Rocky sucks" chants unnerved him: "I got scared. It wasn't going to be easy to fix, but I had to do it – and I didn't have a lot of time. We couldn't walk out of the ring without the people cheering for The Rock." (2002, p. 329) In effect, the audience demanded the match take a particular route, and wrestlers performed the roles in response. The pre-determined outcome of the match (a hard-fought Rock victory) became virtually inconsequential; Hogan received a rapturous ovation, confirmed as a fan favourite once again and, emphasising the changes that had taken place during the contest, it fell to Hogan to raise the arm of his victorious opponent, hence re-establishing The Rock's face credentials. At the end of this match, then, the WWE (or at least the performers themselves) attempted to regain control by responding directly to the audience's demands.

14 If the events surrounding The Rock-Hogan match demonstrate the ability of the audience to directly influence what is performed (and vis-à-vis that of the players to modify their performance to meet those expectations), then those of 2004's *Wrestlemania XX*, and specifically the match between Brock Lesnar and Bill Goldberg, illustrate how spectators can and will reject the official story outright should it not meet with their approval.

15 As one of the headlining events of the pay-per-view, the Lesnar-Goldberg match was again a strongly promoted clash which built over a number of weeks, the former losing his championship to a rival following illegal interference from the latter. Both performers, athletes with illustrious amateur sporting backgrounds and similar appearances, eschewed the conventional heel or face identities of professional wrestling taking instead the morally ambiguous roles of 'tweeners' as in 'inbetweeners'. While this meant fans eagerly awaited the match up (confirmed by the cheers of the crowd at previous pay-per-view events Royal Rumble and No Way Out earlier that same year when the two briefly locked horns), those attending *Wrestlemania XX* did so knowing that for both men this was likely to be their last professional wrestling match, perhaps forever. Despite remaining officially unrecognised in

WWE programming, it was common knowledge that Goldberg's contract would end following the event, while Lesnar had expressed his desire to pursue a career in American football. That much of the audience were aware of both of these situations was largely due to the burgeoning online wrestling community, to which we will return shortly.

16 The grudge between Goldberg and Lesnar, as promoted in WWE programming leading up to *Wrestlemania XX*, was not considered legitimate by any but a small section of (largely very young) fans. Such a question as 'who will win', it is worth recognising, holds as much interest to the fan asking 'who will the writers put over (give the win to)' as it does to the naïve fan asking who will win the legitimate sporting contest. Neither performer, however, expected the response of the Madison Square Garden crowd. To the visible agitation of both, their match was met with, not boos and cheers, but slow handclapping and chants of "You sold out", "This match sucks" and "Goodbye." (WWE 2004) When the contest came to its conclusion, in order to meet the demands of the audience, it fell to special guest referee Steve Austin to administer deciding blows (his patented 'stunner') to both victor and loser, affirming their audience-bestowed humiliation and delivering to the fans a satisfying outcome. It is almost impossible to comprehend this narrative swerve taking place, certainly, in any other live performance medium. Yet there is another shadowy aspect to this event. While never confirmed by the WWE, many of the fan podcasts, websites and forums claim that Vince McMahon's son Shane was in the crowd joining in with the chants. Does this mean the WWE management orchestrated the audience's reaction? Or was Shane simply an audience member? Or only reacting to the general atmosphere around him?

17 What unites these two diverse moments? Firstly there are incongruities between the story the WWE wanted to devise and the story they were compelled to present due to the audience's response. In both, the relationship between fictional storytelling and factual actuality became confused: the focus on the film careers of The Rock and Hulk, the actual contractual issues of Lesnar and Goldberg. I suggest that the most memorable moments in WWE history (for the smarks at least) traverse this troublesome line between imagination and real. And in both the audience forced resolution, though whether the WWE behemoth reacted to, choreographed or simply exploited the situations remains a contentious issue. Whichever, the WWE often boasts of RAW as the longest running serial programme on American television, yet it would certainly be true to suggest the soap operas we might compare it to have an entirely different actor-audience relationship.

18 So, rather than the image of the wrestling fan as a duped, ignorant fool, these two examples reveal the sometimes profound influence the audience can have over the performance, not only because the WWE, by necessity, pander to audience demands for ratings, but also because this performance experience is inherently reciprocal. Despite the almost hegemonic power of the WWE, this discursive reciprocity can, at times, be unmanageable. While not wishing to overstate the point, professional wrestling (even the WWE) can, in this sense at least, be seen as a democratic forum. (Sehmy 2002, p. 11)

Conclusion: the Internet Wrestling Community and new actor-audience interactions

19 Clearly the smark and performer enjoy an active, transformative relationship, whether in the moneyed arenas of the WWE or amongst the smaller communities of the backyard. This relationship received new impetus in the 1980s, with the rise of the 'insider' wrestling newsletter, or 'dirt sheet', spearheaded by fans such as Dave Meltzer with his *Wrestling Observer* and Wade Keller's *Pro Wrestling Torch*. These publications fired a warning shot at the old guard of wrestling promotion; a generation of fans who had grown up watching wrestling knew what they were seeing was not 'real', but the appetite to enjoy it remained and now, for many, grew a desire to know more about what it was they were really seeing. Newsletters, initially produced in bedrooms for a handful of readers but in some cases quickly growing into nationally distributed publications, provided that insight, using (often anonymous) inside sources. From this new dimension in wrestling analysis and reportage spawned a new vocabulary and new type of fan: the informed smark. For they focused less

on results than on process and, connecting directly with my study of reciprocal theatrical relationships, published reviews, informing the reader of what happened in the course of a match. In light of its growing popularity in many countries, it is interesting to observe how different media markets have adopted different approaches to the reportage of wrestling. Some newspapers, such as *The Sun* in the UK, include wrestling coverage in their sport section, albeit kept separate from 'legitimate' sports. Others include reviews of local wrestling events in their 'entertainment' sections, alongside theatre and concert reviews. In terms of television, scandals such as the murder-suicide involving WWE wrestler Chris Benoit attract mainstream coverage, but sports programming will rarely if ever feature wrestling reports, with Japan, where wrestling has always been viewed as a legitimate athletic contest, being a notable exception.

20 The dirt-sheets' criteria for a one, three or five star match proves to be a fascinating study. Critics seem to focus on the athletic prowess displayed in the match. The moves performed take on a new importance; anything that 'looks fake', such as clear air between punches or an opponent visibly assisting with the set-up of a move, is frowned upon. But spectacular moves are not the only benchmark. Marking wrestling as almost unique from any other athletic activity, the psychological aspects of a wrestling match are deemed equally as important as the physical; matches should tell a logical story and, interestingly, have a strong sense of realism. So, if a competitor suffers an injured left arm (and for consistency it generally is the *left* arm), it should follow that the opponent will continue to focus on this vulnerability and not suddenly begin to target a completely different area or ignore it all together. In the same way, a smaller, lighter opponent should use their speed and agility to minimise the inherent physical disadvantage, and a wrestler otherwise outmatched, who the audience would expect to lose comfortably, should gain (perhaps through dishonest means or a stroke of good fortune) a foothold which convinces the audience that s/he actually has a chance of winning.

21 Of course, to suggest that all fans engage with wrestling to the same critical extent would be wrong, even as the rise of the Internet has allowed the bedroom newsletter editors of the 1980s to be the professional web entrepreneurs of the twenty-first century, with ever-increasing global readerships and (paying) subscribers. For every fan who watches an episode of RAW on one screen while reading the real-time live updated analysis from Wade Keller on another, many more will tune in simply to see if their favourite wrestler is going to win or if a wronged protagonist from the previous episode is going to exact his/her revenge. Nonetheless, the 'Internet Wrestling Community' (IWC) has emerged as an individual classification in its own right, which the wrestling industry has identified (unsurprisingly given its largely 18-30 adult male demographic, considered within the entertainment industry to be one of the most lucrative) as something of a priority. The smark community, originating in paper form, has transformed into a collection of social media outputs, podcasts and online message boards.

22 Reading professional wrestling and specifically the WWE as theatrical spectacle, therefore, enables new interpretations, particularly in relation to the wrestler's performing body, the art of scriptwriting or, as in this article, the relationship between actor and audience. Rejected as legitimate sport or acceptable theatre, professional wrestling occupies a significant gap, a marginal space confronting the delineations of genre and the transmission of images from 'worker' (that is the wrestler) to audience and back again. In spite, then, of the dictatorial systems defining the WWE promotion, engrained as it is in hegemonic capitalist constructs, as with all dictatorships, moments of rebellion, revolt or insurrection always simmer beneath the choreographed pyrotechnics and Cena's 'hustle, loyalty, respect' taglines.

23 On the night after 2013's Wrestlemania XXIX, RAW came from the IZOD Centre in New Jersey. General consensus was that this RAW surpassed the flagship show of the previous evening. Its success was not only due to the appearance of The Undertaker or Wade Barrett's regaining of the Intercontinental Title or even the long overdue victory of Dolph Ziggler to win the World Heavyweight Title. Mostly it was down to the 'hot' crowd which seemed to act wholly independently of the organised machine, ignoring a match between two babyfaces (Sheamus and Randy Orton) entirely in favour of singing along with the theme tune of one of WWE's newest talents Fandango and shouting the names of the commentators in turn.

(WWE 8 April 2013) A post-RAW online review titled its article ‘WWE Raw: New Jersey Seizes Wrestlemania Moment from Vince McMahon’s Death Grip.’ (Big Nasty 2013) It seems that even as the WWE stage-manages each scene and storyline, the audience will continue to present an unpredictable and potentially dangerous challenge.

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Résumé

Using two major examples (2002 *Wrestlemania XVII* main event between The Rock and Hulk Hogan, and the 2004 *Wrestlemania XX* match up of Brock Lesnar and Bill Goldberg) this paper will argue that the wrestling arena is one of the most democratic and, indeed, potentially subversive forms of popular theatre. Both these events were directly and immediately influenced by their audiences, the performance narrative changing as the audience members interacted with the matches. Indeed, despite the obvious commodification of professional wrestling and its interpellation into capitalist economic systems, it presents an arena of

exciting actor-audience interaction rarely seen on the theatrical stage. Concluding with a brief examination of the growth in theatrical-style stardom from fans such as Dave Meltzer and Wade Keller, this paper will suggest that professional wrestling remains one of the most exciting twenty-first century examples of performance-based democracy.