

## **Cathartic Mise en scene**

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The title of this of this paper refers to two distinct ideas in the art of theatre. One identifies with an emotion and the other with a physical space.

Aristotle defined the effect that theatre has on an audience as “*catharsis*”. The associations that come to mind are the words cathode and catheter. Cathode is defined in terms of electricity and the movement of an electrical charge, while a catheter is a tool used to inject or withdraw fluids from a body. So we can assume that catharsis is movement based and of general relation to the body. Catharsis is a psychological event that may occur as a physical expression, i.e. Applause, laughter, crying.

The term *mise en scene* refers to a physical environment. In theatre this would be described as the scenography and the performer’s interaction with the space. Attempts to translate the term from French into English referred me to the word *mettre*, which is the verb “to stage”. (Kendris, 295) *Mise* is the past simple form of this verb, meaning the translation is an expression of that which has already happened. *Mise en scene* can then be defined as the effect of a physical space in emotional terms over a period of time.

I am writing this paper to study theatrical space. This topic is understood as an interaction within an environment. Depending on one’s point of view, either as a spectator, performer, director, or set designer, the space will be seen and interacted with differently. For our interests, theatrical space will consist of three spaces and the relationship that binds these spaces together. How does the narrative space of the stage

work to add to the performance and how does that relate to the performers? Secondly, what is the audience's perception of itself within and outside of the fictional space?

### **The Contract**

Theatrical space, with its interplay between fictitious and real counterparts and its interaction between gates and mirages in which actors, audience, characters, text, and author all come together but never become one. By means of interplay bodies are able to pass from a 'real', immediately experienced space to a perceived space, a third space, which is no longer either scenic or public. Lefebvre. Pg 188

Marvin Carlson's book, Places of Performance, looks at the semiotics of the theatre throughout history. He speaks about the use of theatre as a religious ritual and its importance in city events, the development of the theatre building in the social and urban landscape, and the ideology behind the development of the interior spaces. What is interesting in his writing is how people see or understand the theatre.

When you enter a theatre from the street, you have an expectation of what you are going to encounter. After getting your ticket at the box office, you will enter a large lobby, brightly lit and decorated. You will then have to travel up a staircase to enter the auditorium and find your seat. You come to assume that this will be your experience when going to a theatre. Though this description might not define every theatre, it is this path that allows theatre to become what it is.

The development of the grandiose building, its placement in the city, the magnificent façade, and the bright lights and color place the theatre in a special place in our minds. We think of the theatre in a different way than we would think of the courthouse or the bank. Going to the theatre is a special event that does not happen everyday, and the building is just the precursor to what will happen inside.

When entering a theatre we make a transition from reality and the everyday. We are allowing ourselves to enter, both physically and mentally, another world. Much like when we enter any other space, we have a preconceived notion of what is going to happen and we fall into learned social norms. Traveling through the lobby, up the staircase and then down into the auditorium, is a transition up away from real life and then down into a different place where you will allow yourself to be entangled in the narrative that is about to be presented.

### **The Relationship of the Performers and Scenery**

When the curtain rises, it is the scenery that sets the key of the play. A stage setting is not a background; it is an environment. Players act in a setting, not against it. We say, in the audience, when we look at what the designer has made, before anyone on the stage has time to move or speak, “Aha, I see! It’s going to be like that! Aha!” (Jones, 23)

When studying the role of the set in theatrical space, you find that the stage and performers are directly and intimately related. One accentuates the other and they never can truly be separated. The stage physically defines the actor and the actor physically enhances the space. There is a dialogue that happens, which perpetuates both throughout the performance.

The role of the set in this relationship is to make a physical statement. It is real. You can go up and touch it. It stands in front of you as a building might, filling space and having mass. The set is in three dimensions and has a physical relationship to both the audience and the spectator. You may be under it, standing next to it, or even walking through. What is important here is that the set allows you be in a place that is real and has a physical relationship to what is around it.

In her book entitled Designing and Painting for the Theatre, Lynn Pecktal states that the purpose of a scenic designer is to establish the following requirements when designing a set: place and locale, time and period, theme, mood and scenic style. In my opinion the most important of these demands are place and time. The definition of place and time in relation to each other allows the audience to establish grounds by which it is able to understand the performers. It sets a tone by which the audience can reflect and place themselves within the performance. Determining the time and place, whether it is a 1920's speakeasy, a Bavarian forest or a renaissance courtyard, conveys and defines what the psychology of the actors might be, and what they might be going through. "A setting is not just a beautiful thing, a collection or beautiful things. It is a presence, a mood, a warm wind fanning the drama to flame. It echoes, it enhances, it animates. It is an expectancy, a foreboding, a tension. It says nothing, but it gives everything." (Jones, 26)

In the early part of the twentieth century, Antonin Artaud spoke about the ability of the stage to speak a concrete language. He asserts that the physical space needs to be filled so that the power of the image creates a world in which the audience can be brought into the work. (McAuley, 5) The language provided by the set is one in which the audience feels comfortable enough to allow the performers to enter their world, yet is able to speak strongly enough to have its own identity. The audience wants its imagination to be stimulated by what they see on the stage.

In her book on scenography, Pamela Howard communicates a very similar idea. "The spatial image on stage is not purely decorative. It is a potent visual image that supplements the world of the play that the director creates with the actors in the space." (Howard, 15) The setting is not just an ornament to the performer's movements, but

adds levels of complexity to the narrative. It psychologically influences the audience in a way that allows them to be drawn into the action and places a mood about the performers that they can either fight against or embrace. The set is an addition to the performance that transforms the space and can define the actor's role within that space.

Gay McAuley, in his book Space in Performance, defines the actor as the centerpiece for theatre. "The actors may have determined the emotional content of a scene, it is their physical actions in the space (gestures, move, looks) that will articulate it for the audience." (McAuley, 92) The stage and scenery provide a place in which the actors move. It allows the actors to physically define the space through their movements. The purpose of the set is to enhance the powers of the movement by making it more vibrant and exciting. The set serves as a backdrop, cutting out unneeded information and allowing the spectator to be uninhibited in their ingestion of the performance.

When a design is placed into the space it adds to the psychological aspects of the play. It can place the actors and the audience in a recognized 'place' or it can be suggestive or illusionistic. The set adds to the narrative, extending the abilities of the space and the performers. It does all of this to emphasize the performers, to give them relevance. The actors can realize their roles within the set, giving them room to move and interact in such a way to express the psychology of the role they are playing. "The designer creates an environment in which all noble emotions are possible. Then he retires. The actor enters. If the designer's work has been good, it disappears from our consciousness at that moment. We do not notice it any more. It has apparently ceased to exist." (Jones, 27)

The stage and setting are definitely real, but at the same time they lie in the world of fiction. The set can present or represent anything the creator wants to say, but it must convey a sense of belonging. It must be as truthful as it can be; otherwise its ability to be believed is severely compromised.

## **The Audience**

Yet the stage is the focus of spectator's attention throughout the performance and before and a space that is so intensively watched becomes part of the watchers physical and psychic reality. (McAuley, 75)

Theatre's origins are firmly established in spiritual and mythical ritual. The original purpose was to allow the individual to transcend reality and move beyond that which was physical, to get a little closer to God. The ability to realize the imagination and transcend reality on a personal scale was the ritual's most important characteristics. Theatre uses the possibilities of our imagination to move beyond what is real. Theatre wants to transport us to another place.

The notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold on our thoughts . . . The theatre is the last forum where idealism is still an open question: many audiences all over the world will answer positively from their own experience that they have seen the face of the invisible through and experience on the stage that transcended their experience in life. They will maintain that Oedipus or Bernice or Hamlet or The Three Sister performed with beauty and with love fires the spirit and gives them a reminder that daily drabness is not necessarily all . . . At that time, it was called escape and yet the word was only partially accurate. It was an escape, but also a reminder: a sparrow in a prison cell. (Brooks, 42 – 44)

You might use the word entertainment or “suspension of disbelief” to define this experience now. The niche that is now filled by the cinema and television was once the

domain of theatre, allowing a person to enjoy a night away by traveling to a far off destination. The theatre experience is a transition from being real to becoming other than real. It could be defined as an illusion. Instead of a transcendence of reality theatre might just be an escape from reality. Not a movement beyond reality but just a relaxation of our sense of our own reality. Theatre is the desert oasis in the distance. Thirst attracts the body to an unreal idea of place. "Spectators in the theatre both believe and disbelieve, they play a game in which they permit themselves to believe to a certain extent what is occurring, they can even be moved to tears by this, but at the same time they know that it is not real, or, rather, that it is both not real (a fiction) and real (the actors are really present, "in the flesh." (McAuley, 39)

Theatre provides an emotional and physical experience that takes the spectator away, but the viewer is still aware of their placement in a theatre and the reaction of the people around them. "Theatre is a place where fiction and reality come together to problematize each other. What is presented in performance is always both real and not real, and there is constant interplay between the two potentialities, neither of which is ever completely realized. The tension between the two is always present, and, indeed, it can be argued that it is precisely the dual presence of the real and the not real that is constitutive of theatre." (McAuley,127) We take theatre to be an event that allows us to forget where we are and what we are doing but our ability to locate ourselves in a place is never relinquished. Our sense of being is never beyond our grasp. Theatre establishes another place that is real and tangible. It's visually stimulating and at the same time relates physically. The individual is there to be a part of this narrative. They are physically present at Hamlet's death, yet inside their minds are far enough outside the

event to step away. So theatre plays between allowing us to be physically a part of the event and at times emotionally involved, yet it is separated from reality.

The spectators are aware of their own reality, and that of the performance itself, they dismiss or relegate to a lower level of awareness this knowledge in order to enter fully into the emotions of the fiction. At the same time they remain conscious that the actors are a real flesh and blood presence, conscious of the performance as performance – indeed Willmar Sauter’s research has shown that the aesthetic appreciation of a the presentational is one of the key factors in spectorial pleasure. McAuley pg 253

As stated earlier, a contractual agreement is set forth between participants upon entering the theatre. This is what elicits the aforementioned emotional and physical response. We can talk about the space the audience inhabits as a special or holy place. When an audience walks into the theatre it makes the decision to come into the world of the theatre and be a part of it. While we realize that the theatre is not real, we still allow ourselves to be draw into the action and fictional space. It’s a decision we make upon entering any space. We recognize the social or cultural structure that define the space and then fall in line with them. “Performances reside primarily within a set of contracts and transactional conventions between two order of participants – watchers and watched; spectators and performers; witnesses and protagonists- and in three of relationships; performer to performer, performer to spectator and vice versa, spectator to spectator.” (Pearson, 20)

## **Conclusion**

It is hard to understand the true notion of spectator, there and not there, ignored and yet needed. The actor’s work is never for an audience, yet always is for one. The onlooker is a partner who must be forgotten and still constantly kept in mind: a gesture is statement, expression, communication and a private manifestation of loneliness – it is always what Artuad calls a signal through the flames – yes this implies a sharing of experience, once contact is made. (Brooks, 51)

The purpose of this brief paper was to look at the relationships, which are created during a dramatic performance. The performer needs the spectator to perform; otherwise there is no performance. The Greek word for theatre means to see. It stands in front of us, getting in our face, making us realize ourselves and then dancing away seductively, pulling us into the narrative again. Whatever this relationship, the power of the theatre lies in its ability to take us to places we are not from, to set us in a new time and place if just for a little while, allowing the spectator to enter a presentation of a representation of reality.