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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Making Space: An Embodied Practice of Theatrical Design

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Design)

by

Lillian Clare Bartenstein

Committee in charge:

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2015

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2015

DEDICATION

For my parents, who have supported me throughout my educational journeys.

And of course for Leo, my favorite dog assistant and constant companion. I promise we'll go to the dog beach again soon.

EPIGRAPH

...the theater is often able to reveal through its mechanical means great subjective truths, truths that would remain essentially unknown or invisible without the theater artist's ability to manipulate physical form and color. We should never forget that the scenographer must become an expert craftsman who links the world of words and ideas, philosophies and histories, myths and tales, to physical things that can be seen and touched in a world of material form and movement. If there is to be a continuing theater, it must rely on steady flow of craftsmen of revelation.

Darwin Reid Payne, The Scenographic Imagination

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Making Space: An Embodied Practice of Theatrical Design

by

Lillian Clare Bartenstein

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Design)

University of California, San Diego, 2015

Professor Andrei Both, Chair

In my work as a scenographer I develop a visual and tactile landscape that frames a performance. I use “scenographer” rather than “designer” because my work includes more than a single area of focus, and emphasizes the dramaturgy of the physical world. I am most interested in live performance that prizes storytelling and includes the audience in the imaginative journey. I seek moments of theatricality that create space for a viewer to make an imaginative leap and understand images, objects, and spaces in unexpected ways. This

transferred inspiration activates audiences, who make the connections themselves while watching the piece unfold.

Scenography creates visual parallels between a text or other source material and the vision of a director. This work is both generative and dramaturgical - it reaches beyond the most obvious metaphors to locate connections between medium and story, and interrogates assumptions made by those closest to the work by taking on the perspective of a viewer. By defining and supporting the rules of the performance space, scenography illuminates meanings that may not otherwise be evident. Once the core of the piece is located, my work shifts to the more practical modes of design and execution, prioritizing resources to communicate those critical ideas within the physical and budgetary constraints of each individual process. In this work, I am a craftsman, one who must understand the material world and shape it for use by the performer and communication to the viewer.

Making Space: An Embodied Practice of Theatrical Design

Darwin Reid Payne describes scenographers as craftsmen of revelation. My work identifies both with the idea of craft and the scenographer's goal of revealing "great subjective truths, truths that would remain essentially unknown or invisible."¹ Craft is grounded both in the idea of expertise and manual skill. Engaging with ideas is not usually framed in terms of crafting, though much of the terminology around theatre does create these associations. This is why we use the term playwright, with the embedded "wright," a maker or builder, not a mere writer of words. The playwright builds a textual structure for the play, assembles scenes, words and thematic threads, engaging in the craftsmanship of playing. In the same way the playwright crafts the words, the director crafts the staging of the piece, and a scenographer creates a scoring of the piece through design, assembling a physical world unfolding over time in parallel to the meanings and structures of the text.

In the afterward of Pamela Howard's *What is Scenography* she addresses the conversation surrounding the use of the title Scenographer, defining it as "collaborative work that makes theatre from a visual perspective."² What this making means can vary greatly, and there is additional baggage associated that she addresses in her subsequent text. Because the work is more than just designing elements for the performance, the scenographer can be a generative

¹ Payne, *Scenographic Imagination*, 19.

² Howard, *What is Scenography*, 217.

artist working as an equal creator to the director of a piece. Additionally, confining the perspective to the visual is too limiting -- this kind of design includes sensory experience outside of the visual realm as well, including sound, where the same careful dramaturgical perspective is greatly valued.

This important distinction is the breadth of the world a scenographer creates - the ideas are not limited to only one aspect of the created context for the piece. A scenographer may shape scenery, costume, lighting and sound, and these elements together may move the work from a presentational piece to an experience. In my own work, the idea of the scenographer helps bridge my interests in multiple areas of design. When I approach a play as a theatre artist, I don't limit my imagination by the production element I am charged with designing. My work in each area of design uses storytelling ideas and forms native to other design areas. As a lighting designer, my work tends to be strongly architectural. In the Wagner New Play Festival productions of *Hamelin*³ and *Ex Machina*⁴ in 2013, I created two distinct architectural styles of lighting to define the space which was shared by the two plays in rep. In *Hamelin*, tight pools of top light illuminated the characters in the background when their scenes were not primary, shaping a small space for them balancing whatever scene was taking place elsewhere on stage. On the other hand, for *Ex Machina* the architecture of the lighting was more aggressive. I still used areas of top light for emphasis, and because they define space visually on the floor, but additionally used fluorescent

³ Supplemental File 1 - Hamelin constellations

⁴ Supplemental File 2 - Ex Machina

lights as part of the general lighting scheme to connect with the theatrical moment in the ending when the window frame built out of fluorescent tubes was activated. Because of these connections, the overall impact was a unified visual style reflecting both the place, a smartphone factory, and the dramatic structure of the piece.

Some of my favorite projects are those where both the scenic and lighting designs are mine. In these cases, the two design areas overlap and integrate into the storytelling of the piece. In my work at UCSD, the project that most clearly illustrated this idea was *An Evening with Will and the Witch*.⁵ This piece, like many of my scenic designs was essentially a unit set (and one that comes out of a trunk each night), and the lighting was a key component for activating the scenery in response to the unfolding production. In that case, the lighting was controlled by the performers themselves using foot switches, and the other technical elements were controlled from the stage as well. For this project the lighting instruments were part of the scenery, and were also choreographed physically into the piece. The technical elements not only supported the visual style of the piece, mimicking the stark lighting of silent film, but also the storytelling in the piece - the character of the Witch had summoned Will, a silent film magician, and was pulling the strings though out the performance, so by including lighting and sound in her box of tricks emphasized the relationship between the two characters.

⁵ Supplemental File 3 - Will & the Witch

The titles “set designer,” “lighting designer,” or “costume designer” echo a historically hierarchical production structure, where designers were employed to execute the visual ideas of a director. In a more collaborative model, the design scores the piece, balancing and supporting the staging of the performance the director shapes with actors. Where the playscript might act as a score or document of the dialogue, design is notated in cue sheets, run lists, drawings and the stage manager’s calling script. These are then executed both in advance of and during the performance, bringing the piece to life. The idea of designers is closely linked to their technical work, creating these documents and drawings that detail the construction of scenic elements, or programming content in a light board, sound board. As a manager of a space dedicated to supporting the work of local community theatres, I found inexperienced theatremakers did not believe they need a designer unless their project required such technical skill. In the three years I was there, I worked to demonstrate the value a scenographic perspective adds beyond the surface capability of drawing a flat or programming light cues. The content of the work, the ideas imparted by the choices, that designers bring to the table doesn’t require technical skill at its most basic level, just attention to the story and interest in supporting it. There was an opportunity missed for non-performers to enter their avocational practice of theatre and enrich the experience for everyone, and the barrier to entry was a relatively simple set of technical skills.

Visual and interface design considered more broadly than in the theatre does not connote mere technical execution. Our seamless integration of

technologies into our lives is a good example. The interface of a smartphone is intuitive for a user because it was designed to be integrated into use. In “It’s a State of Attention” Philip Glass described the work he created with Robert Wilson, *Einstein on the Beach*, as auto-didactic, a piece that teaches a viewer how to view it through the experience of watching. His observation was primarily in reference to the new style of *Einstein*, but this awareness of creating an experience that shows the spectator how to understand it is primary in the world of design outside of the theatre. Everything in the built environment around us is designed, well or poorly, for use or aesthetic or both. For example, when you encounter a space with which you are unfamiliar, you rely on architects or experts in wayfinding to think about the human interface with the world and guide you to where you need to go. Anticipating the needs or confusions of others allows a designer to shape the experience of a space or object. As a theatre manager, and later as a house manager, I spent a lot of time observing the ways people used the spaces they encountered, what details shaped their experiences, and where they got lost. Over time, you learn the patterns of confusion and sense, and know where to position yourself to best direct others. The instincts that tell me how to organize a space for use by audiences and spectators, or where to place much needed signage, are the same as the instincts that lead me to develop functional stage spaces.

This is one kind of thinking the scenographer employs when designing a space for a piece of theater. A theatrical space is meant to be experienced, both physically by the actor and then visually by the spectator. The perspective of the

viewer is shaped by strong design work. What one sees when entering the theatre creates a set of expectations about what is to come, expectations that can be met or broken but should not be ignored. Most theatre spaces no longer confine their productions to a proscenium opening, masked by a grand drape, so the images and experience of the production begins when the house opens. In the half-light of preshow, as the audience files in, the scenery holds the potential of the play to follow.

However, prescriptive role of design begins long before the audience enters into the equation - scenery, like architecture, determines the action within the space. A supportive set can create the spaces the performer needs to tell the story. Because live performance is anchored in the presence, there is a close kinship between the performer and the physical elements on stage. The set I designed for *Burial at Thebes*⁶ was challenging to arrange architecturally, but the ultimate design felt balanced and elevated to the performer within the space. The scenery was an installation in conversation with the architecture of the Forum Theatre in which it was situated, and from the stage one could feel the two sides of the world pushing against each other, delineated by the river running between them. From the stage, the high walls of the scenery of the city square were balanced by the height of the audience seating surrounding the thrust. With any piece of theatre, the presence of the audience is the final piece that completes the work, and with this production that energy was intensely felt. The audience

⁶ Supplemental File 4 - Thebes

rebalanced the room, aligning it with Antigone's perspective in a way that it hadn't been before.

This presence of the audience is one of the more ephemeral elements of design, and like lighting, atmosphere (in this case I'm talking about the literal quality of air in the room, e.g. haze, humidity, the temperature of the space), and sound, it is much more difficult to pre-visualize than the more concrete scenery and costumes. Any component of the physical world sharing the time and space of the performer contributes to the fundamental nature of the piece. This close connection means design can be an armature for performance, the structure with, against, and upon which the performer performs. The physical world is the most obvious structure - the structure of the space. This spacial structure informs timing of the staging of the piece. In the production of *The Grapes of Wrath*⁷ I worked on my second year, this was apparent when the actors moved from a compressed rehearsal space into the much larger theatre. A staging idea I contributed early in the process, passing the bundle of Rose of Sharon's stillborn child through the cast up the audience risers when Uncle John sends baby down the river as a message to the people, was immediately stronger when the distance and time embedded in the physical space of the theatre allowed us to realize it in proximity to the audience. Structures of timing are also embedded in the lighting, projection and sound - any component of the physical world sharing the time and space of the performer contributes to the score of the piece. Taking

⁷ Supplemental File 5 - Grapes of Wrath Storm

the text as the fundamental score, the directors and performers build the first layer of timing of the piece through the language. Spacing in the theatre, and the time needed for physical transitions of the space are then added to that score when it first moves into the theatre. This is then followed by time-based cuing of the other design elements to support this structure, building the emotional atmosphere of the play around the physical world.

Understanding the fundamentals that shape spaces within the framing of dramatic time can only be learned through experiencing the world of the stage first hand. Robert Edmond Jones explains that the designer “must learn to sense the atmosphere of a play with unusual clearness and exactness. He must live in it for a time, immerse himself in it, be baptized by it.”⁸ The key idea here is living in the space of the play rather than standing apart from it and approaching it as a series of staging problems to be solved. This emotional atmosphere of the play changes constantly through the performances of the actors and the parallel performance of the design elements. Once the space of the play is understood, the designed world surrounding a performance can use “...the language of art, with a common vocabulary that speaks of volumes, space, color, scale, [and] materials, not as abstract concepts but as practical pathways to cracking the dramatic code.”⁹ The problem to be solved is not the arrangement of architectural elements dictated in a groundplan printed in the back of the acting edition of the play, but rather locating the underlying dramatic gesture encoded in the piece

⁸ Jones, *The Dramatic Imagination*, 74.

⁹ Howard, *What is Scenography*, 222.

through rehearsals, staging in the space, and the addition of technical elements. The key performer for the technical elements is the stage manager. The designers place cues based on embedded timings in the piece, and then the stage manager must be actively present with the performers during each performance when they cue lights, sound and projection.

As with acting, this kind of performance is a craft to be practiced and perfected, both in the construction of cues during the tech process and their execution in production. It is also embedded in the practice of staging the play in the space. The term craft, and craftsman, are undeniably linked to a physically grounded approach to developing skill. In *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, Matthew Crawford describes the connection between a mechanic and the machine, based in the “logic of things rather than the art of persuasion”¹⁰ and “practiced submission” to this fundamental logic which creates a sense of freedom for the practitioner. As craftsman engages with the physical world rather than floating in abstractions, and the physical manifestations of theatre must then be in balance with the performer and spectator. These physical elements must submit to both the logic of the embedded dramatic code and the conditions of physics which govern their existence in the world. A scenic interpretation that fights the meaning of the play undermines the performer living in it, and a design that does not anchor itself in reality can never be built. The tradesman Crawford describes diagnoses the machine in need of repair as searching for the needs of that

¹⁰ Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, 18.

object, a process that I identify with in my approach to a text and production. Intelligence of the physical world developed by observation and experience is the common thread between the work of a mechanic and the theatre artist. A design choice does not necessarily work because we think it should, the connection it hopes to make must be verified by the experience of the audience, just as the motorcycle mechanic is not finished with his work until the machine springs to life again. If it doesn't work, it doesn't work, and an alternative approach must be found. However, through practicing the making of theatre, the instincts that guide the choices the designer makes are developed, and embedded in their personal perspective on the world.

This instinct of design is also embedded in the management of the existing physical conditions present in any production process. Design must meet the limitations inherent in budgets, spaces, time and available equipment. Working within limits guides my process immensely, giving me the pressure to respond creatively to the given circumstances surrounding the producing of the piece. Thoughtful producing is critical to achieving artistic goals of a piece, because allocation of resources will always shape the product. Knowledge of the structure of the producing process based in my past experiences guides my allocation of resources of time and budget on each project. As a scenic designer, my most valuable resource is often budget. Reserving budget contingency allows my work to continue to evolve through the tech and preview process. Once the production is in front of an audience, we can evaluate the choices we've made and make adjustments accordingly. In projection design, the time to accomplish

the work is critical. Clearing space in my head around the tech and preview process allows me to perform at my best under the time pressure. Content developed in advance is helpful, but ultimately projection work relies on the other design elements coming together with the performers in the real time and space of the theatre.

Both practice and the creation of supportive conditions opens the artists to receive inspiration, the first component of gift-giving exchange described by Lewis Hyde. Accessing this inspiration in yourself as an artist and craftsman builds the work, and there is great satisfaction and fulfillment available in this kind of engagement with the world. The opportunity to then give this experience of engagement to an audience completes the artist's engagement with the world. This combination of physical work and transference of inspiration is the opposite of the invented labor David Graeber describes in "On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs." For the community theatre practitioners I worked with in Kentucky, their productions fulfill a fundamental need to create something concrete in the lives of people who spend their days in middle management of a healthcare corporation. Equally, offering my students permission to make something, to explore an idea through physical means with verifiable outcomes, gives them a much needed break from the lecture style coursework most of them spend their time immersed in. These are the gifts I want to give as an artist and a teacher, both through moments of connection embedded in design ideas in my work, and through opportunities to engage in the act of creation itself.

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