

TSP405

Visual Communication and Scenography

THE SCENOGRAPHIC PURPOSE

An historical context

It is important to place a chronological reference point upon any analysis of a designer's role in theatrical presentation, as history demonstrates only too well the changing nature of that role throughout the centuries. From the development of the Renaissance stage in the sixteenth century until the late nineteenth century the scenic designer was primarily a painter or fine artist. He was responsible for the reproduction of architectural detail, allegorical symbolism and romantic landscapes, all with a high degree of perspective illusion on two dimensional scenery. Whilst the stage machinery developed in complexity and tastes changed regarding the nature of the visual spectacle, the function of the scenic designer remained that of the provider of the aforesaid visual spectacle; the picture, before which the drama was presented. The relationship between the text, the actor, and the scenery was of limited significance. Even when the advent of the box set placed the actors within, rather than in front of, the scenery, the designer's concern became one of decor or interior design. The prevailing orthodoxy of '*naturalism*' or '*naturalistic illusion*' ensured that for a time verisimilitude became the standard by which all designs were judged. Whilst the locale should now relate to the action taking place within it, in terms of period and society, deliberate visual communication was limited to literal identification.

It is difficult to ascertain exactly when and through whom, the idea of design as an integral part of an overall theatrical philosophy comes into being; although undoubtedly De Louthenberg and Garrick must take some credit, and much is owed to The Saxe Meiningen Company, Beerbohm Tree, E.W. Godwin and Henry Irving.

It could be argued that antiquarianism and its offspring naturalism constituted an overall theatrical philosophy which incorporated the designer and defined his role accordingly. However that role was severely restricted by the conceptual limitations of the philosophy. In contrast, the early twentieth century threw up a plethora of theatrical movements, most of

The nature of Theatre

Although rather contentious, if we accept as a starting point Peter Brook's assertion that the activity of theatre takes place when "a man walks across an empty space whilst someone else is watching him", then the three crucial elements without which the theatre cannot take place have been identified. The *empty space* is the stage, *the man* is the actor or performer *the watcher* is the spectator or audience. Theatre takes place in the shared experience or exchange between actor and spectator, the nature of theatre is dynamic and will change as the relationship between them develops and evolves. Theatre can therefore be defined as an act of communication between actor and spectator; but what determines the nature of this communication?.

Our first consideration must relate to the purpose of the communication. It is evident from the action of the *walking man* that the role of the actor is primarily active whilst *the watcher's* role is primarily passive. By the very act of watching however, the spectator participates in the theatre instigated by the actor; who of course is fully aware of being watched. If this were not the case and the actor were unaware of being watched then the transaction of theatre could not take place. Despite Shakespeare's assertion that "All the world's a stage"; in reality a definition of theatre becomes all embracing and meaningless if it is to simply include all human activity carried out for a wealth of reasons. The activity of theatre is instigated by the actor for the purpose of being watched by the spectator. The spectator will only continue to watch if the actor retains his or her interest, and the richness of the theatrical experience for both parties will be determined by the extent to which the spectator is involved in the exchange. This exchange may be the exchange of ideas or emotions and the spectator's involvement can be determined by the extent to which the actor's work engages his or her attention, both during the period of the watching and afterwards. Some theatrical philosophies demand a more active form of dialogue between actor and spectator, whilst others measure the effectiveness of the theatre by the behaviour of the spectator after the event. In all cases *the walking man* is aware of *the watcher* and walks for a

expectations of the spectator will also affect the nature of the theatre, as in most cases watchers attend the empty space in the anticipation of some form of action taking place. The environment which surrounds the empty space, the spectator's method of entry, the cost of that entry and the existence of other spectators will all have a bearing upon the transaction of theatre.

Peter Brook's minimal definition of theatre is an ideal starting point for the scenic designer, identifying as it does the fundamental relationship between actor and spectator within which visual communication and thus design must always play a part. Within this framework the role of the scenic designer can be extended and expanded aesthetically and practically but must always remain in the service of the purposeful communication between actor and spectator.

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