

TS202 and BA3 Design Theory and Practice

THE SCENOGRAPHIC PROCESS

The designer's overall aim is to maximise the quality of purposeful communication between theatre practitioners and audience through all forms of theatrical expression. This can be done *directly* through the visual imagery presented via scenery, costumes and lighting, and *indirectly* by facilitating the actors' work, thus enabling affective communication through both image, action and speech.

In reality the direct/indirect distinction rarely exists as the majority of affective dramatic images are created by the *interaction of the actor with the scenographic elements*. A setting only truly 'comes alive' when inhabited and used,- a garment only really becomes 'a costume' when worn by an actor. It is generally as a result of this dynamic interrelationship that the highest quality of visual theatre is achieved.

Whilst it is relatively easy to deconstruct the purpose behind the designer's contribution, it is far more difficult to determine exactly how this contribution is to be successfully made. One can identify the designer's areas of responsibility but what procedures should be adopted to ensure success. What are the skills to be acquired and applied? Unfortunately a theatre designer or scenographer is a visual artist and as is the case with all artistic endeavours there can be no single method or process which will ensure success on every occasion.

The creative process is by its very nature a rather unpredictable and dangerous animal. Theatre design requires individual creativity as an integral element of a larger group creation, and as such makes a single blueprint for the "scenographic process" even more difficult to provide. It is also undeniable that some people have a greater aptitude for certain areas of study than others. However whilst a person might have a "good eye" or a natural inclination towards the requisite craft skills; this alone is rarely sufficient. "Natural abilities" in all areas of life have to be recognised, fostered and developed through regular exercise, and theatre design is no exception. The ability to identify and create a strong visual or theatrical image is undoubtedly at the centre of scenographic art, however it must always be remembered that the image should not simply be seen as an end in itself but as an integral component of the production as a whole.

The following areas of study should be viewed as a series of exercises from which the individual theatre designer must devise their personal strategies and systems in order to produce creative solutions to particular theatrical challenges.

The designers work is non-linear; analysis of text will lead to analysis of the theatre space which will in turn lead to either more refined or extensive research which in turn might lead back to more detailed textual study. Sometimes a moment of inspiration will provide the basis for an entire

design, on other occasions the ideas will have to be dragged kicking and screaming from the recesses of your brain. It is unlikely that any serious visual creativity will develop however unless some form of method is adopted to both stimulate it and continually test its value against some accepted aesthetic and practical criteria. An initial instinctive response to a text should never be ignored or undervalued but almost inevitably will need to be adapted, refined or discarded in the light of further study. Whilst the most effective design solutions often appear deceptively simple they are almost always the most difficult to unearth.

Areas of study.

1. The development of a "design" aesthetic. What are the visual tools of the designer?
2. An analysis of the text. What does the text demand of the designer?
3. The development of imagery through research. How can appropriate research inform and stimulate the designer?
4. An analysis of theatre space. How does the understanding of space affect the designer?

1. The development of a "design" aesthetic.

The nature of visual art and visual communication is a vast subject area, which can combine biological analyses of the way in which the brain and eyes work with concepts of social conditioning, classical aesthetics and behavioural studies. It

is undeniable that our visual senses exert a massive influence on the way human beings perceive each other and the world as a whole. As theatre designers involved in the creation of scenic art for the purposes of communication through the medium of theatre, a basic understanding of the way in which visual information is conveyed is essential.

It was for this purpose that the initial introduction to design last year involved the recognition of a visual language composed of both *literal* and *abstract* forms of communication. Our introductory studies concentrated on the ways in which colour, line, shape, texture and scale exerted an influence over the viewer regardless of literal recognition. This was followed by a project which emphasised the need for the careful application of each abstract element if the desired imagery was to be achieved. It should have become clear that each element not only communicated with the viewer individually but also in relation to one another. The discourse was further confused by the acknowledgement that our primary identification of the visual components of everyday life is not via their abstract components but rather through *literal identification*. The project which dealt with the theatrical style of "naturalism" emphasised the need for precise literal detail, if the setting being created was to be perceived as being an authentic replication of the real world. In both projects there was the potential for *visual noise*, an element of the design which blurred or damaged the communicative process rather than enhancing or assisting it.

In the first project this might have been the creation of an inappropriate shape or the disruption of a visual dynamic; in the second project it was more likely to have been the existence of an anachronistic property or an ill conceived arrangement of furniture. Whilst these projects were deliberately created to emphasise the extreme ends of the designer's spectrum, the majority of scenography acknowledges that both abstract and literal visual intercourse exists at the same time, on the same stage and in the same costume or property. It is obvious that the designer must not only consider the pattern of a particular wallpaper in terms of its literal identification of an historical period or social class, but must also consider the abstract effect of the wallpaper on the atmosphere of the room. An effect engendered by the shape, texture, and colour of the pattern and the relative quantity of the wallpaper in the room.

By attempting to deconstruct the elements involved in visual communication it is possible to improve and refine that intuitive sense of design which we all possess to a greater or lesser extent. For centuries fine artists, sculptors and architects have been involved in the study of "aesthetics" attempting to determine what exactly constituted art, beauty and good taste. Rules were created which governed subject matter, arrangement and proportion and whilst scenographers should not be constrained by such rules it is unwise to remain totally ignorant of them. As designers it is important not only to study the great art of the past but also to continually practice the technique of "looking" and "seeing".

Objects or structures should be identified not only in literal terms (an office chair) but also through their abstract components (metallic, shiny, tubular, angled, sleek). The creation of a powerful image can only be achieved by firstly developing the ability recognise one.

2. Analysis of text.

The first reading of any text should be a reading for pleasure with responses being subjective and immediate. How does the play make one feel? What are the pictures which immediately come into one's mind? Are the images of a stage, or a film or real life? Can the characters be visualised? The honesty of this response should give the designer an instant empathy with an audience who will be initially introduced to the play through the production. The significant images, emotions and ideas which spring into our minds as designers, should be similarly aroused in the minds of the audience by the production.

However the imagery should not simply be made concrete in a practical form but rather be created as a stimulus for the audience's own imagination.

After one's initial response to the text has been noted, a more considered and detailed study should now take place in an attempt to answer the following questions. Inevitably this work will also embrace other critical studies about the text and the playwright.

What is the play about?

What was the authors purpose in writing the play?

What are the major dramatic moments or scenes within the play?

Does the play lean towards any established style of performance?

What is the overall atmosphere created by the play?

Are there elements of overt symbolism or metaphor within the play?

How is the play structured? What is the relationship between certain scenes?

What is the pace of the play? How might this affect our design ideas?

Does the style of language used demand a particular visual style of presentation?

What is the convention of the "stage directions" given by the playwright? How significant are they and to what extent should they inform the design?

Does the play lean towards a particular type of staging?

What particular areas of research should be considered?

The questions above relate to the entire play. It is important however to reduce the play into smaller units for more detailed study. Some playwrights will break down the play into very obvious "scenes" which mark changes in either location, time or action. However not all writers divide their plays so overtly and it is sometimes necessary for the designer to subdivide the play into units more suited to his or her purpose. The following questions and tasks should be applied

to each scene or unit in turn.

Where does the scene take place?

How significant is the location?

When does the scene take place? What time of day or night,

How significant is the time?

What season is it, and what is the weather like?

Is this significant?

When is the play/scene set?

How significant is the date?

How many characters are there in the scene?

What action takes place during the scene?

What motivates the action within the scene? Chart the action indicating the amount and type of stage space required.

Does the action in the scene reflect or counterpoint action within other scenes?

How long is the scene? How long is the scene in relation to the other scenes in the play?

What is the significance of the scene to the play as a whole?

What is the atmosphere created by the scene?

Is there evidence of the use of symbolism or metaphor within the scene?

What scenic units (walls, levels, steps etc) are demanded by the action?

What scenic units might enhance the action?

What furniture and properties are required by the action?

What furniture and properties might enhance the action?

What entrances and exits are demanded by the action within the

scene?

What is the nature of these entrances and exits?

What is the most dramatic moment within the scene?

What is the pace of the scene?

How does the scene begin and end?

How does the scene relate to the scenes which precede and follow it?

Given the overall shape of the play how much time should be given to altering the scenery before and after the scene?

What is the type of lighting appropriate to the scene? Specify in terms of colour, intensity, shape and direction.

The numerous questions to be asked and the answers which must be found will provide a mixture of practical information and aesthetic stimuli. Very often however this knowledge must be applied within the umbrella of an overall visual metaphor for the production as a whole.

A fairly recent production by the WNO of Verdi's *"La Traviata"* provides a case in point.

The opera charts the downfall of Violetta, a nightclub hostess, whose love affair is doomed by social convention and an incurable disease! The design placed the production in the hedonistic, boom years of the mid 1980's, whilst very carefully colour scheming each act to reflect the cycle of life. The heated passion of the night club was all red, purple, silver and black whilst our heroine's brief "Indian summer" of love was all cream, beige, muslin and sunlight. Almost inevitably her death scene took place among the

autumnal colours of falling leaves and shuttered windows. The visual metaphor of the changing seasons had been used to chart the journey from life to death, and all of the design decisions remained within that overall concept.

This did not preclude however the use of mirrors and windows being used as a secondary or subsidiary metaphor. The huge distorting mirrors of the nightclub demonstrated to Violetta the effect of her dissolute lifestyle, whilst the open windows and the closed windows reflected her initially hopeful and eventually hopeless situation. These metaphors had the merit of great simplicity, clarity and subtlety providing and appropriate visual framework within which the more specific elements of the production were designed.

3. The development of imagery through research.

The creation of effective visual imagery can rarely be achieved solely from memory, although it is our visual memory which is initially stimulated by our first reading of the text. Our visual memory is often inclined to lack definition, it tends to be blurred and rather generalised. It is because of this that it constantly needs refreshment;- pictures, paintings, photographs, sculptures, buildings, textures, colours, etc. must all be carefully studied to provide information through which one's visual imagination can work. Research is therefore crucial, very little can be gained from staring at a blank page hoping for inspiration! The images which initially sprang to mind when reading the play must be expanded and refined through various types of research.

As previously mentioned our research could begin by concentrating on the playwright and the critical appraisals of the text. By studying the world of the playwright we might well become aware of the visual images which perhaps stimulated the play itself. Darwin Payne uses an excellent example in his book *"Scenographic Imagination"* when he describes a visit to a particularly brightly lit and mirrored restaurant used by Tennessee Williams when writing *"A Streetcar named Desire"*. It is to this restaurant that Williams sends Blanche Dubois, an excruciating environment for a middle-aged woman desperate to maintain an illusion of youth. The physical environment of the restaurant provides a key to our understanding of the play and might well be of value in providing an image for the design; the varied use of light being a crucial element in that particular play.

In a similar vein Frank Wedekind's *"Diary of an Erotic Life"* describes his adventures in a less salubrious quarter of late nineteenth century Paris. His descriptions lead us directly to a number of painters (Degas and Lautrec included) who were living and working in the same area at the same time, and whose work might provide some visual references for Wedekind's *"Lulu"* plays.

The exact nature of the research will vary according to the demands of the text although the initial research tends to be much more general and abstract as one is searching for images and metaphors. The later research tends to be far more specific as one searches for a precise type of cup or

architectural façade.

The research for Wedekind's *"Spring Awakening"* historical research into areas such as late German society and education, Neo-classical Expressionist painting, alongside the search for images which relate to concepts of nature, cycle of life. Spring flowers, trained saplings and pillars, fossilised flora and fauna, and gravestones might perhaps be investigated as an overall visual metaphor begins. To date the quotation found for this play has been from a book called *"Comic Agony"* by an American. He describes Wendla and Moritz as being "caught in the frosts and rigors of spring that sometimes and Melchior as being drawn "past the spring into later seasons of maturity" by the masked men. The seasons implicit in the play's title might be the visual metaphor for the production, at which will certainly help to focus the research.

4. An analysis of theatre space.

The final and perhaps most crucial area of the theatre space itself. It is imperative to understand how the theatre space (stage, auditorium, lighting rig etc.) works and its potential for the creation of dramatic action and scenic imagery. The potential of the space

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The research for Wedekind's *"Spring Awakening"* will require historical research into areas such as late nineteenth century German society and education, Neo-classical architecture, and Expressionist painting, alongside the search for more abstract images which relate to concepts of nature, oppression and the cycle of life. Spring flowers, trained saplings, granite slabs and pillars, fossilised flora and fauna, and assorted gravestones might perhaps be investigated as the search for an overall visual metaphor begins. To date the most useful quotation found for this play has been from a critical essay in a book called *"Comic Agony"* by an American Albert Bermel. He describes Wendla and Moritz as being "claimed by the late frosts and rigors of spring that sometimes precede flowering" and Melchior as being drawn "past the spring and into the later seasons of maturity" by the masked man. The imagery of the seasons implicit in the play's title might well provide the visual metaphor for the production, at the very least it will certainly help to focus the research.

4. An analysis of theatre space.

The final and perhaps most crucial area of study is that of the theatre space itself. It is imperative that the designer understands how the theatre space (stage, wings, flies, auditorium, lighting rig etc.) works and its subsequent potential for the creation of dramatic action and affective scenic imagery. The potential of the space has to be

recognised through an understanding of staging techniques and stagecraft in general before it can be maximised.

Areas for consideration include :-

Various stage configurations.

Sightlines.

Styles and methods of changing scenery.

Entrances and exits.

The use of levels, ramps and treads.

The use of perspective and illusion.

The aesthetics of proportion and scale.

The use of stage lighting,.

As a result of study in each of these areas the potential for a successful piece of theatre design is maximised if not assured, such is the complexity of the art form.

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