Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts
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The Space on Stage

DLA theses

Piroska É. Kiss

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„.. .not even the most beautiful scenery is good ifit
cannot function appropriately in space"
Gábor Zsámbéki

The masterwork on which 1 demonstrate the realization of my theses about the space on stage is the scenery of Miklós László's Perfumery, performed in the National Theatre of Pécs (director: Attila Béres, costumes: Hajnal Tordai)

Although a good theatre performance is only possible in a good space, it has been barely explored what makes a good space on stage. The view of the stage immediately catches the eye; it creates a world. The space is less conspicuous, but it is all the more significant. It determines the rhythm of the performance, the relations of the players, the tensions of the situations. Every performance has its optimal space, which is determined by the drama, the director's intention, and the location, and which can be made optimal by the stage designer. The formal diversity of the space on stage is infinite; it can be open, closed, narrow, roomy, deep, surrounding the spectators, or completely empty, etc. The good space on stage is not necessarily photogenic; its merits come to light during the performace. It must have the practical properties which make a smooth, easy-flowing performace of the play possible. Finally, the creation of a space on stage also has a more elevated aspect, owing to which a scenery design is unique and irreproducible.

In the traditional theatre, the area that is seen from every seat is determined by an isosceles triangle constructed on the front of the stage. In a smaller scenery enclosing this triangle all of the action can be seen. The key acts must be restricted to this triangle also in performances requiring a wider space, with the rest of the stage also designed.

The space of action may be delimited by walls. The construction of a good space begins with the ground plan. A single wall on stage may organize the space, determining movements, locations, and providing a cover for changes.

What is in the front hides the things behind it. Deep spaces can be made visible by a sloping stage or by subtle elevations. A sloping stage descends from the back of the stage to the audience. By enlarging the perspective, a sloping stage enhances the force of movements. It is an element of grandiose sceneries intending to represent boundlessness.

The backstage can be significantly lifted by means of a series of subtle elevations, while the scenery is still perceived as one-storied. The combination of platforms, slopes and stairs can yield an interesting and serviceable space.

Multi-storied spaces have the greatest potential for simultaneous happenings, varied movements, and complex stage situations. The proportion of the vertical division of space is crucial. It is mostly impossible to adopt the level hights of the real world, still, we must design an illusive, credible scenery, which is proportionate with the person playing in it. It is a particularly difficult task to transpose architecture to the scale of stage.

The two basic techniques of creating multi-storied sceneries are platforms and bridges. Platforms are easy to handle because they stand on their own 'feet'. Sometimes we want to show the elevation itself; in that case its material and its structure have to possess the aesthetic quality expected of the view.

In case we need an elevation spanning an undivided and penetrable stage, a bridge is employed. A rational bridge structure always represents a beautiful, forceful element of the aesthetics of the stage design. Therefore, it is often made visible by designers.

Stairs are crucial means of establishing multi-storied spaces. A good stairway is directed towards the acting area. So as not to cover anything, it is employed in the back of the stage, or it is

constructed around it, or it is made transparent by fretwork. Alternatively, the stairs themselves represent the scenery.

It is good to break up space in every dimension, but the potentials of multi-storied spaces can only be exploited through a well-designed system of elevations, bridges, slopes, and stairs.

The ways from the hidden areas of the stage into the acting field are called walks. The number, the sites, and the types of walks have a great impact on the movements of actors and the rhythm of the performance. Many authors give precise instructions concerning the walks of actors. In other cases, there are some fixed walks, but theatrical possibilities can also be increased by adding further ones. Most plays contain no restrictions as regards walks; they are determined by the scenery designer's knowledge of the space on stage and his vision of the play. Well-placed walks make movements logical and proportional, they give significance to an actor's appearance, or, on the contrary, they can make a disappearance unnoticeable. The use of a single walk results in theatrical monotonicity, which can strengthen dramas of confinement and defencelessness. A scenery that is permeable everywhere has an opposite theatrical effect. It may suggest a permanent menace if someone can be expected at any time from any direction.

In addition to the number and the sites of walks, their types are also important. A common type of walk is an opening between curtains or walls, allowing unhindered movement. Appearance through openings is not very emphatic. At the same time, unhindered walks make it possible to get crowds on stage, to use a dolly, or to change the scenery. Sets of black legs and "suffites", with a system of hidden but unhindered walks among them belong to the basic equipment of traditional theatres, and they serve well most modern sceneries, as well.

A general type of walk is the door. Different types of doors have different theatrical functions. Dashing in, for example, works well only in the case of a door opening inwards. Single doors and French doors produce different effects. Sliding doors, revolving doors, and doors known from riding halls whose lower and upper panels open separately provide characteristic walks. The size of the door can be decisive; it matters whether the actor must struggle with a huge gate or he can only enter with his head bent down. It also affects the functioning of the space whether the door has glass panels, is fretted, or is completely unnoticeable.

A curtained opening is as unhindered as its empty counterpart; it is suitable for moving crowds, dollying, changing the scenery, and rushing in or out. At the same time, the curtain creates a space, which it can open or close. A curtain can be used for hiding and spying. The whole scenery is often constituted by curtains, which establish a highly variable space.

Walks at different levels increase theatricality. They facilitate simultaneous actions; they make movements clearer, and by eliminating superfluous routes, they help preserve the rhythm of the performance.

Every space on stage has points at which theatrical effects are particularly strong. Objects, pieces of furniture, signs placed at distinguished sites have a crucial role in the creation of drama. If we can recognize these distingushed points, we contribute to the good disposition of the actors, to the smooth flowing of the performance, to the harmony of the view, and even to the unfolding of the relations of actors. The possibility of catharsis is also enhanced by a good location in space. Some distinguished points serve for all the players, whereas others provide a personal site for only one of them. Some of the plays prescribe certain distinguished points such as the bare tree of Waiting for Godot, the only element in an

empty space. In most of the plays, however, there are no such requirements, and the distinguished points - as well as the whole scenery - are created by the scenery designer.

A set of sitting furniture establishes a good acting site in space. It can be of infinite variety, and each type carries a different meaning, creates a different space, and generates a different acting behaviour. A well-placed column, kneeling-desk, stove* cooker, wall-fountain, washstand, lamp, spring, or tree can very well mark a place for leaving, for arriving, for staying, or for generating actions. The distinguished point need not be represented by an object. The middle of a bridge, a platform, a protected nook, a wall, or an elevated point in the empty space can all serve to highlight.

A number of players require personal attention only in some of the scenes, although they are present all the time. They need nooks in the space that are not emphatic but whose presence is nevertheless perceptible, and which are directly connected with the central playing field, and the distinguished points. If we create the possibility of action also in these out-of-the-way places, the whole of the performance assumes liveliness.

Well-chosen elements of space, levels, emphatic and non-emphatic walks, and distinguished points may define optimal lengths for movements on stage. In a good space the director might as well employ film-like cuts. Naturally, this does not exclude the possibility of slow, dignified or wavering movements, and long ways on stage.

Scenists have always used mobile elements such as the wonderful machinery of the baroque stage. Flying, and shifting the scenery belong to basic theatrical operations. In the past decades mobile elements of scenery have assumed great significance in organizing space and creating atmosphere; the space is often transformed overtly.

The primary means of moving things about on stage is the rigging loft, with its pulleys, hoitst, and flyers. The ceiling also belongs to the stage loft, although it is rarely mobile. It contributes to the atmosphere of the sight, and the character of space, but it barely has any role in organizing space in a way affecting the course of action.

Ideally, the stage can also open downwards. A sinking machinery, an orchestra pit, and a prompt-box offer a great variety of possibilities.

Elements of scenery rolling on wheels also represent variable mobile means of creating a space. The whole scenery can roll back and forth, or rolling walls can create different spaces.

The revolving stage serves to present different scenes quickly, without any rebuilding. We can furnish different spaces separated by walls on it, or we can place a single carefully designed construction on it which displays a different view, a different space in every position. This type of scenery represents a striking view also while in motion. The revolving stage can also be used for zooming if we revolve a distinguished, highlighted point of the great construction towards the audience.

With the development of imaging techniques, projections assume a greater and greater role in performances; pictures are projected on the background, on walls, on smoke, on clothes, on masks, on faces. Some theatrical experiments employing laterna magica have resulted in exciting performances. Virtuality is a dangerous means on stage; it can work wonders, but sometimes it serves to hide the lack of ideas, and it does not substitute for a good space.

Single-space theatres and studios handle their auditorium freely. In most of our theatres the space of the auditorium and that of the stage are separated by a curtain. The fore stage covering the orchestra pit, the most valuable scene of action, intrudes into the auditorium. Designers employ various means - elements built into or above the auditorium -to alter the relation of stage and audience. These experiments successfully enlarge the space of action, but are less successful in solving the problem of image-boundary. The basis of traditional theatre is auditorium and stage facing each other. This fact is not altered by our tinkering with the portal of the stage; the audience remains the "fourth wall".

In sum: I have examined the elements of the space on stage, how they organize space, and what consequences on dramaturgy they have. The basis of our profession is the creation of a good space, which serves the performance perfectly. This knowledge becomes more than the knowledge of a good artisan if it functions as a solid, safe foundation for our thinking about the world, about plays, and about the theatre. All this contributes to the designer's ability to create the heroic space that gives new, verbally unexpressable dimensions to the relations of the actors and the interpretation of the play. This is what makes scenery designing a kind of art, when practiced by artists.

Perfumery
Analysis of aspects of the masterwork

The scenery of Perfumery presents almost everything that I have found important to say about the use of space on stage. My choice has also been influenced by the fact that I like both the performance and its scenery very much.

The play takes place in a downtown perfumery in the middle of the nineteen thirties. The owner, the employees, and the customers of the shop live their everyday lives. The characters are motivated by friendship, rivalry, and various secrets to reveal. Comic and tragic love stories unfold. After the dramatic, harrowing climax of the story each of the heroes finds happiness. Psychologically wounded people, recognizing their options, attempt to avoid loneliness by wise compromises.

In plays taking place in shops, the relation of vendors, customers, and viewers represents a problem. From what point of view do we look at the space? Who do we face? Whose place is fixed?

In order to solve this dilemma, space had to be treated freely. Stage realism does not mean a faithful copying of reality. If we find the optimal sites of distinguished points and walks in stage space, acting will be self-evident. If there is no pseudo-activity on stage, if there are no wrong, false notes, realism arises without the walls and the furniture corresponding to those in real shops.

In my scenery we look at the shop from behind, from the area not used by customers. Opposite the audience are the entrance to the shop, and the two shop-windows, with street activity going on behind them. The furnishing is apparently irregular, still, it does not seem to be random, owing to the ground plan constructed from triangles. The big triangle with the entrance at its vertex provides unhindered room for action. It can be seen from everywhere, and all important walks lead to it. Through triangles constructed upon one another, the scenery opens towards the auditorium. As if looking through a wide-angle lens, we can see everything. Owing to a system of subtle elevations, the backstage also comes to life. The street is one meter above the stage level, still, the shop does not give the impression of being below the street level. Simultaneous action is going on in the shop and in the street. The rhythm of scenes succeeding one another with film-like cuts is overwhelming. Consequently, quiet moments become particularly emphatic. The fact that the view includes the whole space requires the permanent intensive presence of the actors.

The triangle of the gallery in front of the boss's office has an irreal shape; it is a captain's bridge, with its vertex dominating the space. This is from where the owner keeps an eye at his shop, without participating in what is going on below.

The use of the second floor raises problems of proportion. If I design two-storey high shop-windows, they are disproportionate, they are not of a human scale any more. If, on the other hand, I cut them into two, they are too short with a hiatus above them. I solved the

problem by installing a friz Ml of perfume advertisements, which both optically and contentwise belongs to the lower part, extending it upward. The railing of the captain's bridge is a continuation of the friz with ads. The glass panels of the shopwindow are continued above the friz. The barrier between the two levels is dissolved, and proportions become appropriate.

The stairway from the second floor to the left portal follows the wide-angle optic of the ground plan; it encloses the space from the left, with its lower part winding in a spiral.

The rhythm of the play, the rational movements of the players, and the representation of human relationships is facilitated by a carefully constructed system of walks. A highlighted walk is the entrance in the middle of the backstage. The only door upstairs, that of the boss's office, is also emphatic; it can be approached via the long stairway. As a result, the movements of the owner assume importance; and having to go up to his office are also significant events in the lives of his employees. The less emphatic walks also enrich theatrical possitilibites. The door of the dressing room of the staff below the gallery allows a series of realistic actions related to the working place/dressing room. The fore-stage also has two side walks leading to the spaces below the proscenium boxes, which are small and out of the way, but at the same time close to the audience, and which can therefore serve as scenes of confined actions. The one on the right, the lab, is the intimate room of the assistants, who can leave

by disappearing behind a shelf. The one on the left is the site of the rocking chair in which the owner realizes the collapse of his life in the heart-rendering climax of the play. The catharsis of the moment is saved by the fact that in the darkness following the scene the actor can disappear through a nearby door. The storage room of the shop is in the orchestra pit, offering theatrical possibilities in the front. Goods can be transported from the street directly into the storage room through a double swing-door on the right. In our performance this is the permanent walk of the delivery boy on bike.

The beautifully but moderately decorated shop windows represent the "eyes" and the "soul" of the shop, through which the outer world looks in, and through which the players and the audience see the life of the outer world. In front of the paintings representing the shops on the other side of the street, a woman pushing a pram, a tramp begging, lots of pedestrians, a policeman catching a pickpocket etc form the background of the performance, as if we were looking at a film whose players come into the shop from time to time.

The problematic spatial relation among vendors-customers-spectators is resolved by counters. In the freely handled space, among the bending counters nobody is forced into a fixed position. The relations among the players are authentic, and this is seen well by the audience.

The scenery recalls the era even though neither the structure of the space nor the elements of the scenery are contemporary. The shop gives the impression of a perfumery of the ninteen thirties. Its friendly atmosphere is due to its proportions, and to some extent, to its colours. It is reminiscent of the interior of a real shop, as well as of the browned photos that have preserved that period for us.