LITERARY QUEST

Evolution of the Scenographic Designer in Theatrical History

JS Jahangir

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Iqbal College,

Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India.

Abstract

Theatre is a performance art form which discusses events of human life. Performances are being made in theatre space, found space, site-specific space and virtual space. And these spaces are mastered by designers. Opportunities for the designer have never been so varied or the territory uncharted. Scenography is a broad term that incorporates an intricate matrix of overlapping practices any one of which it is impossible to study in isolation. This paper looks at what designers do at the process and practice of design and changing role of the designer over time. It examines the ways in which the visual and material elements of theatre and performance have been perceived at certain key moments in the past and the ways in which these perceptions have been subject to change.

Keywords

Scenography; Designer; Aesthetic Values; New Stagecraft; Stage Designing; Bertolt Brecht; Pamela Howard; Melzier; Robert Edmond Jones.

◆

The history of the theatre is the history of the transfiguration of the human form. It is the history of man as the actor of physical and spiritual events, ranging from naïveté to reflection, from naturalness to artifice. The materials involved in this transfiguration are form and colour, the materials of the painter and sculptor. The arena for this transfiguration is found in the constructive fusion of space and building, the realm of the architect.

Scenography encompasses a broad and divergent sphere of activity. Performances are being made in theatre spaces, found space, site-specific space and virtual space. Opportunities for the designer have never been so varied or the territory uncharted. Scenography is a broad term that incorporates an intricate matrix of overlapping practices any one of which it is impossible to study in isolation.

A number of recurrent themes emerge: the relationship between word and image; designer and director collaborations; design and scenography as descriptors of practice; designing for performance; designing in performance; the presence or self-effacement of the designer's work; and the interaction with movements in fine art. Some of the works cited is linked to distinct theatrical genres: Melziner with poetic realism in America and Neher with Brecht's Epic theatre in Europe, for instance.

The dialogic "well-made play" structured along Aristotelian lines by a single author still dominates much contemporary theatre. Aristotle designated "spectacle", the design and appearance of the stage, as the least important element in his hierarchy of the essential components of tragedy as opposed to "the primacy of plot." The primacy of words over images as the purveyors of meaning in theatre is very much a western phenomenon: the ancient Sanskrit treatise on Indian theatre, the *Natyasastra*, for example, covers all aspects of performance with chapters devoted to costumes, props, and stage architecture. In many parts of Africa there is no notion of a written theatre text: "to say that theatre exists only when we have a script excludes most African theatre forms,

which have never been written down because of the absence of a writing tradition in Africa" (Mlama 5).

Scenography comes from the Greek *sceno-grafika*. It is sometimes translated as scene-painting or perspective drawing, but is now more frequently understood to mean scenic writing. The term is widely used in Europe and plays a lead role in the production of meaning:

> It implies something more than creating scenery or costumes or lights. It carries a connotation of an-encompassing visual-spatial construct as well as the process of change and transformation that is an inherent part of the physical vocabulary of the stage. In the sense, it bears some relation to the French term mise en scene (Aronson 7).

Pamela Howard is one of the prime advocates for the term to be more widely adopted:

> It is very important to use scenography as a more accurate way of describing the role of the visual artist in the theatre, no longer being a servant but rather a leader, a creator or an initiator and a collaborator. (73)

Baugh uses the term "scenography as active performance" (250) to characterize the collaborative partnership between Brecht and the "*Buhnenbauer*" Caspar Neher. Neher's "scenography" is actively engaged in the construction of meaning. Scenography as understood by Neher and Brecht is embedded in the action but not subsumed by it. Word and image act upon each other dialectically, but retain their identity as separate elements.

In relation to site-specific performance, Kathleen Irwin sees the role of the scenographer as "recognis[ing] the intrinsic aesthetic value of a location" (55), of drawing out the existing potential of a site rather than developing or producing a visual language in the ways we associate with "stage design."

In many texts on performance the terms scenographer and designer are used interchangeably, which can lead to confusion. Scenography, as described

by Howard, embraces everything, and all distinctions dissolve into "the seamless synthesis of space, text, research, art, actors, directors and spectators that contributes to an original creation" (130). In which case the scenographer assumes the role of an "auteur," thus replacing one singular vision with another. But Howard also points out that the scenographer is a collaborator, one authorial voice among many. Designers, lighting designers, sound designers, directors, architects, actors and audience all contribute to the making of a performance. The scenographic is the context in which the work takes place, whether it is building based, site specific or in found space.

The dialogue between modernism and postmodernism also become key attraction in the paper. Aronson (1991) examines the impact of this broad epistemological shift on the "aesthetic values" and "ways of seeing" in theatre and performance practice. In the process of analyzing the stylistic characteristics of what might be termed "postmodern design" he identifies certain common principles in the multifarious visual styles of twentieth-century theatre. He groups these together under the umbrella of what he terms "modern design" and in so doing he provides us with a valuable overview of the discourse in this segment.

The dispute between the writer Ben Jonson and the architect and stage designer Inigo Jones in the seventeenth century is used by Nicholas Till to place the argument about the relative merits of words and images in the theatre in its historical context. Till extends this analysis to look at the role of design in relation to the staging of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's poetic texts locate place so succinctly there would appear to be little the designer can add. What is the purpose and aesthetic function of design when place is so eloquently spoken, or in the face of what Bert O. States calls "the powers of rhetorical scenery" (States 54)

Feinsod (1984) analyses the work of the American stage designer Robert Edmond Jones. Jones was one of the leading exponents of the "New Stagecraft" movement in America where it grew out of the restrictions of naturalism and the

limitations it imposed on the visual imagination of the designer. The seminal influences on the New Stagecraft were the experiments of people like Craig and Appia in Europe. In The *Dramatic Imagination*, Jones lays out, in his own words, the philosophy underpinning the approach to design, an approach which demonstrates many of the aesthetic principles associated with "modern design" as defined by Aronson. Feinsod considers the way in which these principles were applied in practice.

Simonson (1932) took issue with the aesthetic aspirations of the likes of Craig and his disciples. He saw designers as "interpreters" rather than originators of meaning and endorsed the modernist view of the single authorial vision: "A play occurs first of all when it is written. It is enacted in the mind of the playwright before it is acted in front of an audience" (Simonson 39). The role of the designer is reactive and historical evidence suggest according to Simonson, that the "designer and mechanic" have never originated any magic movements or paradigm shifts in dramatic thinking. What they have done, he argues, "on the coat tails" of the dramatic imagination of playwrights, is deployed a kind of spatial and visual pragmatism responding to, rather than initiating change. In contrast Liam Doona (2002) uses the terms "proactive" and "interventional" to describe Jo Mielziner's creative relationship with American playwrights Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. He applies the same terms to express the nature of Mielziner's integrated scenography for Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949). The extent to which the "intervention" of the "proactive" scenographer enhances or actually modifies meaning raises, as Doona suggests, important questions of "'authorship' within the broader dramaturgical canon" (64).

Baugh (1994) describes the way in which Brecht's dramaturgy was "extended" by Caspi Neher's "visual propositions." Brecht's theatrical legacy resides in his staging techniques, much as his writing and he worked principally with three designers, Caspar Neher, Karl von Appen and Teo Otto. Brecht's longest collaborative partnership was with Caspar Neher and at the core of their

work process was the interrelationship between scenography, dramaturgy and stage direction. This "play" between all the elements of production - actor, image, text music and audience - resulted in what Baugh terms the "enfranchisement" of scenography. Each element must be independent but at the same time adopt "an attitude" both to the social content of the play, its *gestus,* and to all the other elements as part of a dialectic process which Brecht saw as central to the function of theatre.

The work of the Polish theatre artist Tadeusz Kantor (2000) grew out of an eclectic mix of influences including Craig, the Bauhaus, Cubism, Dada, the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp and latterly the action painting of Jackson Pollock. Kantor moved from directing and designing the work of others to taking control of all aspects of production himself, and his approach, is an example of the total scenographic vision of the auteur. He was fiercely anti-illusionistic, dealing with real objects in space and rejecting the idea of "stage design" as a separate element from the stage action. Kantor wrote extensively, keeping notes and records about his work. He was constantly revising his staging techniques, and his prolific output, combined with his eclecticism sometimes makes his ideas difficult to grasp. However, his desire to establish theatre's autonomy by moving it away from literature and aligning it with the ideas and values of fine art challenged the traditions on which western theatre was based and questioned its role in modern society.

In Foreman's (1992) use of tableau and his unconventional juxtapositions of familiar objects in space we can discern the influences of Brecht. However, Foreman's deployment of these effects, his strategy to "show that you are showing" is not to bring about change in the audience's critical thinking but to expand their perception. In Foreman's work there is no fixed design that pre-exists. The scenographic is composed of a series of dynamic and competing images created moment by moment in performance.

In the final stages, Tim Etchells (1999) explains the collaborative process behind the work of the UK-based performance company Forced Entertainment:

a process in which no single aspect of the theatrical vocabulary is allowed to lead so that set design, found costume, soundtrack, text fragment or idea for action might just as well take the lead as a source or starting point in a project. (Etchells 17)

We have moved a long way from the single authorial vision towards a body of work developed collectively through improvisation. Language becomes "an event" in a tapestry of devised moments inseparable from the total scenographic frame. The unified vision of the well-made play disintegrates as the line between truth and fiction, "performance and life" is blurred and redrawn. The visual and kinetic elements of production become indivisible, there are no hierarchies, words operate as symbols and images are spoken.

Works Cited

Aronson, A. "Postmodern design" *Theatre Journal* 43(1), 1991. Print.

Aronson, A. *Looking into the Abyss: essays on scenography*. Michigan: University of Michigan, 2005. Print.

Barthes, R. "The disease of costume," trans. R. Howard. *Critical Essays*. Evanston: Norton- Western University Press, 1979. Print.

Baugh, C. "Brecht and stage design: Buhnenbildner and the Buhnenbauer" eds. P.Thomson and G.Sacks, *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*. CUP, 1994. Print.

Doona, L. "Hope/hopeless/presence, absence: scenographic innovation and the poetic spaces of Jo Mielziner, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller" ed. M. Grifiths, *Theatre design: exploring scenography*. London: The Society of British Theatre Designers, 2002. Print.

Etchells, T. *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment*. London: Routledge, 1999. Print.

Feinsod, A.B. "Stage Designs of a Single Gesture: the Early Work of Robert Edmond Jones," *The Drama Review* 28 (2), 1984. Print.

Foreman, R. *Unbalancing Acts: Foundations for a Theatre*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992. Print.

Howard,P. *What is Scenography?* London: Routledge, 2002. Print.

Irwin, K. *Performance Design.* Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2008. Print.

Kantor, T. Metamorfozy. *Teksty o Latach 1938-1974* [Metamorphoses, Texts for the years 1938-1974]. 18Aug 2011. [http://www.cicoteka. com.pl/en/]. Web.

Mlama, P.O. "Digubi: A Tanzanian Indigenous Theatre Form," *The Drama Review* 25 (4), 1981. Print.

Simonson, L. *The Stage is Set.* New York: Dover Publications, 1932. Print.

States, B.O. *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre.* Barkley: University of California, 1985. Print.

MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Jahangir, JS. "Evolution of the Scenographic Designer in Theatrical History." *Literary Quest* 1.4 (2014): 110-117. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.