Playwriting as a Visual Art
A study of contemporary English-speaking dramaturgy using the works of five
playwrights trained as fine artists

PhD

Stephen Anthony Di Benedetto
Goldsmiths College, University of London

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Erratum

Due to conversion problems between British and American paper dimensions, the
pagination of this document is regular but inconsistent, and could not be corrected
because of time constraints.

Abstract

In a visual culture where the dividing line between the theatrical and visual art forms is becoming increasingly blurred, it is important to reconsider the ways in which the spatial is conceived. Space is another non-linguistic medium of communication—it does not convey ideas through language, but through an array of visual and spatial components augmented by aural or linguistic threads.

Robert Wilson, Maria Irene Fornés, John Byrne, David Storey and John Arden were trained as fine artists before becoming playwrights. Their works are used to describe stage space as a visible medium of expression. These playwrights make use of principles from painting, sculpture and installation to create spatio-temporal images that work with a text to form a theatrical performance. They have constructed their pieces with an implicit visual structure that is essential to their staging. Each manipulates aesthetic concepts gleaned from the fine arts as mechanisms to create three-dimensional theatrical compositions, which can be categorised as 'scopic building blocks'. By analysing these mechanisms with a methodology and vocabulary drawn from the visual arts, a theatrical conception of spatial analysis will become apparent.

These playwrights will be placed in the context of the theatre as a seeing place, into which artists often have crossed over and made use of as an expressive form. Then a summary of the playwrights' fine art training will introduce their aesthetic technique, thereby connecting their visual art and theatrical work. Their working methods will be examined so that their 'playwriting' or 'visual scripting' can be defined. Once the evidence is presented, there will be an exploration of the ways in which these techniques can be applied to physical theatre, theatres of images or other visually influenced texts.

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Introduction

Sometimes an image seen in production can imbed itself in the mind, and whose vivid imagery years later can bring back the excitement of that particular production. After fifteen years, an image remains in my memory from a Yale Repertory production of *Othello*; Othello fell to his knees with a handkerchief in his hand held over his head, exclaiming "Handkerchief" to the heavens. This moment encapsulated, to me, all that Desdemona meant to Othello, the pain he felt by her supposed infidelity and Iago's cruelty. Another time, a similar experience occurred while reading *Sarita* by Maria Irene Fornés. An image formed in my imagination of a scene in colour—suddenly, the reds and oranges of the scene conveyed to me the emotional turmoil that Sarita was experiencing because of her passion for Julio. In some ways these experiences were the beginning of a journey that has been a preoccupation ever since—a search for the ways in which the theatre creates sensations within a spectator.

It seems obvious that theatre is a visual art, yet seldom are its visible elements the subject of critical discourse. The more concrete aspects of the words that compose the object of the playscripts supersede them. Images are fleeting and subject to change, so they are avoided as a subject of critical inquiry. But theatre practice has conventions that guide the production of images on stage as suggested by a playtext. This thesis was conceived out of a general interest in the ways in which spatial dynamics figure in the creation of drama. Each visual art form has its own expressive capabilities, yet they share many compositional principles in common. Understanding the ways in which these principles operate can expand the descriptive vocabulary that the theatre historian uses to describe the ways in which the theatre uses space and image as expression.

The work of the Robert Wilson, Maria Irene Fornés, John Byrne, David Storey and John Arden are used in this thesis to describe different concepts of the visible and spatial in theatre. Each has trained as a fine artist and their works highlight different approaches to using the visible elements of theatre as a form of expression. Plays will be used to demonstrate the ways in which the visible and spatial are evocative, as well as the ways in which the visual and spatial can be used as organising principles to guide

their reception. A description of different artistic concerns and aesthetics will also be used as a basis for understanding the ways in which the theatre harnesses visible principles and makes them work in their own distinct way. It begins with the most obvious transposition of the visual art world in the theatre of Wilson. He uses line drawing and abstract techniques as the structure of his plays. Then the discussion moves to the less overt visual techniques of the other four playwrights, Arden being the most subtle, in his use of architectural constructs to design his stage space. The principal objective is to clarify that the visual arts principles are not limited to purely visual productions, but are also subtle mechanisms within a conventional playscript that relies heavily upon text and narrative as expressive communication.

The methodology used was to find playwrights who were trained as fine artists to examine the ways in which that training might or might not have affected the way that they write plays. I searched for traces of their early fine arts training in the organisational structure of their compositions. Various methodological models were sought to aid in the theorisation of the fine arts. Many of the techniques are obvious and natural for all theatre practitioners to use. The works of these five playwrights have been chosen not because of their structures are unique, but rather because they are more likely to display overt uses of fine arts.

The focus of this thesis is the manner in which the visual functions in theatre—that is to say, the ways in which visual forms are expression in a theatrical context. The exploration of visual culture is becoming increasingly popular and this thesis tries to use those theories to create an interdisciplinary model for describing visible theatrical form. We need to become more aware of the relationship between the visual and aural components in theatre, since both are primary components of theatrical expression. This thesis shows both theatre works that use primarily the visual and those that balance it with the aural. An understanding of the visual concepts of practitioners who have been trained in the fine arts will help others develop a more refined capacity to exploit visual and aural components in the production and reception of theatre. Visual artists have developed a particular skill at expressing ideas through images in a constrained medium. When they work in theatre, they are allowed a whole range of expressive techniques not

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previously available to them. They use the medium in a way that highlights the visible elements of the theatrical medium in a way a linguistically conscious playwright might not normally try. By focusing on these visual devices, awareness can be built for directors, designers and spectators of the ways in which the theatre medium is adaptable to certain types of visual expression.

Each of the playwrights included in this thesis does something slightly different with visual art principles. It does not matter that they use different techniques. What is important is that they are using visible mechanism and fine art techniques as a form of expression within the constraints of the theatrical medium. They treat bodies and stage space as malleable material that can be shaped to communicate messages within their plays. It does not matter if the visual is a primary mode of communication as it is with Wilson, or whether it is a strategy to call attention to the effect of environments on human society, as it is with Arden. By becoming more aware of the ways in which the theatre is able to use the visible, we are better able to harness its capabilities to create vibrant theatre and deepen our understanding of all theatrical presentations.

Increasingly, scholars are turning to visual theory to explore the creation and production of stage imagery to understand the ways in which spectators perceive bodies on stage. In this thesis, I draw from fine art theories and attempt to re-imagine them in a theatrical context. The technique used is a interdisciplinary approach based on the American model of production dramaturgy. That is to say, this study makes use of literary criticism, production criticism, historical contextualisation, illustration and script analysis with the aim of describing the ways in which a particular dramatic composition operates. Focus is directed towards the ways in which the visual is composed rather than the ways in which it generates meaning. There certainly have been allusions to the use of image and fine art aesthetic, but little exploration on the ways in which the theatre and playwrights create images as expressive media. I chose to write about contemporary playwrights who were trained as fine artists in hopes that their early fine art aesthetic would be evident in their theatrical work. Each production is a tangle of text, image, and interpretation. Where do the images come from? Why do productions of the same play share a similar look? What are our assumptions about the conventions of the visible on

stage? Why do we discuss text, acting, directing and design, but not talk of the images themselves that the bodies and setting produce? We have a convention of turning out the house lights and illuminating the stage space, thereby focusing the spectators' attention on the space in front of them. We do not only listen to theatre as the word audience implies, but also watch. What does the theatre share in common with the other expressive arts? What principles guide the production and reception of the visible elements of theatre?

When we think of visual theatre our immediate response is to think of the spectacle of Cirque du Soleil or of non-verbal forms of theatre such as mime or visual narration. But all theatre is visual; whether it is a static rendition of Spalding Grey monologue or a great big West End musical. The spectators watch actors and sets on stage. Rather than think of the visible on stage as mindless spectacle that illustrates the textual narration, or supports the action of the text, think of the visible as a separate strand that can work on its own as the primary evocation of expression or to degrees of support. For this reason, I have minimised the use of terms traditionally used to describe the visual. Instead, 'visible' and 'scopic' are proposed as alternative descriptors to describe anything that can be seen on stage from props to bodies moving through space. The term 'scopic' has been appropriated from visual culture discourse and takes its root all that is visible by the eye.

The use of contemporary theories regarding semiotics, postmodernism, and cultural theory have been avoided as much as possible. These theories are useful and essential in our understanding and interpretation of the form and content of theatre. Yet, for the purposes of this thesis, the visual is conceptualised in a way that is not possible if one has to interject theories that assume language structures are the primary mode of thinking. The approach draws on theories of visual thinking by Arnheim and harnesses the traditions of art historical thinking in the writings of Gombrich and fine artists. In this way, accepted notions of seeing and understanding images, without the use of conventional literary techniques, are explored.

As this thesis was written, many new studies have appeared in the literature providing theoretical vocabularies and perspectives for viewing various attributes of the

visible components of theatre. Phenomenology and visual theory seem to be the most promising approaches to theatre practice that do not focus on literary text or semantic meaning. Rather they approach the subject by mediated physical experience of artistic stimuli. One can hope that the investigation of the visible elements of theatre can continue to provide awareness of the ways in which we watch theatre and understand scripts. My ultimate aim is to find concrete descriptions for the ways in which the visible works in theatre. A vocabulary is necessary to describe the often-intangible qualities of highly visual theatrical productions. What are the interfaces of the art world and the theatrical worlds? Where do hybrid forms figure in with traditional theatre? These strategies serve as examples that call attention to the expressive capabilities of the dramatic medium. There are other playwrights, both trained and not trained as visual artists, who employ these or similar strategies in the composition of their work. What follows will provide insight into the ways in which we can talk about these techniques. In this way, theatre practitioners can help the theatre spectator become more aware of the multifarious expectations and conventions that we hold concerning the visible elements of the theatre.

Chapter 1

Theatre as a Medium for Seeing

> Every temporal thing contains three elements. One in
> the spirit of the artist, who wants to create it, the second
> in the nature of things, by which it is tied to *materia*, and
> finally in the mind of the beholder.[1]
>
> Gottold Ephraim Lessing

Roland Barthes' essay "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein" describes both theatre and

painting as media for seeing.[2] If this can be accepted as true, then would not the

language of fine art be useful in exploring theatre? Rather than to consider painting,

sculpture, architecture and theatre as distinct things, they should be treated as activities

that share basic forms of visual expression.[3] These forms are employed to create

objects such as paintings, sculptures, buildings and performances. Each of the basic

forms of visual expression is endowed with its own expressive function. The spectator's

experience is a place where basic forms meet, merge with and mutually reinforce one

another, often in unexpected and compelling ways. This chapter will argue that the use

of three-dimensional space is at the root of theatrical presentation and therefore that art

language is appropriate for examining different aspects of theatrical communication. Its

discussion is broken into four parts: 1) **Spatial elements**, describes the necessity of

considering the visual being as important as the textual when designing the performance

of a play. This is accomplished by tracing theatre through the centuries as a 'seeing-

place'. 2) **The expression of form**, argues that the theatre spectator's perception

functions in similar ways to that of visual perception in the pictorial arts, thus requiring

that the spatio-temporal relations of animate and inanimate objects on the stage are

appropriately designed to convey the playwright's vision. 3) **Theatre as a visual art,**

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[1] Quoted in Jacqueline Martin and Willmar Sauter, Understanding *Theatre: Performance Analysis in Theory and Practice*, Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell International, 1995, p.9.
[2] Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, Richard Howard, trans., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 89-97.
[3] See Robert Sowers, *Rethinking the Forms of Visual Expression*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, for a discussion of the ways in which the different fine art

considers the ways in which the playwright is a formative artist who produces art within a contingent form, thus making theatre a suitable medium to discuss aesthetic and visual perception theories. 4) **Artists crossing into theatre**, considers how visual theatre practice is influenced by an avant-garde aesthetic that splintered from Naturalism in the late nineteenth century. A chronology of artists working in the theatre illustrates the influence of other artistic expression on theatrical construction.

Traditionally, the preponderance of theatrical researches have treated a playscript as a literary text rather than as a performance text. While treating plays in this way provides a fundamental understanding of the play text, it ignores the aspects of the written text that relate to the three-dimensional staging of a performance. Only recently have semioticians and performance researchers proposed ideas about the ways in which a play's proxemics are created and how a play's visual components (physical action, costume, three-dimensional staging, spatio-temporal composition) are understood as something other than as accidental or supplementary to the text.[4] Playwrights provide the play's form for the director, lighting designer, set designer and other theatre practitioners, who create theatre using a pre-established text, to work within when making production choices (as opposed to ensemble collaboration, *auteur*, improvisation and other non-textual forms). The visual not only augments the text through physical illustration, but also uses it as a principal component to elicit or convey visual rhetoric through the construction of images as its mode of expression.[5]

This thesis approaches the visible in theatre using concepts gleaned from visual theory, rather than using a language taken from semiotic analysis whose concepts originated in philology. Scholars who work under the rubric of visual theory, such as WJT Mitchell, Jon Thompson and Martin Jay have been utilising the theories of Rudolf Arnheim and Ernst Gombrich as their basis and use an inter-disciplinary approach to

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disciplines share compositional principle within which they exploit their medium's expressive capabilities.

[4] Proxemics is the study of the space between people. See Jon Whitmore, *Directing Postmodern Theater*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 121.

[5] As defined by Jim Williams, Bowling Green State University, Visual Rhetoric is the construction of images for the purpose of persuasion as defined by the rhetorical discipline. See Sonja K. Foss, Karen Foss and Robert Trapp, *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric*, Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, pp. 333-335.

examine the production and reception of visual images. They take a more phenomenological perspective in their examinations of such diverse subjects as advertisement, film and museology. The following chapters examine a series of works by playwrights trained as fine artists to suggest a view of contemporary dramaturgy that embraces the structural principles of the fine arts. My aim is provide a view of the visible in theatre that can complement our understanding obtained through semiotic and textual interpretations.

Spatial Elements

Etymologically, the word for "theatre" points to the importance of the visible in theatre history. It derives from the Greek and the Latin for 'a place for viewing' or literally 'the seeing place".[6] Creating a vision for spectators is the central component in the development of theatre practice. Since the beginning of time, all theatre performance has held in common the convention of placing a physical object in space to watch [**Figure 1.1**]. Gropius' figure is commonly used as an illustration in discussions of theatrical space because it demonstrates the ability of the human form to be used as an object upon the stage that creates a myriad of relationships to its environment. The body becomes an object that shapes and relates within and to space.[7] Biological objects performing in space show how theatre can be considered a medium for seeing. RoseLee Goldberg explains: "To consider the body and object as interchangeable inevitably emphasised the body itself as the individual measure of space: as our first means of perceiving space".[8] Bodies in space make manifest abstract spatial experience. Theatre shapes physical space temporally to show changing spatial relationships. Thus bodies in space, *mise-en-scène* and physical actions create a play's proxemics.

One accepted genealogy of the theatre traces its development from religious roots to a secular community event. Whether it be the Greek festival in honour of Dionysus or the Aztec festivals of the sun:

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[6] See *Oxford English Dictionary*.
[7] Stanton Garner, *Bodied Spaces*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994, explores the expressive signification of actors on stage.

> As time goes on, the primitive players move from a
> masked religious rite to a rhythmic act given by a
> specialised mask; They added word. Then at a religious
> revolution they expand the show, put aside 'superstition',
> reduce the masks, bring in human characters, begin to
> add secondary resources to the players, or suffer the
> incursion of poetry.[9]

Theatre grew from participation in a spiritual ritual to spectatorship of a theatrical

spectacle. What is most interesting, is the uninterrupted presence in performance of an

actor and a perceiver. Whether it was the protagonist stepping forward from the chorus

in a Greek tragedy, or of a monk stepping forward at Easter to sing the lines in the *Quem*

Quaeritis trope, a figure takes the focus while performing. As can be seen in the

renderings shown in **figures 1.2** and **1.3**, a special spatial context is created, such as the

dancing of the native American around a fire [**Figure 1.2**], or with the medieval players

moving around the circumference of the stage [**Figure 1.3**]. This focal point

differentiates the performers (the observed) from the crowd (the observers) during

performance. The scenic property's visual quality can be read or received by the

spectator in a number of culturally constructed codes and conventions. Thus, the mask

or body adornment may be interpreted in several ways depending upon custom. Once

these enactments moved outside the religious arena they developed into the pageants of

the medieval period, which included Hell mouths, costumes and other extravagances,

and the simpler *Commedia dell'arte* troupes that used only mask and physical behaviour

to convey their scenarios. How sophisticated these spectacles became relied on the

artists' creativity, the money available and theatrical conventions.

In a lecture, Augusto Boal emphasised the importance of the spectator in

performance.[10] To demonstrate an actor's presence in space, he waved his arms about

to attract attention. Boal went on to describe that if the spectators close their eyes or turn

their heads all the actor's effort deflates into nothing. Not only does this demonstrate the

necessity of the spectator's presence, but also the power the visual component has in

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[8] RoseLee Goldberg, "Space as Praxis", in *Studio International* , 190.997, (September/ October 1975), p. 131
[9] Richard Southern, *The Seven Ages of Theatre*, London: Faber and Faber, 1962, p. 98.
[10] "Theatre and Censorship", a debate hosted by Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London and the Royal Shakespeare Company at Barbican Centre, London on 23 March 1997.

production. The various performance forms that developed from theatre, such as dance

(kinesis), puppetry (related objects in space) and mime (physical action without words)

prove the efficacy of a purely visual performance. The absence of aural components

does not necessarily obfuscate the work's presentation, if images can be constructed as

visual rhetoric. Alternative pictorial vocabularies and structures of thinking reveal

themselves as dramatic expression. *Swan Lake* is understood, despite its kinaesthetic

presentation, since the dancers relate to each other and shape the space around them to

create the ballet's visual language. Dance technique and the physical vocabularies of

the choreography work in tandem with the ballet's musical score. These theatrical forms

do not always preclude the verbal. Bill T. Jones, for example, used video and

monologue in *Still/ Here* (1995). Often in puppetry, a narrative may be added by a

separate voice, as in Bunraku, or the characters may have their own voices as in the

Punch and Judy shows.[11] It is more reasonable to discuss the effect of the visual on

narrative, rather than to focus on narrative as the exclusive, or primary, determinant of

meaning.

Over the years there has been considerable discussion surrounding intention in

literary criticism.[12] While New Criticism resists ascribing an authorial intention to the

text, intentionality has been invoked since before Goethe in arguments judging art and

literature. The assessment of the ways in which the artist of a visual work intended the

object's presentation to communicate does not seem unreasonable. Richard Wollheim

defends intentionality in representational acts despite the New Critics' objections:

> It would certainly seem that whether a thought does
> express the intention behind that act of, say, drawing
> which it accompanies is not independent of what the
> result of the action, in this case the drawing itself, can be
> seen as. And this supposition is further confirmed by the
> fact that we could not imagine a man forming any
> intention at all to represent something, unless he could
> also anticipate how the drawing would look. If this is
> correct, then obviously the introduction of the notion of

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[11] Bill T. Jones/ Arnie Zane Dance Company, *Still/ Here* (1995).
[12] See W. K. Wimsack and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy", in *On Literary Intention*, David Newton- De Molina, ed., Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976.

> intention into an analysis of representation . . . will not
> subvert the analysis.[13]

Creation involves a conception of what the product will look like, therefore, no matter the outcome the artist anticipated its general composition. One thing is essential for performers or visual artists— it is the spectator that is the final ingredient, and therefore, artistic expression is intended to be seen by a spectator.[14] In mime, the expressivity of the actor's body performing physical actions places him in an environment where he is able to interact with imaginary objects or obstacles, thereby generating involvement of the spectator's imagination. Performers' actions must be made clear to be readable; otherwise all their toil is in vain.

Theatre has always been an amalgamation of all the arts (visual, aural and kinaesthetic). Examples from the visual arts are offered in what follows because each art form is an element used by the theatre. Each exemplifies one visual communication system that operates without interference from the others that may operate simultaneously during theatre production. The twentieth-century has made great use of borrowing from other media: for example, installation art deals with three-dimensional environments; body art concerns itself with the signification of the body and action; and mannequin art places figural objects into an environment to exploit their qualities. In the last one hundred years, widespread experimentation with the bounds of the theatrical may have muddied our definition of the dividing lines between the genres, but it has also broadened these forms' expressive capabilities.

The three-dimensional elements of theatre are aligned closely with the visual arts, yet discussions of the visual arts push theatre aside because of its complex relation of disparate elements. Robert Sower illustrates how artistic activity is carried out in different media using shared compositional principles. The differences between the media are what the expressive capabilities are of the material object produced.[15] Goldberg points to the advantages these differences have for performance:

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[13] Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 20.
[14] In conservatory training programs students practice presenting work to their classmates so they can tell them what they see. This allows the novice performer to gauge his intended expression to what was actually seen by the spectators.
[15] Sower, *ibid*.

> It is clear that performance implies a different kind, i.e.
> quantity of space, for its execution. Space becomes the
> medium for practice and actual experience. Put simply
> then, 'theory'— whether 'concepts', 'drawing', or
> 'documentation' —remains essentially two-dimensional,
> while 'practice/ performance' implies a physical context,
> a space in which to experience the *materialisation* of that
> theory.[16]

Objects in space are our means of perceiving space, and theatre uses space as a

medium for expression. Thereby, performance is a physical expression of theoretical

perception of visual arts concepts. Contemporary theatre artists exploit these concepts

to create visual narrative and alternative modes and models of perception. These

structures transform conventional dramaturgical composition into three-dimensional

visual art forms.

Notions of three-dimensionality have always been in use in the production of

theatre, though, until Einstein's theory of relativity, its use was less a conscious

consideration.[17] Intuition and convention guided the artist's spatial composition.

Einstein's hypotheses states:

> *The principle or relativity.* There are an infinite number of
> systems of reference (inertial systems) moving uniformly
> and rectilinearly with respect to each other, in which all
> physical laws assume the simplest form (originally
> derived for absolute space or stationary ether).[18]

Once artists became aware of the importance and mutability of spatial dynamics, they

began to experiment actively with space and time as organising principles. Brockett and

Findlay consider the influence of Einstein's theories on art, but fail to accept their impact

when it comes to drama: "Whereas painting is essentially a space art, drama is primarily

a time art (that is, composed of successive events which can be experienced only as

they occur in sequence)".[19] Drama is seen as a slave to causality and duration rather

than as a parallel to painting and spatial arrangement. The freedom to use space as an

organising principle liberated the theatre from the neo-classical unities. Artists in all

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[16] Goldberg, "Space as Praxis", *ibid.,* p. 130.
[17] See Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880- 1918,* Cambridge,
Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983. Kern explores the ways in which
Einstein's theories affected the new modes of understanding and experiencing time and
space brought about by the Industrial revolution.
[18] Sri Kantha Scahi, *An Einstein Dictionary,* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996,
p.181.

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media wanted to experiment with notions of time and space. The choreographer Merce Cunninham relates:

> I used to be told that you see the centre of space as the most important: That was the centre of interest. But in many modern paintings [such as Rauschenberg's] this was not the case, and the sense of space was different. So I decided to open up the space to consider it equal, and any place, occupied or not, just as important as any other. In such a context you don't have to refer to a precise point in space. And when I happened to read that sentence of Albert Einstein's: 'There are no fixed points in space,' I thought, indeed, if there are no fixed points, then every point *is* equally interesting and equally changing.[20]

Cunningham broke with tradition to broaden dance's spatial bounds. The performing arts shared visual art's preoccupation with capturing the new modes of perception.

Artists experimented with fractured perception in the form of Dada, Cubism and other non-linear structures. Einstein was influential with artists and made widespread "such techniques as juxtaposition of disparate elements, discontinuity, multiple focus, and unity through theme or motif".[21] These techniques have always been utilised, but as an awareness of spatio-temporality became conscious, so did an awareness of how other elements besides the neo-classical unities can act as the spine to a script. Thereby a solution to non-unity became plausible. For example, Don Juan plays by Tirso de Molina, Molière and Odön von Horvath can be seen as using juxtaposed physical action to provide a thematic motif rather than using only simple cause and effect.[22] Critics have always been dissatisfied with Molière's *Don John, or, The Libertine* (1665) because the action of the Statue dragging Don Juan to Hell breaks with the conventional understanding of the neo-classical unities. If the physical action of Don Juan relating to every character is seen as a seduction, and the Statue's behaviour is juxtaposed to it, then we can see how their actions are the same. Don Juan's seduction and the Statue's actions are connected with the rest of the play by visible means.

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[19] Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, *Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since 1870*, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973, p. 268.
[20] Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 106.
[21] Brockett and Findlay, *ibid.*, p. 268.
[22] See Stephen Di Benedetto, *The Don Juan Theme and Experimental Dramatic Structures*, (MA thesis), University of Michigan, 1995.

Artists who write plays conceivably use techniques that they have learned from the other expressive media, thereby reapplying structural principles into their plays. Combining forms creates new expressive and perceptual possibilities:

> Art ultimately comes out of art, because the artist is influenced more by conceptual modes he observes in art and retains in his head than by non-artistic experience; and what data he finds outside of art generally falls into patterns that were shaped by those prior conceptual modes.[23]

Artists' modes of thinking influence how they process information and how they adapt new media to their expression. How visual principles have manifested themselves in playwriting and production will hopefully enrich our understanding of what is created in practice. Critics have begun to delve into this territory with Stanton B. Garner's study, *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama*, Cynthia Carr's performance theory study *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century* and Una Chaudhuri's cultural study *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, but few examine artistic principles in relation to the dramatic text.[24] In textual studies, the words most often are understood in terms of particular social, cultural or political theories. These perspectives, of course, reveal many interesting insights, but drama is meant to be performed and spatial dynamics figure in the written form of most texts. The ways that the text finds its life on the stage is not only the domain of the director and designers, but also the domain of the constraints of the playtext, which limits artistic choice in production.

The Expression of Form

> Form. . . is the outward expression of its inner meaning. . . The artist is the hand which, by touching the various keys, (form), affects the human soul to respond to certain vibrations.[25]

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[23] Richard Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed-Means: and Introduction to Happening, Kenetic Environments and other Mixed-Means Performances*, London: Pitman and Sons, 1970, p. 10.

[24] Garner, *ibid.*; Cynthia Carr, *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Hannover and London: University Press of New England, 1993; and Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

[25] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, M. Sadler, trans., New York: Dover, 1977, p. 47.

Theatre and the pictorial arts create images that the spectator responds to synaesthetically. In other words, the artwork produces mental sense-impressions that stimulate other senses thereby creating an aesthetic experience. Intuitive knowledge of how the spectator responds to visual stimulation guides an artist's proxemics. Clause Gandelman's *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts*, suggests visual perception is a tactile process: "One reads a picture either haptically (by touch, visual touch) or optically (according to the pure vectorality of outlines), or by a dialectical combining of the two visions".[26] Our sight actively seeks to perceive as we might examine by physical touch. We feel this part and then another, consider its shape, weight and texture and then seek to make a judgement as to what it is or means in its context. Gombrich further elucidates what goes on in our minds when we look at a picture:

> We build it up in time and hold the bits and pieces we
> scan in readiness till they fall into place as an
> imaginable object or event, and it is in this totality we
> perceive and check against the picture in front of us.
> Both in hearing a melody and in seeing a representation,
> what Bartlett called the 'effort after meaning' leads to a
> scanning backward and forward in time and space, the
> assignment of what might be called the appropriate
> serial orders which alone give coherence to the image.
> In other words, the impression of movement, like the
> illusion of space, is the result of a complex process
> which is best described by the familiar term of reading
> an image.[27]

A spectator's impression of visual stimuli is based on a complex mental process that amounts to scanning an image until it makes sense. In performance, formal relationships that came before are constantly being modified by subsequent depicted events. Visual perception is a gradual process of assembling impressions until a mental image of the event or picture forms. Perception is affected according to whether the visual stimulation is received synchronically, as in a single static image containing all the

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[26] Clause Gandelmann, *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991, p. *ix*.
[27] E. H. Gombrich, "Visual Discovery Through Art" in *Image and the Eye: Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1982, p. 51.

relationships like with a Ruben's painting, or diachronically, where images are presented sequentially as in Hogarth's *Marriage a la mode*.

Lessing's quotation that prefaced this chapter points to the nature of visual expression.[28] There first must be an artist with a vision who creates an art object, and then the mere existence of that object will trigger a response from the beholder. The visual speaks through shape, line, texture, colour and mass. All of the visual arts use these forms to communicate. Artists use these concepts as techniques within the confines of their medium to shape an object's composition into a balanced aesthetic. The final component is the beholder, because he or she becomes an expressive conduit for the visual forms. The eyes receive the stimuli and the intellect interprets the experience and makes it into a formal whole. Acknowledging a play as an object that is a three-dimensional artwork designed by a playwright can enrich our understanding of the theatre's visible components.

Traditionally, theatre history has been illuminated by a series of textual theories severed from physical practice. By focusing on the three-dimensional pictorial composition of plays, new ways of understanding can be discovered. Theatre is aligned with the visual arts because it shares in the production of visual form. As studies by Arnheim and Gombrich show, the visual arts have developed a language to talk about visual perception, spatial composition and object signification. Application of this language will help ground theatre's ephemeral qualities. The aesthetic leap between the different media is small. Aesthetic experience comes out of the same primal urge. Since its origins, the theatre has been a place to watch stories unfold. As Michael Issacharoff posits, "A play when enacted must take place somewhere. Its performance must occur in some real visible space, on a stage or in an area fulfilling that purpose".[29] Spectators for thousands of years have enjoyed playwrights' constructed fantasies. Actors are figures in space performing physical actions and relating to a spatial environment. Production is a communication mode that requires visual perception. Playwrights create visual rhetoric using the semiotic systems available through

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[28] See the opening quote of chapter.

production. Their writing implicitly and explicitly manipulates conventions to guide

practitioners in their staging of the play. Parameter and tolerance are made tangible by

the requirements of the play's action.[30] If a player from Storey's *The Changing Room* is

supposed to be getting dressed for a rugby game in 1968, then an actor must put on the

gear that would have been used then. They have to take off their street clothes, put on

shorts, socks and cleats. This action must be performed in an environment that looks

like a changing room. The placement of the benches, coat hooks, door and bath depend

on what the rest of the play's action requires. Playwrights use the techniques of

parameter and tolerance to harness the variation inherent in the contingency of different

practitioners staging the play.

Experiencing the visual involves our emotions as much as our mind and the

pictorial arts can also be thought to be reasoned discourse. Arnheim proposes that

visual perception is visual thinking: "Artistic activity is a form of reasoning, in which

perceiving and thinking are indivisibly intertwined".[31] Thus humans can think with their

senses and theatre acts as a medium for seeing that stimulates thinking or develops an

awareness of objects that one has not noticed before. Artists select elements to help the

spectator see the world through a particular lens: "The number of stimuli that impinge on

us at every moment—if they were countable—would be astronomical. To see at all, we

must isolate and select".[32] The artist chooses the stimuli that will create a particular

visual experience. Perceiving the path or composition the artist has laid out helps the

spectator consider the presented stimuli. In *Image and Eye*, Gombrich relates a story of

the way in which a month after seeing abstract paintings by Lawrence Gowing, he caught

a glimpse of his checkerboard floor through the bottom of a glass and noticed the

resulting distortions in pattern.[33] Though he had seen the pattern through the glass

hundreds of times before, he had never taken note until after he took an interest in

Gowing's abstracted designs; artwork had transformed his perception of the world. The

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[29] Michael Issacharoff, "Space and Reference in Drama", *Poetics Today*, 2.3 (Spring 1981) p., 211.
[30] See Roger Gross, *Understanding Playscripts: Theory and Method*, Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1974, pp. 134-136.
[31] Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969, p. *v*.
[32] Gombrich, *Ibid.*, p. 15.

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visual arts offer a means of communication using images. These principles are also applicable to theatre.

No one argues that languages have to be learned, but image reception is constantly dismissed because it cannot be codified into a universal language. The ability to read pictures must be acquired, as the ability to read letters must be acquired. For example, someone who has been educated with Occidental traditions may find it difficult to approach Oriental art:

> The eye accustomed solely to Oriental painting does not immediately understand a picture in perspective. Yet with practice one can accommodate smoothly to distorting spectacles or to pictures drawn in warped or even reversed perspective.[34]

One must adapt perception to accommodate alien methods. So as the Japanese read down, right to left and Europeans read across, left to right, one historical period accepts polyperspectival views and another accepts linear perspective. It is a matter of learning the conventions rather than dismissing the work as incomprehensible. A person must first learn Hiragana and Katakana script to read Japanese.

One such pictorial language that must be learned is that of proxemics; that is to say, the conventions of social and cultural behaviour. Goldberg asserts the human body is our first means of perceiving space.[35] Artists use spatial composition to frame expression. Different areas of a composition may have significance because convention indicates how they are to be read:

> And when the curtain rises in the theatre, the audience is inclined to look to its left first and to identify with the characters appearing on that side. Therefore . . . the left side (from the audience's viewpoint) is considered the stronger. In grouping actors, the one farthest left dominates the scene. The audience identifies with him and sees the others, from his position, as opponents.[36]

Whether a viewer ascribes importance to objects situated on the top of a Japanese painting, or a theatre-patron associates stronger qualities with a character standing on the left, it is important to acknowledge cultural conventions and to consider how

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[33] Gombrich, *ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
[34] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1968, pp. 14-15.
[35] Goldberg, "Space as Praxis", *ibid.*, p. 131.

convention guides physical action's spatial organisation. Though a character crossing from right to left may signify differently depending on one context or another, it can be accepted that it does signify something. In performance there are important moments that are meant to stand out from the rest of the play's images.

Granted, not all on stage movement is meant to have equal weight, some is included to get characters from place to place. When spectators are able to differentiate between movement with intentional signification and movement with utilitarian function, their understanding is enhanced. Compositional clarity guides the spectator to the components that are pivotal in creating an interpretation. As defined by Gombrich, traditional conventions prescribe that:

> Art stands in need of very clear and unambiguous cues
> to the situation in which the movement occurs. In
> particular we have to know whether a movement
> portrayed should be interpreted as predominately
> utilitarian or expressive.[37]

When the function of the movement is clear, then the context of the whole becomes clear. If the difference is indeterminate, then the overall significance of action and spatial relation may become obfuscated. Dramaturgical structure suggests the play's physical action so that spectators may perceive each component's form which in turn defines their superficial relation to the whole. Theatre's spatio-temporal nature regulates visual stimulation:

> As everything external also contains an inner meaning
> (more or less noticeable), every form also has its inner
> substance. If a form appears meaningless and, as
> people say, 'has nothing to say,' this should not be
> interpreted literally. There is no form, or anything in the
> world which says nothing. The message, however, often
> does not reach our soul.[38]

In other words, everything that can be seen is effective for a reason and that reason tells something about the work. Whether a component is utilitarian or expressive, it adds to the image's substance. How much a brushstroke affects interpretation depends on its relation to the whole. It is the overall effect of the spectators' mental process that leaves them with final impressions of the play.

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[36] Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974, pp. 34-35.
[37] Gombrich, *ibid.,* p. 86.

As the play unfolds, the spectator is presented with physiognomic changes. A

dynamic visual structure works within the regulated textual structure. The stream of

movement configures a variety of nodal images on which to focus:

> A different situation obtains when the action comes
> about through changes in the perceived scene. Think of
> a sports event in which the ball is the centre, moving
> back and forth across the field. To accommodate this
> moving centre, the structure of the playing teams is
> continuously reorganised. This is a centralised system
> of transforming itself over time.[39]

The play's image is always in motion even if its superficial changes are not as drastic as

character entrances and exits. Minute modifications in distance or action are quickly

observed. Rarely is there a single nodal focus as in Beckett's *Not I*, where only the

woman's lips are visible on stage. Most often, a figure moves through space creating

multiple images. For example, in Wilson's *Deafman Glance*, Sheryl Sutton's character

seemingly drifts across the stage without moving. Her slow pace is an extreme example

of how the figure gradually transforms the pictorial composition, thereby adding to the

spectator's overall perception of the stage space. The single node of the Beckett

enhances the spectator's awareness of a single consciousness, while the Wilson

enhances the spectator's awareness of sinister action.

Individual compositional components (characters, setting, props and actions) do

not exist in a vacuum. Their inter-relation defines what they are, as much as their

presence signifies something about the play. Artists include many elements to make the

image's expression clear. As a writer turns an idea around to discuss its different

aspects, artists relate objects together to substantiate the artwork's rhetoric:

> Experience indicates that it is easier to describe items in
> comparison with others than by themselves. This is so
> because the confrontation underscores the dimensions
> by which the items can be compared and thereby
> sharpens the perception of these particular qualities.[40]

Objects are understood based on what their context says about them. We gauge

character behaviour and action by the effect it has on the whole environment. For

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[38] Wassily Kandinski, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, New York: Dover, 1976, p. 46.
[39] Arnheim, *The Power of Center*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, p. 232.
[40] Arnheim, *Visual Thinking, ibid.*, p. 63.

example, consider Anthony Caro's series of sculptures based on paintings.[41] His *Act of War* (**figure 1.4**) is based on Goya's *The Third of May, at Madrid* (**figure 1.5**). He rendered the effect of the painted image in a sculptural medium. A spectator can walk around this sculpture in the gallery looking at the different perspectives: If you stand behind the abstracted figures with the guns you can see the perspective of the soldiers; if you walk behind the prisoners, you become one of the men about to be executed; and if you continue around the sculpture you become the painter watching and recording the scene. In a sense, Caro broke down the narrative depicted in the painting into sculptural experiences, thereby enhancing the painted composition's effect. Caro reduced the shapes of the figures into their formal components: The executioners become masses with horizontal beams stuck out and the victims become narrow bent shapes, and the dead body drapes over the pedestal while the living bodies hold their arms out in supplication. The painting's component details are translated into shape and mass. The spectator's feelings for the sculpture can be traced to the shapes rather than the colour and expression of the figure. Both the painting and the sculpture depict the same action, the same moment in very different ways, they trigger different reactions, but both remain potent images of death and war.

Caro's sculpture tells its story through multiple perspective and abstract shape, while Goya's painting tells its story from a single point using light, colour and physiological expression. The medium of expression is different, but the formal components are used to tell a tale, or to trigger a response. If one were not able to walk around the sculpture much would change; a single perspective would reign and deny the appearance of several component parts. It is frightening to stand behind the victims and see the guns directed at you. This is the same kind of experience a theatrical composition can give. The moving objects provide a changing pictorial perspective and the characters can offer highlights of different viewpoints. Alexander Calder's *Red Polygons* [**figure 1.6**] shows how as a sculpture moves through space, differing perspectives become visible. Each of the mobile's polygons' relationship to its spatial

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[41] See John Golding, *Caro at the National Gallery: Sculpture from Painting*, London: National Galleries Publications, 1998.

context changes as the mobile turns as the air current rush by. The shaping of space offers many different perspectives of the situation. As we watch theatre, our phenomenological awareness leads us through the rhetoric that the playwright communicates through staging.

If visual perception is visual thinking, then applying spatial theories, exemplified by visual art works, to theatre can help define theatre proxemics more clearly. Raymond Mason's sculptures allow us to demonstrate the uses of this approach. The sculptures are a hybrid form that is unlike traditional sculpture, relief or painting. Mason defines his work as "translating a painter's vision into three-dimensions".[42] He creates environments using the principles of painting applied to three-dimensional representation. His handling of his subjects is overtly dramatic in content and form. The principles behind his sculpture align themselves with theatre practice. In *L' agression au 48 de la Rue Monsieur- le- Prince. Le 23 Juin 1975* [Figure 1.7] for instance, multiple figures are set in a spatial environment resembling a stage. Each figure is individually characterised with his/her own colour scheme, costume, superficial emotion and physical activity—the bearded man comforts the woman, the man in the plaid jacket gawks in pleasure at the accident, and the heavy woman screams. Different activities and relations between the different characters are used to create an expression of the whole. Its frozen action suggests a larger frenzied narrative.

A Tragedy in Northern France. Winter, Rain and Tears [Figure 1.8] shows the ways in which semblance communicates by the figure's mere presence in space. The title answers the question of why they all wait in front of the factory with such heavy-hearted anxiousness. We see the action of the sculpture because of Mason's guiding hand. He has sifted out emblematic actions and characters to create a crowd of people—an old man stoops to talk with a child, while others mill restlessly. Episode by episode, the viewer builds a complete image of the composition. Distance between figures establishes both interpersonal and spatial groupings. Intimacy is apparent between the man in the polka-dot scarf and the woman with whom he is arm in arm. Her

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[42] Michael Peppiatt, *Raymond Mason: Coloured Sculptures, Bronzes and Drawings 1952-1982*, London: Arts Council, 1982, p. 9.

round eyes are swollen with despair, and his grip acts as both physical and emotional support. This relationship, when associated with the rest, modifies the viewer's perception of the composition. One is led to ask why this couple is here. This, in turn, poses more questions that lead the viewer through the sculpture's structure.

Mason has sifted different signifying detail, shaped them and fed them back to us. The characters come to life to play out individual stories which, when seen together are many related threads of a larger story. Rosalind Krauss talks of how sculptural structure can show multiple perspectives of the same subject.[43] Theatre takes each perspective one incident after another, explains them over time, while comparing and contrasting the incidents with each other. *View of St. Mark's Place, East Village, New York City* [**Figure 1.9**] is a sculpture in a box that shows the multiple perspectives synchronically. The front window of the coffee shop acts creates a proscenium 'fourth-wall' framing device. Stretching back into the box's recesses are characters filling space. Fingertips on the window show the boundary between the subject and the viewer. The man in the turban's distance from the policeman, who is behind his car, shows that the men are on opposite sides of the street. Each figure goes about his business, but when each is seen in relation to the whole, the viewer gets an impression of the life beyond this East Village coffee shop window. One character relates to the environment as a place to protect, another man simply passes by, and to yet, another it is home. Each relationship is one perspective of East Village life. Theatre achieves the same effect of figures performing actions in space, except that it controls the time one spends looking at each element. Theatre brings the spatio-temporal elements to life and can explore their consequences in dynamic ways. Each sculpture can serve as a lesson in theatre proxemics. Mason's work presents tangible figures and objects in three-dimensional space. Focusing on these frozen moments explores how theatre uses space to create signifying images. As the theatre images change appearance, more relationships are established, thus leading the spectator though the play's visual rhetoric. Theatre and the

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[43] Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 7-38.

visual arts are media for seeing, and seeing is a way of thinking that has yet to be fully

explored with regard to theatre.

Theatre as a visual art

Despite the importance of the visible within theatre, theoreticians have relegated

spectacle to a supporting role of dialogue and plot. As staging is ephemeral and the text

is concrete and unchanging, dialogue has usually been used as the basis of theory.

Critical theory seems to resist using language from the fine arts to discuss theatre

because of the belief that thinking is based solely on linguistic logic. Theatre

communication is most often a polymorphic combination of movement, three-

dimensional visual imagery and literary text. Each strand has been explored by itself,

but since performance combines them all into a weave of simultaneous and ever-

changing semiotic systems, its expression continues to elude description. If theatre is an

art form and playwrights are the artists, what are the ways in which they control the play's

production? Pre-directorial theatre practice indicates that the playtext directs itself.

Written into most conventional playtexts are parameters and tolerances that dictate what

should or should not happen in the staging of a playtext through intended settings,

character requirements and props. For example, to carry out the construction of the

marquee in Storey's *The Contractor,* there need to be poles, rope, tent spikes, a tent,

floor tile and other tools for the men to use as they construct the tent. Certain

movements are essential for the action to make sense. There must be carrying,

hammering, lifting and adjusting that act as expression beyond the dialogue. These

activities demand a certain relationship between the actor and the way he uses the prop.

Moreover, theatre's unwritten conventions guide performers in their presentation. Most

playwrights will consider conventions when forming the play's structure.

Lawrence Weiner outlines why space is an important factor used in practice:

> I don't understand how you can think something that is a
> fact of life is not germane . . . You may not consider
> space an art material, but the fact that you are
> occupying a certain amount of space in a pure physical

sense means that you are dealing with space whether you want to or not.[44]

Human figures on stage inhabit space and the shape of space has a bearing on the performance event. **Figure 1.10** illustrates how the positioning of objects on stage affects their perception by the spectator. Any object placed on stage immediately takes on a relationship with every other object on stage. As the lines highlight, when the upstage-centre figure opens the door, the motion of the door and the entrance of the figure upstage-centre draw focus from the other objects occupying the stage space. Meanwhile, the downstage-left door and figure make a weaker entrance and only draw attention later. The first entrance conveys strength and vibrancy, while the second conveys either hesitation or caution. Even the presence of an open window serves as a gateway to another space, which impinges upon the spatial dynamic of the room. One imaginary scenario could be that the downstage-left figure murdered the figure on the ground and is watching the discovery of the corpse by the upstage-centre. The open windows make it appear as if the murder has already escaped. Each visual choice has a bearing on the ways in which the spectator interprets the action.

Contemporary staging is organised by a director and a design staff, but in other historical periods this was not the case. Each generation has its own accepted ways of conceiving space in theatre. For example, in the visual arts during the medieval period multi-point perspective was convention.[45] Each object was perceived as its own centre, so its placement in a larger context was not a concern as it is today. The depiction and action of each figure were more important than what was the figure's immediate relation to the whole. An illustration of the type of effect this convention has is shown in **Figure 1.11** where the figures appear to be standing on top of each other's heads. In this case an object's function becomes more important than its form and placement. If several actors were crowded onto the small stages of the wagons, the narrative function was more important than the meaning of their spatial arrangement. While today, on a large proscenium stage filled with set pieces and lighted with colour, an actor's placement has

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[44] Goldberg, "Space as Praxis", *ibid.*, p.130.
[45] See William V. Dunning, *Changing Images of Pictorial Space: A History of Spatial Illusion in Painting*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991, p. 6.

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a bearing on the spatial dynamic of the image presented on stage. Though spatial dynamics are in play in both a staging *The Second Shepherd's Play* or Wilson's *Alice*, precise spatio-temporal placement figures predominately in the spectator's response to *Alice*.

Practitioners are constrained by the play's structure, because the playwright knows that the script will be handed over to a director, designers and actors who will interpret the work and bring it to life in three dimensions. Just as an artist plans for the eventuality of a sculpture being sent to the foundry to be cast in bronze, the playwright plans for a play to be sent to the theatre to be staged. Dramaturgical structure uses parameters and tolerances to narrow the range of options the practitioners have for staging. Not all plays have a strict guide to staging. For some plays it does not matter whether it is set in a Victorian or a neo-classical room, while for others with a strong visual aesthetic, their setting needs a very specific constructed environment.

Central images and spatio-temporal relations do not vary greatly from production to production in any given period. As humans we have predictable ways of interacting. It would be difficult to have a sword fight or a kiss if the actors were not in close physical proximity. There is consistency between productions that make each staging of *Home* recognisable as David Storey's *Home*. The production's look is dependent upon convention more than on any actor's performance or director's staging. Take for example the production photographs of English, German and Dutch stagings of Storey's *Home* [**figures 1.12-1.14**]. Despite the different cultures that produced each play, the images are easily identifiable as being the same plays performed in different contexts. The text provides a context with which the actors create a characterisation. In each of the three productions, the actors have been led to choices that structure their visible behaviour. As upper-class gentlemen, they present themselves in defined ways. Notice each of the actors playing Harry hold their canes in quite similar manners; the characters in **figure 1.12** and **figure 1.13** rests the canes on their leg, and the one in **figure 1.14** rests the cane on the edge of the table. Moreover, the same type of hat is on the table in both **figure 1.12** and **figure 1.14**. The major difference between the three production photographs is an expected cultural variation in character type and costume which are

contingencies accounted for in the text's tolerances and parameters. A German

production looks German rather than English; Harry looks like an English gentleman

when played by Ralph Richardson while the Dutch actor looks like a Dutch gentleman.

Another example is the three photographs [**figures 1.15- 1.17**] from different productions

that show *The Changing Room*'s action as unchanging. Kendal must get his nose

broken, the doctor must attend to it, and the coach and the trainer must stand by Kendal.

Despite **figure 1.17** being from a 1996 production, all three photographs show the

training table is in a changing room of the late 1960s— the clothes, table, room and the

athletic equipment will look as they did then. Storey's text demands that the play's

characters perform the activities as they would in life. This consistency makes the

physical staging as reliable as dialogue's different readings.[46]

There is a contingent of playwrights who hold the view that the play's content and

form are sacrosanct and the director's job is to bring it to life: "A director, like an

orchestral conductor, is an interpreter who has to elicit from the printed page the creator's

intentions . . . the text is supreme and inviolate".[47] To playwrights with a strong vision,

the director is there to carry out the playwright's instructions, or rather, prepare the recipe

as a master chef would. A playwright uses theatre conventions to create a play for the

director to stage. Ronald Harwood wrote the passage quoted above as a reaction to a

German director adding text to his play. This incident is not isolated. There can be no

denial, however, that since the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth

century the director has taken control of staging. To the chagrin of some playwrights, the

decision-making regarding staging ultimately lay in the aesthetic sense of the director.

Directors often argue that the same scene can mean different things based on the style

the director chooses to employ.[48] Signification is based on context and the context is

provided by the playwright's text. Directors who choose to superimpose their own

contexts work as *auteurs*; their starting point may be the text, but the text's structure is

not treated as sacrosanct. JoAnne Akalaitis' 1995 production of *Suddenly Last Summer*

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[46] Within a text, variations in dialect and speech rhythms are accepted as reasonable variation while still considering the work as authoritative.
[47] Ronald Harwood, "Cut the Director", *Sunday Times* (4 May 1997).
[48] Whitmore, *ibid.*

used Tennessee Williams' text as fodder for her symbolic exploration of sexuality.[49] Rather than use the physical staging provided by the text she placed characters in symbolic poses or used dancers to express a scene's emotion. So the playwright's implicit and explicit instruction for how a text can be staged was not as important as her own production concept. *Auteurs* work like the Dutch visual artist Alexander Brener who was arrested in Amsterdam for spray painting a ($) over Kazmir Malevich's *White Cross on Grey*.[50] Brener used existing work as a ready-made medium for him to add to as an expression of his views. Although, unlike a visual art object whose form is set once the artist lets the object out into the world, when another artist imposes a concept on the play, the object is not destroyed forever; it is just another production. A well-constructed play is flexible enough to accommodate many different approaches that may differ from the playwright's implicit staging.

In the early twentieth century, Adolphe Appia (1862- 1928) and Gordon Craig (1872-1966) began to realise the theatrical medium's visual potential. Stage scenery and actors, if under control of a master artist, could be used to create sublime pictorial images. While Appia and Craig inspired our century's scenographers, their writing also calls attention to the ever-improving scenic technology developed since the nineteenth century. Lighting technology has improved exponentially since advances such as the Drummond light and gas lighting. These helped Louis Jaques Daguerre (1787- 1851) play with lighting effects in his panoramas, which created spectacle based on images. Robert Wilson's techniques of painting with light are descendants of the early experimentation. Now stage space can be transformed in an instant by the use of lighting effects. Lighting technology became subtler, making possible colour and shadow effects, which painters have been achieving with similar effects in paint and pigment for centuries. Thereby, new forms emerged that combined visual aesthetics with traditional dramaturgy. Artists then turned their attention towards the expressive range of cinema and theatre.

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[49] Hartford Stage production of Tennessee William's *Suddenly Last Summer*, JoAnne Akalaitis, dir., November 1994.
[50] Giancarlo Politi, "Freedom for Brener: in the name of art", *Flash Art*, 30.193, (March/ April 1997), pp. 55.

Film theorists, such as Anne Holander, Jaques Aumont, C. S. Tashiro and

Charles and Mirella Affron dismiss theatre as a visual art because a play must be

recreated each time it is experienced.[51] Hollander points out in her book *Moving Images*,

there is evidence that cinematographers apply age-old painting techniques to their

medium. She argues that a clear connection can be made because both film and

painting create fixed images using light and dark. She relates:

> Theatre is ephemeral—each production lasts only as
> long as its run, and each performance is a new version
> of the piece . . . Film shares in the perfect, unchanging
> action of still pictures, which may be interrupted only if
> the surface is covered or melts, or if the light dies.[52]

She likes, as do most critics, the certainty of unchanging exactness. Fred Astaire and

Ginger Rogers will always dance at the same rate, with the same flow of material trailing

behind at the same moment, in the same way that on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel

God and Adam are forever not touching. To Hollander, the fundamental difference

between theatre and film, and therefore between theatre and art, is its plasticity. For her,

something changes, however minute, with each staging or performance that makes it

unable to be compared with the pictorial arts. Since film can be re-examined indefinitely,

supposedly it is closer aligned with painting. Both theatre and film, however, are a

collective medium whose movement and action are demanded by the production.

Theatre merely has to recreate the artwork each time. Lithographs and engravings

change with every inking, but they are still a single object that can be discussed as fine

art.

Hollander selects certain genres of painting, which she has termed

'protocinematic' to describe effects achieved in cinema. Her argument successfully uses

art language to discuss film, but film does not produce any less of a static image than

theatre production. Therefore, her ideas are relevant in the discussion of the visible

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[51] See Anne Hollander, *Moving Images*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991; Jaques Aumont, *The Image*, London: British Film Institute, 1997; C. S. Tashiro, *Pretty Pictures: Production Design and the History of Film*, Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1998; Charles Affron and Mirella Afron, *Sets in Motion: Art Direction and Film Narrative*, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995.
[52] Hollander, *ibid.*, p. 3.

elements of theatre. Gombrich offers another perspective that supports the parallel between the visible elements of theatre and film:

> Suppose a news camera had filmed the *Judgement of Hercules*. Which of the frames would be suitable for publication as a still from the film? The answer is that none might do. The so-called 'stills' which we see displayed outside cinemas and in books on the art of film are not, as a rule, simply isolated frames from the moving picture enlarged and mounted. They are specially made and very often specially posed on the set, after a scene is taken. That thrilling scene where the hero embraces his girl while he keeps the villain covered with a revolver may consist of many yards of film containing twenty-four frames per second of running time, but none of them may be really suitable for enlargement and display. Legs fly up in the air, fingers are spread out in an ungainly way and an unintelligible leer comes over the hero's face.[53]

The action cannot be epitomised by any one composition. A single image is an illusion. It is the blurring of all the compositions into one imaginary image. In essence, film and theatre draw out the events depicted in a still image from painting. Norris Kelly Smith explains: "A movie camera might break down the occurrence into five events, the sense of which could be understood by isolating only three frames that epitomise the story".[54] While a camera shows a flow of scenes composed of thousands of images, a painting might show three moments, which capture the essence of the event. Pictorial narrative can be gleaned from a static image or shown through physical action. In either method, images communicate the story.

Hollander's observations and comparisons between film and painting are as applicable to theatre. She constantly uses theatre as a comparison with film to give substance to her alignment of film technique with painting technique: "By contrast movies, like Shakespeare's plays and Greek tragedies, are always going somewhere unknown and taking us with them. Drama demands this device, nevertheless they also remain pictures".[55] Theatre and film are pictures that build and reveal their secrets over time. Movies are temporal and their images are ever changing; however, Hollander establishes that they are essentially like other pictorial arts. Therefore the differences

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[53] Gombrich, *ibid.*, pp. 44-45.
[54] Norris Kelly Smith, *Here I Stand: Perspective Painting from Another Point of View*, New York: Columbia University Press,1994, p. 25.

between the media need not be so stringent and should be able to be stretched to explicate theatre.

Understanding of the images comes from an interest to watch the story unfold over time. The rush of images flows together, but we stay to see if we can make sense of what we see:

> Nothing is more unsettling than to look at some
> significant-seeming communication and feel, I can't read
> this. What is it about? Yet much movie power is
> generated by that very circumstance—maybe I'll get it in
> a minute; I'll keep watching.[56]

Theatre and film keep the image moving, while with a painting it takes an active effort to examine individual parts and see them unfold. *Moving Pictures* is a successful example of how art language can be harnessed to explore dramatic media.[57] The language of fine art, as exemplified by Hollander, can be used to isolate and examine elements of visual composition in theatre.

Though theatre has to be recreated with each presentation, it still retains many immutable qualities and can be understood as pictures are. The same principles can be applied to theatre as a visual art, if we accord the playwright the power to create a fairly restricted visual construct. A picture's composition produces its meaning:

> The meaning of separate phenomena in a classic picture
> primarily nourishes the internal coherence of the whole.
> The artist conducts the painting like a symphony,
> standing up front; all the parts serve one artistic purpose,
> however arbitrary their choice and arrangement might
> appear. The painting holds itself and its meaning
> together in the net of its harmonious form.[58]

A painting is made up of parts that when joined together produce an image that imparts meaning. In a similar manner to the techniques a painter uses to create a composition, the playwright purposefully uses the organisation of all the structural components to guide the spectator through the play; thereby using the structure as an expressive form. Furthermore, theatre has the added flexibility to juxtapose architectural, sculptural and painterly qualities to contribute to a richer range of expression.

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[55] Hollander, *ibid.*, p. 25.
[56] Hollander, *Ibid.*, p. 29.
[57] In many ways Hollander's theory not only supports the use of art to describe theatre, but her arguments are useful in exploring the use of light to achieve mood, mystery and focus in theatre as it does in painting.

Conceptions of stage space have changed over the years. What remains consistent over time is the controlling mechanism within the dramaturgy. A playwright's script facilitates choices from which the director conceives the physical actions that must be carried out in a scene, who is meant to be on stage and what props are necessary to facilitate the action. Theatrical conventions guide the actors to the most expedient ways to stage the scenes (faces visible to the house, whether to use diagonal or curved crosses, or whether character status demands upstage or downstage positions). These are practical techniques that enable them to perform without the director's guidance. In contemporary practice, directors ultimately have fine-tuning control; they try and communicate through the blocking and *mise-en-scène*. What clarity they attempt to present is found within the text of the play.

Artists Crossing into Theatre

Though this thesis does not deal with the playwrights from a historical perspective, a brief historical survey will place the trends and practices of contemporary visual theatre in a general historical context. The focus of this thesis is an interest in the work of Wilson, Fornés, Byrne, Storey and Arden and the techniques they have brought to their playwriting from their early visual art practices. This study concentrates on living practitioners, who were trained at a similar point in history. Their use of the theatre medium as a viable form of visual expression is not unique to contemporary theatre. Artists often have used the theatre as a medium for visual expression. To them, the theatre's expressive range is useful and profitable. Their work in the theatre is a natural extension of the forms and principle with which they create on a daily basis. What follows, are examples of artists in different historical periods crossing over into theatre practice to experiment with its expressive capabilities. Each art medium shares basic compositional principle, the differences between them stem from the inherent qualities of the medium; the theatre is another set of conventions and options for artistic expression.

The boundaries between the arts were not constructed until after the Renaissance. Sculpture, painting, architecture, glass making and even cabinet making

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[58] Hollander, *Ibid.*, p. 18.

were thought of as artistic activities sharing similar compositional principles, and even after the categories became distinct, practice still defied categorisation. This cross fertilisation leads to the evolution and development of artistic practice. Forms evolve through the introduction of new stimuli. Picasso's cubist technique, for example, evolved from his exposure to African art. Likewise, there is a long tradition of cross fertilisation between theatre and the arts. For example, a brief historical survey points out that the medieval guilds undertook to build and erect the different wagons or stations for the passion plays, and Leonardo da Vinci, Peter Paul Rubens and Gian Lorenzo Bernini created court spectacles in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to entertain the royalty. They were able to apply their skills as fine artists to production of theatrical spectacle:

> A mock naval battle, designed by Polidoro da
> Caravaggio in 1589, took place in the specially flooded
> courtyard of the Pitti Palace in Florence; Leonardo da
> Vinci dressed his performers as planets and had them
> recite verses about the Golden Age in a pageant entitled
> *Paradiso* (1490).[59]

These entertainment and moving spectacles were planned and overseen by the artists. They were granted the means to enable them to have free range with their imagination and to create these lush visions. For example, Bernini had complete control over all elements in his productions. His contemporary describes:

> Employed by the Barbarini family to decorate the
> theatre, but he also rewrites operas for which he paints
> the scenery, models the statuary, devises the machines,
> writes the dialogue, sets it to music, all in addition to
> building the theatre.[60]

Artists were prized for their ability to create fantastic theatrical spectacle that was not seen as something separate from their work as architects, sculptors or painters. They were artists whose domain as Renaissance men was all art that is created to be viewed.

To state that Wilson, Fornés, Byrne, Storey and Arden create theatre using fine art principle, carries with it an unwarranted notion that their practices are somehow unique to a particular period or generation. Simply, they are a sampling of a long history

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[59] RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988, pp. 8-9.

of artist-writers who have emerged for varying social, cultural and historical backgrounds across Europe and the Americas. Those renowned as both artist and playwright are found throughout Europe as far back as the sixteenth century. For example, the Flemish playwright Carel van Mander (1548-1606), is known for a handbook on painting, *Het Schiderboek* (1604), which was a Northern equivalent to Giorgio Vassari's *Lives of the Artists*. A Dutch playwright, Gerbrand Bredererode (1518-1618), was a portraitist of daily life, but was best known for farces on everyday life as *De Klucht van de Koe* (1612), *De Klucht van de Molenaar* (1613) and *Spaanschen Brabandes* (1617). In America there was William Dunlop (1766-1839), who besides producing, managing, writing and adapting over fifty plays, like *The Father* (1789), *Andre* (1798) and *The Glory of Columbia* (1803), was also a painter and the founder of the National Academy of Design. In Germany, Gerhart Hauptmann (1862-1946) studied art in Breslau and only turned to writing after a failed attempt at becoming a sculptor. Poland's most renowned dramatist, Stanislaw Wyspianski (1869-1907), created symbolic dramas that had striking visual impact upon stage. Then in the twentieth century are, to name a few, Jean Cocteau (1889-1963), Ernst Barlach (1870-1938), and the Bauhaus artists exemplified by Oscar Schlemmer who combined sculpture and art into a theatrical avant-garde. It is notable that these artists have similar professional backgrounds as the five focused on in the study. Each of these artists have similar practices and motifs that are explored in both traditional visual art objects and in their playwriting. It would be interesting to trace the ways in which visual art principles found their way into the dramaturgy of these writers. The only study that closely examines the artist-writer is David Graver's *Aesthetics of Disturbance: Anti-Art in Avant-Garde Drama* that traces Oskar Kokoschka, Gotfried Benn, Raymond Roussel, Roger Vitrac and Wyndham Lewis during the inter-war years by showing how their visual art work expresses itself in the aesthetics of their dramaturgy.[61] Of course there are many other artists, such as David Hockney, Marc

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[60] John Evelyn in Roman Rolland, *Les origines du théâtre lyrique moderne, nouv. éd.*, Paris 1931, p. 149, quoted in Margret Baur-Heinhold. *Baroque Theatre*. Mary Whittall, trans. London: Thames and Hudson, 1967, p. 21.
[61] David Graver, *The Aesthetics of Disturbance: Anti-Art in Avant-Garde Drama*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Chagall, Picasso, Jim Dine and Claes Oldenburg, who have designed for the theatre.[62]
Applications of visual art techniques to theatre have never been constrained to any one tradition. Since visual artists are compelled to experiment with theatre, the theatre must offer a compatible visual aesthetic.

Contemporary mixed media performances have their roots in the avant-garde experimentation of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. On 11 December 1896, Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) opened the slapstick *Ubu Roi* at Lugné-Poë's Théâtre de l'Oeuvre. Jarry was not only a playwright, but also a graphic artist whose own designs were used for that infamous production. As the poster shows [**Figure 1.18**], Jarry distorted the figures to look like little walking turds. Scandalously, not only did the characters say '*Merdre*', a modified French word for 'turd', but also their costumes' took their inspiration from the shape of excrement. Jarry exploited text and vision to convey a satire of a king's meteoric rise to power. He created visual statements by making these cartoon figures strut and fret on stage in a heightened presentational style, thereby shattering naturalistic conventions. Using artistic forms and concepts he harnessed his visual imagination to create a radical theatrical form. The combination of textual with pictorial satire was so successful it triggered riots in the theatre; the visible was designed as deliberate rhetorical expression.

These performances and, in part, the bohemian lifestyle Jarry led inspired the Futurist, Surrealist, Dadaist and Fluxus movements. In opposition to mainstream naturalist and realist tradition, the avant-garde sought an expressive medium rather than a form of entertainment. As visual art experimented with fractured reality and multiple perspective, the Bauhaus movement used non-figural forms to explore the nature of space. As a community of visual artists, Bauhaus attempted "to heal the rift between the arts and crafts, and to insist that art is singular though its media are multiple".[63] The Bauhaus experimented using whatever means available to broaden their expressive capabilities. Like the Renaissance artists, they planned everything from production to

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[62] See Henning Rischbiter, *Art and the Stage in the 20th Century: Painters and Sculptors work for the Theatre*, Greenwich, CT: NY Graphic Society, 1970, for the development of artists in design during the twentieth century.
[63] Brocket and Findlay, *ibid.*, p. 426.

theatre architecture. Many of the Bauhaus artists fled to the United States in the late

1930s and taught the artists who were to lead the avant-garde in post-war America. In

addition to using art, architecture and design, the Bauhaus movement used theatre as a

medium for expression:

> Despite the fact that most of what is written today about
> the work of the Futurists, Constructivists, Dadaists and
> Surrealists continues to concentrate on the art objects
> produced by each period, it was more often than not the
> case that these movements found their roots and
> attempted to resolve problematic issues in
> performance.[64]

Experiments in performance, whose products were taken seriously, explored visual

concepts rather than mere faithful representation of scenic environment.

RoseLee Goldberg's seminal *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*

traces the development of art and performance as a distinct medium.[65] An experimental

theatre, which favoured collaborative and improvisational techniques over scripted

performance traditions, developed alongside performance art. It was inevitable after the

creative explosion in 1958 that dramaturgy and visual art practices would fuse into a

hybrid form.[66] Goldberg addresses the complicated issue of where theatre ends and

performance art begins. The most satisfying definition of performance art is that it

involves theatrical devices, but the artist usually performs it: "Unlike theatre, the

performer *is* the artist, seldom a character like an actor, and the content rarely follows a

traditional plot or narrative".[67] Live artists, as they are known now in Great Britain, use

the medium of theatre to create a three-dimensional spatio-temporal art product, while

visual theatre uses dramatic texts or scenarios to enact a fictional story in three-

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[64] Goldberg, *Performance Art From Futurism to the Present, ibid.,* pp. 7-8. See also
Richard Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed-Means: An Introduction to Happenings,
Kinetic Environments and Other Mixed-Means Presentations,* New York: RK Editions,
1980.
[65] *Ibid.*
[66] See Sally Barnes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the
Effervescent body,* London: Duke University Press, 1993, for a description of the creative
climate of the time.
[67] Goldberg, *ibid.,* p. 8.

dimensions.[68] More attention needs to be paid to the view of live artists, who consider

their performance and object art as equivalent creatures:

> Performance has been considered as a way of bringing
> to life the many formal and conceptual ideas on which
> the making of art is based. Live gestures have
> constantly been used as a weapon against the
> conventions of established art.[69]

The function of expression changed, so the form has been adapted, thus providing

expression that neither theatre nor art can perform separately. Live art is a split-off of

traditional forms in the same way that installation, body art, or mannequin art are

developments of architecture, painting and sculpture. Live art retains a vestige of

anarchy and freedom within its expression: "But performance has one overriding and

peculiar character, which is that it still can be anything at all: For the artist, it represents

the possibility of working without rules or guidelines".[70] It is a form where

experimentation is possible because its conventions are still gestating and artistic control

is still in the hands of a single creator. Conventional dramaturgy does not have as much

flexibility. Theatre employs its unspoken conventions because of its contingency factors;

the collaborative element demands a common language so that everyone can work

together to achieve a product. Playtexts have a certain form that acts as a standard

blueprint, which the practitioners interpret. There are conventional solutions to standard

staging requirements. As with painting, the formal limitations are there to exploit so that

the medium can effectively communicate. The painter or theatre artist uses the bounds

of convention as a structure in which to experiment. If it expected that a painting be

made up of pigment in a medium brushed onto a canvas, the experimental painter will

abide by those conventions, yet use something like body effluvia as a pigment. Thus,

the structure provides the means by which to experiment. With live art, exploiting all the

limits is often the medium. Theatre uses the rules so that the artist can retain his control

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[68] Studies of performance art focus on ideas about the body or signification of the political/sexual being. Nick Kaye, *Art into Theatre: Performance Interviews and Documents*, U.K.: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996, interviews artists on their performance work, but still neglects to tie together how their techniques can reveal something about the relationship of theatre and art.
[69] Goldberg, *ibid.*, p. 7.
[70] Goldberg, *ibid.*, p. 210.

despite the collaborative production process. The theatre is slowly absorbing the influences of visual art, thereby paving the way to new traditions.

Mixed-means performers and theatre artists are contemporary practitioners of a hybrid form of theatre that has been developing slowly in various guises in various social, cultural and historical periods. From time to time, visual artists cross over to theatre and bring along aesthetic expression that they apply when they work within their new medium. This cross fertilisation promotes transformation and growth of age-old traditions, such as the advent of stage lighting transforming the stage into a colour palette. Eventually, the newly developed techniques are filtered back into the traditional approaches to theatre. What once was shocking becomes conventional, new modes of seeing become commonplace. What innovative artists' works can offer is an insight of the ways in which the traditions operate at their core. To varying degrees the work of Wilson, Fornés, Byrne, Storey and Arden are evidence of the development of a visual hybrid form.

A playwright's conception of the ways in the play would work on stage could reveal its compositional structure. Considering what the playwright highlights will provide a key to understanding the work. Visual artists make clear nodes of focus to show which parts are important signifiers. Theatre action has these nodes to separate expressive action from utilitarian propulsion. The way in which these scenic requirements create a three-dimensional pictorial stage life can in part be understood with the help of fine-art examples. As technology has improved, the amount of control theatre artists have over their medium has grown. The dreams of such visionaries as Appia and Craig are possible on a grand scale. Now, rather than just illuminating the stage space, lighting can define and colour space as one would on a canvas. As the capabilities of theatre technology changes, so too do the techniques that playwrights use to delimit staging. Playwrights are not constrained to set their play in one place, because a push of a light-board key can transform a setting from a palace to a dark cell in a second. Playwrights are freed to explore different structure, as photography freed painters to experiment with formal matters like abstraction and colour. The increased control allows for a subtlety in colour and image once available only to the fine arts. Artists now are creating a theatre

of mixed means because they are creating their own traditions. The boundaries between the media have fallen and artists are pushing the expressive limits of the arts. Playwrights use the expanded medium to harness space and pictorial imagery for their expression. Language borrowed from the fine arts will help ground discussion in relation to the canon of aesthetic theory. Images speak straight to our intuitive intellect, thereby triggering visual thinking. Playwrights are artists in their own right—directions for visual imagery are built into the playtext. By following the staging of the author, directors and other practitioners can then use their own imagination to produce productions that maintain the integrity of the playtext through time and cultural changes. Examples from installation, painting, sculpture and architecture will be used to explicate the devices Wilson, Fornés, Byrne, Storey, and Arden use to create three-dimensional theatre through playtexts.

Several issues must be addressed surrounding the vocabulary associated with the description of the visible elements of theatre. The theatre has appropriated the term visual theatre to mean any type of theatre practice that uses images. Many different types of practice can fall under this rubric, such as dance, circus, puppetry, performance art and pantomime. Therefore, when one thinks of the visual in theatre it consequently refers to a broad range of theatre practices. This thesis addresses specific practices that both refer to the visible components of performance and the visible components of the fine arts. These mechanisms are not specific to a theatre driven solely by images, but are devices that most playwrights employ to stage a play. They include the movement of bodies in space, the props, the setting, the costume, lighting effects, blocking and the volume of the space. Consequently, the examples in the following chapters will explore the ways in which three-dimensional objects are placed in a playing space to create images. These are the components of theatre that create visible dramaturgy. These images change like the images in everyday life, only most of their movement is monitored and controlled to the best of the production staff's ability.

Arden, Storey, Byrne, Fornés, and Wilson were all trained as fine artists and their work is useful to highlight the visible components of theatre because their dramaturgical structure presumably has been influenced by their early aesthetic development. Their

theatre practices show the emergence of a form of expression that cannot be encapsulated by other media. The theatre provides them with a malleable form whose compositional mechanisms can be mixed and matched depending on the expression that the artist wants to achieve. Its form provides them with an outlet to mix the sculptural with the verbal and the two-dimensional with the three-dimensional. Each practitioner has struggled throughout the years to find acceptance within the mainstream theatre world. They have hovered along its fringe because their works appear to be conventional, but do not satisfy conventional expectations of what a play should be. In part, the development of their styles has been a struggle to guide spectators to a visually literate experience of theatre practice. Their work both can be thought of as dramatic expression and visual education.

The following chapters will demonstrate the ways in which Arden, Storey, Byrne, Fornés and Wilson use concepts gleaned from the fine arts to create dramatic expression. Consequently, a variety of the theatre's scopic mechanisms will be highlighted, that is to say the mechanical visual details of composition used to create an artistic form for stage presentation. By exploring the ways in which the fine art trained artists use the visible to create theatrical events, the ways in which playwrights generally use the visible and scopic will become evident. Images are a basic component of the theatre medium. Fine art trained artists do not necessarily have unique compositional techniques, but they do use visible elements to create a spine for their compositions. By describing the ways in which they accomplish this, their practices can help suggest ways to examine the function of the visible elements of any stage production. Overall, the following chapters questions what the visible elements of theatre share in common with the visual arts, and questions how these common traits can enrich an understanding of the functions of the theatrical medium.

Wilson admits that his aesthetic is that of a visual artist. He purposefully applies the principles of the fine arts to build his theatrical images. All the playwrights in this study have visual arts background, and as their training shaped their aesthetic, there are probably traces of it within their theatre work. The techniques need not necessarily be the controlling mechanisms within the work, but their work does display similar

mechanisms as Wilson's work, from overt installation settings in Fornés, to subtle architectonic orchestration of the framework of the episodes in Arden. The study will proceed from the most overt use of images with Wilson to the least obvious workings within Arden's seemingly conventional plays. What they all have in common is an aesthetic training that has shaped their dramaturgy. Wilson is best noted for his contemporary work. The transition to a visual theatre aesthetic has slowly emerged since the fifties as audiences learned how to look and conventions became less rigid. Often these playwrights' work is considered second rate next to their peers, because techniques seem strange when seen in the context of linear naturalistic or realistic mechanisms. Their logic is that of the visual—of showing an experience, or depicting impressions and feelings. The progress of these five playwrights is the progress of an emerging form, a form that has found its voice in the dramaturgy of Wilson. From its tentative steps in Arden, to its emotional and visual choreography in Storey, to the tone poems of Fornés, they all share a common goal, to express their aesthetic visions using the three-dimensional medium of theatre. These artists did not influence each other. They worked separately in different decades in different parts of the world. What they do show is the emergence of a new voice and a new style struggling to emerge out of the quagmire of conventional realistic and naturalistic theatre techniques. Images and spatial relationships are created and watching them provides the spectator with the mechanisms to uncover their content. That experience is the composition of the theatrical event. They are the middle ground between performance art and drama. They are the visual playwrights who use the visible as techniques to convey their expression.
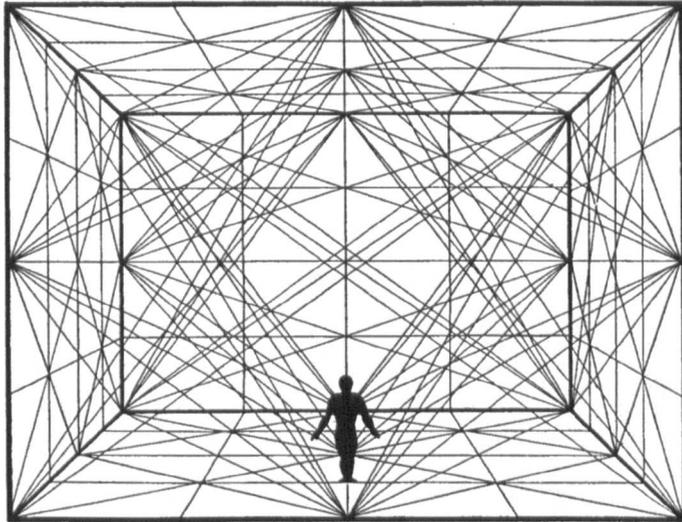
Figure 1.1; Taken from Walter Gropius and Arthur S. Wensinger, eds., *The Theatre of the Bauhaus*, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961, p. 23.
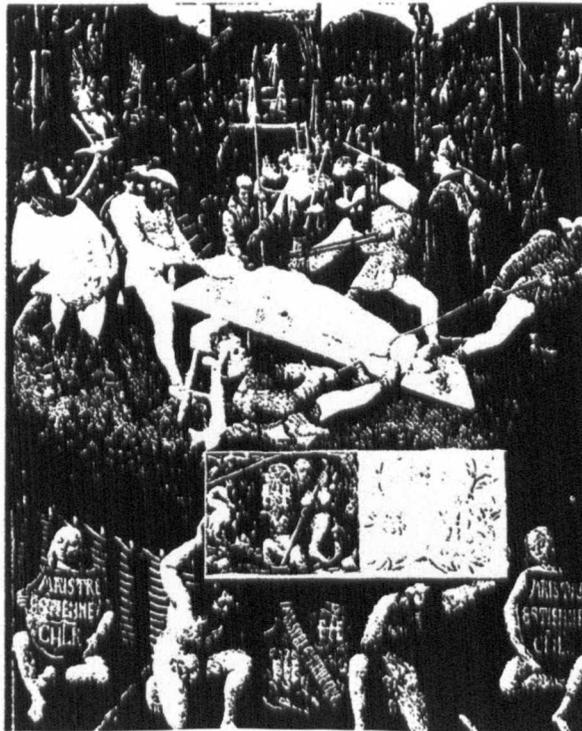
Figure 1.2; Reprinted in Oscar Brockett, *History of Theatre*, 5th ed., Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1987, p. 2.

Figure 1.3 is reprinted in A. M. Nagler, *The Medieval Religious Stage*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, p. 2.
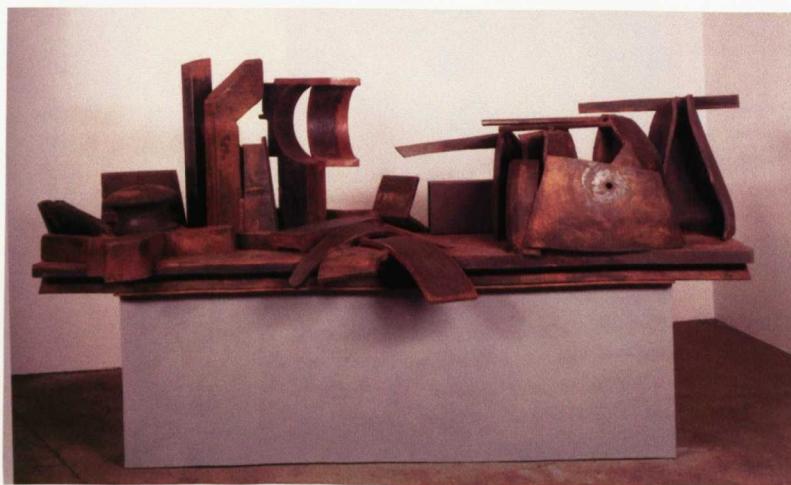
Figure 1.4; Taken from John Golding, *Caro at the National Gallery: Sculpture from Painting*, London: National Gallery Publications, 1998, p. 39.

Figure 1.5; Taken from Golding, *ibid.*, p. 38.
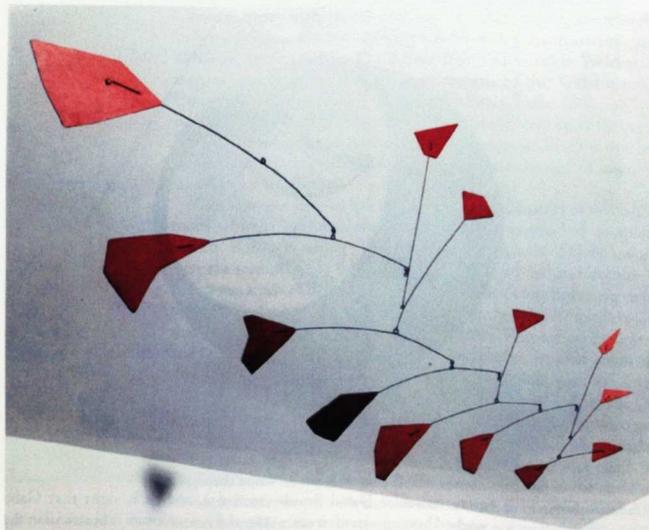
Figure 1.6; "Red Polygons" by Alexander Calder, in Andrew Causey, *Sculpture Since 1945*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 44.

Figure 1.7; *'L' agression au 48 de la Rue Monsieur- le- Prince. Le 23 Juin 1975*, by Raymond Mason, in Peppiate, *ibid.*, p.45.

Figure 1.8; *A Tragedy in Northern France. Winter, Rain and Tears*, in *ibid.*, p. 47.

ST.MARK'S PLACE EAST VILLAGE N.Y.C. as seen through the window of the Village East Coffee Shop. 1971
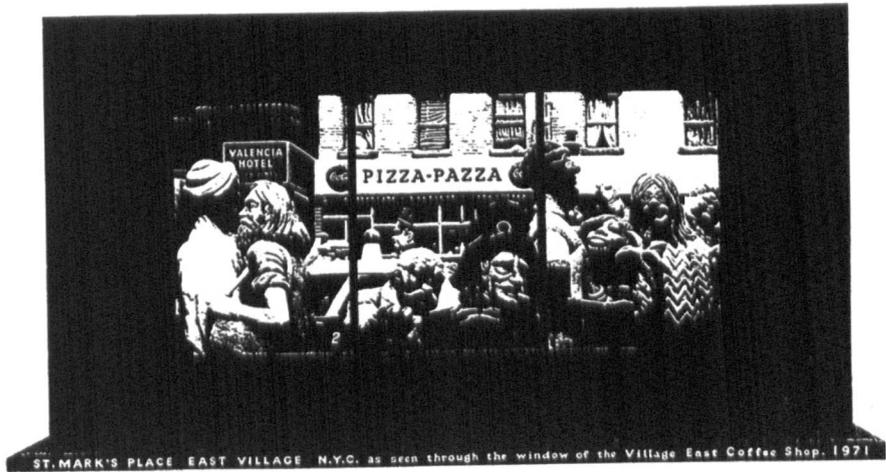
Figure 1.9; *View of St. Mark's Place, East Village, New York City*, Peppiate, in *ibid.*, p. 17.
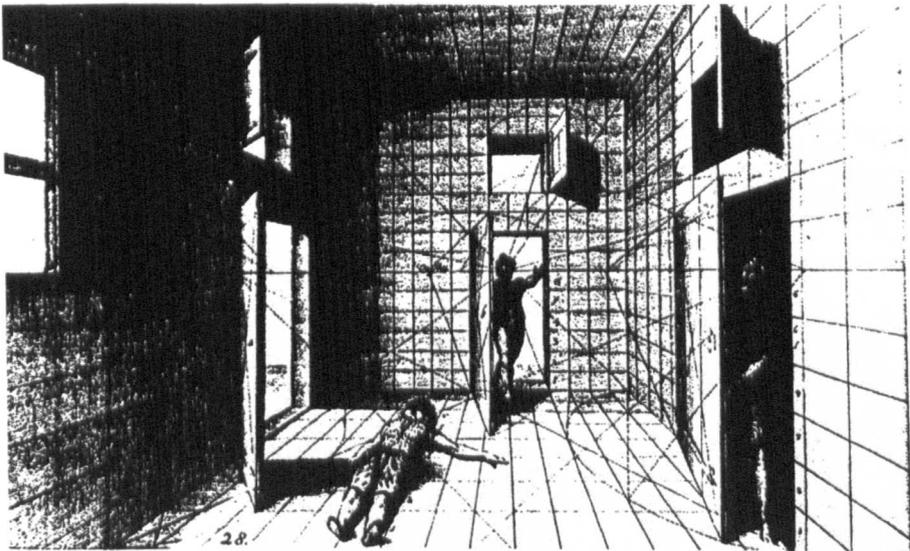
Figure 7.3 Scene from Jan Vredeman de Vries' *Perspective*, engraving (Leyden, 1604-5, pl. 28).

Figure 1.10; *Perspective*, by Jan Vredemann de Vries (1604- 1605), in Calvin F. Nodine and Dennis F. Fisher, *Perception and Pictorial Representation*, New York: Praeger, 1979, p. 120.

LAUDINTNOMENEIUSIN
CHORO·INTYMPANO
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HAECESTOMNIBU
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Figure 1.11; Taken from Albert Skira, *Early Modern Medieval Painting*, New York: Skira Press, p. 102.

Figure 1.12; Production Photo from the Royal Court's *Home*, Theatre Archive, London.
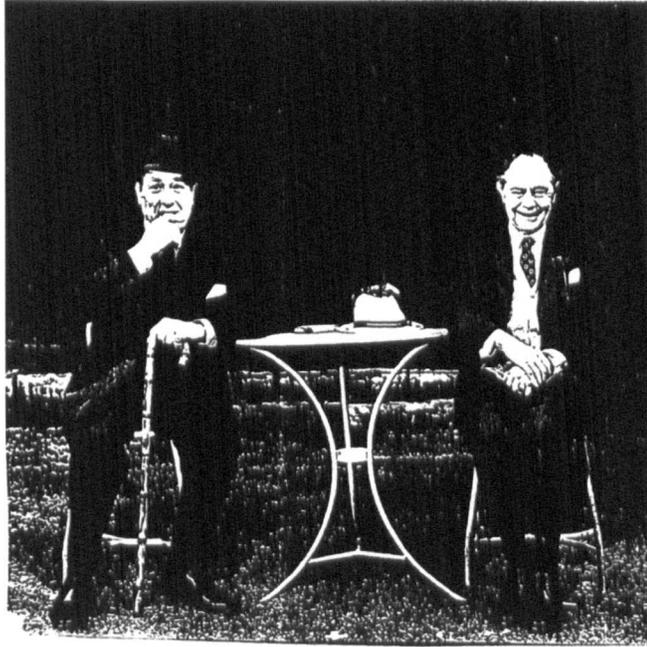
Figure 1.13; Production Photo from the A Theatre in the Hague's *Home*, Theatre Archive, London.

Figure 1.14; Production Photo from Downstage Theatre's *Home*, Nola Millan, dir., Theatre Archive, London.

Figure 1.15; Production Photo from the Royal Court's *The Changing Room* (1971), Lindsay Anderson, dir., Theatre Archive, London.

Figure 1.16; Production Photo from the Göteborgs Stadsteater's *The Changing Room* (1972), Theatre Archive, London .

Figure 1.17; Production Photo from the Royal Court's *The Changing Room* (1996), James Macdonald, dir., Theatre Archive, London.
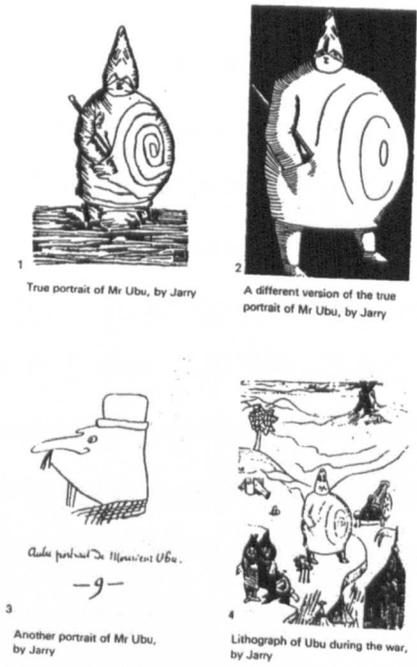
Figure 1.18; Taken from Claude Schumacher, *Alfred Jarry and Guillaume Apollinaire*, London: Macmillan, 1984.

Chapter 2

Elements of Vision:
Robert Wilson's dramaturgical mechanics and their relation to the visible on stage.

David Bradby and David Williams encapsulate the basic components that are

essential to both Robert Wilson's work and the visible in theatre:

> Wilson's anti-intellectual aesthetic is built around
> furnishing the spectator with an implacably beautiful flow
> of images, in the widest sense of the word: temporal and
> spatial configurations of sound, movement and their
> relationship to space— above all, an architectonic
> arrangement of simultaneously superimposed elements,
> like overlaid slides, the contents of which are above all
> their form.[71]

His productions are a flow of images whose expression is the relations of objects

arranged in architectonic theatrical environments. His opus serves as an exemplification

of a blend of fine art and theatre, with an abstracted use of the image that offers insight

about the form of dramatic composition rather than conveying only conventional thematic

information. He consciously manipulates aesthetic concepts gleaned from the fine arts to

create three-dimensional theatrical compositions. These can be categorised as 'scopic

building blocks'—that is to say, visible mechanisms used in the compositional structure of

his theatre work. He uses a stock of these visual techniques to create the content of each

work. Production drawings and texts illustrate the ways in which Wilson shapes his

theatrical compositions. These mechanisms can illuminate the visual mechanisms and

dramaturgical techniques other playwrights utilise in a less deliberate manner.

First a summary of Wilson's fine art training will introduce his aesthetic technique,

thereby connecting his visual art and theatrical work. Next, his working methods will be

examined so that his 'playwriting' or 'visual scripting' can be defined. In Wilson's work,

spatial relationships are often the content. That means that the images filled with objects,

shape and colour, are the visual text that communicates the experience. His use of

spatial dynamics do not function as visual narration, but as a ballet of spatial components

that propel the compositions forward regardless of the textual narrative. The scopic

components of his dramaturgy will be identified and described. A definition of his pictorial

and theatrical vocabulary will be established by describing the different techniques he

uses in various works. Finally, his methodology will be used to discuss less overt uses of the visual arts in the work of other fine art trained dramatists.

Wilson's opus is best divided into two categories—that which was created around an idea and realised by collaboration and that which was adapted and restructured from existing texts. His early work falls in the first, and is best exemplified by *Deafman Glance* (1970), *Journey to Ka Mountain* (1972), *A Letter to Queen Victoria* (1974), *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), and *Death Destruction and Detroit* (1979). These operas can take several days to perform, and are characterised by long duration, surreal imagery and nonsensical language games. The visual and verbal are constructed as two distinct strands and do not necessarily work in tandem. His more recent work usually falls into the second category, is shorter in length and makes use of canonical texts. This work is exemplified by *King Lear* (1984), *Hamletmachine* (1986), *Orlando* (1989) and *Hamlet: A Monologue* (1995). These works weave visual and verbal mechanisms, highlighting one or the other in its expression. There are also operas in his more recent work that can be classified as collaboration. These include *The Forest* (1988), *The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets* (1990), *Alice* (1992) and *Time Rocker* (1996). They are original creations, but they have a more recognisable two-act structure and are only 2-3 hours in length.

Most of the examples and illustrations in this chapter are drawn from Wilson's more recent work, since photo-documentation is more easily accessible. Furthermore, these works most clearly illustrate abstract visual-art principles in forms more closely resembling conventional playscripts. Wilson is not a playwright in the conventional sense, but his handling of the elements in production are clearly those of a practitioner who creates an autonomous script guided by tolerances and parameters. His dramaturgical method will be shown to work as a visual script equivalent to the traditional playscripts generated by Fornés, Byrne, Storey and Arden.

Three major interpretations of Wilson's creative processes have been generated around his opus. The first, approaches Wilson's work as visionary genius. Stefan Brecht

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[71] David Bradby and David Williams, "Robert Wilson" in *Director's Theatre*, London: Macmillan, 1988, p. 233.

wrote the original comprehensive treatise about Robert Wilson's theatre.[72] Through

personal description and interview, he recounts the early influences on Wilson as well as

offers a psychological and visionary interpretation of the early operas. The second

approach has come from critics who have worked personally with Wilson over the years

in a variety of capacities, such as dramaturgs, designers, writers or assistants. Among

these critics are Arthur Holmberg, Maita Di Niscemi and Bonnie Marranca.[73] Their

observations are based on personal experiences of individual productions, thereby,

revealing his development and staging processes. The third critical approach places

Wilson's work in the realm of visual art, exemplified by Robert Stearns and Franco

Quadri.[74] They chart the material art objects such as drawings, sculpture and photo-

documentation that remain after the production has closed. They place those objects

within the context of the visual arts over the last thirty years. Each perspective is useful in

understanding the ways in which Wilson uses the fine arts for the purposes of dramatic

expression. The process of describing the dramaturgical form and production practices

provides evidence to define the variety of interpretation of Wilson's opus offered by the

different critical researches.

Shaping an aesthetic

Wilson was born in Waco Texas on 4 October 1941. He began his education in

business school, but eventually he left for New York to begin studying interior design and

architecture at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn in 1962. There, under the tutelage of Sibyl

Maholy-Nagy and George McNeil, he undertook his visual education. It was Maholy-

Nagy that encouraged him to make connections between random art objects. Her

lectures consisted of a series of slides juxtaposed in haphazard ways (for example, a

Ming vase followed by a Hogarth painting in another) and her students were encouraged

to make connections between disparate objects. After finishing at Pratt, he apprenticed

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[72] See Stefan Brecht, Robert *Wilson: Theatre of Visions*, London: Methuen, 1978.
[73]See Maita Di Niscemi, "Working with Robert Wilson", CLC, 38.1 (November 1988);
Arthur Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1996; and Bonnie Marranca, *TheTheatre of Images*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press,
1996.

with the visionary architect Paulo Solieri at the Arcosanti Project in the Arizona desert in 1966. His architectural drawings were abstract dreams that stretched the imagination, for example, the design of a crystal living environment inside an apple.[75] New York City during the late sixties renaissance was a centre for many artistic changes, offering everything from the experimental café La Mama (for whom Wilson designed a section of *America Hurrah*) to the work of Jasper Johns, Barnett Newman and Ad Reinheart. This period moved away from the abstract expressionism of the 1950s and embraced minimalism, which focused on the material qualities of the object and favoured reductive forms that limited the possibilities for metaphorical interpretation. The experiments conducted by Wilson's fine art predecessors in sound, art, dance and theatre have influenced his work. This can be seen within his aesthetic and across his whole opus. Exposure to the thriving art scene led him to create his own experimental performance events.

The emergence of Wilson's visual form from the 1960s art environment in which he was trained is not surprising. Collage techniques, anti-intellectual form, three-dimensional explorations of space and meaninglessness texts were all current in the avant-garde visual art and experimental music scene. His work seems startling only when contrasted with more accepted avant-garde theatre such as the Living Theater. Wilson is primarily a visual artist and his interests and works are centred on those preoccupations. He was most impressed with Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham and Alwin Nikolais who were breaking free from linear narrative structures in dance by creating form that is more radical.[76] Cunnigham's Chance-choreography was significant in the sense that it freed the performing artist from rational aesthetics. Wilson relates, "I saw the ballets of Merce Cunningham. I liked them very much and still do. They were abstract constructions of time and space".[77] In fact, it is the expression of moving forms

[74] See Franco Quadri , Franco Bertoni and Robert Stearns, *Robert Wilson*, NY: Rizzoli, 1998 and Franco Quadri, *Il teatro di Robert Wilson*, San Marco: La Biennale di Venezia, 1976.
[75] This is a story that is often recounted often— most recently in his lecture at the Lincoln Center Festival, 6 July 1999.
[76] Although these practices were first seen in the early part of the century, it was not until the 1960s that they were fully engendered by a wide range of practitioners.
[77] http://www.robertwilson.com/

in space, not the meaning of the gestures that he considers beautiful. Sometimes Wilson's work can be thought of in the manner of the cliché filled Zen stories that John Cage recounts when describing work from that period. By referring to a philosophy in which things just exist—their meaning becomes clear only through conscious involvement with the material.[78] In other words, Wilson's images 'are'—they are there to be experienced. That which comes from the experience is different depending on what the viewer brings to it.

Connection to the visual

Wilson is a visual thinker. His move to theatre grew out of his development as a painter and architect. As Solieri advocated dream architecture not limited by contemporary practice or practical building considerations, Wilson experimented with the concept of escaping the constraints of a painter's canvas by using the stage as his medium:

> I was very frustrated in the 60's,' he recalls. 'Then I realized I could do things on stage as a painter that I couldn't do on canvas. The stage brought together a lot of things; all the elements were there.[79]

In contrast to a fixed medium such as a painter's canvas, the theatre allows light, colour, mass and movement to interrelate in three dimensions. In another interview, Wilson elaborates, "This chair, or this line, or this cat . . . this cigarette, you, my words, the light, it's all . . . part of one thing. And in the theatre you can be all of it. I think that it is important to express that".[80] A greater whole can be made up of an array of objects, whose individual qualities do not detract from the perception of that whole. Spectators watch it transmogrify as it moves through time and space. The theatre medium enables many different elements to exist side by side and to communicate in very different ways, because time allows for change and transformation. A light can be a light, but also can be a part of a different contextual situation. The moment before influences that which comes after. Similarly to a retinal image, the first stage image stays in the spectator's

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[78] See John Cage, *Silence*, London: Marion Boyars, 1995.
[79] John Rockwell, "Staging Painterly Visions", *New York Times*, 61 (15 November 1992), p.25

consciousness and cannot be omitted. Each new image carries with it residue of its own

past.

As a minimalist, Wilson plays with abstractions. Tadeusz Kantor describes the

component parts of abstract visual expression:

> THE ELEMENTS OF ABSTRACTION—that is, the
> square, the triangle, the circle, the cube, the cone, the
> sphere, the straight line, the point, the concepts of
> space, tension, and movement—are elements of
> drama.[81]

Physical forms or emblematic poses are broken down into their component lines or

relationships to each other. Sorrow may become a curved line, and joy may become an

upward fork. Abstracted theatre creates three-dimensional images using line, weight,

colour, movement, and sound to create metatheatrical experimentation with form.

Wilson's plays are constructed of scopic elements that make up their composition.

Images framed behind the proscenium arch, built by painting with light, adding human

figures, props and blending them with sound. The constant interrelationship over time of

all these mechanisms creates a theatrical event. These images do not necessarily

convey any one possible interpretation, but are presented for the spectator to watch and

to experience on an intuitive level.

Whether images change or remain the same, they become an 'invisible event'.

When they change, they represent a series of minute and mundane occurrences which

when taken together create a monumental image. As Robert Stearns claims, Wilson

> Uses the stage (among many arenas) to focus *our*
> attention on the world around us, on the things in it, and
> ultimately on the beauty and mystery of human
> endeavor.[82]

Pleasure Even the interrelationship of geometric forms demonstrates change. Again,

Kantor describes how abstract elements create a dramatic occurrence:

> One person draws a CIRCLE. Another one draws this
> something that is in opposition to a CIRCLE, that is, a
> LINE. Dramatic tension appears and increases when the
> line gets closer to the circle. When the line passes the

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[80] Thomas Frick, "A Conversation with Robert Wilson", *Art New England*, June 1985, p.20.

[81] Taduesz Kantor, *A Journey Through Other Spaces*, Michael Kobialka, ed., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 209.

[82] Robert Stearns, "Before the Deafman Glanced", in Franco Quadri, Franco Bertoni and Robert Stearns, *ibid.*, p. 207.

circle and moves beyond it, the tension decreases. Repetition makes one think about infinity, about our life and its relationship to infinity.[83]

The visual experience triggers thoughts, which trigger other thoughts. Through seeing visual elements, the viewer follows a path laid out by the artist. Ad Reinheart made black square paintings.[84] To comprehend these pictures, one must examine them for a long time. Scrutiny opens the eyes of the spectator to the nuances of shading and texture within the black square. Wilson's images can be understood in that context. For example, think about his affection for juxtaposing two unlike material objects. Only by noticing the differences between them, can one notice the 'objectness' of each. In other words, the qualities of two unlike objects or components can be seen better when placed next to each other— that is to say, when it is seen as a Brechtian *verfremdung* effect.

The image's texture and structure work together to provide experiences for the viewer of a Wilson piece:

> Wilson began to create a kind of dramatic 'space/ time' through contrasting the front stage with the action on the main stage. This technique has the same effect as juxtapositioning two unrelated images, another postmodernist strategy used by the artist. Once, during an interview, Wilson placed a beer can next to a piece of pre-Columbian pottery and commented, 'The two things are more interesting than just one because they are so different. They're out of context, but they help you see. My works are like that.[85]

Each object can be seen for its own unique qualities because the incongruity of its context highlights what this object is. **Figure 2.1** is a photograph taken from his 1993 exhibition at the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam. He chose to exhibit Aristide Maillol's *La Mediterranee* with a Belgian glass pistol. The bronze statue is displayed on soil with the pistol suspended overhead. Each object's formal qualities stand out discretely against the alien context. In a sense, a third aesthetic relationship is created that has a greater effect than each of the objects displayed on its own. The techniques of juxtaposition, collage and overlay are also exploited using the theatre's ability to synthesise many threads. His medium becomes extremely flexible and he is

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[83] Kantor, *ibid.*, p.213.
[84] Due to problems in reproduction, an example could not be produced where the gradations of black could be discerned.
[85] Robert Jones, "Listen to the Pictures", *New York News*, (21 November 1976).

able to use it to be self-reflexive. The structure ensures that the disparate stimuli work together to create a means of questioning what is the ultimate unity of the images.

Even when Wilson deals with canonical texts like King *Lear* or *Alcestis* (1986), the abstracted images constitute the content of the story. Words are not the primary communicative material. Wilson explains:

> Theatre doesn't live in words . . . It lives in space. A director works with space. Light lets you see the architecture of the space. Other directors pore over the text. I draw space. I always start with light. Without light there is no space. With light you create many different kinds of spaces. A different space is a different reality.[86]

Therefore, the visible components are parts of occurrences that make up the event.

Physical imagery can convey meaning as effectively as a text-driven narrative, but in a different manner. Choosing to use one over the other offers a different type of perceptual invitation to the spectators. By conscious use of both forms of expression, the playwright has a wider palette of expression. Bill Simmer describes how Wilson has a propensity to find unusual things to contemplate:

> There are many different ways to communicate. And there are many different ways for phenomena to be understood by people, whether they be verbally or visually, or whatever. He watches and he listens and he is able to catch these things and then pluck them out of context and look at them, and see them for the beautiful things that they are.[87]

Form, light and space are all aesthetically captivating separately, but often they are not noticed until someone points them out as worthy of contemplation. Image consciousness gleans a different level of understanding of the theatrical medium. Symbolic evocations of abstracted feelings and concepts are embedded within the communicative medium. In *Maladie de la mort* (1991), the projected drawings of the room comment upon the action and the colours are physical manifestations of the characters' emotions. One must notice the subtitles of colour projected on the cyclorama and the ways in which it progresses from light to dark, blue to red, or yellow to green. These changes communicate jealousy, depression, lust or any other emotion. It is the stimuli and processing of these pictorial

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[86] Holmberg, *ibid.*, p. 122.
[87] Bill Simmer, "Robert Wilson and Therapy", *TDR*, 20.1 (March 1976), p. 100

constructs that strengthens the spectator's ability to generate personal interpretation of the event.

By creating these images in the theatre rather than in a gallery, Wilson, the artist, can both frame his vision and mediate the duration of the spectator's exposure to the unfolding image. Nearly all the elements in Wilson's compositions emphasise vision. Sue Sheeny, an actress, suggests that Wilson's theatrics be aptly distilled as moving paintings: "And here's a play, it's just vision. It's just paintings, really, only the paintings are moving".[88] In essence, he uses a three-dimensional palette consisting of biological figures, light, space, props and movement. When these elements are synthesised, spectators are offered structured vision by means of theatrical conventions. Using traditional theatrical techniques, Wilson creates three-dimensional paintings that change as the play progresses. Robert Scanlan clarifies:

> Wilson's expressiveness is achieved through vision. His
> art is plastic and dynamic, framed almost exclusively by
> a collage of the so-called 'visual arts' of painting,
> sculpture, architecture, lighting, and the rhythm and
> tempo of live performance.[89]

In creating his vision, he harnesses the skills and techniques of sculpture, painting and architecture. His work invites spectators to view his theatre as art. Each medium's particular strengths are exploited and then mixed with the other elements. He weaves together the different threads, each of which has a separate function. These functions are seen together as a blend.

Working method

Wilson's working method has developed over the years, but his basic compositional structure has remained the same. When he initiates a project, he thinks by drawing the images out. He begins by sketching his ideas for a piece: "I usually make drawings of my plays so I can readily see them".[90] Even when in conversations about the project with others, he prefers images rather than words. Wilson scripts his theatrical

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[88] Simmer, "Actress from Iowa: Sue Sheehy", *TDR*, 20.3 (September 1976), p. 68.
[89] Robert Scanlan, "Post-modern Time and place: Wilson/ Müller Intersections", *Art and Design*, 10 (November/ December 1995), p. 77.
[90] Robert Enright, "A Clean, Well-lighted Grace: An Interview with Robert Wilson", *Border Crossings*, 13.2 (Spring 1994), p. 16.

constructions visually using a series of atmospheric black and white drawings, where conventional playwrights would create dialogue and stage directions. These sketches are developed into a series of working compositions that serve as a framework for the staging of his play. This gives him overall control over the lighting, props, music, texts, choreography and the look of the play. His technique sometimes resembles that of a cinematographer:

> I work out a storyboard—the timing and the structure, how different scenes can relate to one another, whether there might be recitatives or something spoken, a duet, or some song. I did it with drawings to see the construction, to see how the story is told visually, how the architecture of the piece looks in time and space.[91]

Thus every element is considered and accounted for in as comprehensive a way as those of playwrights who ensure that their vision is clear through orthodox written instructions within the body of the playtext. From these, he transposes the images to the stage and choreographs their movement. Later he superimposes the music and text over the images. They do not necessarily work in tandem with each other, but rather the visual and aural elements can be two separate strands that exist side by side having no more in common than being two different solutions to the same problem.[92]

Initially, a rough summary is created by a dramaturg. At a production meeting, the themes and major actions are read out. Gordana Svilar, a designer describes, what happened at the first two design meetings for Strindberg's *Dreamplay* (1998):

> [Wilson] would sit down and [the dramaturg] would read through the synopsis, 1, 2, 3. It was really basic, no metaphors, no subtle meaning. It was just—you have her coming down the stairs.[93]

After that, they move on to explore the more complicated thematic issues. For example, the dramaturg listed major themes:

> Daughter of a god comes to earth persons in the play are divided appear/disappear & are summoned one conscience over all this
>
> She's come to see how people live on earth/ she is innocence (like Parsifal)

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[91] *Ibid.*

[92] See Cage, *ibid*, for the story of a composition class where they were asked to solve a problem, then solve it in a different way and then another—what did all of these solutions have in common? They were all possible answers to the same question.

[93] Personal interview with Gordana Svilar, 6 August 1998.

She gets to experience life: birth, marriage, death

She wants to know the meaning of what people do.[94]

Once he has the structure of acts formulated, he creates a visual script consisting of a

sequence of images. Wilson elucidates:

> I made a series of drawings as a kind of thumbnail
> sketch or a storybook for the work that told a kind of
> story by the sequencing of images. And then after that I
> went through the text and took certain headlines from the
> text and put them with the drawings and then I began to
> fill in the text and the movement and the attitudes after
> that. But I start with the bones, the skeleton, the forms,
> [and] the structures first. Like an architect who designs a
> city or a building, they start with the structure and then
> we can fill in this building this mega-structure in whatever
> way. Often it is quite abstract in the beginning.[95]

What Wilson describes can be illustrated with **figure 2.2**. It shows an early draft of the

Knee Plays that punctuate the main action of *Einstein on the Beach*. There are four

drawings, one for each *entre acte* scene. Hand-written notes clarify specific intentions or

actions for the composition of each scene's staging. If the character needs to have a

specific prop like a net, or perform a specific action like walk down a staircase, Wilson will

draw them into the structure he has created. For example, in [**figure 2.3**], in the

uppermost drawing the man is at the table counting numbers and a broom leans against

the wall. **Figure 2.4** shows a portion of the storyboard for *Einstein on the Beach*. It is

apparent, when looking at for the entire play, how the images transmogrify as the work

progresses over time. An emblematic drawing stands in for the basic shape and

composition of the scene or act. As words might build on each other to form a sentence,

these are changing images that build on each other pictorially. Knee plays are a strand of

scenes that punctuate the main action. Often their pictorial composition is a break from

visual motifs such as the train, the building and the spaceship that are building throughout

the piece. This structure is further elucidated by **figure 2.5**. These drawings show blocks

of images. For example, the first block charts the movement of the train over the course

of the scene. Movement and changing spatial relationships are accounted for in the

drawings. The stage composition is precisely captured through the scenic scripting. As

the production photo in **figure 2.6** shows, the staging is worked out to the drawn

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[94] http://www.robertwilson.com/studio/dream/dream1.htm
[95] Sound clip "Process" from http://www.robertwilson.com.

specifications. Later, as is commonly known, images from the series of scripted images are extracted and produced as a series of lithographs illustrating the shape and movement of the production. These performance relics are sold to help cover the enormous costs of mounting Wilson's productions.

Wilson charts out these stimuli using the notation of music, dance and the visual arts. Ideas are mapped in sequential lithographs or drawings. Words are then added in a similar manner, with the inflections of the words noted with symbols. Gestures, movement and timing are restricted within those bounds. **Figure 2.7** depicts pages of the *Golden Windows* (1982), and illustrates how precise Wilson is in incorporating the images with the text. Each thumbnail sketch is labelled and matched to the text, describing the pace of the speech, the volume and inflection. The physical performance is captured as precisely as it can be with notation. **Figure 2.8** depicts pages from *Monsters of Grace* (1997) dictating the timing and shape of the movement for a scene. At 0.05, there is a grey scrim, at 0.20, a bar of light emerges from the bottom, then by 1.50 the bar is ¾ the ways up the scrim, and finally, at 2.50 the bar reached the top. The basic drawings show the pictorial organisation of the stage and then the text specifies the place where actors are to stand and the rate at which they are to speak the lines. Once the actors' choreography has been blocked and the setting built, the last step is to overlay colour. Wilson spends a long period in technical rehearsals to make sure that the blending and value of the colour is exactly as he wants them. His work is built in layers, as a painter would apply layer after layer of paint to achieve the effect that he wants. In essence, he is still an architect building with bricks, laying them one atop another, and a painter, mixing layer after layer of paint. The overall effect of the piece creates an architectural space that the spectator responds to through perceptual means.

Wilson's visual score is different from most people's conception of the function of visual drawings:

> In North America, the United States and Europe, the
> visual book is, by and large, simply there to support the
> literary book. Something we call scenic decoration is
> always there to second what we are hearing. So it's
> often superfluous. What I've tried to do in my theatre is

to make something that we see be structurally sound.[96]

Wilson's scenic scripting can almost be considered as the product of the spectacle, just as text is the product of the spectacle in textually derived theatre. He does not construct all of the elements of each piece, but works as a master artist who commissions out different pieces of the project. He gives his collaborators the freedom to work within a prescribed framework. Wilson describes:

> It's a real collaboration. It depends on which artist I am
> working with— but what I usually do is put together a
> structure, a form which people then fill in. I am not the
> best one to write a text and I can't write music, but I can
> put together a synopsis with a visual book. In my theatre
> the visual book is different than in other theaters in that it
> can stand alone.[97]

Images are created and movement choreographed. The text and music are added from different sources. Sometimes these have little to do with the actual images that transpire on stage. Their effect is contingent upon the output of the contracted collaborators. By no means does that mean he does not have control over the form or content. For example, for Strindberg's *Dreamplay*, the dramaturg brought in nineteenth-century pictures of the old south. Wilson liked the sepia tones of the photographs and the structures of the landscapes, so he made thumbnail sketches based on their colour scheme and settings. Consequently, the designer was left with a challenge to conceive how to make the four-inch by two-inch drawing make sense on a sixty meter by forty-meter stage.[98] **Figure 2.9** contrasts the thumbnail drawing for a scene in *Danton's Death* (1992) with a production photograph. The scale had to be chosen to be functional on stage. Wilson's visual-script and written specifications severely limit what the commissioned artists can do. The designer's job is to work out how the drawings will actually be achieved on the stage. Once the design has been realised and a range of props accumulated by his assistants, Wilson chooses, according to his aesthetic, which elements he wants used in the composition. He claims to be constantly aware of the multiple elements of the theatrical composition:

> I am always concerned with how the total stage picture
> looks at any given moment. The placement and design

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[96] Enright, *ibid.*, p. 20.
[97] *Ibid.*, p. 16.
[98] Svilar, *ibid.*

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> (shape, proportion, material) of furniture, the color, fabric,
> and design of costumes, placement and content of film,
> paths and gestures of performers, and lighting were all
> major considerations, no less important than the
> dialogue or music.[99]

Nothing is left to chance; everything must be charted and considered before it is cleared to remain in the final performance. The arrangement of everything on stage is accounted for, even if the effect has ambiguous meanings. That is not to say the work does not change during performance, merely the external mechanisms and motions are accounted for. After that, the actor's skill sustains the organic quality of the performance.

The actor's craft comes into play partly in finding emotional freedom within the form of the experience. Wilson arranges everything else into a *gesamtkunstwerk*:

> Wilson's universe is a totally controlled environment.
> Every effect is studied, every movement is counted and
> checked to the second on the stopwatch. A movement
> script for every scene is encoded by Wilson's assistants
> so that the actors can find their freedom with an
> absolutely structured world. How this world is built can
> be found in Wilson's drawings, notes, and working
> script.[100]

The practitioners must work within Wilson's structured framework. When they follow his instructions, he believes they are able to bring to life his vision. Despite having collaborators, he limits them and dictates what they are to do.[101] How well they accomplish their task is determined by their ingenuity. Wilson co-ordinates the scopic with the aural to create his own brand of theatre that is a cross between dance, sculpture, painting and performance art. Heiner Müller enjoyed working with Wilson because the text and images need not work together towards the same goal. They have different aims and, when juxtaposed, each retains its own character. With Wilson's theatrical performance, each element operates autonomously, neither functioning in an illustrative

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[99] Robert Wilson, ". . . I Thought I Was Hallucinating", *TDR*, 21.4 (1977), p. 78.

[100] Di Niscemi, *ibid.*, p. 15.

[101] In different visual practices, like that of the Japanese printmaking when Hiroshigi worked, the artist would design composition and leave the actual carving of the woodblock to his assistants. Once the composition was created, Hiroshigi would return to indicate the coloration and the contrasts and leave the printing to the expertise of the shop. A similar methodology is apparent in theatre and architecture, especially with Wilson. He indicates the shape, leaves others to create the objects and then applies the finishing touches himself. No one thinks any less of Frank Lloyd Wright for not mixing the mortar, yet his homes are still built to his specifications.

capacity in relation to the other. The textual and the visual exist side by side, each creating its own part in the whole of the performance:

> You've got all these textures and structures, and each one on its own can be very different, but together they offer something else. And it's how they counterpoint one another; how they can be put together structurally so that we can taste and smell and experience them. Each element, whether it's light or a gesture or an object, is thought about as something that has its own validity.[102]

The performance becomes a barrage of stimuli, where elements drift in and out of perception as they relate to the other elements. The experience of watching occupies the sentient being. Its ephemeral nature is the very thing that keeps the viewer involved with the experience.

Wilson's working method relies on logic and techniques drawn from the visual arts. Philip Glass described how the three predominant visual themes or images of *Einstein on the Beach* were conceived:

> Bob often mentioned that he envisioned them in three distinct ways: (1) a landscape seen at a distance (the field/Spaceship scenes); (2) still lifes seen at a middle distance (the Trial scenes); and portraits seen as in a closeup (the Knee Plays). As these three perspectives rotated through the four acts of the work, they created a sequence of images in an ordered scale.[103]

The different genre paintings serve as techniques to achieve different desired effects that are presented to the spectators. Throughout his entire theatrical output, Wilson has used an array of common scopic mechanisms as elements in his dramaturgical composition. By looking at these mechanisms, a range of devices available to the theatrical medium becomes apparent. These elements help show, in general, the ways in which theatre can exploit three-dimensional imagery in its own way. When the production is over what remains is a visual book that consists of a text, the logged timing and the choreography of the play. It is an unorthodox script, but its tolerance and parameters are inscribed within the visual mechanics. The various compositional elements are next considered in detail.

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[102] Enright, *ibid.*, p. 20.
[103] Philip Glass, *Opera on the Beach*, *ibid.*, p. 33.

Compositional elements

Robert Storr's description of the work of Tony Smith, is also useful as a description of spatial organisation in the theatre:

> Space is not just the context in which art takes place—
> the void that is filled by objects and images— but is,
> instead, among art's basic raw materials—something to
> be taken hold of, studied, and shaped. Thus the
> architect frames emptiness to consolidate volumes, while
> the draftsman or painter divides space within the
> confines of the white page or the blank canvas, and the
> sculptor anchors the environment around him with
> physical mass or embraces the atmosphere with
> armatures.[104]

The theatre artist divides space within the confines of the stage, frames it with setting and anchors the environment with props and actors. The stage space is as integral a component of the theatrical experience as the text that actors speak. Wilson's theatre exploits different visual arts concepts to create transient images that shape the space around them. The following discussion will describe the different scopic mechanisms that he uses to create the visible components making up the theatrical event. Firstly, the organisation of stage space from its confining dimensions to its atmospheric qualities will be considered. Secondly, the ways in which setting serves as a landscape that gives a context within which the sculptural objects root will be illustrated. Thirdly, the manner in which sculptural objects with weight and mass are organised to fill the stage space and the ways in which light and dark define the objects in space and direct the viewers gaze will be examined. Fourthly, the ways in which change draws the spectator's awareness to a range of visually communicated themes and motifs over the course of the theatrical event will be addressed.

Spatial organisation

When discussing the shaping of space, the parameters of the visible stage space become variables. Each choice has many consequences for the effect of that space upon the spectator. A deeper stage makes more space available in which humans can interact or in which to place large sculptural objects. Take for example figure 2.10, showing the deep staging with a high proscenium used for *The Forest*. Deep staging

allows the stage space to be divided into separate playing areas that act independently of the rest. The human figure can exist at one depth, the birds in another and the log in a third. The easiest way to visualise the placement of the objects in space is to use the Cartesian co-ordinate system. The horizontal is designated as the ordinate (x), the vertical as the abscissa (y) and the depth as (z). The biological object exists in an environment in relation to other masses. The appearances of its placement in space carries with it emotional connotations for the observer. For example, in *Orlando* (1989), the stage space is horizontally divided into two different zones. If the darker colour moves down the x-axis, the space becomes endowed with a sense of weight and pressure upon the characters. As the objects change values for x, y, and z the movement through space offers a visual narrative of changing spatial relationships. If the black scrim descends on the x-axis, the spectator's impression of the way in which Orlando occupies the space changes, thereby triggering a different understanding of Orlando in the context of what came before.

The grid pattern in the picture for *A Letter for Queen Victoria* [**figure 2.11**] can help show how deep in space the figure moves. The relationship between the figure and the space can create different effects depending on its placement in the architectural environment. The linear perspective of deep space is dependent on the place in the house, in which the spectator sits and thus introduces different complexity to the design of stage setting. Spectators sitting on one side of the theatre see the action at a different angle than those sitting on the other side. Thus, the spatial relationships of the objects on stage are seen differently by the two groups. Wilson must choose whether he wants the variability to be a component in the spectators' response to the scene. In contrast, **figure 2.12** shows the shallow light show for *Lohengrin* (1991). A shallow stage pushes all the action to the front of the stage allowing every spectator the same planer view of the stage space as one has of a flat painting. The relationships within the composition minimise the distortion of linear perspective of three dimensions. Wilson frequently uses a shallow staging. He therefore must utilise the principles of plane geometry; in other words, he works primarily with the horizontal and vertical x- and y-axes. In either example, Wilson

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[104] Robert Storr, "Tony Smith: Architect, Painter, Sculptor", NY: MOMA, 1998.

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must decide whether to limit or broaden the spectator's range of responses to the given moment.

Barnett Newman's compositions help demonstrate the ways in which planer geometric shapes are organised, and in turn trigger a spectator response. **Figure 2.13** shows *Canto VI*. A single vertical strip cuts across the right side of the black rectangle confined by the edge of the page. The space is divided into three distinct zones. Each has its own size and dimension, but is also seen in relation to the whole. Likewise, in *Hamlet: a monologue*, Wilson divides the stage into distinct zones on the vertical. Both have similar divisions of the confining space. **Figure 2.14** shows ¼ of the right side is lit, while ¾ is blocked by black scrim. For example, in the performance, Hamlet jumps out from behind and disappears periodically behind the scrim as the verbal scene repeats. One possible interpretation of the staging is that the image is a physical manifestation of the verbal idea that was beginning to form. When Hamlet jumps out of sight, the image repeats in the same way the text repeats. Later, Wilson opens ¾ of the stage [**figure 2.15**], contrasting it to **figure 2.14** that is set on the closed vista of the ¼ stage. The variant space creates a tempo that structures the visual content. The pacing of the play is carried by spatial dynamics rather than verbal rhythms. Again, **figure 2.16** shows *Note VIII, State 1*, where a strip divides the rectangle on the right and a narrow strip on the left. Note the composition of **figure 2.17** from Wilson's staging of *Bluebeard's Castle* (1995). The painted light divides the planer surfaces of the stage space. There the spatial composition is determined by where the line cuts through the horizontal and vertical axis.

Wilson's use of stage space is analogous to the concepts applied by Mark Rothko to his compositions in which he utilises horizontal geometric shapes to organise spatial arrangements. **Figure 2.18** shows *Number 61(Brown Blue, Brown on Blue)*. The weight of the brown zone pushes down the bright blue strip that rests atop a darker blue rectangle. Each component part has an effect on the reception of the composition. Coloured shapes are the content and the form of the painting. Rothko believed his paintings possess the ability to provoke spiritual transcendence, which he intended viewers to achieve by looking at the paintings. Wilson plays with the manner in which viewers understand space as a communicating medium, to convey something about the

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character of the idea contained therein. **Figure 2.19** from *Orlando* shows Orlando recumbent on stage in a narrow horizontal band of blue light. The height of the frame is only several feet. The weight of the blackness pushes down on the narrow band of space, making what looks like a coffin. The weight of the blackness suggests the ways in which the life force, the blue colour, is constrained by the grip of death, the black colour. The image looks two-dimensional despite the presence of a sculptural entity. Again, in both artistic compositions, the space is arranged in a similar manner, thereby, the coloured planes are the forms that convey the expression of the images.

Another, more radical, use of space is divided staging. The spectators for *Death, Destruction & Detroit* (1979) had to swivel between one of three stages to watch the action. There were the three playing areas surrounded the spectators; simultaneous staging gave multiple images for which the spectator to choose. Divided staging exists when the stage space is partitioned into distinct playing areas. **Figure 2.20** shows a stepped wall that creates several levels on which to present action. In an interview with Stefan Brecht, Wilson describes the way in which he devised the spatial organisation of *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud* (1969):

> The stage is divided into zones—stratified zones behind the other . . . in each of these zones there's a different 'reality'—a different activity defining the space so that from the audience's point of view one sees through these different layers, and as each occurs it appears as if there's been no realisation that anything other than itself is happening outside that designated area.[105]

Each stage division contains its own content so that when seen in relation to the rest, the space has a life of its own which contains the actions within. Another example is the setting for *HG* where the experience had a phenomenological rationale by which the spectator's perceptions were heightened, and perceptual manipulation played a major role—the space and image were designed to be experienced in the same manner as walking through a building. After the spectators pass through the Victorian dining room at the entrance, they discover the rest of the underground space at their own pace in whatever order they come upon its constructed images. It is of little consequence whether one found the Mummy in the misty tomb [**figure 2.21**], or the rows of hospital

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[105] Brecht, *ibid.*, p. 420.

beds and vats of bloody water [figure 2.22]. The act of stumbling through the dank, dark vaults is as much a part of the event as are the brightly lit still lives of different epochs and places.

The space in which the visible elements of theatre are displayed contributes to the ways in which these elements are perceived. Wilson frames the stage space variably using height, width and depth to limit the space into a contained environment for spectators to view. He also divides the stage space to present simultaneous multiple frameworks to shape the content of each theatrical presentation. The different techniques are effects he applies to shape the space into a desired overarching effect. He also uses light and dark to contain the images within the stage space. The space is organised so those sculptural objects can relate within their setting. The relation of these objects within the space becomes the event. Accordingly, these techniques demonstrate Wilson's overt use of the vertical and horizontal and his overt 'foregrounding' of depth and flatness to organise space. This structure provides him and, hopefully the spectators a meaningful context for interpretation of the event.

Setting

A theatrical setting serves a variety of functions. According to Charles and Mirella Affron a theatrical setting has five basic functions.[106] 1) It can denote time, place and mood. 2) It can act as punctuation where design strategies advance narrative propositions. 3) It can act as embellishment where decor displays an elevated style. 4) It can act as artifice where design is patently unreal. 5) It can act as narrative where a single setting is self-reflexive. However, when looking at it in relation to a visual arts genre, setting is most like a landscape painting. It depicts a place made of forms in a contained space. A landscape setting can encompass the more traditional definition of setting, as well as serve as an artwork in its own right. Its form and content communicates to the viewer. Wilson's installation work can show the ways in which setting can be evocative on its own. The *H.G.* installation (1995) is also a theatrical event

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[106] Charles Affron and Mirella Jona Affron, *Sets in Motion: Art Direction and Film Narrative*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995, pp.37-40. The study includes individual chapters on each of the functions of setting.

that only uses a visible setting. The ephemeral presence of H.G. and the inhabitants of the world that he presented became the protagonists of the event. Moreover, the movement between scenes and the duration of the event depended upon the spectators, who were the actors following the random path of H.G. bouncing through history. The sculptural properties that compose the still lives or landscapes of the installation have a history that will be unearthed by the spectators in an analogous way as archaeologists reconstruct ancient civilisations based on relics they unearth. Often very little else is given by way of action or dialogue to inform the spectator. Thus, the setting becomes the primary conveyor of sensory stimulation.

The presence of an object changes the narrative. In *H.G.*, there are nineteenth century objects scattered through the different created environments. Within the mummy's tomb, towards the back on a brick in the dust was a hip flask with "H.G." engraved on it. The spectators' take notice because the lighting highlights its presence. This discarded human article suggests that H.G., the time traveller, had been there before the attendant. Finding the object in the proximity of the mummy changes the story of the space. It can suggest that humans have walked here before the spectator and others will come by later. As other historical spaces have other objects, a relationship between H.G. and these sites becomes apparent. Humans have walked this earth; different refuse remains as archaeological evidence of past life; in our century Coke cans and bottles, for the eighteenth century painted portraits. Our objects tell the story of our movement through history during our own transient time and our ultimate death. Other sites suggest that humans can die by extermination (pairs of tagged shoes like in German death camps), die of disease (influenza records strewn about the medical ward), or die in war (arrows across the sky in the Classical ruins).

The decor may ground the scene into what is recognisable. A bedroom suggests one thing, and a drawing room suggests another. A room filled with objects that are too large for it yet another. The setting tells the spectator what kind of distortion, or what type of illusion, is expected. The form and content of the setting carries thematic implications. The visible whole world of the play is communication that conveys story or place. The information spectators glean from the component elements of the picture is one form of

expression in Wilson's work. Images carry the show and bind it together into a visual unity. The function of the words is not unimportant, only they are not the primary mechanism that unifies the theatrical experience in Wilson's works. Words are elements that clarify, direct or suggest contexts in much the same way that sets in conventional works may punctuate, denote, embellish or narrate.

A more traditional and recognisable landscape is of the homestead. An American colonial home shows up in several of the pieces. Houses like those in **figure 2.23** appear in *Edison* (1979) and *Time Rocker*. The colonial home is emblematic of the American consciousness of history and of a sense of nationality. Bachelard professes:

> For our house is our corner of the world. As has often
> been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every
> sense of the word. If we look at it intimately, the
> humblest dwelling has beauty.[107]

In *Edison*, Wilson goes a step further and projects a landscape upon the colonial house. **Figure 2.24** shows a waterfall superimposed upon the façade of the house. These landscapes are emblematic of themselves as much as they are of illustrative locations in time and space for the characters. They serve as more than mere setting, because they shape the space and add to the total fabric of the visible theatrical composition.

The shapes that are formed on a painted canvas capture particular moods or feelings. The advent of photography in the nineteenth century freed the art of the twentieth century to explore the unreal or the abstract; in other words, to explore what cannot be captured or defined by mere reflective representation. Theatre has always had this ability, and Wilson exploits it to depict the fantastic on stage. In *Time Rocker*, a fish skeleton can be a time machine transporting the characters into unknown dimensions [**figure 2.25**]. Through the arrangement of forms in space, he is able to convey dream elements with the illusion that they are real. The transformations of those forms match the fluid quality and fractured logic of the mind flitting from one idea to the next. In *Time Rocker*, Nick and Priscilla have travelled from one environment to the next witnessing different events. Though there were songs and text, these different worlds were described only by the components that made up the landscape and the different characters dressed in costumes that further defined the world that they inhabited. These

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places were clearly fantasy locales, even if one seemed primitive or another seemed Egyptian. Depicted were human figures in abstracted human situations. The impression that spectators were left with does not so much concern where the characters were, but concerns what type of qualities these places possessed.

Like a painting, a play can have visual texture that is an apparent rather than tactile quality of a surface. Whether a visual surface is smooth and silky or rough and jagged affects the ways in which the spectator responds to the image. Within Wilson's images, the different components have their own qualities. The woman in *La Maladie de la mort* wears a silky gown [figure 2.26], while the dancers in *Time Rocker* wear angular stiff clothing that resembles crumpled newspapers [figure 2.27]. One effect of the silky curves and the satiny texture of the colours of the setting are that they promote a sensual quality to the intimacy of the piece. In contrast, the rough crimped lines of the *Time Rocker* dancers' costume and hair distances the spectators from the experience. Setting also has shape and texture. In *La Maladie de la mort* the chairs are slender curves resembling the beauty of a woman's shape, and in the dance scene of *Time Rocker*, the hair and the small city props that fill the space are all angular. Not only do these objects shape space, but they also give the stage image a feeling of texture. The materials of the clothing, the shapes of the props and setting all work together to provide a texture for the images. Curves and silk help contribute to the sensuality of the images in *La Maladie de la mort*, while angles and rough material contribute to the mechanistic feel of *Time Rocker*. Therefore, visual texture is a mechanism of dramatic composition.

Wilson also shapes the architectonics of the space by creating artificial locales and interiors as setting. In *Maladie de la mort*, he projected charcoal-looking line drawings on the back wall to create a hotel room in various perspectives [figure 2.28]. Only general indications of the room's walls and window were needed because the bodies and the interaction between them made the space signify as real. Other architectonic mechanisms anchored the narrative to the immediate visions of the body. The slender art deco lines of its furniture played against the curve of Lucinda Childs' body. The charcoal drawings were abstracted and unreal and the sensual beings were

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[107] Gascon Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1994, p. 4.

real and sleek. These are a physical realisation of the sexual fantasy playing itself out in the abstracted space of the mind. An architectural landscape became the landscape of the imagination. With *Maladie de la mort*, Wilson takes on a design and directorial role, but the technique he used to give life to the Duras text used her work as a component of his own theatrical expression. The spectators are allowed a glance into the 'interior screens' of the figures onstage, that is to say, that Wilson talks about the imagination or conscious self as interior screens.[108] A drawn architectural setting can be seen with *Death, Destruction & Detroit*. In **figure 2.29**, not only is the landscape abstracted, but also the shading and shadows allow the background to take on any number of associations. Staging imaginary landscapes makes the theatrical medium stretch in a different direction than the more conventional mirror to nature. These plays are visions in three dimensions. The landscape and the figures are portraits of feelings, moods and unreal fantasy. The stage and the transformations of colour and perspective can shift as the thoughts and dreams of the narrator shift. The play becomes the staging of impossible landscapes.

The genre of landscape painting has provided Wilson with a device in which to place his actors. Like a painting, the component parts of the landscape's composition contain a visual narrative. Take for example **figure 2.10** from *The Forest*. The rocks and creature that move across the stage are indications of the events that are transpiring. Each object is on stage for a reason. It is those forms that convey a part of the theatrical experience. Its textures of jagged rock or its sculptural forms of biological entities guide the spectator to an understanding of the space. Wilson's most commonly used settings are composed briefly with line in the form of recognisable locales. Above all, as with orthodox theatre practice, the setting provides a context for the events of the play. The environment and the ways in which the environment changes are how the play progresses through time.

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[108] Simmer, "Robert Wilson and Therapy", *ibid*.

Sculpture

Wilson uses figures and objects to shape and mould space in different configurations as the play changes from scene to scene. He can create different sculptural shapes by placing different objects together. As **figure 2.29** shows, human forms can be manipulated using costume or masks to change the line of mass of the figure. If the man were not inflated to mimic the elliptical shape of the egg-vehicles and the mountains in the background, he would have disturbed the visual harmony of the composition. His presence would stand in opposition to the rest. As he is in tune with the rest of the elements, all of the ellipsoid shapes, from the goggles to the mountains work together. The interrelationship of these elements also changes the nature of each element as well as that of the space. The shape, texture and movement of the human figure can be adjusted to broaden the possible creations that can be constructed. Movement of the figures can be seen from different perspectives. The architectonic setting also bears on the nature of the construction because its mass shares the space with the sculptural objects. Together they give a sense of whether it is confining, crowded, vast or small. Wilson's installations can be considered sculpture. By setting up a classical colonnade or a row of beds, he is organising and dividing the installation into three-dimensional landscapes. This mutability moulds the contexts that the spectators view and experience.

Sculptural objects— whether biological or inanimate— shape the emptiness around them. For example, in *Lohengrin* Wilson begins with an empty stage, for he claims "There's nothing more beautiful than an empty space".[109] From there, he adds human figures and objects to his theatrical stage. He uses a designer's strategy when shaping the content of his dramatic expression. This highlights the ways in which forms within that space change its qualities. **Figure 1.5** showed a man in a room with doors and windows. The man's form fills part of the box's volume. The crook of the arm and the mass of the torso spread out in space. The angle at which the figure faces the wall conveys where he is looking. Different shapes elicit different feelings. The configuration suggests several imaginary scenarios; the figure peeking through the door seems

devious, almost as if he is hiding. With two objects in the space— they each are what they are and together they are the sum of what they are. Recall Wittgenstein's reversible duck/ rabbit picture **Figure 2.30**. The spatial area you choose to focus on as the changes your perception of the image. In one case the lines form a duckbill, in the other rabbit ears. One can focus on the objects onstage or the space between them. By vacillating between the two images the mind processes information from two different visual sources. In the theatre, the character can be shown one way, while reacting to the other characters in a different way. The spectator can focus on the individual and on the relationship between individuals, thus creating two perspectives simultaneously. Sculpture's relation to other sculpture and architecture offers several avenues of communication that can elicit many things for the viewer. All these manners of suggestion are pasted together into a collage of impressions, as is the case in *Time Rocker*, where Priscilla and Nick relate to each other as to well as the different worlds they visit. With sculpture, the curve of a line, or the colours of its context can trigger emotional reactions. The ways in which the visual artist arranges and manipulates the objects creates an atmosphere, or world, that the attendants of the experience can respond to in a variety of ways. Intuition, convention and cultural codes guide them to what feels like a harmonious arrangement of form and context. These arrangements are the stimuli for the spectator's to experience and augment the other communicative mechanisms in operation in the work. Wilson's aesthetic operates within a given set of cultural and social conventions.

The sculpturing of human figures are an essential part of Wilson's dramaturgical composition because figures shape space and augment 'liveness'. Actors become what Kantor describes "as an almost biological symbiosis between actor and object", or in other words, as a 'bio-object'.[110] Theatre highlights 'objectness' because it uses self-propelled human figures as part of the visible components of the stage. Critics often describe actors in Wilson's plays as furniture. In fact, Wilson choreographs their movement and records it on videotape so they can learn the appropriate gestures, body shapes and

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[109] http://robertwilson.com/studio/lohengrin/lohengrin1.htm
[110] Kantor, *ibid.*, p. 240.

movement. They are meant to be tableaux vivant expressive of the shape and spatial

relations that Wilson intends. At the other extreme, props can become animate. The

flying bird [**figure 2.31**] from the Knee plays in *The CIVIL warS* (1984) takes on life at the

hands of the puppeteers; here 'furniture' becomes a biological entity. In *Hamlet: a*

monologue, a shovel stuck in the ground [**figure 2.32**] moved around the stage on its own

accord. The inanimate objects begin to have their own personality and also tend to lend

an air of humour to the piece. The shapes and movement of objects can change the

composition and the nuance of the space.

The space between things is also important in dramatic expression. According to

Susan Cole:

> Wilson is characteristically concerned with 'the space
> around the movement': 'the space under the arm'. It is
> part of his concern with ways of seeing: 'In the theatre
> you always have to fill the auditorium with presence . . .
> the weight of the gesture has to get to the exit signs.
> And the space around it helps us to see it . . . as I've said
> many times . . .a small dot in a large room . . . will fill the
> room simply because of the space around it.[111]

Form shapes space and space shapes form. As studies in kinaesthetic theory, such as

Edward Hall's *The Silent Language* show, basic human physical behaviour and

interaction is a readable language.[112] Different cultures have prescribed ways of

interacting that is inculcated in the individual during social development. The proximity of

two people defines the formality or intimacy of the relationship at that moment.[113] In its

most conventional forms it can tell us whether two people are feeling affectionate, are

friends, lovers, business partners, or of higher or lower status. In Wilson's work, these

relationships are often abstract or gestural representations. **Figure 2.26** from *Maladie de*

la Mort showed an intimate moment when the characters make love, yet they lean on

each other, facing opposite sides of the stage. The spectator witnesses two halves of

one sculptural embrace. In the staging of *The Meek Girl* (1994) [**figure 2.33**], the three

actors move through the architectural space and adopt poses or gestures reminiscent of

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[111] Susan Letzler Cole, "Robert Wilson Directs *The Golden Windows* and
Hamletmachine", in *Director's in Rehersal: a hidden world*, London: Routledge, 1992, p.
152.
[112] Hall, Edward T W, *The Silent Language*, New York: Doubleday, 1990.
[113] In different cultures there are unwritten comfort distances at which people stand next
to each other without invading personal space. See *ibid*.

nineteenth century tableaux frieze. Their poses are mirrored in the other's gestures. They inhabit different places on the stage, yet retain a balanced pictorial composition. It is the space between them and the manner in which they interrelate that is evocative of the content of the piece. A usurer tries to understand why his wife committed suicide, and relives their sado-masochistic hell filled with silence, passion and contempt. Sculptural movement or posing sets up the relationship between the movable objects and the static objects, and thereby, stimulates the spectator's awareness of the figural interrelationships.

Another important technique in contemporary sculpture is choice— what object goes where. In a recent interview, Gordana Svilar relates a story, possibly apocryphal, that demonstrates how careful Wilson is in his aesthetic choices.[114] He wanted a particular rock from a river in Thailand to be found and shipped from Asia for the staging of a Paris opera. It took more than one try to get the right rocks, but apparently these rocks had a texture, shape and mass that Wilson wanted within his stage composition. Later, he coloured the rocks to light them to their best advantage. His choice to bring the rocks across the world was criticised, but its effect in the texture and shape of that image was important to him. The choice of which objects to leave or influence an image, are no less important than the relation of two words together. Shakespeare's speech, for example, can sound like the hissing of a snake by word choice and proximity of two S's together. Object choice can colour the way in which the spectators perceive the scene. In *Time Rocker*, does the protagonist's dark suit contrast with the white, Japanese newspaper costumes seen in **figure 2.27**? In *Hamlet: a monologue* does Gertrude's shoes or Polonious's cloak, stand in for their corpses? By reflecting upon the ambiguous staging, one invites questions concerning the intended meaning of the visual experience as it relates to the dynamic content of the play.

Costume can shape or stand in for the bio-object. In *Hamlet: a monologue* Wilson used the costumes of all the dead characters, in the final moments, as a sort of summary of all the deaths in the play. The clothing became a litany of senseless death. In *H.G.*, personal props and shoes were left strewn around the tunnels as a reminder or

evidence of past human exploration. The items become evocative of larger issues, such as the holocaust, cycles of mortality and contemporary humanity's place in history. The clothing and props can be thought of as a type of ready-made sculpture. These are all sculptural objects in a contemporary, visual arts conception where found clothing acts as a surrogate to human corporeality. Wilson manipulates these theatrical elements to achieve the effect he wants on the spectators of the piece. For example, **figure 2.34** shows the pipe chairs from *Einstein on the Beach*— created because of a comment that Einstein made about wanting to be a plumber. They are made of long slender rectilinear forms that are evocative of linear thinking and the practical aspects of constructing a bomb. Whatever they can be taken to mean becomes possible because of their relation to the other objects within that context. **Figure 2.35** shows "Kafka Chair" from *Death, Destruction & Detroit*. Taken out of context, the chair is an optical illusion, reminiscent of the drawings of M.C. Escher. This seems appropriate to the endless bureaucratic corridors that fill Kafka's writings. Even when these objects are seen outside of their original theatrical context they carry with them senses of the play— heavy or straight, tall or squat. These all shape the spectators' reception of the environment. It is significant that the objects are sold as sculpture to finance future theatrical development. Whether it is text or a sculpture of a bio-object, each strand is complete in itself and it is the interrelation of all the strands that creates the theatrical performance.

A recurring object can suggest a recurring theme. A train, suggesting the industrial age, is a recurring image in *Einstein on the Beach*. The repeated identical movement of bars of light in *Lohengrin* is a reminder of earlier material. One sculptural object in a particular time and place will resonate with another in a different time and pace, thus adding structural integrity to the composition. Our own personal associations with the images have a bearing on the way we experience the event. The presence of a particular object can plant seeds of ideas within the subconscious of the viewer. How much is suggested from the introduction of that element depends on visual, cultural, and educational literacy. The ambiguity inherent in the structure, form and content provides

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[114] Svilar, *ibid.*

enough flexibility to transcend cultural or literal specificity yet retain a controlled range of meaning.

As on the outside of a church where the relief sculptures on either side of the door will balance each other, a visual stage composition can be arranged to highlight a particular element or to visually rhyme with other elements. The composition may be balanced asymmetrically, as for example, where Wilson places non-identical forms to either side of a balancing point in such a way that the two sides seem to be of the same weight. The bird in **figure 2.36** balances out the human winged figure on stage left. Despite being equally distanced from the centrepoint, their vertical position and relative size are disproportionate. Regardless, the composition achieves a harmonious balance. A composition balanced symmetrically would be the placing of identical forms to either side of the central axis to stabilise it visually. For example, **figure 2.37** from *Quartett* (1987) shows Valmont upstage right and Mertueil upstage left, balanced by the large pre-Columbian plate between them. Visual rhyme exists when two objects share similar qualities that play off each other as two words with similar sounds might. An example of this is **figure 2.38** that depicts a moment from *Time Rocker*. The line of the vase mirrors the curve of Priscilla's hip and the red of the dress is projected on the cyclorama. Two different long slender objects such as a tall pipe-chair and a tall lanky actor can create the same type of visual rhyme.

Sculptural objects serve as compositional elements whose arrangement and rearrangement create a fluid image of spatial relationships. The 'objectness' of each figure, prop or set piece helps to convey an emotional or formal relationship. Watching the ways in which these forms occupy space and the ways in which their character is used in the overall framework of the play creates an experience that is, in part, the content of the play. Their characteristics trigger mental associations in the manner described by Arnheim's theory of visual thinking. A visual language triggers a range of perceptions within the spectator. These sculptural forms inform the spectator in non-verbal ways and their lighting provides the illumination to focus attention on them.

Light and dark

Without light, only a void exists, but with it, shape, depth, mass and line reveal themselves. Light is one of the most essential mechanisms that Wilson uses in the construction of his images. With it he is able to illuminate and delineate forms and shapes. **Figure 2.39** shows Orlando standing at the division of the cyclorama into a black zone stage left and a forest green zone stage right. She holds a hat in the illuminated area and another object in the stage left area. If seen from head on, her body straddles the barrier of the two worlds. The contrast created between the figure and the ground highlights parts of the bio-object. The lighting organises the space by breaking it into units, thus suggesting possibilities for interpreting the image as a character that hovers between two worlds. With lighting, a stage can become a bright ground whose figures stand out from the bright wash of colour behind them. **Figure 2.40** shows Orlando atop what looks like a staircase. Its mass stands in relief to the planer coloured surface of the cyclorama. The world around the solid mass is a blank canvas, whose colour shows change, create a visual tempo and characterise action. In addition, light can stand in relief to darkness and reveal the tiniest lips of an actor. **Figure 2.41** shows light picking out Hamlet's face, his jacket and a glove puppet of the king who is murdered. Black, as a ground, is neutral background against which the minute shades of the other colours stand clearly forward.

From light and dark, there is also shadow and silhouette. Either they are used as an effect, or they shape the objects illuminated on the stage giving them mass and depth. The silhouette is used as an effect to contrast the corporeal objects. **Figure 2.42** shows the moment when Elis and Lohengrin are unable to console one another by touch. A silhouette takes on an abstracted emblematic status, while the corporeal object becomes a gestural signifier. **Figure 2.43** shows Lucinda Childs in *I was sitting on my patio this guy appeared I thought I was hallucinating* (1977). Her silhouette becomes another sleek line framed in the material environment. **Figure 2.44** shows Orlando standing posed upstage centre closer to the back scrim. On the wall behind her is a shadow of her dress that lacks her head and her arms. The shadow is different from the bio-object on stage. Of course, this is a theatrical trick, but it acts as an image that suggests Orlando's sexual

transformations. The setting becomes a place to contemplate the ways in which her other self is beginning to reveal itself. There is a similar type of effect in *Dialog/Curious George* (1980) with Christopher Knowles. **Figure 2.45** shows how the shadow is different from the projected object. Knowles is centre stage reciting his sounds, while a cowboy silhouette lurks towards him. The scrim shadow is used as a comedic device contrasting the solid human form to its mischievous spectral self.[115] As an interpretation of the action of figure will show, shadows can have a variety of interesting effects. Holmberg interprets,

> In *Quartet* Wilson used shadows to create a climate of menace and for psychological bobbling. When Merteuil saw her shadow, she screamed, exposing self-loathing.[116]

Whatever associations are elicited by the uses of shadow, the device certainly calls attention to itself. These are instances where the effect plays with traditional notions of shadow and shading to create theatrical imagery that carries the spectator through a theatrical presentation.

Projected line drawings on the back of the stage are also a type of shadow and shading. The line creates an effect of shadow that printmaking and classical painting use to create effects of depth or weight to a two-dimensional object. Wilson most often uses this technique when he is using shallow staging that renders the stage practically two-dimensional. The three-dimensional bio-objects stand out from the artificially projected backgrounds. **Figure 2.46** from *Death, Destruction & Detroit* shows a parachutist coming down across the charcoal-shaded sky. Rather than create shadows using beams of light against objects, the shadows are drawn by way of projections. This enables Wilson to light the figures independently of the visible landscape. The reverse is also true. Rather than changing foreground, in *Maladie de la mort*, the background changes from time to time thus changing the emotional climate of the environment. Just as dialogue between the characters can reveal a shift in their mood, a changing background can make tangible the unseen emotional swing. As **figure 2.28** shows, at times there would be the black to grey shadowing, while at others the perspective lines for a room were drawn in. In this

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[115] See Victor I. Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow*, London: Reaktion Books, 1997; a shadow can be the evil self or the other self, p. 36.
[116] Holmberg, *ibid.*, p. 165.

way, the space of the environment becomes highly artificial and contrasts with the bio-objects.

The Golden Windows is a prime example of the use of light and shadow as expressive content within theatrical composition. Wilson uses a picture of a house on a mountain, viewed at different times of the day. As the play's thumbnail sketches [figure 2.47] show, lighting and shadow shape the structure of the play. Changes in shadow and the angle at which the house is viewed create a temporal light show. The light show is the content of the experience whose text serves as a counterpoint to the images. Lighting guides the spectator's perceptions of the environment. In turn, it becomes a mechanism to question the ways that changing appearance illuminates or obfuscates the event and the figures in the environment.

Even in a darkened space, we need light to see the forms in front of us. This was taken to the extreme in the H.G. installation. The spectators were led into a dark, dank underground system of tunnels. The only light was from the tableau installations. Spectators moved forward tentatively testing the ground in front of them and feeling for walls. Form was revealed and shaped by light cutting through the darkness at different intensities. The objects took on a brilliant aspect when the spectators emerged from the darkness into a brightly-lit hospital ward, or when they peeked through a hole in the wall and saw a cascade of arrows flying across an ancient colonnade [figure 2.48]. Some scenes were purposely left dark allowing the spectator to question who the figure was that lurked near the pole [figure 2.49]. The whole experience suggests the character H.G. was the attendant stumbling through time and space searching for and discovering new worlds.

In Hamlet: a monologue, the shades of darkness created one atmosphere, which then were contrasted to the bright light of another. The changes in intensity shaped the audience's perception of the characters and objects on stage. For example, in scene 3, the sculptural elements of Hamlet and a precipice he laid upon changed position as he spoke about "murder most foul" and the lighting in the background foregrounded the sculptural objects. The shifts in stance gave shape to the shifts in verbal expression and the silhouette of the setting took on a resemblance to a pistol. Wilson uses light and dark

and its intermediary shadow as a painter would to give depth, shape, mass or create

effects that become emblematic of concepts or ideas. Light and darkness lead the viewer

to take notice of the significant moments that Wilson has made apparent in his structuring

of the piece. The lighting reveals the journey of the images, and it is meant to trigger

emotion or impressions of the space in a manner that is used for sculptural images. A

shaft of light cuts the cube of the space, while floodlighting opens the entire vista of the

confined space. Adding the colour spectrum further highlights the progression of the play

through lighting.

Colour

> Colour is a power which directly influences the soul.
> Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the
> soul is the piano with many strings, the artist is the hand
> which plays, touching one key or another, to cause
> vibrations in the soul.[117]

Colour is the last detail Wilson overlays on his artistic composition. Not only does it

manipulate the different emotional atmospheres of the space, but also it fills the space.

Wilson has a limited palette; he predominantly uses white, grey and blue and occasionally

uses red, yellow and green. A flood of colour against the cyclorama functions in ways

similar to those used by Rothko for dividing the composition in his late minimalist

paintings. The geometric shapes composed of simple colour washes are meant to evoke

a transcendent spiritual reaction within the spectator. As Kandinsky describes:

> Shades of colour, like those of sound, are of a much finer
> texture and awake in the soul emotions too fine to be
> expressed in words.[118]

However, as with Rothko's work, some people relate to Wilson's work and others find it

formal and empty.

Wilson projects colour or images upon a seamless cyclorama, thus creating

gargantuan pictures, where forty-foot by twenty-foot baths of colour create a potent

physical reaction in the body.[119] The work is entrancing because of the sheer scale of the

scrim bathed in colour. As the play progresses, the lines change, the colour is blended

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[117] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, NY: Dover, 1977, p. 20.
[118] *Ibid.*, p. 41.
[119] I found that as a spectator, the colour triggered involuntary psychological reactions, such as crying for no apparent reason.

before one's eyes. There is always something to watch. Sometimes Wilson will use a pure colour like blue or red, and gradually blends them with other colours to control the change in mood or scene. In *Maladie de la mort*, the spectator suddenly would become aware that the background is a shockingly different colour. Grey can blend to form white or to form black, depending on the sentiments of the characters. A blue can brighten in its value or change hues completely. A pin-spot may pick out a hand or prop with light, and colour may be projected upon a costume thereby emphasising a moment in a character's emotional journey. It is as if the viewer is watching the act of painting as it happens. The colours that Wilson achieves are more brilliant and noticeable than is normally seen in theatre. His control is so masterful that the changes become fluid. The plays are unified seamless experiences whose scene changes are not a distraction because they work within the cohesive whole.

Wilson's most spectacular use of the visual comes with the ways in which he uses colour in a three-dimensional space. In **figure 2.50**, Hamlet stands holding a dagger in the air against a great wash of crimson red filling in the space behind him. The colour is an expression of the abstract emotions of the character. Its beauty and intangibility stuns the spectators and distances them from the verbal logic of the play, so they just experience what is unfolding in front of them. It does not only serve to highlight mood or be incidental detail, but also can take an active part in the unfolding of the event in time and space. The concrete changes in visual stimulation are guideposts that lead the spectators through the event. The colour can make and organise time like a measure in a musical composition. Intensity and duration act as visual crescendo and tempo. Again, Kandinsky describes the effect of colour,

> Blue is the typical heavenly color. The ultimate feeling it
> creates is one of rest, when it sinks almost to black, it
> echoes a grief that is hardly human. When it rises
> towards white, a movement little suited to it, its appeal to
> men grows weaker and more distant.[120]

The colour is expression that is conveyed over time. In *Maladie de la mort*, the coloured background transforms in a symphony of tonal gradation. Colour can be used to mark out sections in play, act as an organising principle, or serve an abstracted non-illustrative

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[120] Kandinsky, *ibid.*, p. 38.

function. As with a painting, theatre spectacle can be organised with fragmented structures; a cubist painting can offer up as pleasurable experience as a pop art painting. Their aims and techniques of presentation are merely different.

Sometimes, the figural or sculptural image can remain the same, but with a simple blending of colour, or colour change, the entire world of the stage can shift to a whole new plane. These instantaneous changes done before the eyes of the spectator are surreal. Colour can change mood, setting and shift the impact of the images. These changes can lead us down a path or bring us on a journey to somewhere new. Colour can provide an abstract narrative. Colour and light can shape the space by making it shallow or deep, tall or short. Light and its absence can transform an enormous orchestra hall into an intimate bedchamber. The colour and the darkness guide the viewer through the experience. The light can be made to dance or its movement can mesmerise, as does the spaceship in *Einstein on the Beach*, and it can adjust the perceptual experience. Its movement provides rhythm and shape to the temporal unfolding of the play.

In some ways, Wilson's work is reminiscent of the light and dark artists of California. An artist such as Robert Irwin, control spaces and creates an aesthetic experience based on light and dark and subtle changes in the environment. Most are imperceptible to human senses because the changes are so gradual. We as perceivers of the human experience barely acknowledge the changes are a result of variations in lighting as the sun crosses the sky. It is only when we come in from the bright day to a dark room or vice versa that the change is startling or noticeable. The changing conditions of light on stage offer the potential of an aesthetic experience. Wilson harnesses this effect and uses it as an element in tandem with dialogue and the movement of three-dimensional forms in creating a theatrical experience. The principal concept of light and dark is used in the theatrical experience in tandem with dialogue and the movement of three-dimensional forms in space.

Jan Butterfield explains what effect this has:

> The participant in a work of Light and Space slowly lets
> go of rational, structured reality and slips into an
> altogether different perceptual state. In this 'double
> depth of the dreamer and the world', the *presence* of
> light, the *sense* of color, and the *feel* of space merge,
> becoming far more real than any representation of them

could be.[121]

A dreaming perception of a created reality suggests that the spectator's response is irrational and based solely on sense reception. When the form of the artwork is also its content, the reception of the experience becomes an intuitive process that resists definitive interpretation. Wilson uses light as if it is paint, to layer colour across the stage, and transform objects from one thing to another as if by magic. Using shadow, he creates alternative realities. Light is also used to create rhythm and tempo in the movement of the play. It is a technique to create intimate or social spaces based on how much of the void is illuminated. Light guides the spectators to the worlds they are supposed to look at.

Change

It is obvious that theatre is time-based art where movement plays a major role. Setting, sculpture, lighting, and architectural space are in constant flux. In Wilson's theatre, the transitions between scenes have a profound significance on the content of the images. Whether the changes are discernible, contrast with what came before, or unfold at a constant rate are factors that contribute to the spectator's experience of the event. The work of mimes is especially good at this style of communication; they can create a space simply by reacting within it. The ways in which their body reacts within those bounds demonstrates the ways in which the space is conceived. The changing of that space becomes the expression of the event transpiring. Fluctuations in spatial relationships dictate a context in which a performer reacts, thereby creating an abstract visual experience with a beginning, middle and end. One of the most startling techniques that Wilson uses is the slowing of stage time. The closest aural comparison is with his sometime collaborator Philip Glass. In a similar way to the repetitions and gradual changes in pitch or pattern of the music, Wilson's images can remain virtually static over long periods. Tempo and movement of the objects, such as the runner in *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973) who did laps around the stage, can dictate the weight of the space between things. The technique asks viewers to linger visually more than they

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[121] Jan Butterfield, *The Art of Light and Space*, New York: Abbevile Press, 1993, p. 10.

might normally in a single moment. In this way, when change does occur, it takes on profound significance. Also as a figure or object moves slowly across the stage, the spectator is drawn to the motion and is allowed to scrutinise the lines and shapes of the object. By doing so, the spectator is able to consider the nature and qualities of the image as it is, rather than by where it may end up. Transformation and its causes are revealing of the spatial dynamics, which compose the expression of the performance.

The rhythm of its movement is as important as the duration of the unfolding of the play. The music of *Einstein on the Beach* has a deliberate tempo. Changes or shifts in tempo and rhythm are noticeable. The pace of a particular event is determined by the time that Wilson believes it necessary to absorb the visual elements of the scene. The opening curtain in *La Maladie de la mort* was a black and grey colour scheme, and then as the play progressed it used a bright blue palette. The progression of the colour scheme slowly changed as the emotional involvement between the characters built. The environmental change occurred parallel to the dialogue and action and amplified the effect on the attendants. More extreme was the tempo of the movement in *Deafman Glance* of the figure of a Victorian lady in the process of moving across the stage over the course of a half-hour. Spectator response varied, in that some people claimed to see things that were not there, while others fell asleep. One does not experience that type of opportunity on a daily basis and, thus a regulated rhythm over a long period in the theatre can be an unsettling experience for the spectator.

During the production process, it is essential that the transitions be worked out so that the piece retains its fluidity. **Figure 2.3** shows the continuing expression that builds between the scenes of the main action. **Figure 2.12,** as an example of the transformation of spaces as expression, shows the movement of a bar of light on the x-axis over the course of the prelude of *Lohengrin*. It begins with an empty space, and then a rectangular band of soft horizontal light reminiscent of the geometric shape in a Rothko painting, moves across the stage. The third image shows a vertical harder edge light appear creating a cross. The final image shows the vertical line like a zip from a Newman

composition.[122] Wilson arranges the compositional elements to propel the visual action forward. As the circumstances of the character change, the light creates atmospheric changes that work as a backdrop to the plot. The shaping of space expands and contracts, thereby manipulating the spectator's experience of that space and their responses to the images that flow in front of them. There are two major visual components at work in Wilson's *Lohengrin* sketches. Firstly, there are the horizontal and vertical strips he mixes and matches [**figure 2.51**]. Secondly, there is the small horizontal bar that later becomes a square [**figure 2.52**]. These two vertical motifs are used as compositional elements throughout the opera. The motifs that worked as separate compositional elements are brought together at the pivotal transformation of the character Lohengrin in Act III; Wilson uses both long strips and the square. A character shapes space with attitude, gesture and text, while an object shapes space by size, shape, colour and depth. The changing visual components transform the images into new compositions, thereby creating the experience of the opera.

Inherent in each discussion of the visual mechanisms in Wilson's dramaturgy has been the notion that each element is seen in relation to the whole. Any spatial change has an effect on the objects within that space. Actors move, setting changes, light and colour change in intensity and value. The pace and rhythm of these changes moderates the spectator's response to the whole theatrical experience, thereby providing it an overall shape. As a visual artist, image and change are at the core of a Wilson composition. The final element left in the equation is the attendant for whom all of the devices are meant to trigger a response.

Visual technique and its connection to the scopic in theatre

Of the elements in theatre, utterance and image, the utterance is privileged, particularly in the West-end or Broadway theatre. Wilson's theatre depends on the eloquence of the set and the form within it, in other words, on what is seen. In most theatre, the visible elements carry a low level of narrative weight. They set time, place,

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[122] A zip is the white strip in his coloured compositions. Putting a piece of masking tape on the canvas before painting usually creates them. When the paint has been applied, the tape is removed leaving a zip down the canvas.

and mood and subscribe to the generally accepted depiction of the real. Time, place and mood are often conveyed by the visible elements through conventional generic strategies and conventional depiction of cultural contexts. Décor participates in the narratives that claim minimal description, that is, narratives determined to depict the familiar through verisimilitude. In Wilson's theatre, décor acts as a form of expression, thereby serving as a structure to the performance's composition. Scopic constructions metamorphose through time to form an aesthetic journey for the attendant of a performance. At its heart, Wilson's work is series of drawings realised onstage through the layering of the visible components. When the performance is over, what is left is a visual script. Perhaps, these visual scripts are as much a play written and organised by a single playwright as any conventional play.

Overall, Wilson creates portraits, still lives and landscapes using the medium of the theatre. These genres serve as the conceptual framework for the visual composition of the scenes. These different perspectives work together to create a visual experience. The differing ways of showing a range of images and a range of spatial relations unifies the images that unfold over the course of the performance. In other words, like a fine-artist, the techniques are used in and of themselves to create a product meditating on its own form. A spectator's reaction to the forms is the experience of the work. That is the art of the visual play. Wilson's work highlights the ways in which visible compositional elements are used as forms of expression. His use of the visible demonstrates an abstracted use of the stage image as expression. The forms themselves are the subjects of his drama, and as such can act as a visual primer to train one's awareness of the ways in which theatre uses the visible.

Little attention has been paid to what meaning and effect these techniques have within the specific work. The fine-art-trained playwrights use feelings they have for their chosen medium to shape the theatrical experience. What are the ways in which looking at the techniques in this way help us understand Wilson's work? The scopic techniques discussed are visual themes that organise the experience, providing a way to make tangible what was seen and provide a vocabulary with which to describe it. These compositional elements do not work by themselves, rather they function as a web,

connecting and building a structure for the whole experience. A better understanding of a play such as *Time Rocker* is developed by recognising the ways in which, music, dialogue, song, light, sculpture, movement, change, texture, repetition and colour are intertwined to create a painter's view of theatrical expression. In another play, such as *The Forest*, by tracing the formal structure, the spectator can discover the way in which he used open spaces to give an expansive feeling to the images, and why half way through, he changes to very dark confining spaces. These cues are the plot devices that can trace the journey of the play through the visual ideas expressing humanity's progress and development, which are central preoccupations of the work.

In contemporary visual theatre, like that of La fura del bas, the form demands a different way of watching. With *F@ust 3.0* (1997), there was a flood of sensory information, much like the copious information flowing at us in contemporary culture. Individuals become overwhelmed by the experiences of everyday life. Wilson, on the contrary, has developed a specific language, which is far slower than most ordinary experience. It is about watching the minute details to understand what is going on. Like the experience of looking at a painting, it is in the infinitesimal components that convey the most information. The elements in Wilson are presented in such a way that the spectators must focus on visual change because it affects the way in which they will perceive the onstage environment. A change in spatial relation or in lighting modifies the experience. He orchestrates three-dimensional visible environments by choosing the visual and aural media that the attendant will witness. He arranges them so that the spectator can experience certain sensations and relate to different spatial relationships revolving around a theme. *Hamlet: a monologue* is Shakespeare's *Hamlet* seen through the eyes of Wilson; it is a different experience because it is mediated by Wilson's visual aesthetic.

Practitioners with no fine art training and directors who worked as painters both create vibrant theatre. They both use an aesthetic to block, design, move people and sets on stage. The devices and mechanisms that Wilson commonly uses are not unique, merely a creative form of visual expression born of his experience as a painter. They can enrich the repertoire of all directors, regardless of the extent to which they are used.

As we enter an increasingly visually literate culture, the nature and form of the theatre will shift to more diverse structural patterns. Already La fura del bas incorporates, film, theatre, art and computers to create a mega-spectacle. Wilson, Fornés, Byrne, Storey and Arden have shown the way towards a growing awareness and use of other logical structures in addition to linguistic narrative as dramaturgical structure. Their work highlights a trend in contemporary culture to explore and exploit the visible as a vocabulary. The visual is a quick way to express ideas. Visual presentation is replacing the long written dissertation. Theatre is no different from the rest of the trends in society, and is as much a cultural product of its time as pop-fashion drawings. Therefore, its conventions and expectations are shifting with each new generation of practitioners. With these changes, our vocabulary must adapt to be able to describe the new forms and techniques.

In any event, Fornés, Storey, Byrne and Arden, to varying degrees, also incorporate fine art mechanisms as dramaturgical components. They employ some of the same principles as Wilson as well as a range of their own. The basic relationships and limiting of space are essential to all of them. They control what goes on and off stage. All playwrights do this. There is a setting and characters make entrances and exits. It is the ways in which the relationship of the forms creates rhythm is important. In the following chapters, techniques from the arts and other artists will be identified to show the ways in which the visual communicates. Various guises in a variety of subtle and overt techniques will be used to indicate the ways in which the visible elements of the theatre are embedded within the dialogue and stage directions and the ways in which the implied movement and actions of characters also implies a visual composition for plays. These devices are a part of the theatre medium's power.

Figure 2.1; *Portrait/ Still life/ Landscape; Robert Wilson*, Museum Boymans-van Beunigen, 1993.
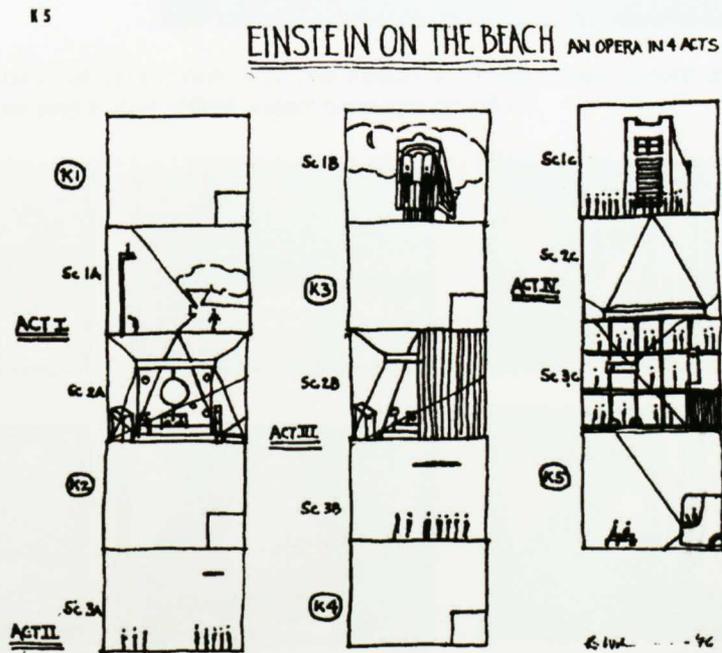
Figure 2.2; Thumbnail Sketch of *Einstein on the Beach*, in Lawrence Shyer, *Robert Wilson and his Collaborators*, NY: TCG, 1989, p. 219.

▲ The Knee Play organization.
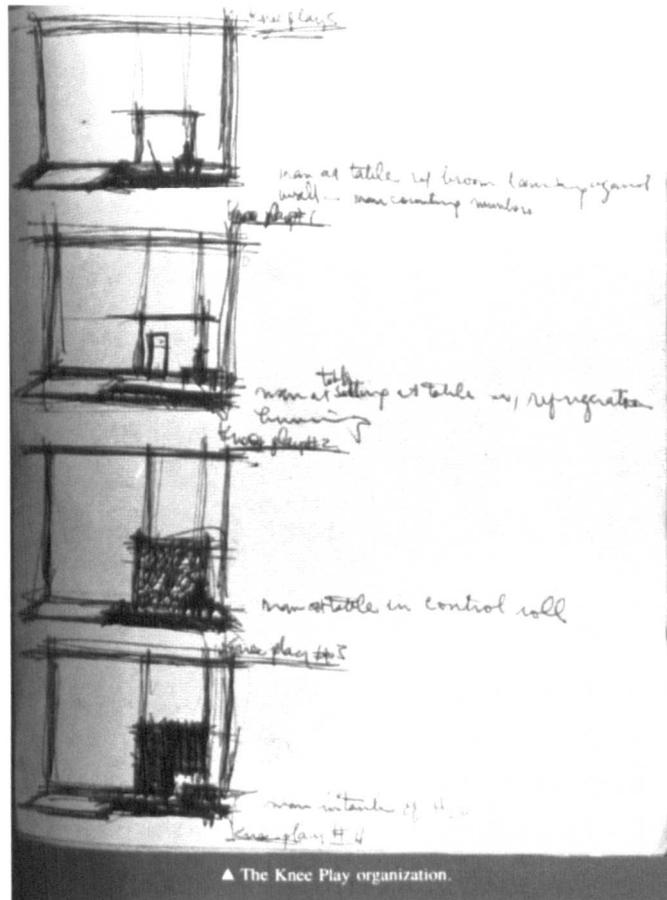
Figure 2.3; Thumbnail Sketch of *Einstein on the Beach*, in Philip Glass, *Opera on the Beach*, London: Faber and Faber, 1988, insert between pp.46-47.
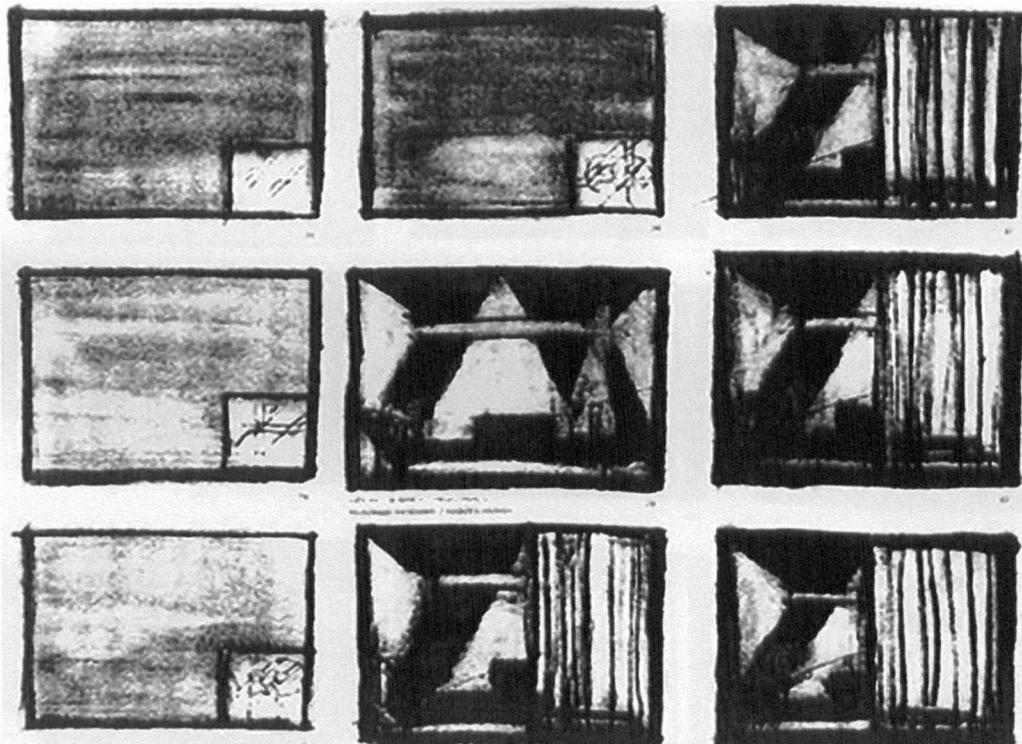
Figure 2.4; Thumbnails, in *Einstein of the Beach*, Vicky Alliata, ed., 1978
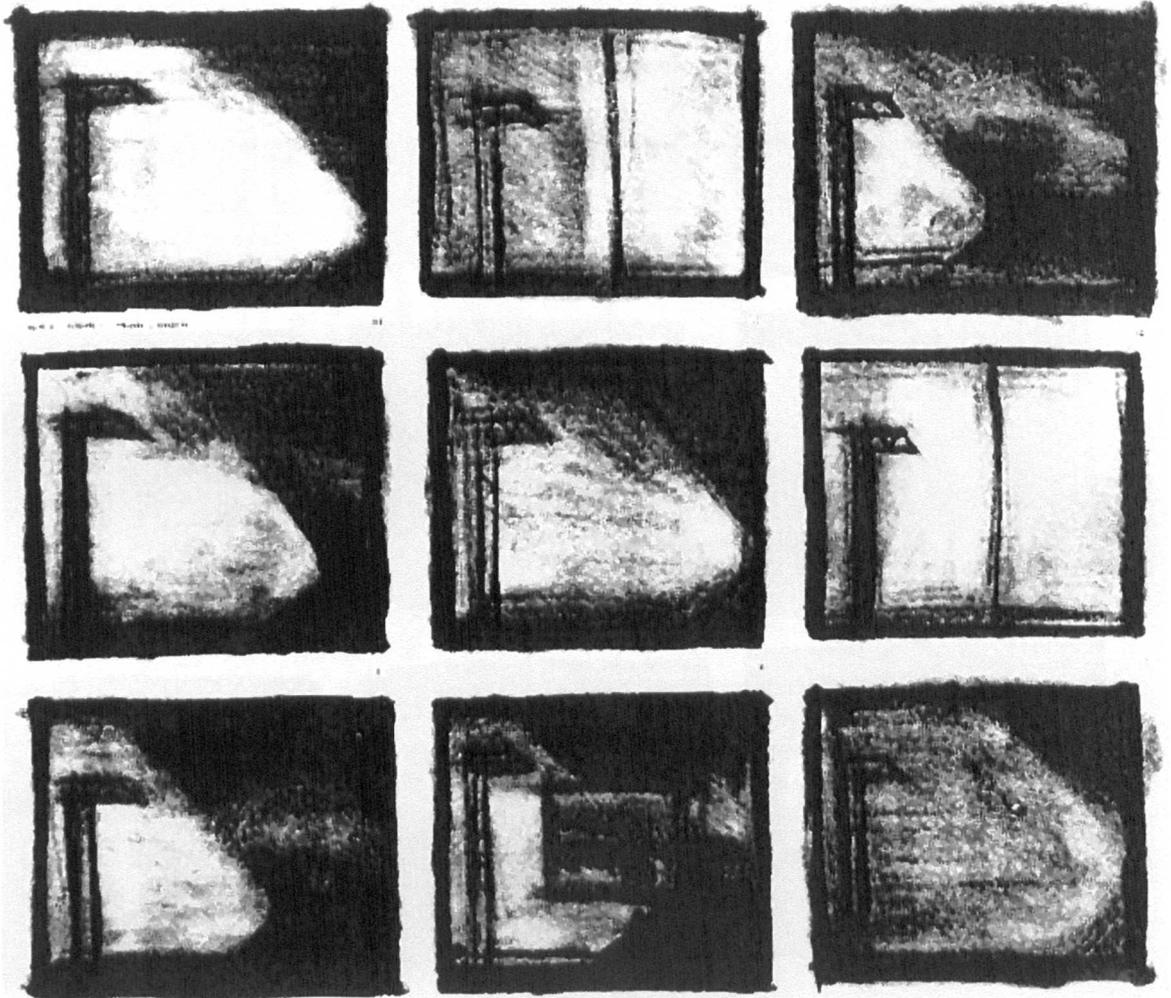
Figure 2.5; Thumbnails from *Einstein on the Beach*, in *Einstein of the Beach*, Vicky Alliata, ed., 1978.

Figure 2.6; Production Photo from *Einstein on the Beach*, in *From A Theatre of Visions*, Cincinnati: The Contemporary Arts Center, p. 47.
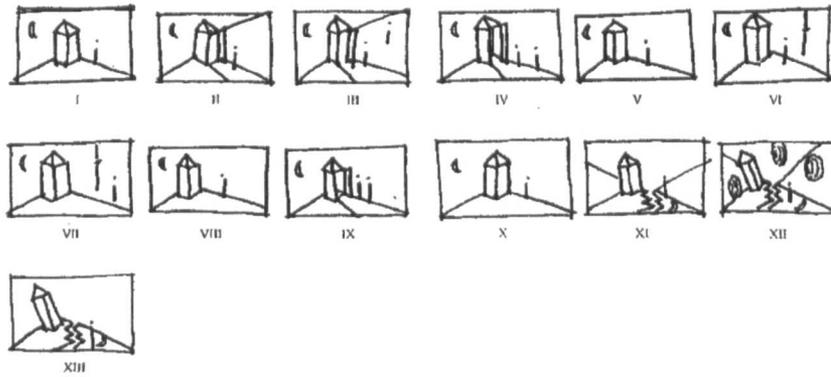
I. 2 stands center stage, door of house closed.
II. '2 stands center stage, door of house open.
III. 4 appears standing in sky.
IV. 4 appears downstage right.
V. 4 enters house, door closes.
VI. 3 appears downstage, hanging on rope.
VII. 2 moves downstage right to man hanging from rope.
VIII. 3 flies away.
IX. 1 enters from house and gives 2 a revolver.
X. 1 exits.
XI. earthquake; moon disappears from sky upper stage left and reappears on floor downstage right.
XII. large rocks fall through the sky as 2 walks down raked stage towards audience.
XIII. 2 arrives downstage center facing audience.

I. 2 steht in bühnenmitte. tür des hauses geschlossen.
II. 2 steht in bühnenmitte. tür des hauses offen.
III. 4 erscheint am himmel, stehend.
IV. 4 erscheint vorne rechts.
V. 4 geht ins haus. tür schließt sich.
VI. 3 erscheint vorne, am strang hängend.
VII. 2 geht nach vorne rechts zum mann am strang.
VIII. 3 fliegt davon.
IX. 1 kommt aus dem haus und gibt person 2 einen revolver.
X. 1 ab.
XI. erdbeben; mond verschwindet vom himmel hinten links und erscheint wieder im boden vorne rechts.
XII. große felsbrocken fallen vom himmel, während 2 über die schräge in richtung zuschauer geht.
XIII. 2 erreicht die rampenmitte, gesicht zum zuschauer.

21

E *music thirty seconds*
2 *stands center stage*
   lights up slowly
   pause
   lights to full

2 after murder
   after murder
   after murder
   after murder
   after murder
   after murder
   after murder

   door of house opens slowly
   after murder after murder come quickly you are trembling at last madame i am glad i insisted . . . please for my sake what can i call you here here permit me to present ourselves we are the comedians from the opera comique *laughs 40 seconds* don't be a fool we are fighting the same thing now where were you?

E MM DO ALL OF YOU HEAR ME

   E 1 you never thought that was possible did you?
   E *two gun shots*
   E 4 you must leave from this place
   E 3 come ahead . . . here
   2 have you been alright if that is possible do you know something what what
   4 *appears in the sky*
   4 i like you and you know oh well the night is for dreaming and a star falls out of the heaven i have to go what
   4 *disappears*
   2 i want to hold my lover wherever they might . . . be now well tell me about it just as you say i've got a secret a big surprise i still will not tell this will interest

E *musik dreißig Sekunden*
2 *steht in bühnenmitte*
   licht wird langsam heller
   pause
   volles licht

2 nach dem mord
   nach dem mord
   nach dem mord
   nach dem mord
   nach dem mord
   nach dem mord
   nach dem mord

   tür des hauses geht langsam auf
   nach dem mord nach dem mord komm schnell du zitterst endlich madame ich bin froh daß ich darauf bestanden habe . . . bitte mir zuliebe wie kann ich dich nennen hier hier gestatten sie mir uns vorzustellen wir sind die komödianten von der opera comique *lacht 40 sekunden* sei kein dummkopf wir kämpfen gegen die gleiche sache und wo warst du?

E MM KÖNNEN SIE MICH ALLE HÖREN

   E 1 du hast das nie für möglich gehalten oder?
   E *zwei gewehrschüsse*
   E 4 du mußt diesen ort verlassen
   E 3 komm schon . . . hierher
   2 ist es dir gutgegangen wenn das möglich ist weißt du was was
   4 *erscheint am himmel*
   4 ich mag dich und du weißt oh nun die nacht ist zum träumen da und ein stern fällt vom himmel ich muß gehen was
   4 *verschwindet*
   2 ich will meinen geliebten festhalten wo sie jetzt auch . . . sein mögen schön erzähl mir davon genau wie du sagst ich habe ein geheimnis eine große überraschung

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Figure 2.7; *The Golden Windows*, by Robert Wilson, pp. 21-22.

MONSTERS OF GRACE

PROLOGUE	5 minutes no text just music
ACT 1, SCENE A	12 minutes Man Text: Hans Arp, Konfiguration I, Konfiguration II
ACT 1, SCENE B	8 minutes Man Text: spoken or sung numbers
ACT 1, SCENE C	4 minutes Man Text: Hans Arp, Decisions in Dream
ACT 2, SCENE B	8 minutes (7 minutes music, 1 minute text in the end) Woman (possibility) Text: Kurt Schwitters, The Hand
ACT 2, SCENE C	4 minutes Child Text: Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, The Louse and the Flea
ACT 2, SCENE A	12 minutes (music-text-music-text-music-text-music) Man (possibility) Text: Jean Arp, introduction to max ernst's natural history
ACT 3, SCENE C	4 minutes Child Text: Kurt Schwitters, Four Bear Songs, No. 3
ACT 3, SCENE B	12 minutes Woman Text: Else Lasker-Schüler, A song
ACT 3, SCENE A	8 minutes Woman and chorus Text: Lucretius, On the Nature of Things (Latin sung chorus and spoken in English)
ACT 4, SCENE A	6 minutes Hummed, sustained notes
ACT 4, SCENE B	6 minutes (Hummed, sustained notes leads to sung or spoken and then sung text) Woman Text: Jean Arp, The Seasons of the Clock the Strawberry the Velvety Animals and the Cradle
ACT 4, SCENE C	6 minutes (Sung text leads to chorus) Chorus Text: Lucretius, On the Nature of Things
EPILOGUE	5 minutes Child Text: Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, The Ditmarsh Tale of Lies
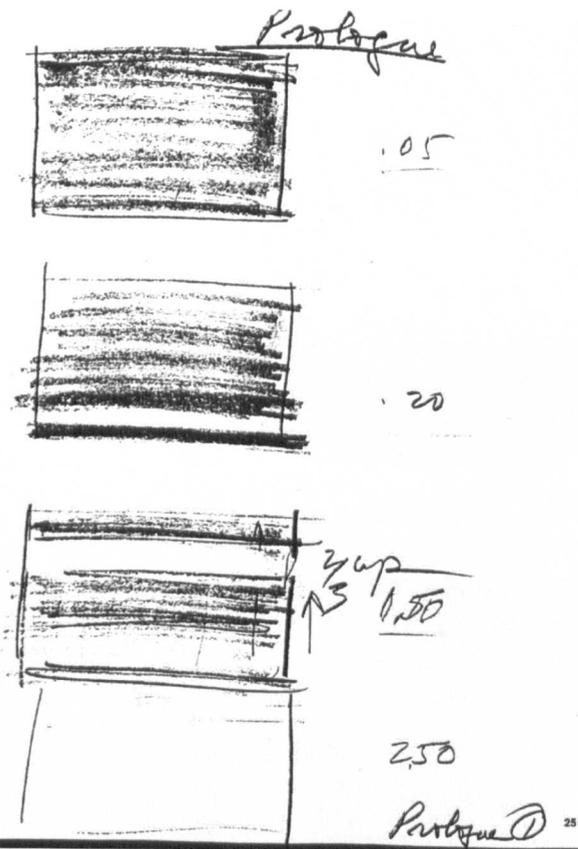
Figure 2.8; *Monsters of Grace*, in *RWWM*, pp. 24-25.

Figure 2.9; Production Photo of *Danton's Death*, in Richard Thomas, "Wilson, Danton and me: a recollection of the production process", *American Theatre*, (July/August 1993), p. 28.

Figure 2.10; Production Photo of *The Forest*, in Bonnie Morranca, "Robert Wilson's Forest of Symbols", *Art International*, 7 (Summer 1989), p.14.
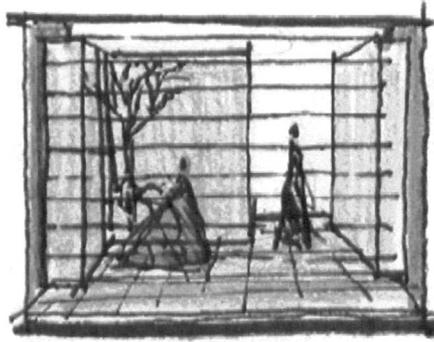
Figure 2.11; Thumbnail Sketch of *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, by Robert Wilson, at
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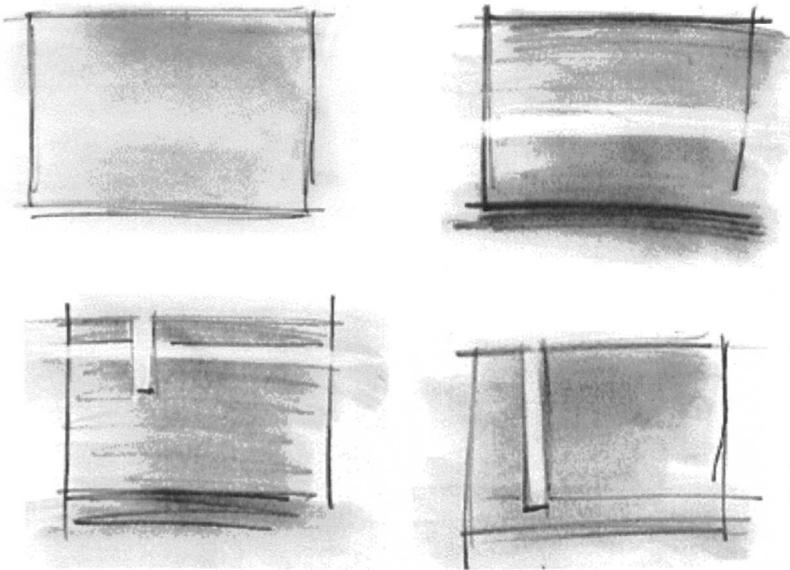
Figure 2.12; Thumbnail Sketch for *Lohengrin*, by Robert Wilson, at
http://www.robertwilson.com/studio/lohengrin/lohengrin1.htm.
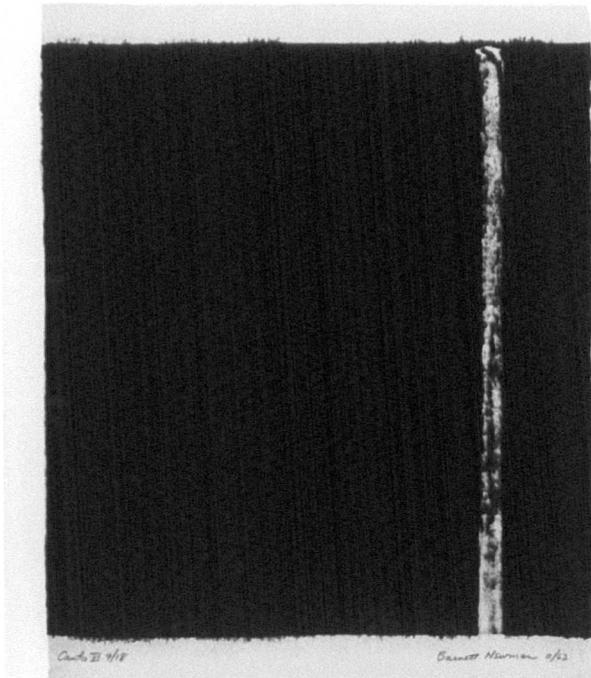
Figure 2.13; *Canto VI*, by Barnett Newman, in Gariele Schor, *The Prints of Barnett Newman 1961-1969*, Stuttgart: Hatje, 1996, p. 63.

10 now might i do it
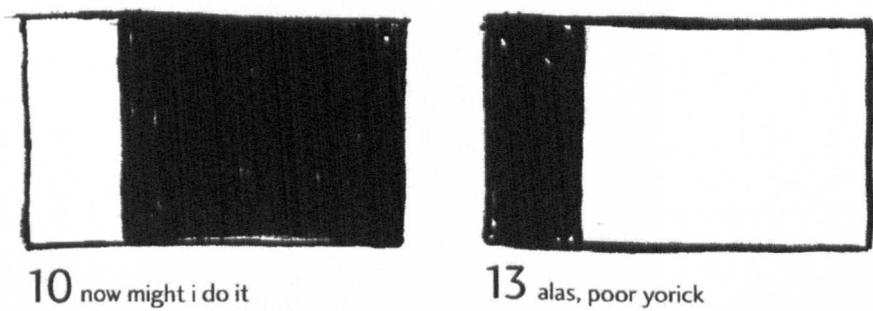
13 alas, poor yorick

Figure 2.14, Thumbnail Sketch for *Hamlet: A Monologue*, "now might i do it", by Robert Wilson, in *DGKRNT*, 14 (28 June 1997), p. 3. / **Figure 2.15**, Thumbnail Sketch, "alas, poor yorick", *ibid.*
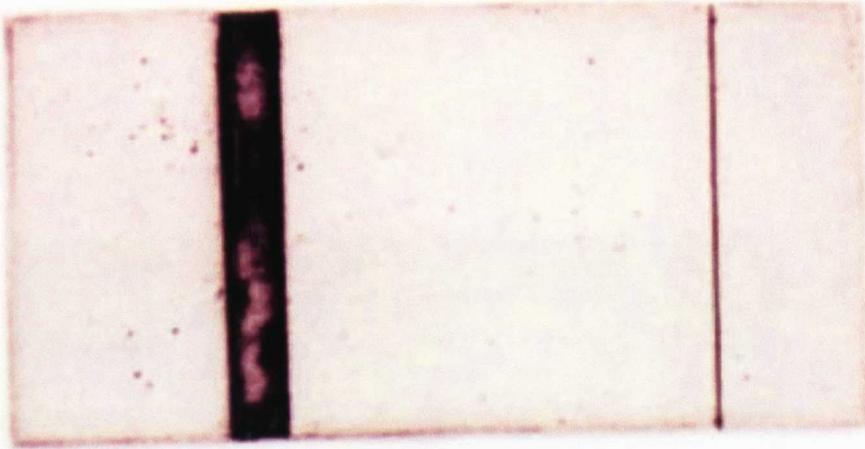
Figure 2.16; *Note VIII, State 1*, by Barnett Newman, in Gariele, *ibid.*, p. 101.
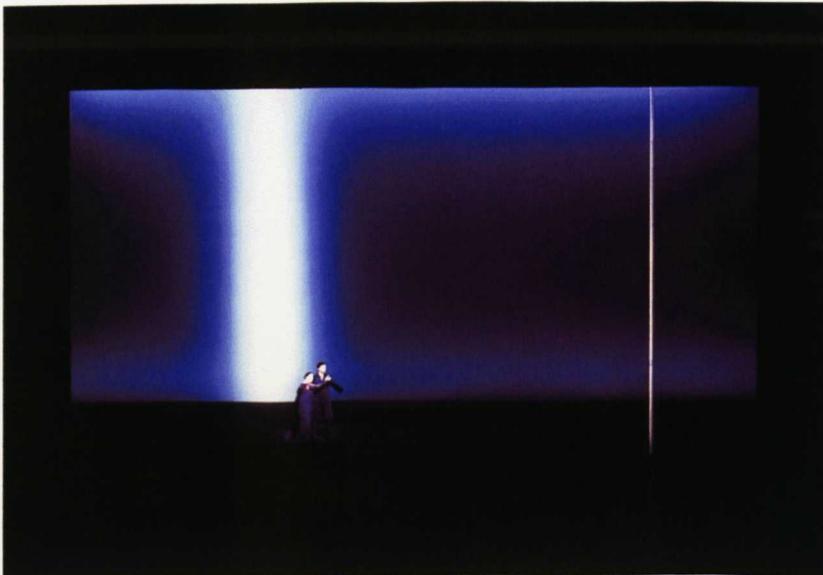
Figure 2.17; Production Photo of *Bleubeard's Castle*, in Rizzoli, *ibid.*, p. 176.

Figure 2.18; *Number 61(Brown Blue, Brown on Blue)*, by Mark Rothko, in Diane Naldman, *Mark Rothko, 1903-1970: A Retrospective*, NY: Harry Abrams, 1978, plate 108.
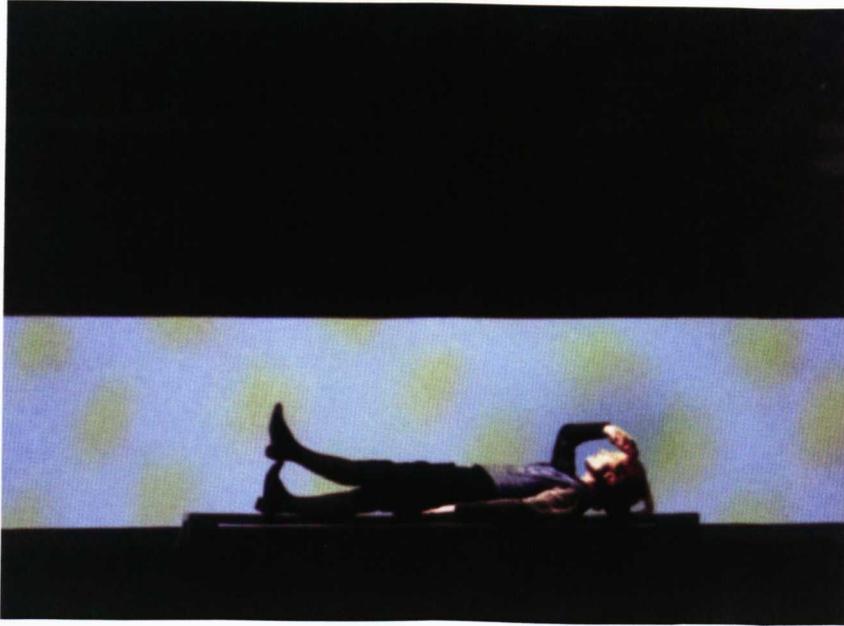
Figure 2.19; Production Photo of *Orlando*, Rizzoli, *ibid.*, p. 140.

Figure 2.20; Production Photo of *Death, Destruction & Detroit*, in Rizzoli, *ibid.*, p. 48.
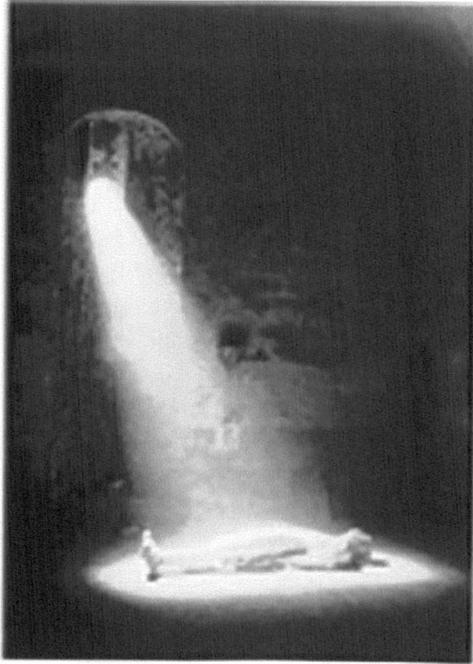
Figure 2.21; Photo of *HG*, in Rizzoli, *ibid.*, p. 229.
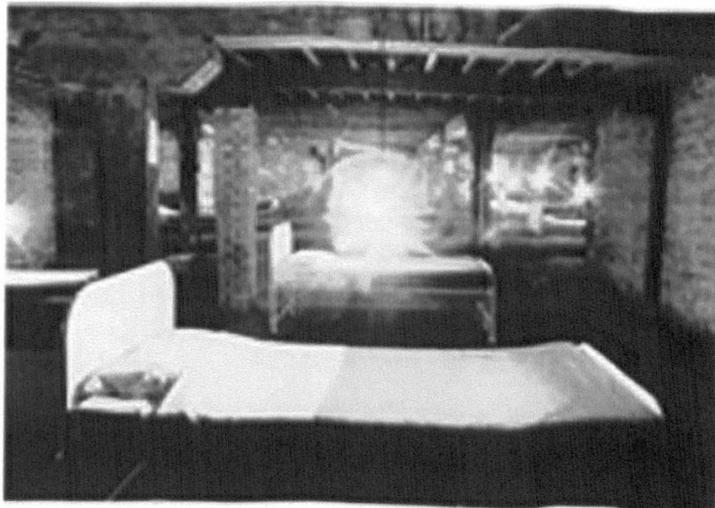
Figure 2.22; Photo of *HG*, in *ibid*.

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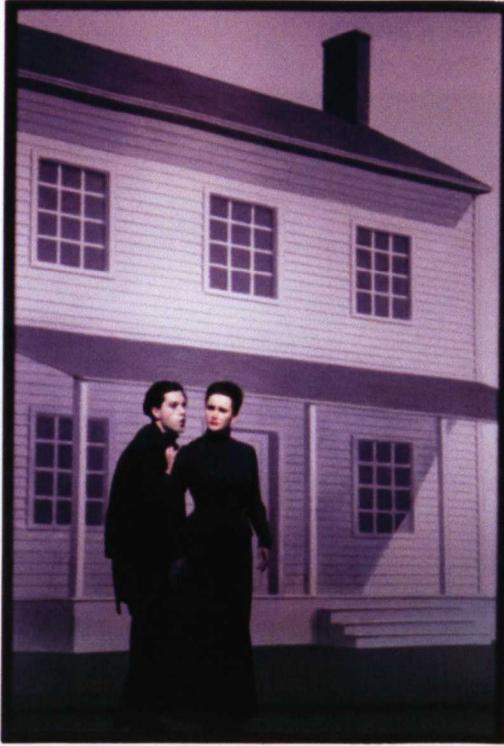
Figure 2.23; Production Photo of *Time Rocker*, postcard from Thailia Theatre company.

Figure 2.24; Rizzoli, *Ibid.*, p. 108.
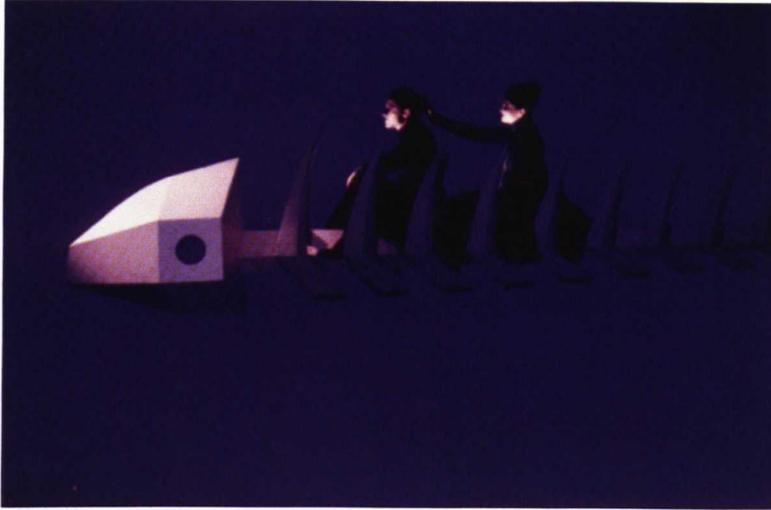
Figure 2.25, Production Photo of *Time Rocker*, postcard from Thailia Theatre company.
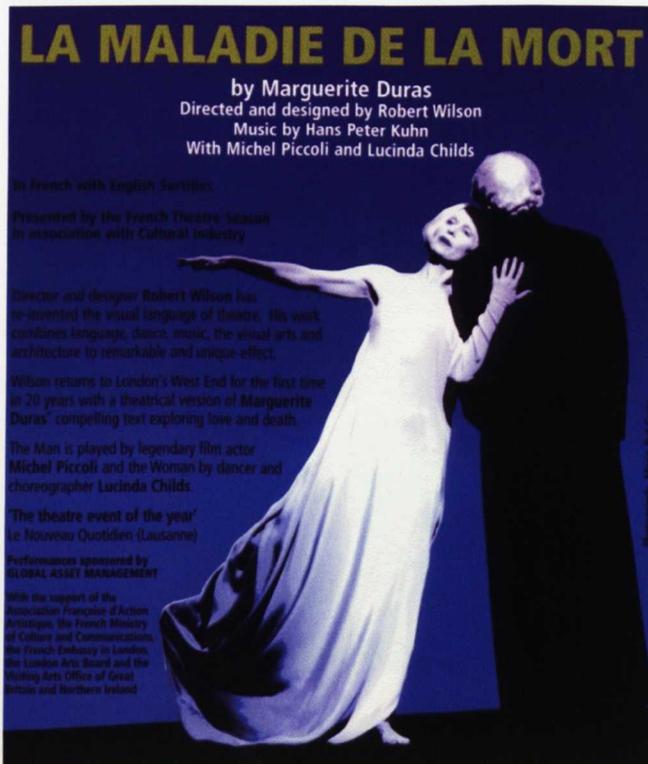
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Figure 2.27; Production Photo of *Time Rocker*, postcard from Thailia Theatre company.
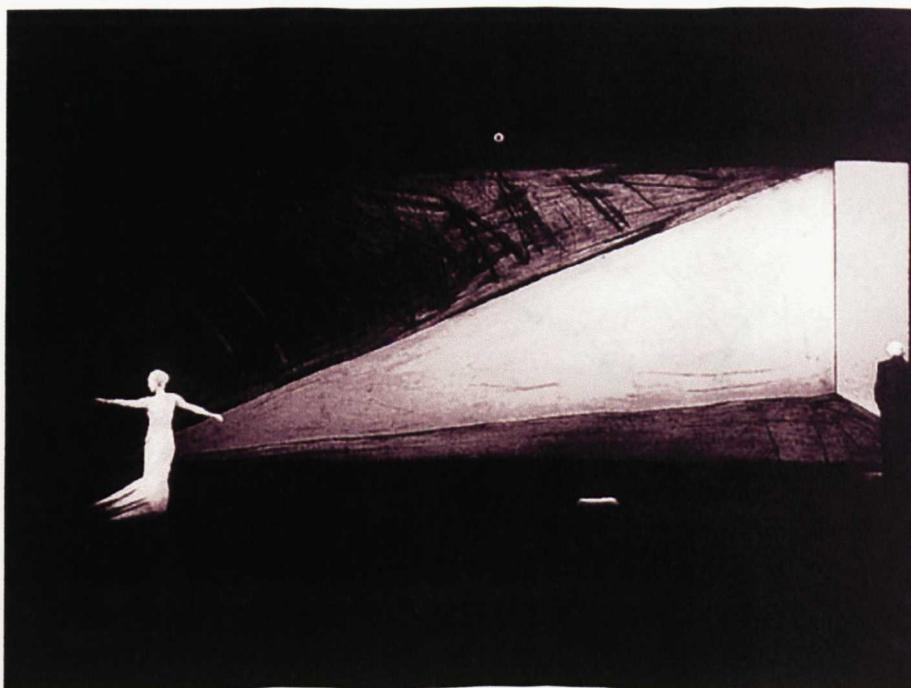
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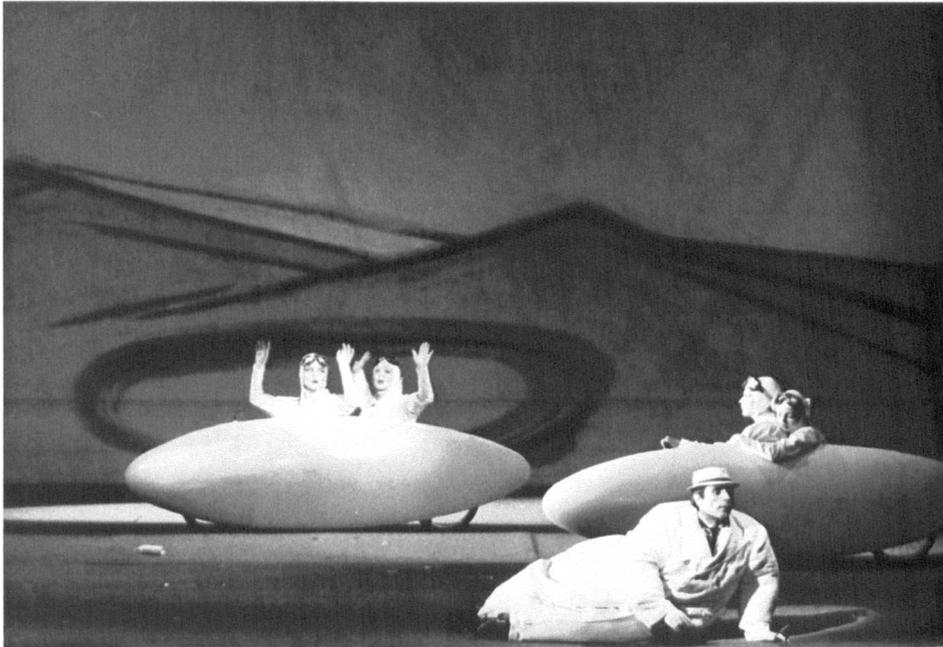
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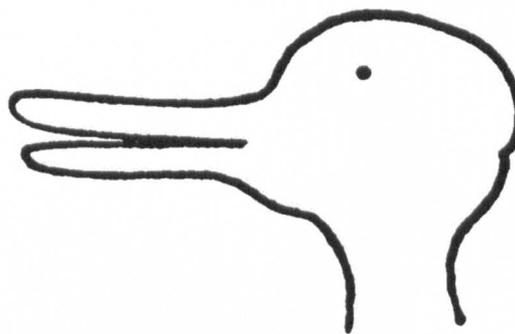
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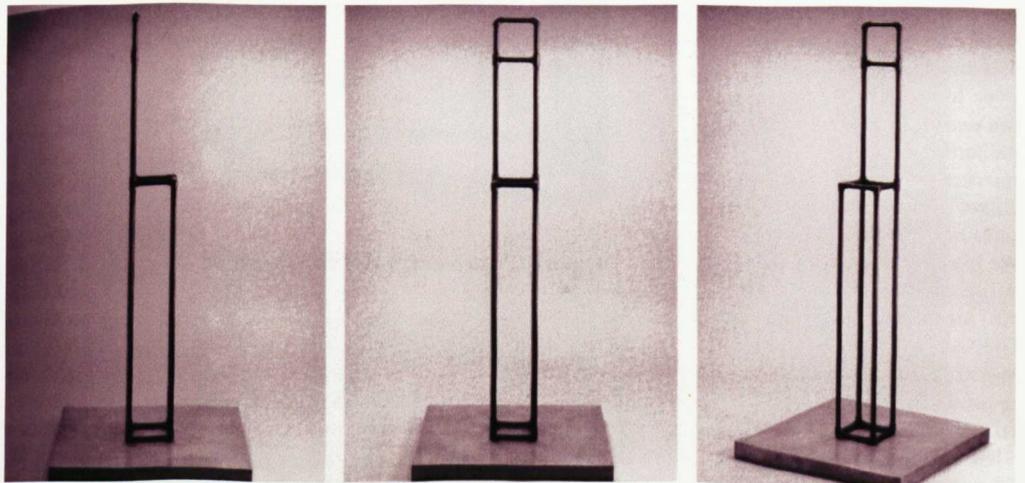
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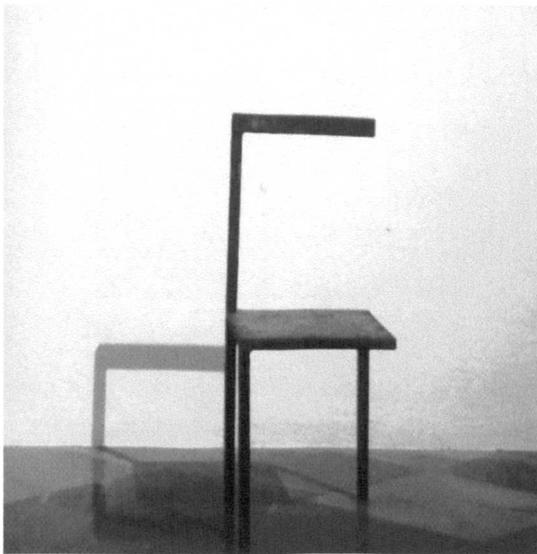
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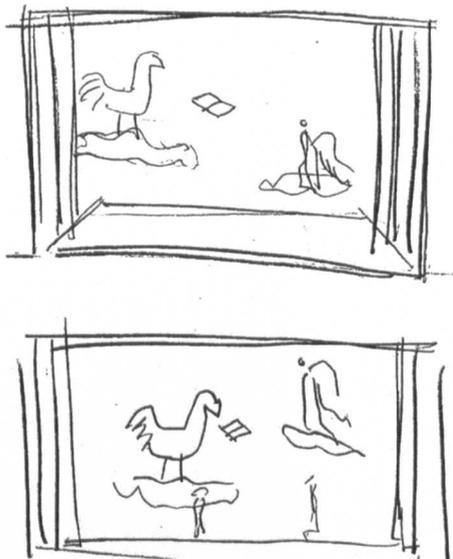
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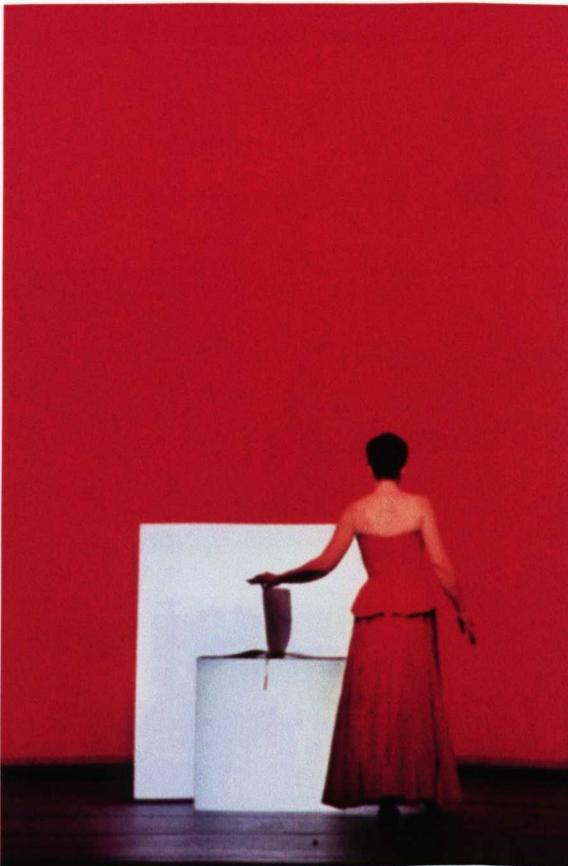
Figure 2.38; Production Photo from *Time Rocker,* postcard from the Thailia Theatre company.

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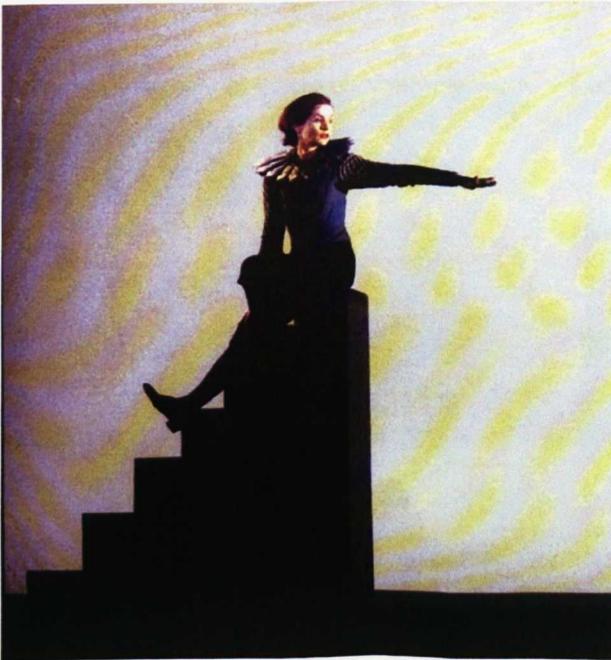
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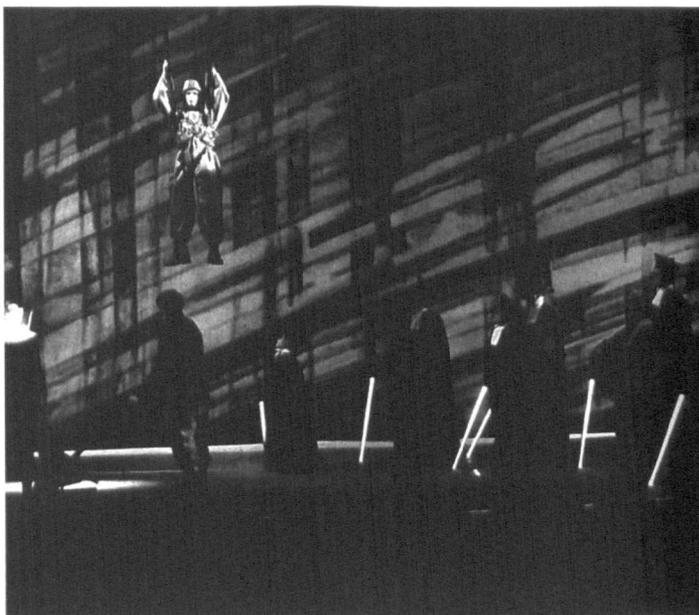
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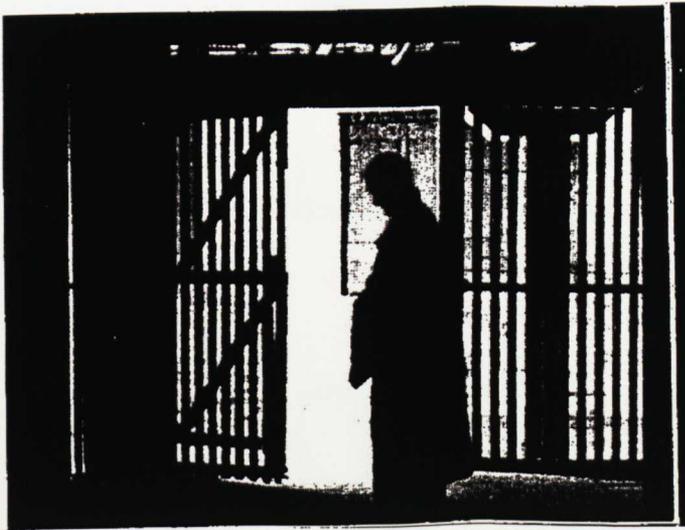
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Figure 2.50; Production Photo from *Hamlet: A Monologue*, in Rizzoli, *ibid.*, p.173.
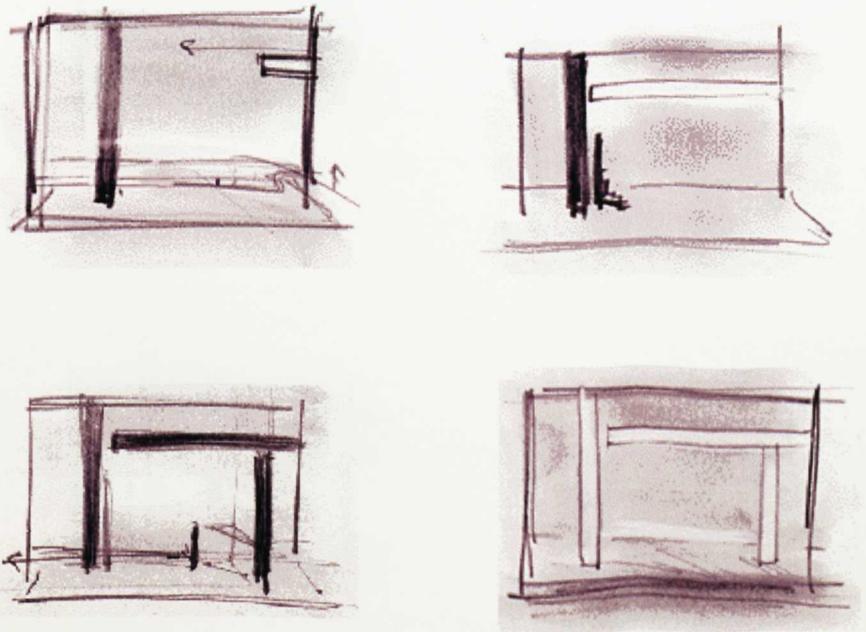
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http://www.robertwilson.com/studio/lohengrin/lohengrin2
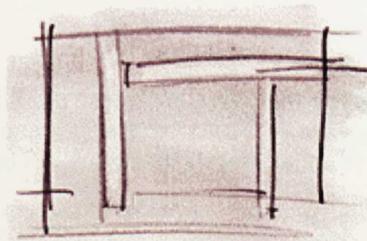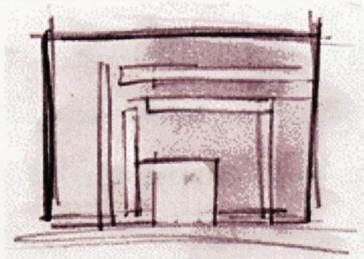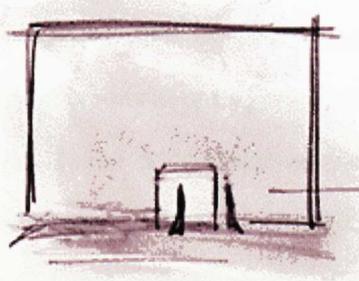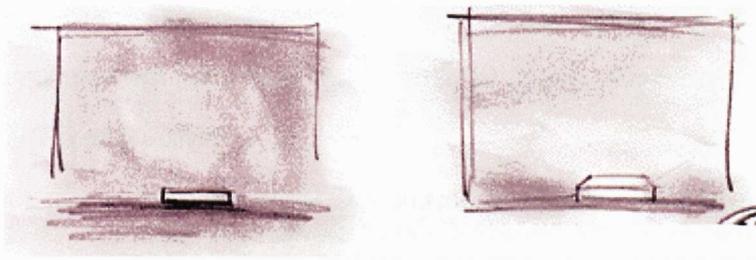
Figure 2.52; Thumbnail Sketches of *Lohengrin*, at *ibid*.

Chapter 3

The Whole is Greater than its Parts:
Staging plastic images in the dramaturgy of Maria Irene Fornés

Sculpture exists in three-dimensions and since the beginning of the twentieth-century sometimes has included an element of motion. Hans Hofmann explains the effects of spatial activity:

> But space is not only a static, inert thing, space is alive;
> space is dynamic. Space is imbued with movement;
> space vibrates and resounds and with it vibrates form to
> the rhythm of life. Life does not exist without movement
> and movement does not exist without life. All movement
> processes are of spatial nature and thereby movement is
> the expression of life in space.[123]

Play production is a logical manifestation of this phenomenon. As characters move across the stage they create a variety of changing tensions and spatial relationships, thereby expressing a view of life using the spatio-temporal movement of sculptural forms.

Maria Irene Fornés' playtexts chart the construction of a living sculptural environment emphasising certain moments, situations or emotions using devices such as freeze, opposition, repetition, change, juxtaposition and spatial fracturing. The scripted actions offer an accumulation of images that give depth and weight to the spectator's perceptions. When seen in relation to each other, the different elements create a greater whole that expresses what the spectators are expected to perceive. For the spectator of theatre, "the process of seeing is based upon the effect of appearance".[124] Hofmann's theories of sculptural plasticity, visual composition and the nature of artistic expression are relevant in a discussion of Fornés' work. This chapter examines the ways in which Fornés trained as a visual artist by Hofmann, uses objects to present relations in space as a form of expression.

A Painter's Eye

> The artist possesses his complete medium only after he
> has real spiritual command of his spiritual projection
> ability and his power of presentation.[125]

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[123] Hans Hofmann, "Plastic Creation", reprinted in *Hans Hofmann*, New York: Abrams, 1981, pp. 37-38.
[124] *Ibid.*, p. 38.
[125] Hofmann, *ibid.*, p. 36.

In 1949, Fornés began taking painting lessons with a friend of the family.[126]
These lessons led her to train in the early fifties with Hofmann in New York and later at his
artists' community in Provincetown. Eventually, this triggered a move to Paris where she
remained from 1954 to 1957. During the development of her painterly aesthetic she had
an epiphanic theatrical experience when she saw Roger Blin's production of *Waiting for
Godot*:

> I didn't know a word of French. I had not read the play in
> English. But what was happening in front of me had a
> profound impact without understanding a word. Imagine
> a writer whose theatricality is so amazing and so
> important that you could see a play of his, not understand
> one word, and be shook up. When I left the theatre I felt
> that my life was changed, that I was seeing everything
> with a different clarity.[127]

This exposure to characters interacting in space opened her eyes to the possibilities of the
visual as theatre.

Fornés discovered the pleasure of playwriting when she dragged her flatmate,
Susan Sontag, home one night in 1961 so they could write together. She found she
enjoyed being absorbed in her writing and "realised I was not really a painter. I had to
push myself to paint".[128] Following the production of her first play, *Tango Palace* (1963),
she wrote a range of experimental plays and musicals. These include *Promenade* (1965),
The Successful Life of 3 (1965) and *Cap-a-Pie* (1972), the political *Vietnamese Wedding*
(1967) and *Dr Kheal* (1968), and the surreal *The Office* (1966) and *Molly's Dream* (1968).
During the sixties these early plays were produced by landmark artists and organisations
such as Herbert Blau, Joe Chakin and the Open Theatre, and she collaborated with
seminal avant-garde artists and groups such as Judson Poets theatre, Julian Beck and
Claes Oldenburg.

In 1977, the success of her production of *Fefu and her Friends* triggered a series
of works during the 1980s that fuse both her experimental construction and a type of
three-dimensional realism that uses actors to create monumental images. Fornés' most

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[126] Maria Irene Fornés was born on 14 May 1930 in Havana, Cuba.
[127] Scott Cummings, "Seeing with Clarity: The Visions of Maria Irene Fornés", in *Theatre*,
17.1 (1985), pp. 51-56.
[128] Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, eds., "Maria Irene Fornés", in *Interviews with
Contemporary Women Playwrights*, NY: Beech Tree Books, 1987, p. 154.

recent works are surreal, stark, dark and violent. They deal with subjects such as desperation at the end of the world in *What of the Night* (1986), cultural conquest in *Terra Incognita* (1991) and illness and Aids in *Enter the Night* (1993). She continues to collaborate on musical libretti with *Lovers and Keepers* (1986) and an opera called *Balsaros* (1997), about Cuban refugees.

Over the years, articles by Scott Cummings, Helene Keyssar and Bonnie Marranca have been the standard critical explorations of Fornés' plays.[129] They have shaped the threads of critical discourse that characterise her as a feminist playwright. The most comprehensive study of Fornés' work is Assunta Kent's *Maria Irene Fornés and her Critics*.[130] Kent describes the critical reception of her work to argue that the ambiguities inherent in her texts are a deliberate device used to characterise complex situations. Diane Lynn Moroff's *Fornes: Theater in the Present Tense* offers an exhaustive analysis of Fornés' best known plays, *Fefu and her Friends*, *Mud*, *Sarita*, the *Conduct of Life* and *What of the Night*.[131] She sets out to analyse the plays as performance texts whose visual images take precedence over their dialogue, thereby arguing that the interplay of theatrical elements enables Fornés to create lyrical plays that explore the power dynamics between people. These recent studies are evidence that Fornés' work is beginning to be given credit as a major force of the avant-garde theatre movement in the United States.

As a director and designer, the critics agree, Fornés has a delicate visual aesthetic that leads her to create startling spare images. When Susan Cole asked Fornés what her primary concern in directing a play is she responded: "For clarity of what is happening [in the playtext] . . . as manifest in the words".[132] Fornés summons all the

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[129] See Cummings *ibid.*, Keyssar, "Drama and the Dialogic Imagination: The *Hedi Chronicles* and *Fefu and Her Friends*," *Modern Drama*, 34 (1991): 87-106 and Marranca, "Interview: Maria Irene Fornés", *Performing Arts Journal*, (Winter 1978): 106-111.
[130] Assunta Bartolomucci Kent, *Maria Irene Fornés and her Critics*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996.
[131] Diane Lynn Moroff. *Fornes: Theater in the Present Tense*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.
[132] Susan Letzler Cole, "Maria Irene Fornés directs *Uncle Vanya* and *Abingdon Square*", in *Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 47.

techniques at her disposal to ensure her productions are perspicuous. Cole describes

what guides Fornés in her directorial concerns:

> She trusts most not a set of principles but what she calls
> 'a painter's eye' . . . and experience: 'If I have a feeling
> that the actor needs to get up and walk over there, then I
> don't know if it's right . . . [What] guides me on how to
> block scenes and [in the] composition of scenes . . . has
> to do with energies that happen between shapes and
> persons. Something happens inside the person when
> the distance between objects and persons changes.'
> Later she adds: 'An unpleasant composition [on the
> stage] is as much as an irritant as somebody making an
> unnecessary movement.[133]

Fornés' aesthetic experience has firm roots in her early development as a painter, as well

as in her participation in the production of her own plays. Daniel Blinkoff, who played

Vernon Robins in *The Summer in Gossensass* (1998), commented on his frustration with

being told to move under the window because that was his character's space.[134] His

blocking was not textually motivated, but directed by Fornés' sense of how the character

fit within the stage environment. She shapes the sensations of the play through spatial/

visual mechanisms.

Having seen productions that suffered because of directorial misunderstandings

of her dramaturgical structure, Fornés now implicitly and explicitly lays out how her plays

are to be staged. In an interview with Kathleen Betsko she describes her intentions more

precisely:

> I do think a play has to have a tough structure in the
> sense that people are always messing with it. You hand
> a play to a director and he or she interprets, then the
> actor interprets, the audience interprets, and the play has
> to stand up through all of this.[135]

Fornés learned that her plays need a resilient structure that resists directorial meddling.

Her texts leave very little for an outside director to embellish upon:

> Everything I put in my plays is something I do to enhance
> its understanding. People seem to be in love with the
> idea of team work. It seems democratic, palsy and fun.

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[133] *Ibid.*

[134] Personal interview with Dainiel Blinkoff 16 July 1998.

[135] Betsko, *ibid.,* p. 158.

> But theatre is an art and what is important is not that
> people have fun but that the final result is art.[136]

This suggests that theatre to her is no more a collective process than the design and casting of a bronze statue, the playtexts have blueprint control over the production of the artistic product. The amount of control playwrights exert over their scripts is dependent upon the formal choices they make in the composition.

Fornés' description of her plays' genesis illuminates the centrality of the visible components in their dramaturgical structure. Though her first thought may not be a play's physical staging, in subsequent drafts those concerns become essential:

> When I write a play, I have no idea how I'm going to
> stage it. Because my approach to writing is visualising
> the characters in the real world not on a stage. When I
> edit the play, when I structure it, it's when I start
> imagining it in a single space. I feel if a playwright starts
> writing for the stage (from the very beginning) the
> dialogue becomes rigid and the characters stiff. It is
> good to get to know the characters in the real world.
> Then you can switch to the stage when you re-write: How
> are you going to do all this that you want to do in one set?
> That's hard to do, but it's worth it for the sake of the
> liveliness of the characters.[137]

Her re-writing is a process of structuring images so that they will be suited to the space in which they are to be performed. Examples will show the manner in which she first develops the play, and then shapes the text so that it will best express her subject when mounted on stage. When Fornés describes the development of a play, she uses a visual vocabulary including concepts of colour, shape and image. She draws on these visual details, structuring the play and determining how it is to be staged on a single set:

> When I start working on a play the words are just on
> paper. Perhaps I will see some things or I hear
> something. I feel the presence of a character or person.
> But then there is a point when the characters become
> crystallised. When that happens, I have an image in full
> colour, Technicolor. And that *happens*! I do not
> remember it happening, but I get it like *click*! At some
> point I see a picture of the set with the characters in it.[138]

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[136] Rod Wooden, "Maria Irene Fornés in Conversation", in *In Contact with the Gods: Directors Talk Theatre*, Maria M Delgado and Paul Heritage, eds., Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 102.
[137] Wooden, *ibid.*, p. 101.
[138] Fornés, "I Write the Messages that Come", in *The Drama Review*, 21 (1976), pp. 27-28.

As stated above, her final script is not based on general, haphazard description, but a deliberate selection of expressive options.

Fornés now always directs the first productions of her plays, often revising her scripts in the process of staging the production. She moves actors around, switches dialogue and adds new scenes according to how the play occupies space. Though most of her re-working of her plays occurs on the rehearsal room floor, one extreme example of this is the development of *The Conduct of Life* (1985) for the Padua Hills playwright festival. There she used a roof overlooking a field to present a more visual version of the play, but the images would not clearly translate to a conventional stage. Fornés describes the problem: "It was wonderful, but none of it would work at the Theater for the New City. It wouldn't even work on a big stage—it would become a Martha Graham Ballet".[139] She made additions and changes to find a simple structure to capture the play's core expression in its presentation in a traditional theatre setting:

> I started as a painter and developed a strong visual
> sense. In painting you make a drawing and you practice
> perspective; you make a drawing of two people and how,
> because of their position, they relate to each other. This
> is something you do when you are taking pictures also, if
> you don't just take quick snap shots but take a little more
> care. You move the camera, slightly, carefully, and you
> see how the perspective changes and you see how the
> picture can become a lot more interesting, more
> beautiful, more powerful. That kind of eye is very
> important for theatre, to make it a lot more beautiful or a
> lot more mysterious.[140]

For her, a play must be structured so that the presence of the characters in space creates a relationship that is both expressive and interesting to watch. In the case of the second production of *The Conduct of Life*, to bring it in focus within the parameters of a conventional stage, more dialogue was added and the visual nuance was minimised to make it more understandable according to conventional theatre spectators.

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[139] Fornés, "Introduction to A Conduct of Life", in *On New Ground: Contemporary Hispanic-American Plays*, NY: Theatre Communications Group, 1987, p. 49.
[140] Wooden, *ibid.*, p. 100.

Visual/ Spatial Relationships

Fornés' use of space and its effect are reminiscent of Hofmann's description of the ways in which artists' use space. He describes the comprehension of nature in terms of visible spatial relationships. Formal composition organises the parts of the artwork within the perception of the whole:

> We comprehend nature as a unity out of opposites and relationships. We recognise that form exists only by means of light, and light only by means of form, and we further recognise that colour is only an effect of light in relation to the form and its inherent texture. In us everything is bound up in the acknowledgement and the presentation of the whole as a unity.[141]

Thus, as defined by Hofmann, spectators perceive the forms only in relation to their association with a unified whole. In the same way, theatre can be seen as using light, dark and colour to shape a spectator's perception of a theatrical world. Therefore, each action can only be understood in relation to all of the actions of the play.

Unlike a painting, a theatrical event cannot have an immediate impression because of its spatio-temporality, but the two artistic products similarly evolve step by step. Hofmann explains: "A painting has immediate impact, but is conceived sequentially. The process of development is made invisible in the synthesis of the completed work".[142] Thereby, painting also involves a sequential layering in its creation to achieve its impact. In theatre, the initial process of the playwright is made invisible, yet the sequential production is evident as it develops scene by scene. The more we see of an object's relation to the whole, the more we know about the object. Hofmann argues the spectator is able to process this information:

> By means of our inner perception, however, we grasp the opposing forces and the coherence of things, and primarily in that manner, the essence of things becomes comprehensible to us.[143]

Over time, our inner perception associates all the divergent fragments of information and experience, and therefore leads us to a final assessment of the effects the artwork has

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[141] Hofmann, *ibid.*, p. 36.
[142] Hofmann, "The Color Problem in Pure Painting—Its Creative Origin", *ibid.*, p. 47.
[143] Hofmann, "Plastic Creation", *ibid.*, p. 36.

triggered. It is the technical task of artists to transform their internal expression into a

tangible object using the techniques available in their chosen medium:

> Every art has its own language. But all media of
> expression function in the same way— the physical
> carrier is overshadowed by a relation. The relation
> creates an overtone. The overtone spontaneously
> transforms the means of creation into a spiritual reality.[144]

In other words, the elements within the composition, whether they be colours, shapes or

objects, are seen by a spectator in relation to the other elements within that composition.

It is the overall experience of the artistic stimuli or 'essence' that produces an experience,

it is the awareness of the experience that is what Hofmann terms the 'spiritual reality'.

Together they are able to create a greater expression than they could on their own.

Theatre begins with an opening image and adds to that image as the scenes

within the play transpire, so each new object shown (props, characters, movement, and

physical action) relates to the initial impression of the opening image. Artists and

playwrights organise the elements of the piece so their interrelation will display their

content:

> Metaphysically, a thing in itself never expresses anything.
> It is the relation between things that gives meaning to
> them and that formulates a thought. A thought functions
> only as a fragmentary part in the formulation of an
> idea.[145]

As the bits of information accumulate, the sensations of the play become increasingly

defined. It is the playwright who organises these elements to create an effect that

produces a greater expression than any single event carried out on stage.

Fornés uses the theatrical medium to create images that when seen over the

duration of the performance contain an experience that is greater than the expression of

single fixed images or movement. A play provides a malleable structure with which she

can create plastic compositions. The devices that she uses, when related together, form

an overarching spatial/ visual experience. It is the spectator's response to the sense of

stimulation that leads them to a perception of the theatrical performance. One can isolate

and examine Fornés' methods of realising images on stage to show how she solves the

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[144] Hofmann, "Sculpture", *ibid.*, p. 49.
[145] Hofmann, *ibid.*, p. 39.

technical problem of "how to transform the material with which she works back into the sphere of the spirit", or phenomenological experience of the spectator.[146] She uses the form to create an expression that combines and goes beyond the effects that verbal/ visual devices can achieve on their own.

Structural Devices in Action

Each of the following case studies isolates and probes different devices that constitute the structure of the play. These devises, when seen in relation to each other, create an overall experience of the play. *Mud*'s structure is constructed by focusing the spectators' attention on the physical action of the characters. These actions become emblematic of visual types and they are presented in freeze so they can be viewed as snap-shots of particular times and situations in the character's predicament. *The Danube* will be used to show the ways in which Fornés uses stereoscopic setting to heighten the artificiality of the setting and call attention to the actions of the characters as if they were manipulated puppets. She uses image/ text opposition and repetition to show character behaviour remaining the same despite changes in the environment. In *Fefu and her Friends*, Fornés creates installational settings that the spectators must move through to experience the play. She also illustrates abstract concepts by physically encapsulating them in character interaction. *The Conduct of Life* will be used as an example of Fornés' technique of dividing the stage picture into several domains to visually keep in play opposing thematic motif. Finally, components from *Sarita*'s composition are used to illustrate the ways in which Fornés creates visual rather than textual narration in place of textual development.

Mud

Mud (1983) illustrates Fornés' use of modified focus, ideographic characterisation and photographic tableaux freeze as techniques to draw focus to the action of moving images within the play and the scenic background. *Mud* is the story of Mae and Lloyd. Lloyd is sick with a bacterial infection and Mae goes to try and get help for him. She

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[146] Hofmann, *ibid.*, p. 39.

brings Henry home to read a pamphlet about the disease. Henry moves in with them.

Lloyd and Henry compete for control of the house. Mae cannot cope with the men's antics

and determines to leave, but as she tries to, Lloyd follows her out carrying a shotgun.

Focus and its modifiers

Fornés uses the setting to foreground the bio-objects, thereby focusing the

spectator's attention on the actions of the characters. The setting contrasts the

foreground elements against the background elements. This can be demonstrated with

her set description for *Mud*. The three component parts of the setting are the background,

the house and the bio-objects:

> (*The set is a wooden room which sits on an earth*
> *promontory. The room has the colour and texture of*
> *bone that has dried in the sun. The earth in the*
> *promontory is red and soft and so is the ground around it.*
> *There is no greenery. Behind the promontory there is a*
> *vast blue sky. On the back wall of the room there is an*
> *oversized fireplace which is the same color and texture*
> *as the walls and the floor*).[147]

Both the blue sky and the red earth carry with them associations of sterility and isolation.

The background is reminiscent of the colour schemes that pervade Georgia O'Keefe's

paintings. Take for example, *Near Abiquiu, N.M—Hills to the Left, 1941* [**figure 3.1**]. The

other scenic components further qualify the expression of the colours. When a house out

of an Andrew Wyeth painting, such as *The Cooling House* (1953) [**figure 3.2**] is placed in

the foreground it stands in relief to the background. Therefore, when the bare white

house is positioned against the red and blue background, it is thrust into the foreground

taking on an almost surreal quality. Despite the background's static quality, the animated

colours exude an illusory aura that can be interpreted as reflective of the characters'

emotions. This becomes apparent when the three characters come on stage. They fill

the space as sculptural forms and stand out from the static background, thereby attracting

the spectator's focus.

In the same way that a Dutch genre painting characterises an environment and its

inhabitants by depicting the objects used in daily life, playwrights use the props to provide

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[147] Fornés, *Mud* in *Maria Irene Fornés Plays*, NY: PAJ Press, 1986, p. 15.

the spectators with a means of understanding the world they see before them.[148] In de

Hooch's *Domestic Interior* (1659-60) [**figure 3.3**], the scattered objects figure almost as

importantly as the human figures and work with them to create a cohesive image of the

inhabitants and their lifestyle. In *Mud*, the room contains a minimal amount of props and

furniture. Almost everything that is going to be used during the play is in sight from the

opening moment:

> (*On* [the bench] *there is a pile of unpressed trousers. On
> the table there is a pile of pressed trousers . . . On the
> mantle piece there are, from right to left: a brown paper
> bag with a pamphlet in it, a pot with three metal plates
> and three spoons stacked upon it, a pitcher with milk, a
> text book, a notebook and pencil, a dish with string
> beans, a folded newspaper and a box with pills. Between
> the fireplace and the door to the left there are an ax and
> a rifle*).[149]

As the components of the setting are evident from the outset, there is little to distract the

viewers from the action of the characters inhabiting the space. Therefore, Fornés can

take advantage of the changing spatio-temporal relation of the bodies and objects to

transform the static environment into a continuous impressionistic kaleidoscope.

Fornés also uses in *Mud* a formal means of modifying the impact of an image by

including an additional element beyond the focal point of the physical composition. The

art theorist, Michael O'Toole, describes the methodology of the focus of an image in a

formal composition of an artwork.[150] For example, the central image in Bronzino's *An

Allegory with Venus and Cupid* [**figure 3.4**] is Venus and Cupid in an erotic embrace.

However, Venus' hand sneaks round to grab an arrow to prick Cupid and framing this

scene are Time and other demon characters with spikes and horns. A double effect is

produced because of modifying elements that colour the spectators' response to the

eroticism of the central figures. Tempering the spectator's perception of the sensual

delights is the presence of death and the painting becomes more than an erotic image.

Likewise, theatre spectators are expected to notice the ways in which the component

parts of the stage-picture relate to each other. **Figure 3.5** shows Mae strangling Henry as

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[148] Anne Hollander, *Moving Pictures*, Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University
Press, 1991, pp. 126-127.
[149] Fornés, *ibid.*, p. 15.

Lloyd looks on. The central action focuses attention on the strangling, but Lloyd's presence leaves open the question of his part in the situation. The triangular relationship transfers focus from one focal point to another, thereby asking the spectator to become aware of the role of the three characters in each interaction.

The same holds true for the blocking of the seduction scene in scene 3. At first glance the foreplay seems to be a life affirming choice for Mae, but there is the apparent contradiction of Lloyd's presence that contradicts the prevailing focus' significance. Spectators will modify their perceptions to include the implications of the additional element. Fornés accomplishes a similar effect to that of the cupid picture with the placement of Lloyd:

> ([Mae] *holds the plates in her hands as if she were about to put them away. Lloyd lies on the floor, under the table, facing front. Henry moves his chair in slightly to the left. He and Mae have been talking. They both speak with philosophical objectivity*).[151]

The full impact of the image comes to fruition during the scene's concluding frieze. As the action builds, Mae moves closer and closer to Henry enticing him to stay, until finally she kisses him and asks him to move in. The final freeze shows Henry and Mae next to each other with Lloyd underneath them facing the spectators. As the cropped photograph in **figure 3.6** shows, Mae and Henry kiss, but imagine the moment with Lloyd beneath the table they sit at. It is a simple and precise framing effect. Lloyd's presence modifies Henry and Mae's relationship, because it is a physical reminder of his stake in the situation. It is not just an off-stage reminder, but has direct weight upon the proceedings. The effect this action will have on Lloyd adds resonance to the action carried out in the dialogue of the scene.

Ideographical characterisation

Each of the characters that inhabit the picture foreground of *Mud* is shown as a contemporary ideographic type. An ideographic type is a character whose actions are emblematic of ideas. Their repeated actions carry with them additional connotations beyond literal depiction. The visual form can be read in the same way that the depictions

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[150] Michael O'Toole, *The Language of Displayed Art*, London: Leicester University Press, 1994.

of Catholic saints are understood as icons. Take for example, *Saint Sebastian* [**figure 3.7**] who is always depicted with arrows piercing his breast. Any martyred saint figure depicted with arrows is immediately recognisable as Saint Sebastian. Fornés creates an ideograph of a caregiver by depicting Mae with an iron in hand, the character Henry is depicted as an ideograph of the learned one by reading a book and the character Lloyd is depicted as an ideograph of the sexual one by fondling his genitals.[152] Fornés establishes individual ideographs through the actions of the characters. Recurring images show Mae as the caregiver, as in scene 4, when she breaks the news to Lloyd about Henry moving in:

> ([She] *places a pair of trousers on the ironing board and puts out the ironing board. Lloyd gets the box with the string from the fireplace and stands down left holding it. Mae irons.*)
> Just put it down. (*He stands still. She continues ironing.*)
> Put it down Lloyd. (*He stands still.*) Henry is going to stay here with us. He is going to live here [. . .] Get papers from the shed and lay them on the floor. I'll get you a blanket. —I'll take it up now. (*She takes the box from Lloyd and exits left*).[153]

The background world of the set remains the same, while both the dialogue and the ideographic gestures define the situation in the foreground. Mae irons and takes care of Lloyd; therefore, the action and the characters' relationship to the space and to each other define the use of the space.

At the opening of the play Lloyd's sexuality is defined in scene 1 as a series of actions that display to the spectators the impotent ideograph. He grabs his crotch, moves closer and retreats, forcibly puts Mae's hand against his crotch and postures as if to beat her:

> **Lloyd**: (*Moving toward her.*) I'll fuck you till you're blue in the face! (*He stops and starts back to the chair.*) I don't even want to fuck you.
> **Mae**: You can't that's why. You can't get it up. [. . .]
> **Lloyd**: Come here! (*She puts the iron down.*)
> **Mae**: What for!

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[151] Fornés, *ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

[152] For a discussion of the production and identification of iconic symbols see Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969. For a discussion of shifting roles in everyday life see Irving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, Pantheon Books, 1967, and *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, NY: Doubleday, 1959.

[153] Fornés, *ibid.*, p. 25.

> **Lloyd:** I'm going to show you something.
> **Mae:** (*She walks to him*) What!
> **Lloyd:** (*In one movement he takes her hand, crosses his left leg, and puts her hand on his crotch.*) Feel it!
> **Mae:** What?
> **Lloyd:** It! It! Touch it!
> **Mae:** I'm touching it!
> **Lloyd:** Do something to it!
> **Mae:** What!
> **Lloyd:** Anything, stupid!
> **Mae:** Let go of my hand!
> **Lloyd:** (*Pressing her tighter.*) What hand?
> **Mae:** Let go, you jerk! You stink! You smell bad!
> **Lloyd:** So what!
> **Mae:** You're disgusting!
> **Lloyd:** No kidding!
> **Mae:** Let go! (*She steps on his foot.*)
> **Lloyd:** Shit! (*She goes back to the ironing board.*) I'll kick your ass! (*He feels his genitals.*) Shit, it's gone![154]

The physical gestures of touching his genitals and his mimed ejaculation, seen earlier, call attention to his sexuality that is contrasted with Mae's physical rebuffs that leave him beaten and debased. The interchange reinforces Mae's provider-role and makes concrete Lloyd's impotent-failure role. Gesture and tableau become a primary mode of communication. The physical interchange works with the verbal interchange to show a specific relationship.

Henry's physical actions in scene 2, when he reads the medical pamphlet to Lloyd, establishes his initial symbolic function as an ideograph of wisdom and learning:

> (*Henry enters and stands by the fireplace. He places his left hand on the mantelpiece . . . Henry sits on the center chair. Mae closes the door*).[155]

Before he even reads the pamphlet he has put himself in a clichéd position of a statesman standing next to the hearth, with his hand somehow connecting him to the heart of the home. He goes as far as to offer his diagnosis that drinking is the root of the problem. He takes his time preparing to interpret the text, thus triggering anticipation in his captive audience and adding authority to the pronouncement:

> (*Henry puts on his glasses. He reads each section first to himself in a low voice. Then he reads it out loud stumbling through the words at a high speed.*) Prostatitis and Prostatosis. Acute and chronic bacterial infection of

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[154] *Ibid.,* p. 18-19.
[155] *Ibid.,* p. 22.

the prostate gland: symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment.
(*He wets his finger and turns the page*).[156]

His choice to sit in the centre chair draws the focus to him.[157] This behaviour incorporates actions that make him appear to be an authority.

Another example of Henry's ideographic knowledge-role manifests itself in scene 10 when Lloyd returns from the clinic:

> (*Harry enters left carrying a notebook, pencil and a few
> bills. He sits left. He transfers figures from the bills to
> the ledger. Lloyd enters right. He stands up-center. He
> reaches into his pockets for a medical prescription and
> stretches his arm in Henry's direction*).[158]

His actions appear like an officer-manager in charge, while Lloyd awaits a verdict like a humble employee. Fortunately for Lloyd these roles are not fixed, because as the play unfolds these emblematic actions shift to different characters. For example, when Henry moves in, he deprives Lloyd of his ideographic behaviours by taking on the sexual ideograph. Eventually, illness takes Henry's role away from him and he is depicted in the role of an invalid. Mae, who embodied the caregiver, takes up the learned ideograph and the provider ideograph, and Lloyd is shown trying to read, care and learn, thereby taking on the physical attributes of Mae's former roles. An analogous visual example of this can be illustrated with Duane Michael's photographic series *The Fallen Angel* (1968) [**figure 3.8**]. In this sequence of separate images, a figure with wings arrives, copulates with a woman thus losing his wings, which are the symbol of being an angel, and then leaves in misery as an ordinary man. In the case of the play, all these characters enter in one ideographic role and leave in another.

In scene 15, after the accident, an example of this shift in roles occurs. Henry takes on the characteristics of the impotence-role that Lloyd embodied in scene 1:

> ([Mae] *stands by the down-right corner of the table . . .*
> [Henry's] *hand is inside his fly. He handles himself.*)
> **Henry**: Mae. I still feel desire. —I am sexual. —I have
> not lost my sexuality. —Mae, make love to me. (*Mae
> doesn't answer. He continues touching himself.*) You
> are my wife. I want you. I feel the same desires. I feel

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[156] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[157] Arnheim explains the center position draws focus and implies precedence over the other elements. See Rudolf Arnheim, *The Power of Center,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

[158] Fornés, *ibid.*, p. 30.

the same needs. I have not changed. (*He holds on to the table and begins to stand*) Mae, I have not stopped wanting you. —I can make love to you. —I can satisfy you. (*Supporting himself on the table, he slides toward her.*) I am potent. —I can make you happy. Kiss me Mae. —(*He grabs her wrist.*) Tell me you still love me. Kiss me. Let me feel you close to me. —You think a cripple has no feelings. —I'm not crippled in my parts. — it gets hard. (*He puts his right arm around her waist.*) Mae, I love you. (*He holds her tighter. He starts moving his pelvis against her.*) I'm coming . . . I'm coming . . .. I'm coming . . .. (*He collapses. She falls on the chair. She stands and leans against the table*).[159]

Even without the words, the actions are evocative of Lloyd's actions in scene 1. Both characters perform the ideographic physical gesture of handling themselves as both try to force Mae to help them reach sexual satisfaction. These physical actions create an image sequence that refers back to a correlative image sequence a few scenes before. Thus the spectator sees Henry in Lloyd's metaphorical shoes, in the same way they would associate a man with his hand tucked in his shirt at the belly as an image evoking Napoleon.

Likewise, in scene 14 Lloyd is shown taking on the characteristics of Mae's and Henry's ideographical roles. For example,

([Lloyd] *takes the textbook and sits center. He attempts to read. He first makes the sound of the letter. Then, he puts the sounds of the letters together. Henry sits to the right facing front. He mimics Lloyd's effort and laughs in silent convulsions*).[160]

In this extract he sits in the dominant centre position that Henry occupied in scene 2 and works at reading in the way that Henry read the pamphlet. This same illustration can be made with scene 13 when Lloyd feeds Henry. The blocking configuration mirrors a previous composition, thus reinforcing Lloyd's standing location as a power position over the sitting Henry:

(*Lloyd is perched on the table next to Henry. He feeds oatmeal to him. Henry moves the oatmeal around in his mouth, then lets it dribble out or he spits it. . .*) **Lloyd**: Stop it! (*Scooping the spilled oatmeal from Henry's chin and bib and putting it back in his mouth*).[161]

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[159] *Ibid.*, p. 37.
[160] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[161] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Not only has he taken on the dominant central focus, but also he has started to display the physical actions of the nurturing-role.

Photographic tableaux freeze

Another device that Fornés exploits to heighten the spectator's visual awareness of the spatial interaction of the characters is her use of snapshot freezes at the closing of each scene. The image is a slice out of time in a flowing narrative, creating a moment held in suspension, to let the spectator ponder and feel the weight of its consequences. Susan Sontag's description of photography's role in life: "One of the perennial successes of photography has been its strategy of turning living beings into things, things into living beings," can be said of the photographic-style freeze's effect on the play.[162] Theatre becomes a medium both to animate and objectify elements in the artwork to serve the needs of the artist's expression. Fornés shows the spectator the ways in which the images develop temporally through the repetition of static images leading to change. In *Mud*, the accumulation of the images over time is like looking at a picture book of the action.

Flipping through the final tableaux of the seventeen scenes is like leafing through a family album and discerning the stasis or change in family fortunes. Each tableau at the end of each scene acts as a photograph or a painting emblematic of scenic experience. The story pauses and the spectator is left to absorb the stimuli that transpired before, ponder its consequences and speculate on its past and its future. At the end of scene 1, the tableau is composed of Mae standing at door with clothes and Lloyd sitting holding his axe.[163] Why is he so hostile, or why at the end of scene 7 do they suspiciously stare at each other in a triangular image where Henry looks at Lloyd, Lloyd looks at Mae and she looks at Henry?[164] Sontag explains the ways in which the temporal effect works in photography:

> A still, which allows one to linger over a single moment
> as long as one likes, contradicts the very form of film, as
> a set of photographs that freezes moments in a life or
> socially contradicts their form, which is a process, a flow

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[162] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, London: Penguin Press, 1979, p. 98.
[163] Fornés, *ibid.*, p. 21.
[164] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

in time . . . life is not about significant details illuminated a
flash, fixed forever. Photographs are.[165]

Fornés takes advantage of both the flow of time in the action of each scene and the fixed

quality of the photograph with each freeze. When the spectator takes in all of the freezes

and experiences them as a part of a whole artistic experience the spiritual qualities of the

final moment take their full effect. With the closing image the sequence reaches its

climax, Mae dies on the table, Henry sits moaning and Lloyd stands attending to Mae.

The play ends with a Pietá-like composition:

> (*Lloyd appears in the threshold carrying Mae. She is
> drenched in blood and unconscious. Lloyd turns to
> Henry.*)
> Lloyd: She's not leaving, Henry.
> (*Henry lets out a whimper. Lloyd places Mae on the
> table. Mae begins to move.*)
> Mae: Like the starfish, I live in the dark and my eyes see
> only a faint light. It is faint and yet it consumes me. I
> long for it. I thirst for it. I would die for it. Lloyd, I am
> dying.
> (*Mae collapses. Lloyd sobs. Henry lets out a plaintive
> cry. They freeze*).[166]

This not only refers back to the ideographic narration of the play, but the whole canon of

implied Pietá-like images. The temporal effect of image accumulation puts the final punch

in the emotion emanating from the physical stage image. Each of the devices, the setting,

the ideographical characterisation, the modifying elements and photographic tableaux

serve to focus the spectator's attention on the relation of the objectified actors to each

other and their spatial environment. This thereby lays the foundation for the spectators to

relate the whole to its parts and formulate their interpretation.

The Danube

The Danube (1983) illustrates Fornés' use of stereoscopic setting, picture/ text

simultaneity and opposition, and puppet theatre to highlight images that carry the text

through to the final image. The play is situated in Budapest beginning in the 1930s and

continuing until the end of the world caused by nuclear annihilation. The plot is relatively

simple; boy (Paul) meets girl (Eve Sandor). As time passes all the characters begin to

suffer the effects of a mysterious illness that reduces the city's inhabitants to a legion of

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[165] Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 81.

coughs, mucus excretions, bodily sores and diarrhoea. The events jettison the characters through a series of doctor's visits, food shortages, and general sickness. Wishing to escape this madness, Paul and Eve try to leave to Hungary before it is too late.

Stereoscopic Setting

The setting of *The Danube* is another deliberately theatrical construction designed to foreground the appearance and actions of the characters:

> (*The set is a playing platform with four vertical posts.*
> *Two are on the upstage side of the platform two feet from*
> *each side. The other two are on each side of the*
> *platform four feet from the downstage side. Painted*
> *backdrops, in a style resembling postcards, depict the*
> *different locations. A drop with a theatre curtain is hung*
> *on the down stage posts. At each change of scenery*
> *smoke will go up from three places on the stage floor).*[167]

The postcard background keeps the play extremely artificial, but still allows the space to have depth, like the three-dimensional effect achieved when looking through a stereopticon at a postcard. The characters appear to perform their actions as if they are thrust out of a two-dimensional surface. W. B. Worthen describes how Fornés' Theater for New City production departs from traditional spatial conception:

> The play is staged on a platform—not in a stage 'room'—
> held between four posts that serve an openly theatrical
> function: postcard-like backdrops are inserted between
> the rear posts, a curtain is suspended from the
> downstage pair, and between scenes smoke is released
> from holes in the platform itself. In its proportions the set
> is reminiscent of a puppet theatre, and much of the
> action seems to imply that the characters are
> manipulated by an outside agency.[168]

The overt theatricality of the staging calls attention to the characters' 'object' quality, thus allowing spectators to perceive the actors as puppets.

A postcard background has a mannered visual effect. A backdrop inserted into the poles creates a very flat picture much like the effect of apron staging would have had at *Il teatro Olimpico* on the linear-perspective set. Fornés' postcard set creates a startling effect where the characters stand out against the stylised picturesque backgrounds as in

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[166] Fornés, *Ibid.*, p. 40.
[167] Fornés, *The Danube, ibid.*, p. 43.
[168] W.B. Worthen, "Still Playing Games: Ideology and Performance in the Theatre of Maria Irene Fornés", in Enoch Brater, ed., *Feminine Focus: The New Women Playwrights,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

old picture postcards [**figure 3.9**]. Human figures appear gargantuan in relation to the miniature background setting, creating an almost surreal context. In the play, as time goes on, this effect is heightened as the strange distortions in behaviour and appearance caused by the radiation poisoning become increasingly manifest. The stiff language-learning dialogue complements this effect; thus the spectators take notice of the temporal changes in the actors' behaviour and facade. Both the language and picture post-card background remain consistent, while the contrasts in character and action grow increasingly distorted. The repetitive verbal and structural motifs, placed in an assortment of locale for variety's sake, are the spine that brings into focus social behaviour in the face of the distorting effects of disintegration.

Image/ text simultaneity and opposition

Unified pictorial and verbal effect are used to establish a motif that will be modified later in the play. Scene 1 works in tandem with the dialogue enacting the behaviour of a traveller abroad in the picture-perfect postcard background:

> (*Eve enters. She wears a lightweight two-piece suit.*
> *She stands at the door looking out.*)
> **Mr Sandor**: Here is my daughter Eve. Eve, please come
> here. (*Eve approaches.*) I should like to introduce Mr.
> Paul Green from the U.S. (*Paul stands.*)
> **Eve**: (*Shaking hands.*) Glad to meet you.
> **Paul**: Thank You.
> **Eve**: But, please take a seat. (*They sit.*)
> **Paul**: Thanks. Very gladly.
> **Eve**: Do you understand Hungarian? I speak English.
> **Paul**: I understand Hungarian.
> **Mr Sandor**: She understands German, English and
> Hungarian.
> **Eve**: Do you understand German?
> **Paul**: I don't understand German.
> **Eve**: But you speak Hungarian very well.
> **Paul**: I studied Hungarian in the U.S. My firm had me
> take special courses in Hungarian. They have a
> Hungarian affiliated firm.[169]

They exchange polite banter as they get to know each other. When Eve enters, Paul, the gentleman that he is, stands to introduce himself at the approach of the lady, and then they will sit and continue their conversation until everyone leaves and smoke billows out from the holes in the ground obfuscating the past until the smoke clears revealing a new

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[169] Fornés, *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

scene. The picture and the dialogue show no unsettling discrepancies. By scene 4 an obvious amount of time has passed despite the continued impersonal conversation between the characters. The progression of scene settings indicates that Eve and Paul have been dating. At the close of the scene they kiss, thus displaying intimacy and breaking the formality of the language. The theatricality of their pose is heightened when smoke billows out of the stage when the scene ends, thereby, obliterating the image from view.

A synchronised text/ image is set up only to draw attention to specific changes in the unity of the pictorial and verbal effects used in scene 1. For example, variant behaviour triggers the spectator to notice and acknowledge changes within the patterns. Scene 10 illustrates how conversation and basic blocking mirror scene 1, except the characters' costume and demeanour have changed:

> (*Mr Sandor's living room. There is a table and two chairs. Mr Sandor enters right. He carries a tray with a coffee pot and two cups. He stands with his back to the left, places the tray on the table and pours. All characters will wear goggles from here on. Their speech will be progressively convoluted. Their skin will show reddish spots as if of burns. Their clothes appear to have been exposed to ash dust and strange drippings*).
> **Mr Sandor**: Hello, Paul. (*Paul enters, Mr Sandor turns.*) Would you like some coffee?
> **Paul**: Yes, thanks. (*Paul sits. Mr Sandor gives Paul a cup, and takes the other to his chair. He sits.*) Perhaps tomorrow the weather will be good.
> **Mr Sandor**: Yes, the weather is bad. Perhaps tomorrow the weather will be good.
> **Paul**: In the morning I was warm. Now in the evening it's cold. Where's Eve?
> **Mr Sandor**: She went to town.[170]

Despite the physical reality of disease, the characters ignore the change and continue on as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened. **Figure 3.10** shows the characters in their distressed state. They are covered in red spots, their clothes are covered in ash and they all wear goggles, yet their conversation remains as formal and banal as when they first met in scene 1.

The language and the setting are the only two things that appear to have remained the same and the physical mutation is the only evidence that time has passed.

They relate to each other in space in the same way, except that they have more distracting physical quirks. When Fornés directs the play, she starts with stillness in the beginning scenes and as the play progresses there is more and more extraneous physical motion, such as facial tics.[171] Deviations from the repetitive dialogue and stage blocking are indications to the spectator that the change has significance. Technical devices are used to shape the way the spectator perceives the verbal interaction of the characters on stage. A contrast between sculptural stillness and sculptural agitation would manifest itself, thereby clearly calling attention to the deviations in the structure.

Puppet Theatre

One of the most startling devices of the play is when the bio-objects finally take hold of puppets and repeat each of the two final scenes. Scene 13 is the first of the scenes that enact a puppet play on the forestage that repeats the stage action of the previous scene:

> (*There is a theatre curtain placed on the downstage posts. A puppet stand is placed on stage. On the floor of the puppet stage down right is a blanket . . .* [the same setting as the human stage] *Paul, Eve, and Mr Sandor operate puppets whose appearance is identical to theirs. The following scene, which is the same as Scene 12, is performed by the puppets).[172]*

Puppets perform identical actions using identical words in the same way as the actors did before them. They create a further objectified image of the play's action. After going through all the actions in the guise of the actors, this break in the cycle of repetition calls attention to the scene's action. Like with the photographic tableaux in *Mud*, the spectator is given the opportunity to re-examine significant actions through an objectified illustration. The characters acknowledge their inevitable actions and attempt to change their course, but it is too late. As they start to exit "there is a brilliant white flash of light. Black out".[173] This nuclear explosion is the last image the spectators are left to contemplate.

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[170] *Ibid.,* p. 58.
[171] Fornés uses a vocabulary or realism, but her use of stillness and slowed down time have more in common with Wilson's techniques. See Cole, *ibid.,* p. 39.
[172] Fornés, *ibid.,* p. 61.
[173] *Ibid.,* p. 64.

The emotional side emerges from the interrelation of the different visual images despite the alienating effect of repeated banal dialogue. Bonnie Marranca sums up the effect of the device precisely:

> Though [Fornés'] work is purposely presented in a flat space that emphasises its frontality, and the actors speak in a non-inflected manner, it is not the detached cool of hyper- or super- or photo-realism, but more emotive, filled with content. Gestures, emptied of their excesses, are free to be more resonant. *The Danube* resounds with the unspeakable horror of nuclear death precisely because it is not named.[174]

The sequence of scenes emphasises the absurdity of humanity's inability to change in its myopic repetitive habits. The physical staging presents characters that do not see or admit the changes that are going on around them, even in the obvious face of destruction. The pain and desperation of the characters come out of their inability to break from that which binds them to their behaviour and environment.

Fefu and Her Friends

In *Fefu and her Friends* (1977), Fornés actively involves the spectators by creating installations that they must move through to see the second act of the play. Fornés illustrates abstract ideas through physical enactment, shows multiple perspectives of the action, creates an image in constant flux and ultimately fragments the narrative to call attention to the play's images. The plot is relatively simple; a group of women gathers at Fefu's house to rehearse for an upcoming presentation. Over the course of the afternoon, Fefu shoots blanks at her husband, fixes the plumbing and entertains her friends. Paula and Sue talk after they have separated, Cindy recounts Julia's accident, Julia hallucinates, they all rehearse a presentation they are supposed to give in the near future, they have a water fight, suck ice and just generally talk to each other about life, love and metaphysics.

Setting as Installation

Installation art is a useful illustration of the aesthetic effect of Fornés' use of multiple spaces. De Olivera, et al. define installation as a term "to describe a kind of art

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[174] Marranca, "The real life of Maria Irene Fornés", in *Theatre Writings*, NY: PAJ Press, 1984, p. 70.

making which rejects concentration on one object in favour of the relationships between a number of elements or of the interaction between things and their contexts".[175] This definition can be expanded to include the presence of the spectator within the context, experiencing the sensation of those relationships. In *Fefu and Her Friends*, Fornés uses multiple spaces as environmental settings for her characters' actions. Rather than set, clear, and rearrange the stage space, she makes other spaces in the theatre into stage areas. Scenes take place in the living room, patio, bedroom and kitchen of Fefu's house. During the second act, the spectators are broken into groups and brought through these rooms to watch each scene. The experience is a more immediate visceral experience, like walking down the ramp of Richard Wilson's *20/50* (1987) [**figure 3.11**] installation at the Saatchi gallery. When one walks down the ramp, a sense of vertigo sets in because there is no indication of how to perceive height or depth. The sensory confusion is part of the perception process and only after walking in can one begin to disentangle the effects of its spatial dynamics. A viewer's presence in the object, whose form produces sensations, leads to a perception of the relation of the structural elements to each other. Fornés takes settings that usually would have been shown sequentially and puts them into action simultaneously. She moves the audience through five different environments to watch different parts of the play.

For part one and three the spectators sit in the audience and watch the action of the living room scenes on a traditional stage. It is described as:

> (*The living room of a country house in New England. The decor is a tasteful mixture of styles. To the right is the foyer and the main door. To the left, French doors leading to a terrace, the lawn and a pond. At the rear, there are stairs that lead to the upper floor, the entrance to other rooms on the ground floor. A couch faces the audience. There is a coffee table, two chairs on each side of the table. Upstage right there is a piano. Against the right wall there is an open liquor cabinet. Besides bottles of liquor there are glasses, an ice bucket, and a seltzer bottle. A double barrel shotgun leans near the French doors. On the table there is a dish with chocolates. On the couch there is a throw*).[176]

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[175] Nicolas de Olivera, Nicola Oxley and Michael Petry, *Installation Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1996, p. 8.
[176] Fornés, *Fefu and her Friends*, NY: PAJ Press, 1990, p. 7.

Here the visible world is framed behind the proscenium creating a mediated portrayal of the characters. In part two, the spectators split into four groups and travel together to each of the four extended settings. The four settings are the lawn, the study, the bedroom and the kitchen. When the spectators enter the lawn environment:

> (*There is a bench or a tree stump. Fefu and Emma bring boxes of potatoes, carrots, beets, winter squash, and other vegetables from the root cellar and put them in a small wagon*).[177]

Here the spectators are able to see and smell the vegetables and stand next to the characters as if they are privy to the conversation. When they go into the study:

> (*There are books on the walls, a desk, Victorian chairs, a rug on the floor. Christina sits behind the desk. She reads a French text book. She mumbles French sentences. Cindy sits to the left of the desk with her feet up on a chair. She looks at a magazine. A few moments pass*).[178]

Here they are in a cosier environment, and they are able to experience the feeling of the room that contributes to the manner in which the characters exchange their dialogue.

When the spectators enter the bedroom they see:

> (*A plain unpainted room. Perhaps a room that was used for storage and was set up as a sleeping place for Julia. There is a mattress on the floor. To the right of the mattress there is a small table, to the left is Julia's wheelchair. There is a sink on the wall. There are dry leaves on the floor although the time is not fall. The sheets are linen. Julia lies in the bed covered to her shoulders. She wears a white hospital gown. Julia hallucinates. However her behaviour should not be the usual behaviour attributed to a mad person. It should be rather still and luminous. There will be aspects of her hallucination that frighten her, but the hallucinating itself does not*).[179]

They are in the bedroom, but because of the contents of the room it seems to be colder than one would expect a bedroom to be. The actor is seen and heard within the environment that plays a part in the spectators' experience of the scene. This stands in contrast to the kitchen environment. Here they see:

> (*A fully equipped kitchen. There is a table and chairs and a high cutting table. On a counter next to the stove there is a tray with three soup dish and spoon. There is also a ladle. On the cutting table there are two empty glasses.*

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[177] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
[178] *Ibid.*, p. 30.
[179] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

> *Soup is heating on a burner. A kettle with water sits on*
> *an unlit burner. In the refrigerator there is an ice tray with*
> *wooden sticks in each cube. The sticks should rest on*
> *the edge of the tray forming two parallel rows, like a*
> *caterpillar lying on its back. In the refrigerator there are*
> *also two pitchers, one with water, one with lemonade.*
> *Paula sits at the table, she is writing on a pad. Sue waits*
> *for the soup to heat).*[180]

The concerns that the characters are exploring are shown from different vantage points in each room. A discussion in the context of the library has different connotations than the same discussion in the bedroom. The meaning attached to the situations by the spectator is affected by differences in the experience of the settings. Helene Keyssar argues, "Fornés has created a dramatic correlative for the multiple points-of-view narrations of the modern novel or the parallel montages of film".[181] Indeed, it is a theatrical rendering of literary and cinematic technique. But it is also a technique that is uniquely theatrical because it uses live actors in a constructed setting. It provides unmediated visceral sensations that work towards expression. The feel and smell of each environment contributes to the spectator's perception of the spatial dynamics of both the bio-objects' and objects' interaction within specific contexts. The spectator's presence and movement through the different settings calls attention to the relationship between objects in space.

Fragmenting Scenes

One of the effects of the extended setting is that the simultaneous performance of four scenes in different locations around the theatre, provides an awareness to the spectator that the scenes are all part of a greater whole, which is more important than the order in which they are watched. Scott Cummings describes it as a deliberate device to avoid linear causality:

> Writing the play, Fornés sought to avoid 'writing in a
> linear manner, moving forward,' and instead undertook a
> series of centrifugal experiments, exploring
> characterisation by writing a series of improvisational,
> extraneous scenes.[182]

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[180] *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.
[181] Helene Keyssar, "Drama and the Dialogic Imagination: The *Hedi Chronicles* and *Fefu and her Friends*", in *Modern Drama*, 34 (March 1991), p. 100.
[182] Scott Cummings, "Notes on Fornés, Fefu and the Play of Thought", *Ideas and Productions*, 8 (1988), p. 179.

The action is perceived in fragments, as in all plays, but how they are joined together is established not through order, but Fefu's entrances and exits. In other words, it is not the sequencing that is important, but how all the parts come together in the end to trigger a reaction within the spectator.

Fefu, acting as a unifying thread, penetrates in and out of the scenes thereby making the viewer aware of the simultaneity of the various installations. As the squares in a crochet blanket, Fefu is the yarn that connects the separate squares together. One brief illustration is when Fefu enters into the study and intrudes on Christina and Cindy's conversation:

> (*The door opens. Fefu looks in. Her entrance may*
> *interrupt Cindy's speech at any point according to how*
> *long it takes her to reach the kitchen.*)
> **Fefu**: Who's for a game of croquet?
> **Christina**: In a little while.
> **Fefu**: See you outside. (*She exits*).[183]

This interruption gives the scene continuity since Fefu manages to relate the study-fragment with the atmosphere of all the other scenic-fragments for a moment when she enters. After all four groups have watched all the scenes, Fefu finally succeeds in bringing them out to the lawn to play croquet.

Fornés uses the theatrical medium to create sensations that make tangible the abstract qualities of the depicted characters. For example, the character Julia has been crippled by a sympathetic response to a hunter's shooting of a deer and is confined to a wheelchair. One possible interpretation triggered by the physical image is Catherine Schuler's argument that it acts as a symbol that shows the ways in which the male hierarchy is brutal to the female psyche.[184] Regardless of what interpretation is generated, Julia's presence in the house is a physical expression of an abstract concept to which spectators can attach meaning. The perception of the spectator is enhanced in the bedroom scene by the proximity of the spectator to the wheelchair. This effect would be lost with the distancing of the image behind the proscenium arch. It becomes more difficult to remain a detached voyeur when the spectator is amidst the action.

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[183] Fornés, *ibid.*, p. 32.

Another example of physical illustration of abstract emotions takes place in part 3 when the women have a water fight. Worthen's interpretation suggests that the actions, when displayed in the context of the play, become a metaphor of the women playing with each other both physically and mentally.[185] Fornés uses the form of the medium to express the whimsical quality of their intellect. The action when they have a water fight over who will do the dishes is a tangible depiction of their intellectual activity.[186] Thereby, the abstract is tethered to a concrete physical action.

The final image

The final image of the play leaves the spectators to wonder what connection the gunshots have with the death of Julia and her hysteria. Many of the thematic strands come together in this scene. The multiple impressions that were conveyed throughout the action colours the understanding that the spectators have of the action. For example, Fefu periodically fires the shotgun out the window at her husband. The action's repetitious nature was established early on in the play when Fefu explains that it is a game she and her husband play. When the structure is modified, the form calls attention to the variation. Fefu is at her usual game of shooting into the garden:

> **Fefu**: I enjoy betting it won't be a real bullet! You want to bet?
> **Christina**: No (*Fefu exits. Christina goes to Julia.*) Are you all right?
> **Julia**: Yes.
> **Christina**: Can I get you anything?
> **Julia**: Water (*Celia goes to the liquor cabinet for water.*) Put some sugar in it. Could I have a damp cloth for my forehead? (*Christina goes toward the kitchen.*) I didn't tell her anything. Did I? I didn't.
> **Celia**: (*Going to Julia with the water.*) About what?
> **Julia**: She knew. (*There is a sound of a shot. Christina and Celia run out. Julia puts her hand to her forehead. Her hand goes down slowly. There is blood on her forehead. Her head falls back. Fefu enters holding a dead rabbit.*)
> **Fefu**: I killed it . . . I just shot . . . and killed it . . . Julia . . . (*Dropping the rabbit, Fefu walks to Julia and stands behind the chair as she looks at Julia. Sue and Cindy enter from the foyer, Emma and Paula from the kitchen,*

[184] Schuler, Catherine A, "Gender Perspective and Violence in the Plays of Maria Irene Fornés and Sam Shepherd", in *Modern American Drama: The Female Cannon*, London: Associated Press, 1990.
[185] Worthen, *ibid.*, p. 173.
[186] Fornés, *ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

Christina and Celia from the lawn. They surround Julia.
The lights fade).[187]

At this point all of the characters surround Julia and all the different fragments are temporally joined in the final moment of the play. The ways in which the events come together to explain why Julia is paraplegic and how the others are involved depends on the spectators' perceptions. This incident can serve as a point for the spectator to speculate how all the fragments relate to each other in light of the final stimulus.

Fornés uses different environments to set up a multiple perspective in the form of installational setting and character interaction. The characters in the environments make manifest abstract intellectual ideas through physical illustration. Fornés joins the fragmented experience together through the use of an intertwining thread. Once the different elements are observed, then the spectator can form an overall picture. The order in which the scenes are seen is not important, but each scene acts as a component part of the greater whole. Spectators are left to interrelate the different perspectives together to formulate perceptions from the sensations expressed during the performance of the play. By using the form and structure to shape the experience of the spectators, Fornés adds levels to the expression that are not available through mere textual narrative. She uses the medium to stimulate multiple sensations, both physical and mental.

The Conduct of Life

The Conduct of Life (1985) illustrates the ways in which Fornés structures spatial organisation, domain and opposition to create a repetitive visual pattern. In the plot, a young lieutenant wants to rise in the ranks and determines that he will do it in any way possible including marrying for status rather than love. He gets his promotion and works as an interrogator for a sinister Latin American government. Slowly his professional life eats away his personal life and he takes up sexually molesting a twelve-year-old girl whom he keeps in the basement. Tensions escalate and in a final altercation his wife, Leticia, murders him and hands the smoking pistol to the girl.

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[187] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Spatial field organisation

Fornés breaks the stage space of *The Conduct of Life* into four separate domains according to use. The living room and dining room are domestic, because the family socialises there, the warehouse is professional, because it is used for torture and the basement mingles both the domestic and professional. The stage is constructed in a series of horizontal, tiered planes: the forestage area represents the domestic and the upstage the professional. The stage directions read:

> (*The floor is dived in four horizontal planes. Downstage is the livingroom, which is ten feet deep. Center stage, eighteen inches high, is the diningroom, which is about ten feet deep. Further upstage, eighteen inches high, is a hallway which is about four feet deep. At each end of the hallway there is a door. The one to the right leads to the servants' quarters, the one to the left to the basement. Upstage, three feet lower than the hallway (same level as the livingroom), is the cellar, which is about sixteen feet deep. Most of the cellar is occupied by two platforms which are eight feet wide, eight feet deep, and three feet high. Upstage of the cellar are steps that lead up. Approximately ten feet above the cellar is another level, extending from the extreme left to the extreme right, which represents a warehouse. There is a door on the left of the warehouse. On the left and the right of the livingroom there are archways that lead to the hallways or antechambers, the floors of these hallways are the same level as the diningroom. On the left and the right of the diningroom there is a second set of archways that lead to the hallways or antechambers, the floors of which are the same level as the hallways. All along the edge of each level there is a step that leads to the next level. All the floors and the steps are black marble. In the livingroom there are two chairs. One is to the left, next to the table with a telephone. The other is to the right. In the diningroom there are a large green marble table and three chairs. On the cellar floor there is a mattress to the right and a chair to the left. in the warehouse there is a table and a chair to the left, and a chair and boxes and crates to the right.*)[188]

This organisation enables each scene's action to occur in different zones. The entire playing area is visible throughout, though lighting focuses call attention to the dominant action. The pictorial environment functions in a manner similar to the setting in Dutch genre paintings. In fact, Fornés manipulates focus by using lighting effects similar to those Hollander outlines in her discussion of Elsheimer's *The Stoning of St. Stephen* [**figure 3.12**]. Each figure is placed adroitly and highlighted with light so as to draw the

focus of the spectators. St. Stephen's expression and gaze are the primary focus and the figure preparing to pummel him adds weight to pleading of the martyr. In *The Conduct of Life* light is directed to different playing zones where the action is taking place. In a sense, Fornés turns the light on in the room where she wants the spectators to see what is happening.

Fornés creates a structure of visual symmetry, where certain types of action take place in defined areas of the stage. According to Worthen, "The set provides a visual emblem of the hierarchy of power in the play. More significantly, though, the set constructs a powerful habit of vision for the spectators".[189] This way of seeing, no matter what interpretation it brings, controls how the spectators perceive both the physical and verbal actions of the play. Hollander describes this phenomenon in relation to the cinematographers, where the cuts and framing create visual organisation. In the theatre, these structural underpinnings are less obvious because of the ephemeral nature of performance, but the text regulates the production of pictorial images. Take the opening scene of *The Conduct of Life* as an illustration:

> (*Orlando is doing jumping-jacks in the upper left corner of the diningroom in the dark. A light, slowly, comes up on him. He wears military breeches held by suspenders, and riding boots. He does jumping-jacks as long as it can be endured. He stops, the center area starts to be come visible. There is a chair upstage of the table. There is linen towel on the left side of the table. Orlando dries his face with the towel and sits as he puts the towel around his neck*).[190]

As the play opens, the audience is presented with sound emanating from darkness. The absence of image concentrates the attention of the spectators on what is about to happen. Moroff aptly describes the opening moments:

> The time devoted to the audience's watching this action and hearing nothing but its sounds emphasises image over content. The spectator is staring and waiting. Crucially, because the image opens the play, it is not yet surrounded by a narrative context; it is more like a painting in a museum than a scene from a play.[191]

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[188] Fornés, *The Conduct of Life*, ibid., p. 67.
[189] Worthen, *ibid.*, p. 175.
[190] Fornés, *ibid.*, p. 68.
[191] Diane Lynn Moroff, *Fornés: Theatre in the Present Tense*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996, p. 98.

From blackness, the light slowly illuminates Orlando's image immediately drawing the

spectator's focus, like the pictorial effects of a light source illuminating a small scene as in

de la Tour's *The Angel Appearing to St. Joseph* [**figure 3.13**]. Every spectator's eyes are

drawn to Orlando's movements because Fornés has given him the focus. Further, details

in the spectator's memory will colour their perception of the action as a context is created,

but at the start the canvas was bare and the first light illuminated the space revealing the

primed canvas to which colour would be added in time.

Zone Utility

Each playing zone is defined by its designated function. At the opening of the play

the women inhabit only the domestic zone of the dining and living rooms. Their time is

occupied by the mundane tasks of the upkeep of a house, as exemplified by scene 4:

> (*Olimpia is wiping crumbs off the diningroom table. She
> wears a plain grey uniform. Leticia sits to the left of the
> table facing front. She wears a plain grey uniform.
> Leticia sits to the left of the table facing front. She wears
> a dressing gown. She writes in a notebook. There is
> some silverware on the table*).[192]

Olimpia cleans and Leticia is involved in some domestic accounting at the table with

silverware piled up next to her. Even the women's clothing in the play relegates the

women to the domestic realm like the genre paintings; such as Jan Steen's painting *The

Doctor's Visit* [**figure 3.14**], where the unkempt clothing of the people in the parlour

indicate their previous night's debauchery. As the stage directions indicate, Olimpia wears

a drab uniform and Leticia wears a night-gown. The assumption that the women are

involved in daily chores and this is their realm, is reinforced by their dialogue:

> **Leticia**: We need a green.
> **Olimpia**: Watercress
> **Leticia**: What else?
> **Olimpia**: Nothing
> **Leticia**: For desert.
> **Olimpia**: Bread pudding
> **Leticia**: Again.[193]

Throughout the scene the actions of banal domesticity are shown, even to the extreme of

Olimpia physically miming her morning routine as she describes it to Leticia.

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[192] Fornés, *ibid.*, p. 70.
[193] *Ibid.*, p. 73.

In contrast to the domestic zone assigned to the women is Orlando's professional zone at the warehouse, figured in scenes 3, 5 and 7, which are those of sexual abuse and violence. Here he carries out his interrogations, which include rape and torture to extract information out of prisoners. Scene 5 is typical of the action seen in this environment:

> (*The warehouse table is propped against the door. The chair on the left faces right. The door is pushed and the table falls to the floor. Orlando enters. He wears an undershirt with short sleeves, breeches with suspenders and boots. He looks around the room for Nena. Believing she has escaped, he becomes still and downcast. He turns to the door and stands there for a moment staring fixedly. He hears a sound from behind the boxes, walks to them and takes a box off. Nena is there. Her head is covered with a blanket, He pulls the blanket off. Nena is motionless and staring into space. He looks at her for a while, then walks to the chair and sits facing right staring into space. A few moments pass. Lights fade to black*).[194]

Though there is no overt sex in this scene, the action of scene 3 already has established what Orlando's intentions are towards her. **Figure 3.15** shows another episode where Orlando is about to abuse Nena. The potency of the image builds each time a new version of the action in this space is shown to the spectators.

By the end of the play the domestic and professional zones will have merged and become indistinguishable. The violence of the work place will infect the domestic. Orlando's professional realm begins to seep into the women's domestic sphere as early as scene 6. When Alejo comes over for tea, each character's conversation is laden with violent vocabulary, but the real penetration of the professional into the domestic comes in scene 9 when Leticia leaves on a trip to visit her mother. An object from the house has been taken and used in Orlando's professional duties:

> This strap is too wide. It doesn't fit through the loop. (*Orlando doesn't reply*) Is this the right strap? Is this the strap that came with this suitcase? Did the strap that came with the suitcase break? If so, where is it? And when did it break? Why doesn't this strap fit the suitcase and how did it get here.[195]

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[194] *Ibid.*
[195] *Ibid.*, p. 77.

Orlando has taken the strap from Leticia's suitcase to bind Nena's hands. Not only has he begun to take things from the house for his torturing, but also he has brought his work home. Nena is housed in the basement.

In scene 10 the mix of professional realm and the domestic are made tangible in the basement zone. There the spectators see Alejo and Orlando talk about problems at work as Orlando uses Nena as a backrest and Olimpia sweeps. **Figure 3.16** shows a moment in scene 11 when Olympia stands up to Orlando's tyranny. He tries to rid the domesticity from the zone by threatening violence to Olimpia. By the time Leticia returns to the stage, the violent and the domestic are fully intermingled. In scene 17 the two zones, as embodied by Nena and Leticia, are displayed side by side. Now, Orlando uses the dining room table to sleep while waiting for phone calls from work, and the women are shown behaving violently to each other. The professional has become indistinguishable from the domestic.

The fragmented images created by different domain and types of actions come together by the end of the play. Spectators are shown multiple images, whose action is supposed to lead them to consider the mingling of the professional and the domestic. Layer upon layer of meaning has been built up around the house and the characters. Fornés uses spatial utility as an organisation principle to make tangible thematic violence that she wants to highlight. Overall, the action begins at the start of the pay far away from the spectators, but as the play progresses and the violence seeps into the domestic zone, the violence moves closer to the spectators. By the final scene, the violence takes place on the edge of the stage in the faces of the spectators. They are forced in close proximity to the violence. What started as distant and removed is immediately experienced. The experience of the whole expression is what the spectators are expected to base their understandings of the ways in which violence infiltrates the characters' lives. In this way, spatial organisation serves as a spine to the play's dramaturgical composition.

Sarita

Sarita's (1984) is an illustration of Fornés' use of pantomime scenography, abstract ideographical representation, variation and modified compositional patterning. Its

structure creates a cyclical world where time repeats the same predicaments over and over again; until a change is made evident and the world the characters inhabit becomes a different place. The play is a tale of passion in which Sarita is in love with Julio. He leaves her and she becomes promiscuous to dull the pain of his loss, gets pregnant and has a baby. From time to time Julio returns only to leave again, while her passion enslaves her to him. To rid herself of the unhealthy attraction, she sees no resort but to commit suicide. During a failed suicide attempt, she meets Mark; they fall in love and marry. Unfortunately, Julio returns and creates problems for Sarita and Mark. On one afternoon when Julio tries to blackmail her for money, she stabs him in a fit of rage and ends up in a mental hospital.

Sarita's spatial organisation utilises the notion of domain explicated in the discussion of The Conduct of Life. A single stage setting is divided into several zones that are transformed into different locale:

> (The set represents Fela's livingroom in New York's
> South Bronx. However, the proportions are not realistic.
> The ceiling is inordinately high. The are no windows
> except for a small one, ten feet high on each side wall.
> There are two doors in the back wall. In the livingroom
> there are an overstuffed couch, two overstuffed chairs, a
> coffee table, and two footstools on each side of the
> coffee table. The orchestra pit is behind the back wall.
> Seven feet above is an open recess or a rectangular cut-
> out on the back wall which is Sarita's kitchen. There is a
> kitchen table and two chairs. To the left on the
> livingroom back wall there is a window. There are three
> backdrops which are lowered in the course of the play.
> They are: the upper floors of the Empire State building, a
> beach and the waitingroom of a mental hospital).[196]

In this play the set is non-realistically proportioned and is intended to evoke an expression of Sarita's psychological association with the depicted places. Its composition serves to express the emotional resonance of the action, as well as provide an environmental context like that implied in Mud's setting. The three backdrops that are to be lowered during the course of the play share a similar function to the post-card drops in The Danube; focusing attention on the interaction of the actors rather than on the setting's naturalistic contextualisation.

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[196] Fornés, Sarita, ibid., p. 91.

Pantomime scenography

Pantomime scenography is the most apparent visual device used to portray Sarita's story without using text. In other words, the different visible compositional elements (bio-objects, props and setting) become more significant in defining the ways in which the action is to be understood. Scenes 5,6,7,9 and 18 use mostly image, supplemented only with a repetitive dialogue. For example, Scene 18 is an example of visible images conveying the entire action of the scene:

> (*A few hours later. Mark sits with his head on the table.*
> *He is unconscious. There is a bottle of liquor and a shot*
> *glass on the table. Sarita enters. She is 21 years old.*
> *She starts to go to Mark, notices the key and picks it up.*
> *She is dejected. Mark and Sarita wear the same dress*
> *as when last seen. Lights fade to black).*[197]

Since Mark is unconscious next to a bottle, the spectators can infer that he is upset, and Sarita knows that Mark discovered the affair because she sees the key left by Julio. Visual cues are there for the spectator to put the narrative together.

Physical action dominates the spectator's focus, because the scenes rely on image sequence more than language. As Sarita tries to cope with her crisis, she repeatedly writes letters to Julio to try and stop him from coming. Her actions such as the kissing of a letter to Julio draw focus. When he interrupts, the spectator's focus splits between the letter emblematic of her conflicted feelings, and the person around whom she is helpless. Their sexual dance visually seduces the spectators as much as it physically seduces Sarita. In the darkness she is able to break away physically from his embrace as she tried to do with the action of writing the letter, but when the scene is lit again she is sucked back. Then their dance is performed again. This patterning sets up visual shorthand for scene 8 when there is a similar letter scene. The spectator needs only to see a small portion of the action to know what is going to happen:

> (*There is the sound of a key in the lock. The door*
> *opens. It is Julio. He walks to her. She puts her arms*
> *around his waist. He notices the letter, picks it up,*
> *crumples it and kisses her. The lights fade to black).*[198]

The presence of the letter and the action of it being crumpled is enough for the spectator to understand that she succumbed to his pleasure once again. Pantomime images carry

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[197] *Ibid.*, p. 129.

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the weight of the expression to quickly indicate a similar situation by its visual configuration.

Abstract ideographical representation

Rather than simply depicting an ideograph of a caregiver as she did in *Mud*, Fornés builds images of such abstract concepts as wantonness, worship, competition and fate. Formally, the ideas are made concrete by depicting actions that form a solid monumental image, but the elevation to the status of an ideograph is embodied in an action-sequence rather than a character's embodiment of the concept. An example of this process is scene 1 where Yeye reads Sarita's fortune from a deck of cards. During the sequence Yeye is forced to assure Sarita all is well in her life, except at the end of the scene the spectator is left with a feeling of dark foreboding:

> **Yeye**: He loves you, Sari . . . Ask the cards to make him
> be true. (*Sarita closes her eyes tight for a moment.*
> *Then opens them.*) Did you?
> **Sarita**: Yes.
> **Yeye**: (*Taking the cards.*) O.K. I'm going home now.
> **Sarita**: Good bye, Yeye, you're good.
> **Yeye**: Good bye, dummy. (*She drops a card. She starts*
> *to pick it up and stops. She looks at it.*)
> **Sarita**: What is it?
> **Yeye**: (*Picking it up.*) Nothing.
> (*Yeye exits. Lights fade to black*).[199]

A card dropping on the floor and Yeye's response implies that the information she saw in the card contained an ill omen. Since this seemingly extraneous detail is out of place in the economical dialogue, it draws focus to itself and serves to foreshadow coming events. This image sequence makes the idea of fate as concrete on the stage as the idea of mortality was embodied in the figure of Time in *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid* [**figure 3.4**]. The sequence is reinforced as other scenes of superstition and fate are worked into the play late in scene 11 at the Sántaria altar.[200]

In a similar fashion the characters embody abstract qualities—Julio is the embodiment of a demon. His actions mimic those associated with the myths surrounding the Sántaria god Oshun. Oshun is said to charm his lover Ogun by witchcraft, thereby,

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[198] *Ibid.*, p. 107.
[199] *Ibid.*, p. 97.
[200] *Ibid.*, p. 111.

giving him an unearthly power over his lover. When Julio's actions mirror those of Oshun,

he is shown to have power over Sarita. In fact, Julio returns to Sarita during a celebration

honouring the gods at the household Sántaria altar. His presence disrupts Sarita's

offering to the gods:

> (*She walks towards the altar. She sees Julio and drops
> the flowers* [Mark gave her a moment ago]).[201]

These actions refer to the mythology surrounding the Sántaria religious figures, and

abstractly embody an ideographic image. Religious iconographic imagery and the

conventions of reverential behaviour associated with reliquaries contradict the behaviour

of Sarita. Again, the image and gesture become a primary conveyance of situation.

Modified composition and patterning

Scene 7 serves to illustrate the introduction of new objects into a pictorial

composition, thereby modifying the composition and patterning established up to this point

in the action. As a newly introduced figure, Julio's entrance in scene 17 steals focus away

from Mark, whose centrality had been established as a solitary figure in a lighted room:

> (*Sarita's kitchen. Mark sits at the kitchen table. He
> reads from a large textbook and makes notes on a yellow
> pad. There is the sound of a key. Mark looks toward the
> door. Then returns to his work. The door opens. Julio
> enters. Mark looks at him in a state of shock. Mark
> wears a shirt and pants. Julio wears a blue suit.*)
> **Julio**: I had this key here that I had to return. I didn't
> knock because I thought no one was here, —and I
> thought I'd just write a note on a paper and say I had the
> key and I thought I'd drop it off. Because I shouldn't have
> a key that's not the key to my place. (*He puts the key on
> the floor.*) Say hello to Sara. —I haven't seen her in a
> while. —Bye now.
> (*Julio exits. Mark stares at the open door. Lights fade to
> black*).[202]

Julio's entrance is both a surprise and shock to the spectators and Mark. Julio takes

immediate focus when he walks in, remains standing and talks to the seated Mark staring

agape towards him. Even after Julio leaves he has focus, because Mark stares out the

door at him, indicating that the object outside the spectator's view still impinges upon the

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[201] *Ibid.*, p. 115.
[202] *Ibid.*, p. 128.

effect that the situation has on Mark.[203] As forms are introduced into the composition they change the dynamic of the situation by creating new spatial relationships. Thus, this device serves to propel the action forward to call attention to movement and change.

The repetitious pattern, of which Julio is the centre, changes in the penultimate scene 19. Throughout the play his presence controls the action of the other characters. In scene after scene Sarita is shown acquiescing to his demands. It is as if the pattern of the image set in a variety of time and locale, repeats itself frame after frame, in the manner of Eadweard Muybridge daguerreotypes [**figure 3.17**]. In the photo stills, the boxers dance back and forth avoiding each other's punches. Their response is an expected result of the stimuli in the frame before. In the logical sequences of action one could imagine what the next composition would look like. In the Fornés play, these types of patterns are established and then suddenly, in scene 19 this patterning changes when a new image is inserted into the structure. Sarita begins to follow the same pattern both in action and visual relation, but before Julio can overpower her with his embrace a new configuration is introduced:

> (*He goes to kiss her. She takes a knife from the table*
> *and stabs him. He speaks as he begins to fall.*) Hey,
> honey, what are you doing? Hey, hey, hey, hey, baby
> baby. Hey, baby. (*He holds on to her. They slide down*
> *to the floor. His head is on her lap. He is unconscious.*
> *She starts to sob*).[204]

The violation of the expected pattern breaks the mould of the action sequence. The shock of the violation startles the spectators into a new awareness of the worlds they are observing.

Scene 20 is the beginning of a new pattern of action and differs in composition to the previous sequences of scenes. Its final image is evidence of the possibility of new moulds. Sarita sits in the waiting room of a mental hospital and the whiteness of its walls wipes away the exaggeration and passionate coloration of the setting in the play's previous scenes. The interaction of Sarita and her family show an image of family unity:

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[203] See Rudolf Arnheim, *The Power of Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982 for discussion of open and closed composition. See also **figure 3.3**, which shows the same device with the little girl's gaze that directs the viewer to question the cause of her attention and its relation with the central focus.

(Mark and Sarita's hands lock with force as music is heard. Lights fade to black).[205]

This forgiving gesture supports Sarita as the next stage of her life begins. *Sarita's* compositional structure illustrates Fornés' ability to use pantomime scenography and ideographical abstractions to create spatial relationships. Its ending, without the established referents of setting and colour, brings the outcome of the events to a new plane both physically and expressively. Sarita's spiritual fight emerges beyond the text of the drama with the effect that the scenes have on the perception of the spectators, and finds expression in the conflicts and changes shown predominantly through visible means.

Spiritual Elevation

The images created in Fornés' plays are shaped using structural devices of setting, spatial organisation, ideographical characterisation, modifying focus, repeated images, tableaux, contrast, movement and the spatio-temporal relation of objects. These devices help create a viewing habit for spectators so they will be in a position to relate the parts of the drama to a larger whole experience. Following a visual spine is another way of entering into the action of the play and following how it guides spectators to process what they perceive.

Viewing theatre and viewing art are two separate experiences, yet they share many common traits. Michael Blass outlines the differences:

> In theatre, for example, it is rather important that 'things happen'. Otherwise you get bored just sitting there in rows in the dark. In a gallery, you're not disappointed when 'nothing happens', and for that matter you don't expect to just sit there. As soon as you start crossing the borders between these different ways viewing art, expectations can be confused. A 'theatre person' expects to watch something, a 'visual art person' expects to look at something. Live performance that 'follows the rules' of visual art can be pretty dull, unless you start looking at it actively instead of watching it passively. This means that the expectations of the public before they come are in practice very important - for our work it's important that they expect to look, not watch, even though there are many live elements.[206]

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[204] Fornés, *ibid.*, p.129.
[205] *Ibid.*, p. 132.
[206] Michael Blass in a private email.

In the case of playwrights with a fine art background, they sometimes demand that the theatre spectator utilise some of the skills normally associated with viewing an art object. Those types of compositional structures expect spectators to distance themselves from the experience to assess the production as an art object whose component parts unfold over the duration of the production. Therefore, the sum of all the compositional parts becomes the whole. As with a painting or a sculpture, its compositional parts when experienced within the context of the whole production are greater than the object itself. This is what Hofmann describes as the spiritual dimension.

Dream images trigger a response in the spectator because the temporal changes emphasise certain moments. The theatre puts the spectator in a position of watching a plastic shell depicting the semblance of human acts performed in life, thus,

> By putting to use our power of spiritual projection, our emotional experiences can be gathered together as an inner perception by which we can comprehend the essence of things beyond mere, bare sensory experience. *The physical eye sees only the shell and the semblance—the inner eye, however, sees to the core and grasps the coherence of things.*[207]

This statement points to the phenomenological experience of observing artistic stimuli; by experiencing stimuli and becoming aware of that experience, provides an intuitive understanding of the art object. The playwright as an artist, structures those semblance in hopes the viewer can perceive a range of ideas made manifest through image and designed by theme and text. Emotion exists on a spiritual level separate from the characters within the experience of the viewing and the displays of scenes set out by the playwright. We see situations and hear the dialogue, both of which colour our perception, but it is the sum total of the whole experience that is what makes up the artistic product.

This chapter has demonstrated the ways in which Fornés uses visual art techniques to construct theatrical compositions. It is between the lines that the greater ambiguity of expression lay. Most prominent in her composition is a strong sense of spatial organisation. She likes to use domain for a split in life space. She also has a very strong sense of the way the stage is supposed to look at any one time. She uses the actors' bodies as moving sculptures that are shaped to become emblematic of abstract or

emotional qualities. She further uses dialogue as a technique to draw attention and focus to images of ideas and themes. Through an active engagement with the visual/ verbal stimuli, the spectator becomes a critical third element where the expression of the different elements comes together in the experience and perception of the spectator. Unfortunately, it is difficult to quantify the experience. All that we are able to do is point to the devices that have the possibility to trigger a certain type or range of experience.

Perhaps, Hoffman is not the best authority on the hopes and aims of contemporary mixed-media production, but he was an early influence on Fornés. She was able to find a form of theatrical expression by moving beyond formal boundaries of painting and began to experiment with additional elements of fluid movement, text, colour and actors together. She has remained on the fringes of theatre, but it may have much to do with confused expectations of her spectators. They enter the theatre seeking a well made naturalistic play and expect to watch rather than to look and to participate in the artistic activity. She is asking spectators to watch in a manner different than they know. It expects a certain amount of literary/ visual literacy that goes beyond passive spectatorship.

Fornés' perceptual invitation offers a framework or method of organisation with which to break down the spatial/ visual components of a play constructed with a more visual / aesthetic ground plan. Dramaturgical construction is always made up of parts that work together to form a greater whole. Fornés creates a dramaturgical structure that takes advantage of visual components to keep in play a range of possibilities that are not always expressed best through text alone. Spectators have expectations when they enter a theatre. As our culture becomes more and more reliant upon visual means, alternative methods of viewing will have to be taken into account. The principles by which Fornés builds her compositions are one possible way of merging expressive forms to communicate to spectators. All plays use spatial division or create installational settings in their composition. Fornés simply highlights their function as a means of expression.

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[207] Hofmann, "Plastic Creation", *ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

The next chapter will move beyond these devices and explore other techniques made

evident in John Byrne's dramaturgical composition.
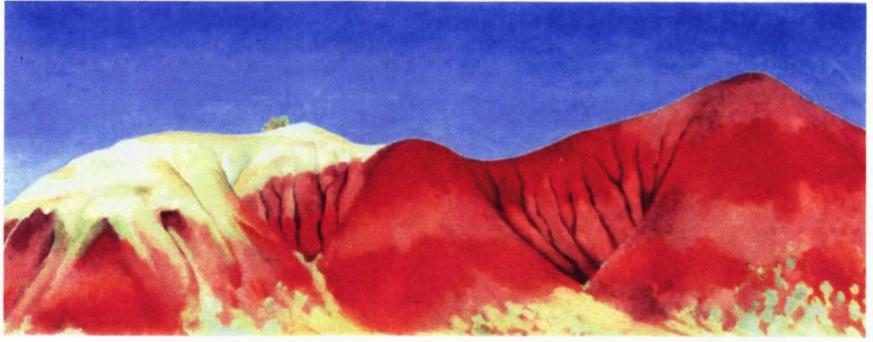
Figure 3.1; printed in Charles C Eldredge, *Georgia O'Keefe: American Modern*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 115.

Figure 3.2; printed in Wanda M. Corn, *The Art of Andrew Wyeth*, Boston: NY Graphic Society, 1973, p. 117.

Figure 3.3; *Domestic Interior*, by Peter de Hooch is printed in Bob Haak, *The Golden Age: Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1984, p. 444.

Figure 3.4; Bronzino (1503-1572), *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid*, is printed as a postcard for the National Gallery, London.

Figure 3.5; Production Photo from *Mud* in Marc Robinson, *The Other American Drama*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997

Figure 3.6; Production Photo from *Mud* in *London Theatre Record*, 26 February- 11 March 1995, p. 262

Figure 3.7; *St. Sebastian*, by Andrea Mantegna is reprinted in H. W. Janson, *History of Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1991, p. 480.

Figure 3.8; printed in Peter Turner, ed., *American Images: Photography 1945-1980*, London: Viking Press, 1985, p. 193.

Figure 3.9; printed in Robert Lebeck, *Angeber Poskarten*, Hannover: Taschenbücher, 1979, p. 39.

Figure 3.10; Production photo from *The Danube* (1982) printed in Robinson, *ibid*.

Figure 3.11; *20/50* (1987), by Richard Wilson is printed in de Oliveira, et al., *ibid.*, p. 76.

Figure 3.12; *The Stoning of St. Stephen*, by Adam Elsheimer is printed in Hollander, *ibid.*, p. 105.

Figure 3.13; *The Angel Appearing to St. Joseph*, by Georges de la Tour is printed in Hollander, *ibid.*, p. 115.
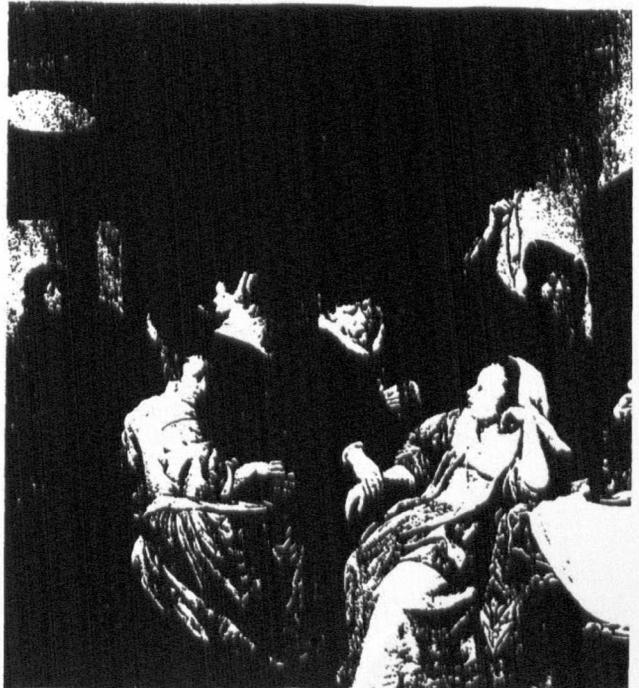
Figure 3.14; *The Doctor's Visit* by Jan Steen.

Figure 3.15; Production Photograph http://www.

Figure 3.16; Production Photograph http://www.
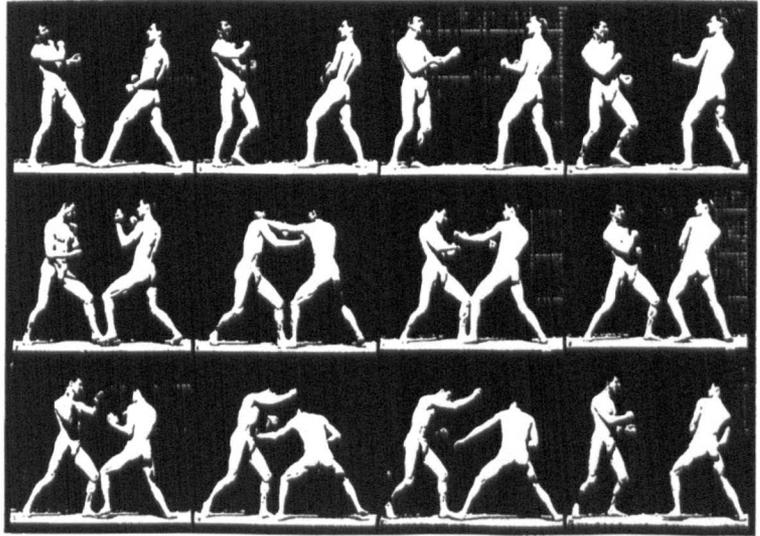
253 vol.5, pl.338

Figure 3.17, *Animal Locomotion*, Eadweard Muybridge, is printed in *Photography: the first eighty years*, London: Colnagh, 1976, p. 154.

Chapter 4

Staged Portraiture:
People, places and social interaction in the plays of John Byrne

> Portraits reflect social realities. Their imagery combines
> the conventions of behaviour and appearance
> appropriate to the members of a society at a particular
> time, as defined by categories of age, gender, race,
> physical beauty, occupation, social and civic status, and
> class.[208]

Portraiture can be defined as the creation of images that vividly describe or

represent figures or objects within environmental contexts. Most commonly a portrait is

thought of as a drawing or painting of a figure, but it is also a depiction of the places that

the figures inhabit. John Byrne's plays use theatrical conventions to create three-

dimensional moving portraiture that depict impressions of place and characters whose

images capture and consolidate the significance of ordinary behaviour in social contexts.

His plays are portraits made visible through clothing, props, occupation and physical

action.

Byrne's painting has always been figurative; he consciously rejected the prevalent

abstract movement.[209] In an interview for the *Independent*, Sarah Hemming once posited

that his interest in the human figure is what the content of his artwork in both the theatre

and painting mediums have in common:

> Perhaps this is where the two mutually complementary
> spheres of his output meet. The literary quality of his art
> and the visual awareness of his writing—in a very
> immediate concern with the tangible. [Hemming]
> hazard[s] this as a theory. Byrne muses, fingers his
> moustache and then generously agrees. 'Aye. Both are
> concerned with life and with people. Landscapes, the
> seas, still lives, animals—all great subjects, but people
> are what fascinate me most'.[210]

His depiction of human behaviour is extant in both his painting and theatre works. In

another interview Byrne goes as far as to speculate on the similarity between his visual art

composition and theatrical composition: "Painting and theatre have a lot in common. The

frame and the proscenium arch both lead you into an artificial world".[211] Both his painting

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[208] Brilliant, Richard, *Portraiture*, London: Reaktion Books, p. 11.
[209] Sarah Hemming, "The Carpet Gager", *The Independent*, 28 February 1987.
[210] *Ibid.*
[211] Lucinda Bredin, "Byrne's Night", *Evening Standard*, 31 March 1988, p. 30.

and his theatre create environments in which figures are contained, thereby focusing attention on what the figures look like and the ways in which they behave. Examples of characters defined by their appearance will be used to show the ways in which the visible elements are essential to characterise the figures in Byrne's dramaturgy.

Rather than merely representing the facies of a person or place, as in traditional portraiture, theatre allows spectators to witness the movement and interaction of characters within their environmental context, thus providing a more complete characterisation. Byrne exploits the theatrical synthesis of the visual and aural to create a multifaceted depiction. His work makes evident that theatre can reveal man's moving, changing qualities within his environment, rather than simply producing a painting that works only on a static level.

From figural painting to staged portraiture

To characterise Byrne's plays under the rubric of portraiture, it is important to demonstrate the similarities between his work as a painter and the construction of the visible elements within his dramaturgy. Byrne was born on 6 January 1940. Little information pertaining to his private life is available, other than comments indicating that many of his plays were drawn from personal experience. He trained as a painter at the Glasgow school of Art from 1958-1963 and at Edinburgh College of Art from 1961-1962. He travelled to Italy in 1963-1964 on a scholarship. He has continually exhibited in numerous group and solo exhibitions internationally and predominantly earned his living through the sale of his paintings. Both his theatrical and visual artwork have won him notoriety. Among Byrne's numerous awards are the Newberry Medal, the W. O. Hutchinson Prize for Drawing, and the Bellahouston award at the Glasgow School of Art (1963); the Evening Standard Award, Most Promising Playwright for the *Slab Boys* (1978); the BAFTA Award (*Tutti Frutti* titles, 1987); and the Special Jury Prize, Celtic Film Festival (*Byrne about Byrne*, 1989).[212]

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[212] Byrne has used his artistic ability in many of the jobs he has held. Before he began art school, he worked as a slab boy (1957) mixing colour for wool in a local carpet factory and later as a carpet designer. He has also worked in the graphics department for Scottish television, designed Penguin book jackets (1964-1966) and designed for theatres such as 7:84 and the Borderline theatre.

Byrne was well established as a painter and designer before he ever put a pen to paper to write a play, and came to the theatre with a clear understanding of the ways in which the visible operates in theatrical production. He recounts the way in which the idea to become a playwright was first introduced to him:

> Theatre was still very new to me when I started writing at the age of thirty-six, although I had designed several shows before then. I think I really caught the bug when a friend bought me tickets for a West End play in 1969 when I was in London hanging a one-man show of my paintings.[213]

It was not until 1976 that he handed a friend a first draft of his first stage play, *Writer's Cramp*, which was described as "a scherzo in J minor for trio".[214] Little remains to document his early development as a playwright because much of Byrne's dramatic output was lost in a fire at the offices of Margaret Ramsey, Ltd. Besides *Writer's Cramp*, all that survives from this time are a few scattered production reviews of *Candy Kisses* and *Cara Coco* describing their plots and their humorous worlds that are inhabited by strange characters.

Byrne's notoriety in the visual arts came with the naive painting style that he creates under the pseudonym Patrick. These paintings are like nineteenth-century New England portraits where the figures have big heads on little bodies or foreshortened legs [figure 4.1]. What were most important about these portraits were not the realistic depiction of semblance, but the figure's personality as seen through clothing, props and stature. As was common in portraiture, the subject's property is depicted as a landscape of her town in the background, and the necklace, rug and flowers are an indication of her status in the community. An illustration of Byrne's painting in this style is *Boy Running With Streamers* [figure 4.2]. The streamer is a physical manifestation of the whimsical quality of the little boy's character. His clothing is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the children depicted in traditional naive portraiture. Byrne's *Golden Angel by the Sea* [figure 4.3] is an abstract version of this style of portraiture. The sea is his place in the world and the wings define him as an angel. An overall impression of the compositional features conveys the angel's character. Byrne's painting also makes evident an impression of the

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[213] *Contemporary Authors*, v.104, 1982, p. 6015.

character. One can see its deviation from everyday life, but the portrait somehow expresses that this person is a part of a particular time and place that has something to be admired.

The *Grove Dictionary of Art*'s description of naive painting captures a key quality of Byrne's technique:

> It is a keynote of naive painting that it should appear complete in every part, with an even accentuation of each last detail: it is often this studied concern for minutiae at the expense of the overall balance, combined with the naturalistic norm—awkward contours, incorrect colouring—that creates its characteristic aesthetic impact. Several commentators speak of naive artists as operating in regard to a mental idea of their subject rather than a visual impression . . . thus the artists translate what they know or feel rather than what they see; they often consider their work to be realistic, where others notice only its deviance from actuality.[215]

The style may convey a sense of exaggeration, yet it also captures the character of the represented figure, by drawing focus to an anatomical feature or held object. Byrne's *Caledonian Smoking* [**figure 4.4**] works in this way. The figure is situated in a coherent, yet almost expressionistic environment, and his cigarette exudes massive amounts of smoke. His cap and wool jacket stand in as external signifiers of his Caledonian identity and his physiognomic features are inflated like a mannerist composition. A synthesis of all the compositional elements conveys an impression of internal psychology. These paintings are not quite naturalistic, nor are they expressionistic. This is the type of exaggeration or heightening of particular qualities that is in operation in the plays. Byrne's painting *National Velvet* [**figure 4.5**] depicts a guitarist who wants to be seen as being like Jimmy Hendrix. His outrageously American clothing and his presence amongst the south-western accoutrements and period memorabilia express more than his semblance, but a desire of the way in which he wants to be seen by the world.

There is a twentieth-century tradition of creating three-dimensional portraits. The painter and sculptor Fernando Botero's works serve to illustrate by analogy the ways in which Byrne's figural construction is inflated to draw attention to certain characteristics of the figure's portrayal. These portraits are not so far afield that they are unrealistic. The

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[214] *Ibid.*

combination of traits defines the characters, thus making them seem believable. Take for

example Botero's *General* [**figure 4.6**]. The figure is seen in an environmental context

that indicates the way in which Botero wants him to be seen by the world. A library

bookcase suggests he is a learned man, the painted chair suggests culture and the

clothing suggests his status in the world. However, the style of the portrait intimates that

the portrait not to be considered seriously, but rather satirically. Similarly, Duane

Hanson's sculptures are three-dimensional examples of this style. They not only depict

the facies of the model, but a stereotype of person at a particular job. While creating a

portrait, he takes liberties in the description of his models' physiognomy by exaggerating

their authentic details. Viewing his sculpture is an unsettling experience.[216] As it is

sculpture, one wants to look, but they seem so life-like that one wants to look away. Out

of the corner of each eye, the viewer spots objects and people in the gallery; Are you

being watched by the guards or are they sculptures? These figures inhabit space much

the same way as the spectators. The tourist is sprawled out in a corner of the gallery, and

his luggage clogs the walkway [**figure 4.7**]. Spectators read the sculpture in the same

way that they read people, places, gestures and facial expressions when they are walking

down the street. Clothing choices, props and semblance trigger these reactions. The

figure in *Lady with Shopping Bags* [**figure 4.8**] carries a J. C. Penny bag filled with cheap

processed food. The type and condition of the clothes and accoutrements place her in a

particular time period. Whether she wears a hat or whether dirty laundry fills her bag

shows the viewer the woman's character. These sculptures are convincing because of

their skin texture, colour, pimples and blemishes that appear realistic to our sense of

observation. They are not meant to deceive, but guide the parameters of the viewer's

thinking and suggest larger metaphors relating to Hanson's outlook on life. Have you ever

stopped to look at the people who populate the menial work force? What are those

workers thinking beneath their placid façade?

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[215] Jane Turner, ed., *Grove Dictionary of Art*, London: Macmillian, 1996, v. 22, p. 440.
[216] David Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, presents many interesting arguments concerning the ways in which wax images and effigies trigger responses of joy, fear and fascination from viewers.

George Segal's sculptures go one step further than Hanson's sculptures. He creates life-size portrait in a patron's personal environment. Robert and Ethel Scull are positioned in relation to a settee in a parlour [**figure 4.9**]. It is not only in the way that they are dressed, but also in the way they relate to each other and the environment that tells us about Mr and Mrs Scull. The husband and wife are placed at a distance from each other and the settee creates a barrier between them. Mrs. Scull sits relaxed on the settee, and her husband stiffly stands a distance behind her. Despite having their likeness cast as a sculptural group, they remain anonymous and removed from each other. Thus, the figural objects in space are an essential way of learning about characters.

Theatre and sculpture both give one a chance to stare and observe. Hanson's and Segal's sculptures bring the issue to the forefront. When Hanson's security guard is leaning against the wall, the environment in part announces who he is. While walking by him the image is reinforced by appearing to be watching you, as are the living gallery guards. The art object is scrutinised in a way that is prohibited when looking at humans in daily life. The theatrical medium is endowed with the capacity to depict figures in motion and adds another dimension to the spectators' perception, by giving them a chance to watch an artist's vision of a particular figure in several situations.

Journalists have variously described Byrne's theatrical work as satirical inflation and naturalism. One anonymous critic from *The Observer* lamented that Byrne left behind satire in his later works in favour of naturalism.[217] Rather than thinking of Byrne's work as one or the other, it is more suitable to think of it as cartoon-realism, that is to say, the plays are an internally coherent realism where exaggeration is normal. Each play's world is structurally believable and the aberrations from everyday life are made to seem seamless. Byrne selects which elements of our world he wants to bring forward to depict a part of the play's composition.

Dramaturgical Portraiture

Byrne creates moving portraits. Rather than merely placing the subjects in an environment full of props, he utilises motion to give the portraits a more complex dynamic.

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[217] Anonymous, "Normal Service", *The Observer*, 18 March 1979.

While visual signification reveals much about character and space, it is the combination of words, action and physical imagery that carries the narrative. A direct aesthetic influence on Byrne is comic books. Hugh Hebert points out Byrne's early exposure to the Scottish comic books *Hotspur, Rover* and *Wizard* as a child and cites their influence on his design and construction of *Tutti Frutti*.[218] The comic book style is apparent in the design drawings. **Figure 4.10** and **figure 4.11** are further examples of the characters defined by simple clothing or props in the style of a satirical cartoon or comic book drawing. The characters are seen through the selected details of cowboy hats, 1950s rock and roll and touches of 1980s life. Less apparent are the comic cartoon structures that are the structural underpinnings of the plays. On the most superficial level these characters look as if they are cartoon drawings brought to life in cartoon town, but the synthesis of word, image and sight-gag are essential foundations of the drama.

Maurice Horn's description of the polymorphic expression of comic strips is a useful description of the ways in which Byrne's plays operate:

> The narration of the strip is not conveyed visually, but expressed in both pictures and words. While emphasis may be given to one of the dual aspects of the strip over the other, the interest most often shifts back and forth according to the demands of the action or the needs of the characterization and atmosphere.[219]

A communicative synthesis is reached where all systems work together to achieve a rhetorical end. While Byrne may use a brassiere as a fan belt at one moment, he also uses one-line jokes to produce a similar effect. The integration of the two effects completes his expression. Character interaction depends on the constraints of the environment that they occupy. Byrne highlights certain elements over others to convey rhetoric visually.

Portraits allow the spectators to focus on the human figures rather than on the spatial composition of the stage images. The play becomes a lens with which to focus on the personality of the characters and the ways in which they react to their environment. Byrne's continual preoccupation with figural form led him to use the theatrical medium to

[218] Hugh Hebert, "Tutti Frutti" in *British Television Drama in the 1980s*, George Brandt, ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 187-188.

create three-dimensional moving sculptures. There is no reason he should have to draw a cartoon when he can place loud obnoxious actors on stage wearing the clothes and getting into mishaps. In this way, he is able to exploit costume, environment and physical interaction to portray people working and pursuing their dreams—that is to say, he consciously uses clothing, stereotype, environment and comic escapade to highlight their personality. He creates his theatre using traditional means, but it relies on visual expression. The ensuing examinations of each of Byrne's major plays show the ways in which figural portraiture helps implant a visual image of people and places in the perceptions of the theatre spectators. *Writer's Cramp* is an example of the use of living tableau to define important moments in the biography of his principal character. The *Slab Boys* trilogy demonstrates the ways in which Byrne uses costumes as clothes to indicate the ways in which the characters see themselves and the ways in which the world relates to them. Discussion of *Normal Service* builds on these ideas to show the ways in which the rhythm of movement creates sight gags that expose their characteristic traits. Finally, *Colquhoun and MacBryde* will be used to show the ways in which characters are emblematic of abstract ideas like alcoholism, sexuality and the 1950s London art scene.

Writer's Cramp

As with his figural painting, Byrne uses environmental context and props to characterise a figure. Staging portraits in this manner is comparable to Hogarth's drawings of *The Rake's Progress*, with picture after picture advancing the viewer's understanding of the story.

Writer's Cramp (1977) traces the life and times of Francis Seneca McDade, an obscure, fictional Caledonian writer, painter and sage [**figure 4.12**]. Using little more than costume and lighting, Byrne leads the spectators through McDade's life from his childhood to his deathbed. Each episode presents a living tableau of one biographical moment, which works in tandem with the dialogue to make tangible McDade's characterisation. The ways in which he forms each setting through verbal description are immediately apparent. The

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[219] Maurice Horn, *The World Encyclopaedia of Comics*, New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1976, p. 9.

ways in which that text creates a portrait in the traditional style is essential to grasp

McDade's character and to understand Byrne's satire of the life of the artist. Working with

verbal description, Byrne uses physical staging to place the bio-object in multiple settings

to provide a context for McDade's portraits. McDade is depicted in a series of settings—

Paisley, Oxford, boot camp, prison, home and his deathbed. In this way, Byrne gives a

variety of views to both establish who McDade is and at what traditions these portraits

poke fun.

      Writer's Cramp calls for three actors; two of whom play five characters each. The

scenery is virtually static, and the action consists of either the narrator reading segments

of biographical information or writing and McDade composing letters to various relatives or

friends. Each scene taken from an important moment in his life contains an introduction

by the narrator, a letter by McDade, a visit from at least one character and an extract from

his artistic output. The narrator mediates between the scenes and the spectators, almost

as if he were acting as a curator pointing out paintings of historic battles hanging on a

museum wall. He introduces the first portrait, showing McDade under the covers in the

cupboard next to the matron's room at Miss Kibble's college, Paisley in 1934, where he is

penning a letter to his brother Brendan [**figure 4.13**]. The image is interrupted by visits

from his classmate Double-Davis and the headmaster Dr Quigley. A picture is presented

of McDade writing letters, smoking cheap cigarettes and involved in childish pranks:

> **Double-Davis**: Dying for a drag, Frankie boy. Spiers
> cadged my last 'Four Square'.
>
> **McDade**: The shite! Here, have one of mine.
>
> (Proffers packet of 'Gold Flake'.)
>
> **Double-Davis**: (*lights up*) Finished that piece for the
> mag, yet? (*Sticks cigs down trousers*).
>
> **McDade**: Glad you brought that up, DD. Have a read of
> that.
>
> **Double-Davis**: (*reading silently for a few moments*) You
> a hundred percent positive about that pump, Frankie?
>
> **McDade**: I already told you . . . twice!
>
> **Double-Davis**: OK . . . OK . . . I believe you. But, I don't
> think Grimes is going to like this. (*Holds out paper*).
>
> (Pause. McDade takes pump from trouser leg and holds
> it over.)

Still, we might manage to squeeze it in onto page three.
Bonsoir, old thing. (*Heads for door*).[220]

Both the depiction of McDade writing and his interaction with Double-Davis and Quigley are critical to this particular time in the portrayal of McDade's life. The visual components of the letter writing, smoking and inter-personal communication work like a traditional portrait that situates McDade in his environment in the act of emblematic activities, thereby portraying his character. In this way, the visible components work like those in the early portraits as exemplified by **figures 4.1- 4.3**.

A second portrait is staged of McDade's life during the summer of 1938 at Magdalen College, Oxford. In this composition Chic Brazil joins him to exchange gossip about fellow classmates' sexual improprieties. While they talk of Pammer resting her head on his 'stiff dickie', they drink tea, eat crumpets and flip through jazz records:

> **McDade**: I say, park the booty and we'll have some tea and crumpets. (*Pours teas*) Camels or dromedaries?
>
> **Chic**: Mm?
>
> **McDade**: One lump or two?
>
> **Chic**: Three, please, old bean.
>
> **McDade**: I say, pop on a waxing and we'll dent the polly old drummers, hm?
>
> **Chic**: Super (*peruses records*) I say, wee bit passè. Ain't we got any Glenn Millers?
>
> **McDade**: Broqers.[221]

They are portrayed with the material objects that define who they are and what they think of themselves. The integration of the verbal and visual presentation, that is to say, the relation of two bodies wearing costume and handling props, creates an effect similar to that expressed by the Botero figure by satirising simultaneously McDade's lifestyle and mannerisms.

In the next scene, a third portrait depicts McDade in Milingavie at a Special Training unit for officers in 1943. Here Captain McDade writes a letter to his mother as he awaits the arrival of his subordinate. McDade's life quickly moves to a fourth portrait set in HM Prison, Albany, Isle of Wight, where McDade is forced to do his writing on toilet paper to the light of a single match. In prison he receives two visitors whose presence help

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[220] Byrne, *Ibid.*, p. 40.

characterise McDade—his mother and Trusty, the cleaner with a bottle of home-brew hidden in his slop bucket. A fifth portrait is set after the war, in 1949, when McDade moves to London with his young son Polly. McDade is presented writing a letter to Double-Davis as he cares for the baby. The spectators are left to watch a pitiful *tableau vivant* of a dejected man in a cold-water-flat drinking whisky and feeding his baby out of the same miniature bottle. A visual motif of variations of writing and drinking emerges through the repetitions, scene after scene, using the same objects and people.

Each scene is prefaced by the narrator's comments that set the context of the action. For example, in the sixth portrait after divorce in 1957, he returns to Scotland where he retreats to 'Bideawee'. There he has taken up painting and sent to the work to London under the pseudonym Sconey Simple. At the opening of this scene, the narrator reveals a large painting done by McDade:

> **Narrator**: His first formal picture was one of Genge the Baptist, in oils . . . painted on the inside of a kettle using specially designed brushes. Painting for McDade was then a mere dalliance and in the spring of that year he applied himself with customary diligence to this testing new artform. We have ample evidence of the extraordinary dexterity he achieved in just a few short weeks in this, (*unveils large painting*) his magnificent painting 'Ecco Homo'. . . depicting the Nazarene, in a delightfully relaxed pose, languishing on a day-bed in Jerkin and bumpers. It was this painting more than any other that established Frank as 'Giotto Nuovo' of Nitshill.[222]

It is worth quoting this passage at length to reiterate the function of the narrator as a docent introducing each portrait, as the spectators observe. Each successive scene illustrates a different station of McDade's life as the martyred artist. In the seventh portrait, McDade is shown beneath two small pictures of animals writing a letter to the Snorkel gallery in London. To show that his paintings are a success, Byrne introduces Malcolm, a TV interviewer. The interview is a travesty and once again McDade's popularity plunges into oblivion.

Act II, Scene iv is the eighth and final portrait of the play. McDade is portrayed on his deathbed, writing a letter to his brother Brendan begging for money. In the course of

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[221] *Ibid.*, p. 42.
[222] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

this scene, McDade is visited by Father Mannion, who leaves him with his school cap, Double-Davis, who leaves him with the lost toilet-role manuscripts from prison and finally Chic Brazil, who leaves him with a package full of money. Relics from his entire career as an artist and writer surround him in this final depiction. The last moment the spectators see is of McDade ripping open the package and finding the money he had been searching for all his life:

> (McDade rips open package to reveal great wad of tenners.)
>
> **Reader:** Chickers, Double-Davis, Brother Brendan, Priest . . . the zoo . . . at the end of his life.
>
> (McDade expires.)[223]

From childhood to death, the spectators have witnessed significant moments from McDade's life, culminating with the ironic fulfilment of McDade's dreams. The narrator has shown eight portraits characterising McDade during significant stages of his life.

Writer's Cramp is a tour through a gallery full of portraits of McDade painted at various points during his life. Byrne's dramaturgy makes prominent the visible characteristics of his protagonist in the same way that he does in his painted portraits. In his later plays Byrne develops and expands on this technique of showing living characters in different environments at critical moments in their lives. These images do not just portray the characters' semblance, but also embody the ways in which the artist feels about the characters and the world they inhabit. With the *Slab Boys* trilogy, *Normal Service*, and *Colquhoun and MacBryde*, he goes beyond simple depiction and develops the visual means to characterise his portraits three-dimensionally over time. These later plays exhibit the manner in which he surpasses the technique of using a static series of images with fluid movement combined with ideographic situations.

Costume as external identity

> Clothes make, not the man but the image of man—and they make it in a steady, reciprocal accord with the way artists make, not lifeless effigies but vital representations.[224]

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[223] *Ibid.*, p. 50.
[224] Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. xv.

The status of Byrne's characters is reflected in their clothing as well as their social interaction. While this is not a unique idea, his exaggeration in cartoon form highlights this in a satiric manner. Thus, he is able to depict multifaceted characterisations of stereotypical figures. *The Slab Boys* (1978), *Cuttin' A Rug* (1979) and *Still Life* (1982), will serve as examples to explicate the ways in which clothing is a scopic building block within Byrne's dramaturgical composition. He uses habiliments; that is to say clothing suited to a particular purpose, to depict portraits of individual characters. In a similar way that he creates figurative paintings like *National Velvet* [**figure 4.6**], he uses the theatre medium's ability to create plastic semblances. He uses elements of theatrical production to create moving figurative portraits of the employees of A F. Stobo & Co. Carpet manufacturers, focusing on Hector, Phil and Spanky. The three plays clearly illustrate the ways in which clothing and dress visually facilitate the communication of hierarchical status, desirability, self-worth and differentiation between types of people.[225]

Costume sketches are published in the playscripts of the trilogy, indicating how important the specificity of the costuming is to Byrne's conception of these plays' visual worlds. Michael Billington reports the way in which this communicated in performance:

> What Mr Byrne does have is a draughtsman's eye for detail. One guy comes to the hop in his father's DJ which fits him down to the ground: another, a mini-Elvis, is an ambulatory oil-slick; a third sports a white tuxedo with an iron-burn branded on the back; and, of the carpet-factory's two seductresses, one looks like a petticoated Kewpie-doll and the other boasts a figure-hugging black dress that is school of Ann Sheridan.[226]

The attire of the characters of *Cuttin' A Rug* has as much to do with an outward display of personality as it does with establishing the period of the play. The individual discussions of each play will examine the ways in which Byrne creates a world that works with

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[225] Semiotic analysis is best suited to isolate the different levels of meaning associated with the visible signification of clothing choice. In this way, social, economic and personal codes can be extracted and explored. See Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1985. This study extensively examines the role and meaning of fashion in everyday life. Byrne's use of fine-art principle also works on a level that is not addressed with semiotic methodology. The line between the visual and the verbal components resists cognitive linguistic logic. Visual perception comes before linguistic cognition. Therefore, it is necessary to find alternative non-linguistic based methodologies of description. The scopic organisation of the plays is also composed of non-material expression that cannot be described through language.

[226] *Theatre Record*, v. 19, 1992, p. 650.

Hollander's supposition that "dress is a form of visual art, a creation of images with the visible self as its medium".[227]

The Slab Boys

Byrne depicts the characters in a work environment, dressing them in clothing that defines their status and behaviour. *The Slab Boys* is set in the slab room of a carpet factory during the winter of 1957 in Paisley, Scotland. Its action revolves around the activities of Phil, Spanky and Hector who are apprentice designers [**figure 4.14**], otherwise known as the 'slab boys'. As shown in **figure 4.14**, dustcoats are the standard outer uniforms that differentiate the apprentice designers from the designers. To the rest of the company the boys' identities are interchangeable: "**Phil**: She had to ask fancy pants there what one of us was Hector . . ./ **Hector**: That doesn't say much for youse either".[228] Despite each thinking that he has individual style, the apprentices are lumped into one group because of their job, and that is immediately apparent because of their outer garments. What differentiates Phil, Spanky and Hector from each other are their choices of street clothing they wear beneath their dustcoats. Their sense of style marks out their individuality amidst themselves. Their individuality is shown in differences in taste and outlook. Byrne, thereby, uses visual components to raise the characters above stereotype.

Phil McCann is a local nineteen year-old working class boy. The emblematic portfolio full of drawings he carries as he enters suggests his artistic aspirations. George Farell, otherwise known as Spanky, is another nineteen-year-old local [**figure 4.15**]. His clothing choices of drainpipe trousers, a Tony Curtis hairdo, a painted-on watch and crêpe-soled shoes reflect both the limitations of his socio-economic position and his aspirations. Like Phil, he is a joker who aspires to leave for a life beyond Paisley. In the same way that the guitar and American flag clothing associates the figure in Byrne's portrait *National Velvet* to rock music, Phil and Spanky's fashion choices associate them with the prevalent youth culture.

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[227] Hollander, *ibid.*, p. 311.
[228] John Byrne, *The Slab Boys*, p. 16.

Hector is considered a social misfit and stands out from the others because he has no understanding of contemporary style [**figure 4.16**]. Byrne describes him as shorter and 'weedier' than Spanky.[229] Phil and Spanky constantly ridicule Hector and disparage his appearance. When he reveals that he wants to ask Lucille to the Staffie, Phil and Spanky mock him:

> **Spanky**: It struck a wrong chord with me at the time . . . that a doll like Lucille would want to partner you to the dance . . . I meant to say, look at you.
>
> **Hector**: What's wrong with me?
>
> **Phil**: Everything's wrong with you. Look at the state of your clothes for a start.
>
> **Hector**: There's nothing up with my clothes.
>
> **Spanky**: 'There's nothing up with my clothes.' You must be joking. I've seen more up-to-date clothes on a garden gnome
>
> . . . you're a mess, Heck.
>
> **Phil**: Them duds of yours is twenty years behind the times, kid
>
> . . . you never stood a chance of getting Lucille to the Staffie.
>
> **Spanky**: Dames like her only go for a guy with style . . . style, that's what counts.[230]

They make the assertion that what separates the desirable from the undesirable is those with style. From this moment on, Phil makes it his intention to redesign Hector's garb to make him presentable to Lucille. They understand what Hollander describes as the aim of fashion, that "dressing is always picture making".[231]

Alan is working for the summer to earn pocket money for university. He wears clothing that is more expensive and carries his father's Parker pen, thereby reflecting his wealth and education. He is given a new spotless dustcoat, which blatantly shows that he is a newcomer when seen amongst the besmirched garb of the rest. Phil and Spanky constantly make reference to Alan as 'Creepy Clothes' and 'Fancy Pants', accordingly distancing him and identifying him as an outsider merely based on the look of his clothes.[232] The dress choices for Jack Hogg, a designer, further demonstrate the ways in

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[229] Byrne, *ibid.*, p. 5.

[230] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[231] Hollander, *ibid.*, p. 311.

[232] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

which status is differentiated in the Company. The costume choices specified in **figure 4.17** accentuate Jack's earthy qualities and the accoutrement of a watch separates him from the apprentices financially. He wears a gingham shirt with a Munrospun tie, covered by a 'Chunky' Aran knit 'Lumber Jacket' with elbow patches. He wears beige Calgary twill trousers, yellow socks with Chukka boots and an imitation gold wrist watch with expanding bracelet.

Lucille Bently is described as 'every slab boy's dream'.[233] She is a seductively dressed sketch artist employed in the design room and all the slab boys desire a date with her. Byrne's costume rendering shows just how her curves are accentuated by her clothing choices [**figure 4.18**]. She wears a black and white bold striped blouse, with a 'Waspie' belt, a black skirt, black stilettos, a charm bracelet, bangles, and hoop earrings. Her hair is tied with a scarf into a ponytail. She has style because she dresses in the current fashion; she works at a white-collar job and buys clothes to keep at an advantage to the men.[234]

Curry's appearance is in direct contrast to the other workers. Besides being the boys' boss, he is of an older generation. As Byrne's costume sketch shows, Curry is dressed in predominately black garments [**figure 4.19**]. His conservative clothing contrasts to the colourful fashions of the youngsters and the paint-splashed slab room. His trousers and waistcoat are in black pinstripe. He wears shiny black oxford shoes, a starched white collar decorated with a regimental tie and wears his sleeves rolled and banded. He is ready for manual work and keeps his watch slid half way up his arm so that it will not get in the way.

All the clothes in the play are designed for the purpose of showing the character of the figures by non-verbal means. The figures are divided into different social groups as indicated by their clothing. Their dialogue calls attention to their external appearance, and enhances the depiction of their portrait. These habilimentary signifiers are a guide to social interaction as well as a definition of character roles. For example, among equals

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[233] Byrne, *ibid.*, p. 3.
[234] See Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, London: Virago Press, 1987, a study of post- war women and fashion in Britain. Wilson argues that

the boys play jokes and behave rudely, but when they are in the presence of someone of a higher status, they are playfully respectful. Their relative position to each member of the company, as reflected in their clothing, mediates character interaction. Like Hanson's sculptures, Byrne's costuming of each character serves to purposefully portray their social status, age, occupation and personality. The presence of living sculptures dressed for work allows spectators to see beyond general occupational roles to the individual personalities. Byrne's portrayal of the character shows the ways in which each conforms or deviates from the play's established conception of social norms, and thus depicts the process of social interaction.

Cuttin' A Rug

Cuttin' A Rug represents the Slab Boys characters in a social environment away from work. They are depicted in formal clothing that portrays their social personality rather than their occupational personality. Cuttin' A Rug is set in the Town Hall at a Christmas dance. During the course of the evening, Curry is to give a speech and there will be dinner and dancing. The boys exploit the alcohol and dancing to muster their attempts to seduce Lucille and her friend Bernadette. Unfortunately for them, Bernadette's beau, who thinks he is Elvis, gets in the way. Sadie spends the night complaining about her feet and her drunken husband to Miss Wilkenshaw, a spinster designer, who spend the night complaining about caring for her ailing mother. The evening proceeds smoothly until Hector, in a fit of depression over Lucille's fickle behaviour, stabs a rusty knife through his wrist.

Again, habiliments expose the characters' personalities and their social situation. The slab boys are shown dressed in their finest apparel whether rented or borrowed. Though composed of ordinary everyday shoes and clip-on bow tie, Phil's outfit takes the award as the most outrageous [**Figure 4.20**]. He is proud of his jacket, despite the scorch mark on its back:

Terry: Dig the jacket, pal. Pretty cool, eh?

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women at the workplace spend their money on contemporary clothing to situate themselves above the women to make themselves more desirable.

Phil: Fifty eight stock . . . just new in. Got the Old Man to give it a press for us. (*He turns and we see a scorch mark on the back. It is in the shape of an iron.*)

Hector: Hey, Phil, there's a . . .

Spanky: (*Quickly*) And how're we doing, Heck son? My, aren't we the swanky ones? Say another word and I'll put my fist down your throat.

Phil: (*Fingering Alan's lapel*) Am I wrong, kid, or is this still warm from the corpse?

Spanky: Another crack, Phil, and the boy's going to mention the scorch mark.

Terry: Don't let him get away with that, son . . . make one back about the scorch mark.[235]

His jacket is the latest fashion, but the mark epitomises Phil's problems. Byrne calls attention to it, both as a comedic opportunity and as image/text opposition—that is to say, where what is shown and what is said contradict. His appearance does not reflect the awful day he has had, where his mother was locked up in the mental ward, he was rejected from art school and he was fired from his job.

Phil's remark about Alan's clothing is triggered by the suit's overlarge size [**figure 4.21**]. Alan's appearance shows him trying to fill his father's 'shoes'; that is to say, the company is tailoring him to follow in his father's career path as a designer. When Phil asks him about his suit again, Alan tries to avoid the question:

Alan: This wasn't hired . . . belongs to . . . Oh, Christ, I wish the floor would open up . . . belongs to my Dad, actually.

Spanky: He's not still in it, is he, there's enough room.[236]

Metaphorically, the young and naive Alan has a lot of growing to do to think for himself. This same attitude is reflected in his awkwardness with Lucille and his inability to quip with the lads. His suit both portrays who he is, and how comfortable he is in filling that role.

Hector's clothes go beyond the unkempt state of Alan, Phil and Spanky's clothes [**figure 4.22**]. As Byrne's sketch shows, he wears a dinner jacket that is several sizes too small and years out of date; an elastoplast is evident from the hair-cut wound. Hector's appearance reflects the socially awkward child, abused by a world that he does not understand. The actions of others make this clear: Curry sends him on trivial errands;

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[235] Byrne, *Cuttin' A Rug*, Ibid., p. 55.
[236] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

Lucille uses him as a decoy date to fool Bernadette away from Alan; Terry hits him in the eye; and Sadie and Miss Wilkenshaw treat him as a pet.

Bernadette, decked out in her imported dress, and her ersatz Elvis beau, Terry, make a lively spectacle. Terry's oiled hair makes him feel as if he looks like Elvis and reflects his desire to go to America, yet to those around him the grease makes him the target of many jokes. These two are enamoured with American fashion and like to associate themselves with it because it makes them feel special. Terry brags to Phil about the way his Uncle keeps sending clothing in care packages:

> **Terry**: And he's sending us over some Western gear.
>
> **Phil**: Western Gear? What? A burlap Sheriff's set and a plastic tommyhawk from Woolies?
>
> **Terry**: The genuine article . . . real McCoy . . . cowboy boots from a store in Denver.
>
> **Phil**: A right chookie you're going to look strolling down St Mirren Street in a pair of cowboy boots!
>
> **Terry**: There's nothing up with cowboy boots!
>
> **Phil**: They've got high heels, stupid.[237]

To Terry and Bernadette, American clothing is supposed to be better quality and more stylish, while to Phil, the clothing makes them seem out of place and idiotic. These characters use clothing as reflections of dreams, and in this sense are portrayed in the same way as the figure in Byrne's *National Velvet*.

In contrast to the clothing of the youth culture, the middle-aged Curry arrives in a double-breasted dinner jacket, decorated with dresswear ribbon, rimless beer bottle specs and a gold watch and chain [**figure 4.23**]. After displaying his utilitarian side at work, his dapper military demeanour reveals his magnanimity. This is shown further with the action of dipping into his pocket and giving the boys money. Moreover, his desirability is shown when both Miss Wilkenshaw and Sadie compete for Curry's attention, by whisking him off to dance or onto the veranda for a moonlight chat. Curry also is seen in many managerial duties like fixing the lights when they go out, preparing his speech and tending to Hector's wound.

The older generation's style is further portrayed when Miss Wilkenshaw arrives wearing a 1920s-style silk, sac-dress with evening bag and fox fur stole [**figure 4.24**]. She

has done her best to fit with the fashion of the time. Unfortunately, it merely calls attention to her predicament:

> **Lucille**: (*Whistles*) That's a really beautiful gown you've got on.
>
> **Miss Wilkenshaw**: Oh, d'you like it, Lucille? It's just an old rag of Mother's . . . been hanging in the closet for ages. I've had it altered to fit in with today's fashions of course . . .
>
> **Bernadette**: Yeh, you can see that.
>
> **Lucille**: Did you manage to get a taxi all right?
>
> **Miss Wilkenshaw**: Gracious me, I came on the bus.
>
> **Bernadette**: I wouldn't've came on a bus with that on.
>
> Miss Wilkenshaw: Oh?
>
> **Bernadette**: In case it got crushed. What're you kicking us for, Lucille?[238]

Clearly, the girls do not think that the woman should have gone out in public dressed in a gown that is out of fashion. Her position in society is reflected in the quality of the clothing, which indicates she comes from fading wealth. The appearance of Miss Wilkenshaw's gown and the dialogue portray her as a regretful spinster.

Again, Byrne chooses visible components to shape the way the spectators see the personalities of the characters. Clothing is an embodiment of the ways in which the characters in *Cuttin' A Rug* believe they fit into the social order. People create ideals or reflect their desires in the manner of their dress. They use the components of visible appearance as a palette to shape the ways by which the world views them. Whether Phil wears a white or black jacket shows the way in which he wants his friends and co-workers to view him. By choosing the white jacket, he is set apart from the more common choice of black, thus emphasising his role as a non-conformist. Phil's vision of himself as fashionable is shown as an illusion, because the scorch mark is a perpetual reflection of reality. Hector wants to impress Lucille, but he cannot understand that his awkward behaviour and appearance make him a social outcast. Habiliments are not only a way for spectators learn about the characters, but also a scopic building block in Byrne's dramaturgical portrait construction.

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[237] *Ibid.*, p. 61.
[238] *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

Still Life

    Still Life continues to portray Phil, Spanky and Lucille a decade later in 1965 and two decades later in 1972. Their clothing reflects the intermingling of the social and occupational in their personal identity. They are established now in their life-long careers. Phil is an artist and Spanky is a musician who is married to Lucille. In 1965, they are brought together at Hector's funeral. On top of the cemetery hill they reminisce and catch up. Phil's career is unsuccessful with only one exhibition a few years back, and Spanky's band is on the verge of success. In 1972 Phil, Spanky and Lucille are brought together again on top of the same cemetery while Phil waits to put a headstone on his mother's grave. Spanky, now a heavy metal rock star has flown in from the U. S. to try to see his child. Again, Byrne creates portraits of the characters and their circumstances by using the visual expression of clothing. Predominantly, focus is on Phil, Spanky and Lucille, besides a short intrusion from a workman and Jack, now a gentleman's clothing retailer.

    Out of the three central characters, Phil is the only one who does not have a costume change between the two acts of the play. He does not change significantly in these two years. **Figure 4.25** shows the large overcoat he wears for both acts.[239] His artistic career is still unsuccessful and he does not earn much money. He remains an unfashionable artist from 1967-1972, and the mischievous prankster that he was back in 1957, but his egotism has mellowed. Lucille's wardrobe changes considerably from 1965 to 1972 **[figure 4.26]**. Her outfit has gone from poor fashion to a more self-assertive elegance. When she was with Spanky in the first act, she was unhappy in her marriage and bogged down taking care of her child. Once she marries Phil, she blossoms once more into a mature fashion. In the final moments of the play, Lucille and Phil lean against a tombstone in an embrace. He puts his overcoat round her to keep her warm and they form a picture of a couple tenderly working together towards a hopeful future.

    The most dramatic change is manifest in Spanky's self-image as seen through his clothes. In 1967, he dresses in the stereotypical musician's garb **[figure 4.27]**. Byrne's designs show him wearing dark glasses, a black box jacket with velvet collar, a black crew neck jersey, black crocheted tie and black Chelsea boots. Spanky is the archetypal

musician of the period who imitates the clean-cut Beatles. By 1972, after achieving

success, he wears fashionable American clothing, such as aviator glasses and the Che

Guevara beret, fringed suede jacket and Levis and wears his hair long [**figure 4.28**].

Sequentially, he looses a boot, leaves his jacket behind, falls in the mud and tears his

shirt. His appearance is fashionable, but his mental state is revealed as a tattered mess.

The spectators are shown the semblance of a man whose image is so fragile that one slip

in the mud shatters that façade.

Byrne uses clothing to externalise abstract qualities like personality and social

status. Through these appearances, he shows the spectators a portrait of the characters

and their world. Hector is treated like a child and is constantly mocked, and his outward

appearance is bruised, beaten and awkwardly clothed. Rather than merely appearing as

the object of derision, the effects of the derision are externalised. In this way, Byrne

expresses the internal subtleties of the characters using the same visible building blocks

that he uses in his painted portraiture. The action thus goes shallow farce to a

multifaceted characterisation. Byrne's dramaturgical structure present spectators with a

visual rhetoric to accompany the comedic dialogue and action. Though these worlds are

cartoon-like, they contain recognisable elements from ordinary life inflated to draw the

focus of the spectators.

The group portrait

Kate Kallaway expresses her admiration for Byrne's ability to create a world where

chaos and trauma seem seamlessly accidental:

> On the page, his plays read as if they started life
> elsewhere, as though they must have simply happened
> on the stage and then been transcribed into a book. This
> is because Byrne, when he is writing, designed them in
> detail in his head.[240]

Despite the implausibility of the situations and coincidences that occur, the action seems

natural and almost expected. Young attributes this skill to Byrne's visual imagination

intentionally shaping the action and physical staging.[241] The characters propel themselves

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[239] Byrne, *ibid.*, p. 112.
[240] Kate Kallaway, "John Byrne", *The Observer*, 2 October 1994, p. Arts 5.
[241] Young, *ibid.*

through the intricate web of plot almost as if they are blindly wreaking havoc on the plans of the other characters. This helps call attention to the ways in which Byrne creates a dramaturgical group portrait that shifts focus from one character to the next as an integrated ensemble.

Richard Brilliant describes the traditional function of the group portrait in painting:

> In Dutch group pictures, the integrated ensemble may prevail over the independent individual, but in them the strong emphasis on the realistic depiction of specific individuals permitted each person's portrait to compete for close, if momentary, visual and psychological attention. The Dutch artists seemed to compel the viewer's eye to move from face to face, never losing sight of the others in the contemplation of the one. Such works are peculiarly cooperative and collusive in their nature, because each person in the group contributes to, and draws from, the presentational dynamic of the whole. Some conformity to the norms of the group, whatever these might be, affects all members, forcing each person to evince some significant degree of participation as a way of manifesting the alleged coherence of the group, as represented in the work of art.[242]

Brilliant's analysis of Dutch group pictures describes the synergistic characteristics of individual portraits competing for focus, where this competition only serves to emphasise the nature of the whole over the individual. In viewing a group portrait, the spectator gets a fleeting impression of each member's personality. Focus shifts between the different figures, and thereby the spectator is furnished with a general impression of the whole composition. Byrne's play *Normal Service* functions in the same way by providing a look at the array of characters that work in the design office at Caledonian television. His play offers a series of momentary glances at individuals. Characters have their own particular foibles and activities; however, it is the intermeshing of these with those of the other character's that draws the towards an understanding of the group.

Normal Service (1979) occurs over two days in November 1963 in the design room of Caledonian Television. The play shows the designers designing the opening and closing credits for the shows produced at the station, trying to make it through the day, cutting a few rollers, getting their shows on the air and celebrating a co-worker's retirement. Though the portraiture techniques involving habiliments and contrast are

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[242] Brilliant, *ibid.*, p. 93.

evident, Byrne does not emphasise them in the rendering of the group portrait. Instead, he builds *Normal Service*'s composition utilising stock characters and an array of objects. Using typical farcical devices, Byrne's portraits transcend these limitations to create polyptychic portraits of social types. The idiosyncratic traits of these characters become more than comedic devices, they are individuals shown behind their working masks.

Circumstantial interaction is essential in both the comedy and propulsion of the play. Situations revolving around props lead many of the characters to clash with each other, consequently revealing their personality. Eric Shorter's description of the production illustrates that Byrne

> Paints a detailed picture of a Scottish television design
> office fifteen years ago with enough sense of character,
> chaos and crisis to make [the audience] believe
> something of importance is continuously afoot.[243]

Byrne winds the characters up like mechanical toys and sends them on their way to crash into each other; what ensues are a multitude of clashes and conflicts as the characters inadvertently get in each other's way. Over the course of the play, the entire office is drawn into confusion because each character fiddles with the others' property. The characters are involved with inadvertently finding, misplacing and destroying objects, thereby creating a frenzy of activity.

Shifts in focus and intertwined characterisation

Byrne depicts an integrated ensemble in a similar way that a portraitist balances his compositions. He spins a web of invisible threads that lead the different characterisations in and out of focus during the performance. Through repeated physical actions Michael, Max, Murray, Ferdie, and Bruce, like the other characters in the play, insinuate their personality upon the others in the room. They either serve as the catalyst of other's misfortunes or cause confusion that agitates the rest. Their entrances and exits usually have the effect of directing the focus away from one character or situation towards another. Accordingly, they enable Byrne to keep the action of the play moving forward. Patterns of movement serve to keep an ever-changing flow of images in action. There are eight characters in the play. It has a two-act structure, with each act composed of two

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[243] Eric Shorter, "Normal Service", *Daily Telegraph*, 14 March 1979.

scenes. There are thirty entrances and exits in Act I, scene i, twenty in Act I, scene ii, thirty-seven in Act II, scene i and sixteen in Act II, scene ii. In total those makes one hundred three entrances and exits in a ninety-minute or so play. The office is a constant flurry or activity. At any given moment there are up to eight characters on the stage at one time.

Situations centred on objects create a node on which to focus. The visual life of the stage picture comes alive, whether Max pulls out his paintings or Ferdie rushes into the room and grabs the telephone out of someone's hand. They serve as focal points because explosive situations occur as a result of characters meddling with each other's belongings. Michael often weaves in and out of the problems of the other characters. He is very jumpy and his reactions usually result in physical or property damage. For example, in a three-minute scene Michael has an incident with Murray when he asks advice about aligning letters on a roller. By the end of the exchange, Murray is irritable and tosses a handful of brushes onto Michael's desk as he leaves. This triggers Michael to hurl the brushes against the wall and upsets the roller on which he was working:

> Keep your rotten brushes . . . (*Throws them against the wall*) And your rotten. . . (*Inadvertently rips roller*) . . . Oh, Christ . . . (*Surveys the damage*) Oh, Christ . . . (*Tries to patch it up*) Oh, Christ.[244]

Meanwhile, the phone rings, he stops what he is doing to pick it up and it stops, he goes back to work and Ishbel enters. Focus shifts to Michael trying to fix the roller. After another few minutes, Max enters then Ferdie who is in a panic. Focus shifts again. Later, another explosive situation occurs when Ferdie and Michael cross paths at a critical moment in both their single-minded pursuits. When Michael steps out of the office to do a favour for Peter, the phone rings with the call he has been waiting for all day. While Ishbel waits with the call for Michael from the hospital, Ferdie barges in the office looking for Bruce's telephone number and grabs the phone from her. Michael enters with the next beat of action and when he finds out the call is about the birth of his baby he tries to grab the telephone from Ferdie:

> **Michael**: Give us the phone. This is urgent . . .
> They wrestle with the phone.

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[244] *Ibid.*, June, p. 43, col. 3.

> **Ferdie**: So is that! Go to hell . . . I've found his number. .
> .
>
> **Michael**: I'm warning you . . . If you don't hand over the
> phone I'll . . . I'll . . .
>
> **Ferdie**: You'll what? You'll what? Go on . . . go on . . .
> you'll what? (*Sticks chin out*)
>
> **Michael**: I'll . . . (Hits Ferdie on Jaw. Ferdie collapses in
> a heap. Michael grabs phone).[245]

Each character only can see his own interest, so they end up coming to blows over the use of a telephone when there are eight telephones in the room. The rapid fire pace of the action leaves no time for the characters to straighten out misunderstanding. Character movement and pacing bring different characters together and the props they interact with become the focal point for character interaction.

It is impossible to describe any one character's actions merely as an individual portrait. Every interaction is intricately tied to the other characters. When the curtain first rises, the spectators see Wilf tinkering with the 'Vulcan Junior'. This object and his activity are emblematic of his personality, but his actions have consequences for the other characters in the office. Wilf's obsession with the repairs renders him oblivious to the needs or predicaments of others. At moments when other people have a critical need, he will do something infuriating to distract them. In this scene, Wilf's single-minded pursuit to fix the "Vulcan' impinges upon the single-minded pursuits of Murray and Ferdie. For example,

> **Wilf** returns to 'Vulcan' starts banging.
>
> **Murray**: Could you hold on, Mike? Wilfred! !. . .
>
> **Ferdie**: Hold on . . . Wilfred! !
>
> **Murray**: Sorry, mate, Wilfred's trying to get a packet of
> Spangles out of the 'Vulcan' . . . Wilf!
>
> **Ferdie**: (*to Wilf*) D'you think you could drag that bloody
> roller coaster into the corridor and demolish it there, Wilf?
> Wilf! Christ . . .![246]

His actions are intertwined in the actions of the characters around him. Though he is not involved in the actions they carry out, his presence interferes with what they are doing and, in effect, escalates the pace of the action. Multiple actions occurring simultaneously on stage conveys a sense of liveliness and constructed anarchy.

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[245] *Ibid.*, p.46, col. 1.

Byrne uses these visual means integrated with verbal exchanges as a way to build upon stock types. This rather conventional technique gives him the opportunity to experiment with rhythm and tempo, building a frenzy of activity that is much like an animated cartoon. Wilf sees the world around him as a large impromptu toolbox that he picks and chooses from according to the qualities of the tool he needs. For example, after oiling the 'Vulcan' he searches for something with which to clean his hands:

> **Wilf**: Have we any Swarfega, d'you know?
>
> **Ishbel**: Hey . . . what're you doing in there, Wilfred? Get out . . .
>
> **Wilf**: I'm looking for something to wipe my hands on . . . What's this?
>
> **Ishbel**: You touch those rompers and I'll throw this coffee over you . . . D'you still want this coffee, Max? Or can I throw it over Wilfred? Wilfred if you so much as go near that matinee coat . . . I'm warning you . . . [247]

Nothing is safe from Wilf; no personal belonging will escape his prying hands. He constantly meddles with everyone else's possessions and depending on what the object is, the owner reacts accordingly. In this way, incidents that involve Wilf project back onto the whole group dynamic. Each gag shifts the spectator's attention away from one character towards another character, thereby intertwining the paths of the different characters and giving the spectator a dynamic view of the whole office.

Peter's identifying prop is a bag of shopping and these purchases often are the objects that Wilf mistakenly assume are parts for his machine. One reason Peter's belongings end up as spare parts is because he always leaves his desk unattended rather than getting around to his responsibilities. Rather, he is usually running an errand for his wife or visiting his girlfriend down in prop stores. At the beginning of Act II, Peter returns from shopping with a jar of 'Virol'.[248] When he leaves again, Wilf meanders into Peter's office yet again, picks it up and pours it all over some rusty bolts. Another of his purchases becomes a fan belt:

> **Wilf**: Here, did he get that fan belt I ordered? For the 'Vulcan'

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[246] John Byrne, *Normal Service*, in *Plays and Players*, May 1979, p. 40, col. 2.

[247] John Byrne, *ibid.*, June 1979, p. 42, col. 2.

[248] *Ibid.*, June, p. 40, col. 1+2.

> ... (Hunts around. Comes across a package with nursing brassiere in it) Aye ... this looks like it

Ishbel: What've you got now Wilfred? Wilfred. ..

Wilf: (*peering at package*) 'Nurse Grant's'. We usually get these from Lucas, do we not? It'll be one of those new-fangled bloody things, I expect ... (*Pulls out brassiere*) Aye, I thought so ... (*clambers under 'Vulcan'*) Hey, Archie ... can you crawl under here and tell me where these cup things go? No, it's all right, son ... I've found ... Oyah! Get on there, you bugger! Ouch!![249]

Spectators see a character use an object and then another character take that object and use that for another purpose. It is the thread that ties the action of the characters together. It is as if they are relay runners passing the baton.

Byrne's drawing for the premiere production poster depicts several of the characters at work [**figure 4.29**]. Each character performs their signature single-minded actions that inadvertently interfere with the action of another character. They fail to listen or consider those around them, thereby getting in each other's way and never actually achieving any of their aims. The focus shifts from one person to the next, never resting on any one character for very long. When one character causes harm, focus immediately shifts to the reaction of the owner of the object. Consequently, it is the interaction of the two that contributes to the group portrait. Over the course of the play, the characters are shown in a variety of situations and the spectators are offered multiple impressions of the portrayal. Over the course of the play's action, the characters are depicted as a group portrait made up of individual eccentrics, in much the same way a Dutch group portrait presents an integrated ensemble to manifest a coherent representation of the group. In this way, the stereotypical farce contributes to express a more rounded portrayal of these individuals at work.

Emblematic portraiture

> A portrait never tries to reproduce the individual it represents as he appears in the eyes of people near him. Of necessity, what it shows is an idealisation, which can run though an infinite number of stages from the representative to the most intimate. This type of idealisation does not alter the fact that in a portrait an individual is represented, and not a type, however much the portrayed individual may be transformed from the

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[249] *Ibid.*, p. 48, col. 1.

incidental and the private into the essential quality of his true appearance.[250]

At its debut, *Colquhoun and MacBryde* (1992) was subject to vitriolic attacks by the press and public because of Byrne's portrayal of the legendary eponymous artists.[251] As Richard Brilliant suggests, portraits can never please the eyes of those closest to the represented, since the artist produces a picture that aims to communicate an abstracted idealisation of the subject's true appearance. Regardless of the portrait's accuracy, Byrne set Colquhoun and MacBryde's lives on stage and uses their lives to create portraits of the two men in the manner of a Hogarth series. Set between 1937 and 1957, *Colquhoun and MacBryde* charts the fame and ill fortune of Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde's careers and personal relationship. The play opens shortly after they graduate from art school, as they try to work out the way in which they are going to find their places in the pantheon of artistic genius. Byrne portrays them travelling through Italy studying the Great Masters before the war, escaping army service, in their London studio, at their exhibition openings, in the country and, finally, in a hovel after their success has faded.

Byrne uses the technique of placing the eponymous characters in a variety of contexts over an extended period during their life to create multiple portraits of them as he did in *Writer's Cramp*. In *Writer's Cramp,* he uses tableau portraiture to present biographical moments, while with *Colquhoun and MacBryde* he uses tableau portraiture to express abstract emblematic emotions. Byrne also uses shifts in focus and intertwined characterisation to characterise Colquhoun and MacBryde as he did with the characters in *Normal Service*.[252] Furthermore, in a manner similar to the depiction of the characters in the *Slab Boys* trilogy, Byrne displays Colquhoun and MacBryde consciously creating their personas using habiliments.[253] The techniques that Byrne developed over the years are harnessed to highlight situations that both characterise Colquhoun and MacBryde and

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[250] Brilliant, *ibid.*, p. 18.
[251] Both Soho drinking partners, spearheaded by Jeffrey Bernard, and family acquaintances accused Byrne of taking liberties with the biographical details to suit his own aim—though no one ventures to define those aims. See the Spectator and Raffaela Barker, "Playing my Father False", *Evening Standard*, 24 September 1992, p. 29, for the most vicious attacks and Robert Hewison, "Of Myths and Men", *The Times*, September 1992, for a good summary of the journalistic debate.
[252] See John Byrne, *Colquhoun and MacBryde*, London: Faber and Faber, 1992, pp. 19-20.

comment upon the predicaments in which they are found. Among the series of portraits are moving portraits emblematic of naïveté, politics, debauchery, fame, Romanticism and love. The scenes of *Colquhoun and MacBryde* unfolds in mini-vignettes as do the different episodes in Hogarth's *Rake's Progress*.

Byrne depicts Colquhoun and MacBryde's personal relationships in settings such as Italian museum and an army base during the war, but most revealing of his dramaturgical picture making are the scenes dealing with their career. A portrait emblematic of artistic naïveté is shown when Colquhoun and MacBryde first arrive in London and offer their paintings to all the galleries on Cork Street, only to find that no one is interested in their paintings. They each take one side of the street and go in and out until they have exhausted all of the galleries. When they realise that it did not go as they planned, they turn on each other and blame the other. In a series of simple actions, the spectators watch their unrealistic expectations and ambition transform into bitterness. [254] Simple displays of emblematic actions show a sense of the situation and the characters' reactions to it.

In another stage of their career development, Colquhoun and MacBryde take extreme measures to gain notoriety by adopting the guise of politics. Their actions create a living tableau of the artist as political activist. They are shown wearing kilts in the cold, on a starvation diet drinking only from a thermos and demonstrating with placards in front of the Lefevre Gallery demanding to have the same opportunities to exhibit as their 'English Brothers'.[255] The are like Mason's sculptures sitting in the gallery, except they are living artistic statements. By the end of the scene, their spectacle attracts the attention of the media and the gallery accepts their paintings for exhibition.

Byrne constantly depicts Colquhoun and MacBryde imbibing liquor and are they are rarely seen without glasses or a hip flask in their hands. As the action progresses, the amount of alcohol they consume increases. Their debauchery becomes evident in scenes where the are shown in compromising situations licking ice-cream off an Italian's shoe or caught kissing on an Army base. The unkempt, hung-over men fail to function in

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[253] See *ibid.*, pp. 26-27.
[254] See *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

everyday society, and because of their alcoholism they are kicked out of Soho pubs. Furthermore, as they become famous they are seen breaking open champagne, and MacBryde still wants to get drunk again the next morning even after regurgitating on critics from *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Observer*.[256] With the flash of the photographer's camera and the gallery opening their notoriety is apparent.[257] The alcohol becomes a visual icon of their behaviour. These images are the parable of the struggling artist.

Byrne also portrays Colquhoun and MacBryde as the Romantic ideal of the artist. At the height of their fame, they stop painting because of their drunkenness. Consequently, they find refuge with Barker in the country, where they are shown sailing on a dinghy reading poetry. Their activities no longer show the working struggling artist, but shows men playing and frittering away the hours doing anything else but work. In one vignette Barker is shown working while Colquhoun and MacBryde, dressed as Indians, chase each other around Barker's house like children wearing feathers and wielding tomahawks. Carefree behaviour in the face of adversity is shown repeatedly. In this section, they are shown as the living embodiment of the drunken, Romantic artistic ideal.[258]

The final significant emblematic episode depicts the dignity of love. Colquhoun and MacBryde are shown destitute amidst the wreckage of their home and possessions. They stumble home drunk one day to find all of their belonging tossed onto the pavement. Forcibly evicted from their flat, many of their canvasses were damaged. Byrne depicts them tenderly picking up the broken canvasses and placing them on a handcart. MacBryde crosses and touches Colquhoun's shoulder. They comfort and hold each other to face the future. Their actions reveal the love they feel towards each other and towards their art.[259]

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[255] See *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.
[256] See *Ibid.*, pp. 35-40.
[257] See *Ibid.*, p.41.
[258] See *Ibid.*, p. 52.
[259] See *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Byrne leaves the spectators with an image of two ruined men, begging for the love and glory that they once had for the asking.[260] It is a modern day *Rake's Progress*, much like David Hockney's series of drawings depicting his life as a struggling artist in the New York Art scene of the late 1970s. Through the depiction of the lives of Colquhoun and MacBryde, Byrne created a series of portraits that depict more than the semblance and mannerisms of two artists. Spectators are shown the naïveté, politics, debauchery, fame, Romanticism and love. By portraying these men in a variety of situations, Byrne was able to show the effect fame had on them. He used the specific legend of two artists to illustrate images of the artist's life. Using a combination of techniques developed in his earlier days, Byrne pushed beyond mere figurative portraiture and portrayed the context in which these figures are forced to find substance. Thereby, he uses their semblance to present fables that can be understood as larger than that of two men's biographies.

Dramaturgical depiction of figural form

> Portraits exist at the interface between art and social life
> and the pressure to conform to social norms enters into
> their composition because both the artist and the subject
> are enmeshed in the value system of their society.[261]

All of John Byrne's dramatic output, visual art and writing are preoccupied with the human figure in environmental contexts— that is to say, he is interested in the ways in which humans are part of and exist in the world. External appearance reflects his characters' social being and through observation of clothing, props and physical actions spectators can better understand their behaviour in social contexts. All the characters display their personality like peacocks; the whole world can watch them in the colourful garb and behave flamboyantly. His plays employ devices similar to those which figural sculptors or portraitists use to depict their subjects' relation to the world they inhabit. Hanson defines his figures by the type and condition of the accoutrements they wear or have on their body. Segal places his subjects in an environmental context. Botero inflates the form of his figures to emphasise their feelings over their semblance. All of the artists use props to direct the spectators to identify the job or environment their subjects

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[260] See *Ibid.*, p. 67.
[261] Brilliant, *ibid.*, p. 11.

inhabit. Rather than use static means, Byrne creates living portraits by carefully defining what his characters wear and the ways in which they interact with props and each other. This may not be a unique theatrical practice, but his form does call attention to the semblance of the characters and in turn direct the spectator's attention to the importance of the way humans present themselves to the world. This may be common in contemporary theory and practice, but Byrne celebrates the wonder and creativity of the individual.

Byrne has continually been fascinated with the figural form in his visual artwork and he uses the theatre to further explore the ways in which characters move and relate to three-dimensional space. The theatre has many attributes that sculpture and painting do not have, in that it can depict movement rather than merely suggesting it. As with any product of the fine arts, spectators have the opportunity to examine the many systems of visual signification for interpretation and a deeper understanding of the event. Byrne's drama, as seen through the imagery of portraiture, offers a picture of characters struggling to communicate with each other. In this manner, he portrays the values of society while portraying the characters' existence in the world.

Critics praise Byrne's work because it captures the wit and humours that characterises everyday urban life in cities like Glasgow.[262] What most attracts non-Scots journalists and spectators is Byrne's affection for the characters that he portrays. Review after review praises Byrne's eye for capturing the witty foibles of the people he characterises. This affection for his characters is apparent in his visual artwork as well and his peculiar way of depicting the figures rarely fails to bring a smile to the viewer. As Ned Chaillet describes, "Mr. Byrne's people have the complexities of real life in their cartoon clarity".[263] Through Byrne's images spectators can see the ways in which people behave in different contexts. Perhaps this is why he has been produced around the world, despite the regional specificity of most of his work.

Television and film have broadened Byrne's audience. He develops his thematic preoccupations using structures that he developed in his theatre work. The major

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[262] See Randall Stevenson and Gavin Wallace, eds., *Scottish Theatre Since the Seventies*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996.

differences of the television and film work and the theatre work are the environmental context he creates. In television and film, he is not restricted to a fixed set. He uses the basic distinctions between media in his formulation of dramatic structure. He often flashes rapidly from one location to another and from one image to another by inserting a few frames in the picture to build the tempo of the action. Byrne continually exploits the attributes of the media he is using, whether it be painting, drawing, theatre or film, to better depict his characters in an environmental context.

Byrne's dramaturgy exploits the traditions of portraiture and spectators can approach his dramaturgical work as they would approach visual artwork. Art history provides the tradition to understand the ways in which depiction of people or places to shape the ways in which an attentive viewer responds to the work. Environmental contexts, clothing, the stylisation of mannerisms and organisation of the figures in space all modify the reception of the individual elements of painting. Picture making involves choosing elements that will work together to form an image of the chosen subject. Its structure creates a system that spectators observe and consider. Plays exhibit a different range of options, and their effect may even be less constrained. Plays offer a dialectic between semblance, motion and words that play off each other to express complex, and conflicting messages in a more powerful manner than a painting or sculpture. Byrne is a showman. The action in his plays take place on a stage created to provide a context for their interpretation. Spectators are shown a world through the guidance of Byrne's choices. Like a cartoonist he provides the fewest possible lines for spectators to fill in with their imagination. By pumping up the significance of tiny details, he creates an inflated cartoon of the world that calls attention to human foibles in an amusing manner. The plays work at their best when spectators are shown idiotic characters bumping into each other and misunderstanding each other as in a Fedeau farce. Ultimately, all their mayhem triggers a feeling of pity towards the characters because they inevitably end up miserable. Despite their constant contact with other characters, they never seem to communicate in a productive enough way to accomplish what they set out to do. In a sense, the action turns into a social commentary about the way societal organisation

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[263] Ned Chaillet, "Slab Boys" in *Times*, 19 November 1982.

drives one away from the people that can help the most. The characters' relationships are often put under tremendous strain simply because that is the way the society or the office operates.

Moving portraiture is more than a metaphor, however. Motion and text add another dynamic that can bring forward many more traits that capture the ambiguity and contradiction in the subject's personality. This especially becomes apparent when the dramatist introduces different kinds of characters to the central subject. When this happens, the spectators are allowed a glimpse of the ways in which the figure behaves in different situations, thus revealing a variety of personality traits. A moving portrait over time also has the ability to depict change, growth or destruction. Active processes and abstract ideas can be made tangible using a combination of these tools.

The techniques that Byrne has developed during his career as a playwright are not unique to his dramaturgical structure. The use of clothing, physical humour and character interaction as means of directing focus are techniques that all playwrights employ to some extent. A theatre of images is not confined to grand spectacles or performance without text. The visual world is inherent in any piece of performed theatre and it is important to speculate on the ways in which it works in tandem with theatre's other systems of communication. By using a vocabulary developed over centuries of experimentation in the visual arts, lessons can be learned about the ways in which playwrights use sculptural movement, colour and the interaction of forms in space. Byrne's experiments with the depiction of a figure are among the most important of several techniques commonly borrowed from other forms of visual communication.

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Figure 4.1; Anonymous, *Eliza Smith, Providence School Mistress* (1835), printed in Jean Lipman, *American Primitive Painting*, NY: Dover, 1942, plate 24.

Figure 4.2; *Boy Running with a Streamer*, by John Byrne, printed on a Scottish Gallery Postcard.
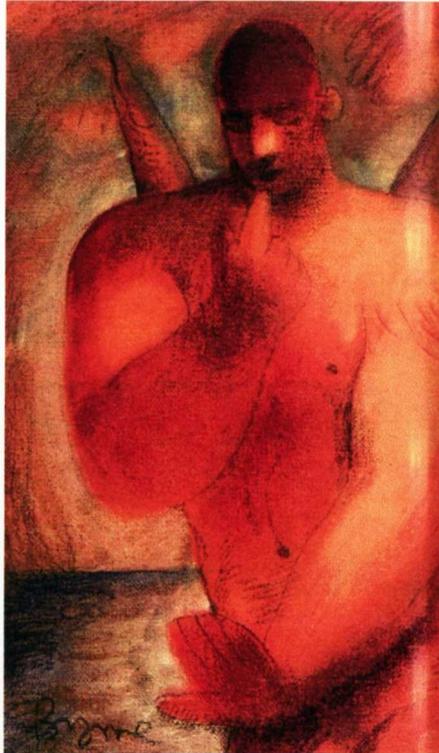
Figure 4.3; *Golden Angel by the Sea*, by John Byrne, printed in *Art Review*, v. 45, December/ January 1994, p. 46.
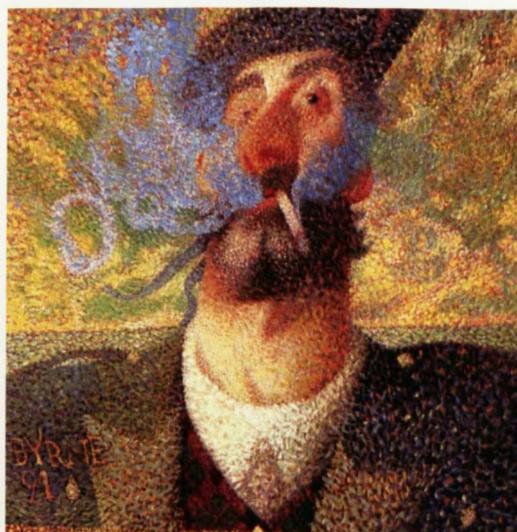
Figure 4.4; *Caledonian Smoking*, by John Byrne, printed in *Scottish Art in the 20th Century*, Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1994, p. 121.

Figure 4.5; *National Velvet*, by John Byrne printed in *Art Review*, v. 45, February 1994, p. 42.

Figure 4.6; *General*, by Fernando Botero, in Werner Spies, ed., *Fernando Botero: Paintings and Drawings*, Munich: Prestel-Virago, 1992.
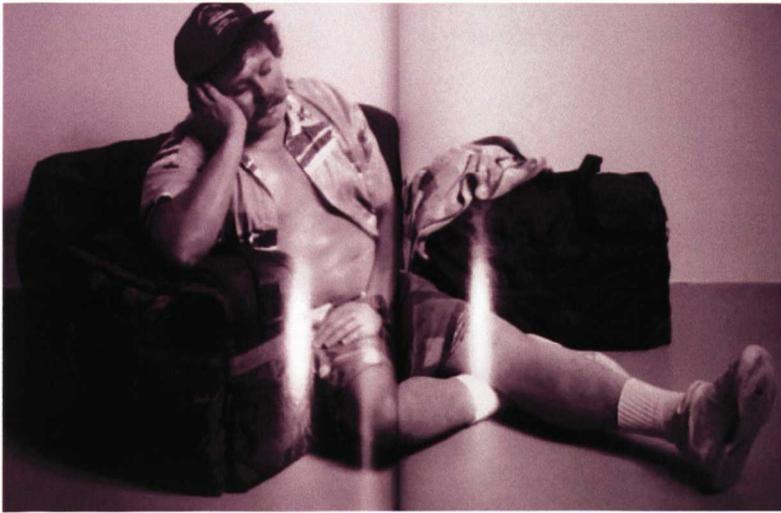
Figure 4.7; *Traveller*, by Duane Hanson, printed in Marco Livingstone, *Duane Hanson*, London: Saatchi Gallery, 1997.

Figure 4.8; *Lady with Shopping Bags*, by Hanson, printed in *ibid*.
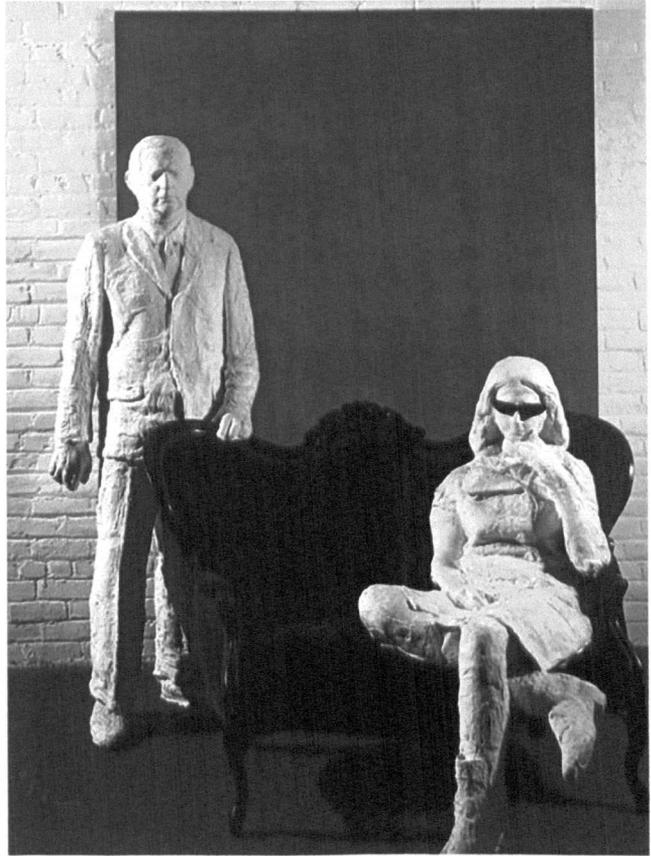
Figure 4.9; *Robert and Ethel Scull*, by George Segal, printed in Phyllis Tuchman, NY: Abbeville Press, 1983, p. 51.

Figure 4.10; Cover of *Tutti Frutti*, by John Byrne, London: BBC Books, 1983.

Figure 4.11; Drawing from *The Slab Boys*, by John Byrne, printed in London: Faber and Faber, 1998, p. xi.

Figure 4.12; Poster for the Bush Theatre's production of *Writer's Cramp* (1973), Theatre Museum Archive, London.

Figure 4.13; Production Photo of *Writer's Cramp*, by John Byrne, in *Plays and Players*, December 1977, p. 41.
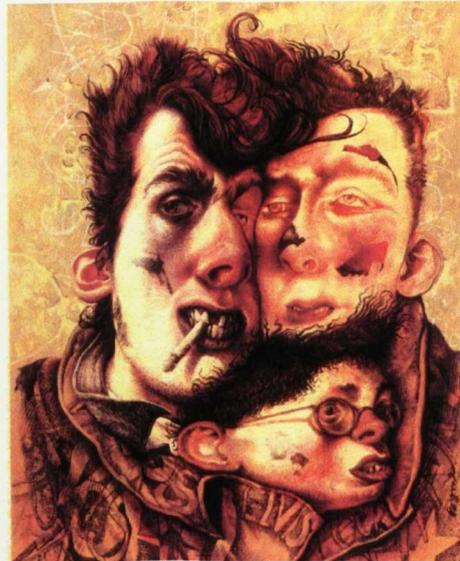
Figure 4.14; Cover of *The Slab Boys Trilogy*, by John Byrne, New York: Penguin, 1990.
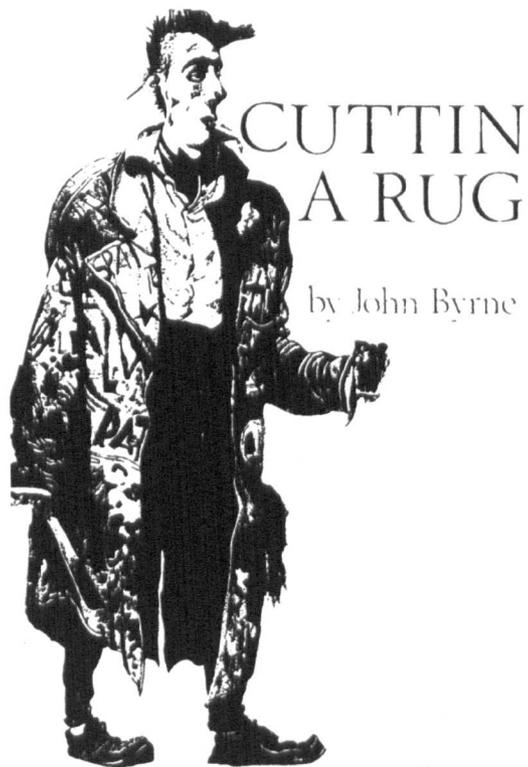
Figure 4.15; Cover of *Cuttin' a Rug*, by John Byrne, Edinburgh: Salamander Press, 1982.
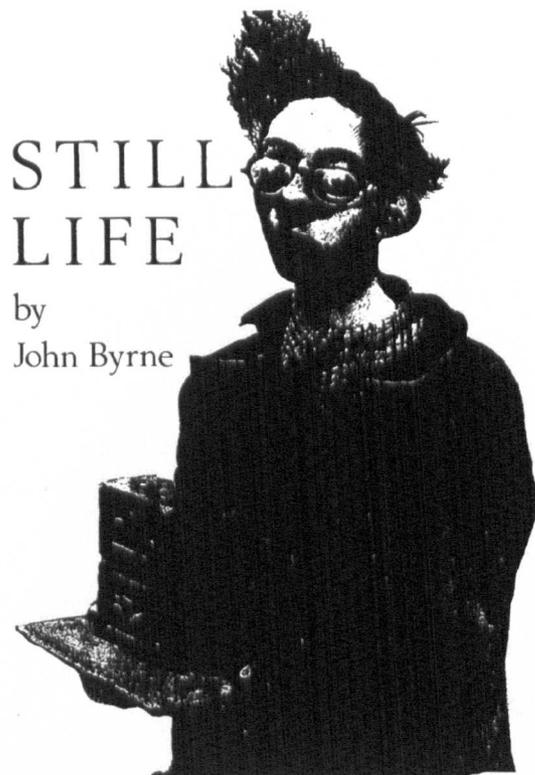
Figure 4.16; Cover of, *Still Life*, by John Byrne, Edinburgh: Salamander Press, 1982.

Figure 4.17; Drawing from *Slab Boys*, by John Byrne, in *The Slab Boys Trilogy*, *ibid.*, p. 23.

Figure 4.18; *ibid.*, p. 15.

CURRY

Pin stripe waistcoat
& trousers, black shiny
oxford shoes. Striped
shirt, white stiff collar.
'Regimental' tie.

sleeve bands

(single-breasted)

+ pin striped jacket (with hanky)

+ soft hat (dark shade)

Wristlet watch
halfway up arm
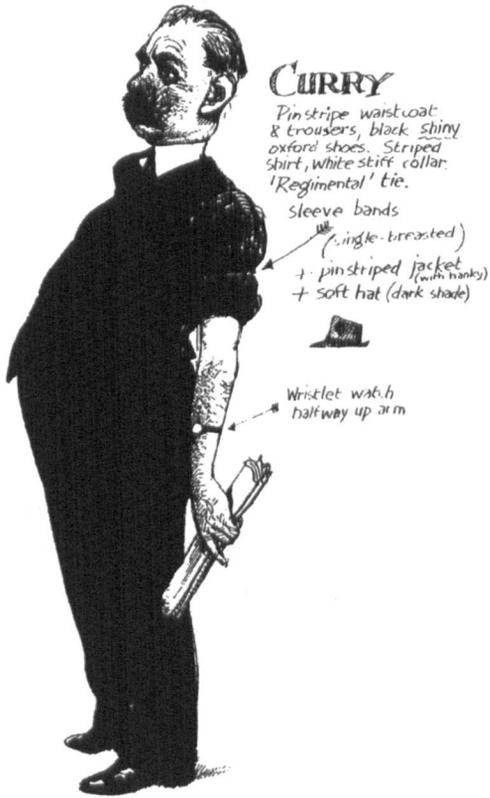
Figure 4.19; *ibid*., p. 45.

Figure 20; *ibid*., p. 70.

'BIG TUX'

ALAN DOWNIE

Figure 4.21; *ibid.*, p. 65.

HECTOR
IN UNCLE
BERTIE'S
DINNER
SUIT

← ELASTOPLAST

PATENT
PUMPS

Figure 4.22; *ibid.*

CURRY
CUTTIN' A RUG'

Double breasted D/J
waistcoat
dresswear medal ribbon
(Burma Campaign etc)
Dress shirt.
Black Oxfords.
gold watch & chain.
rimless specs. (Beerbottle

CURRY
real
bow tie

Figure 4.23; *ibid.*

Fox Fur
STOLE

Evening Bag

PURSE

CREAM SILK

Miss WALKINShaw
CUTTIN' A RUG

Figure 4.24; *ibid.*, p. 70.

Figure 4.25; *Still Life*, *ibid.*, p. 112.

Figure 4.26; *ibid.*, p. 132.

Figure 4.27; *ibid.*, p. 94.

Figure 4.28; *ibid.*, p. 112
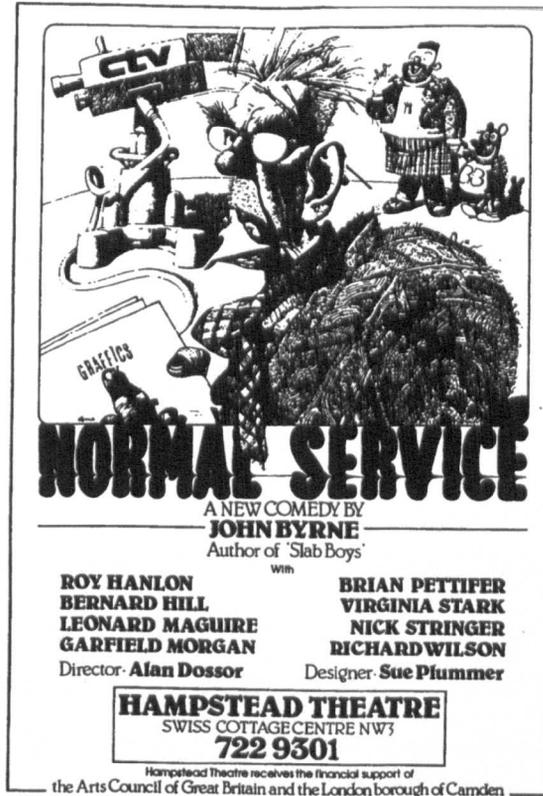
Figure 4.29; Production Poster for *Normal Service*, by John Byrne housed in the Theatre Museum Archive, London.

Chapter 5

Towards Integrated Visual / Verbal Compositions:
Visual expression in the plays of David Storey

The major critical studies of David Storey by John Russell Taylor and William

Hutchings explore the connection between his working class origins and his recurring

motifs. These are further elucidated in articles such as James Ginden's "Education and

the Contemporary Class Structure", David Craig's "David Storey's Vision of the Working

Class" and "Middle Class Tragedy", and Malcolm Pittock's "Revaluing the Sixties".[264]

What tends to be overlooked, and only recently elaborated on by Storey himself, is his

development as a visual artist and its relation to his writing. The discussion that follows

traces Storey's training as a visual artist and explores the ways in which his aesthetic

training influences the structure of theatrical compositions. *Life Class*, *The Contractor*,

The Changing Room and *March on Russia* will be used to show the ways in which Storey

uses the theatrical medium to create a visual experience guided by fine art principles and

integrated with text.

Though critics seldom attack painters for repeated studies of one subject (Kossoff

has painted the embankment and other architectural monuments dozens of times), Storey

has been criticised for his fixation on working class families and their educated

offspring.[265] It must be recognised, however, that fine art is the medium that guides his

work. As the *Sunday Times* reported in 1976:

> Art provides his reply to the charge that his literary
> themes are by now overworked, 'Cézanne could paint the
> same pair of apples in 25 pictures, as long as each
> picture was different and the work always improved. I am
> not afraid to transfer the same principle to literature'.[266]

Most authors could be accused of overworking the same themes, but it is significant that

Storey turns to art as his example. It is the medium in which he developed the aesthetic

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[264] James Ginden, "Education and Contemporary Class Structure", in *Postwar British Fiction: New Accents and Attitudes*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1962. 86-108; David Craig, "Middle Class Tragedy", *Critical Quarterly* 26.3 (Autumn 1984): 3-19; Malcolm Pittock, "Revaluing the Sixties: The Sporting Life Revisited", *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 26 (1990): 97-108.
[265] See Phyllis R. Randall "Division and Unity in the Plays of David Storey" in Hedwig Bock and Albert Wertheim, eds. *Essays on Contemporary British Drama*, Max Hueber, 1981, for a treatment of reused theme and character.
[266] *Sunday Times*, (26 September 1976).

that guides his work. Many other examples from Storey's cannon of plays can be drawn. The plays can be broken into two distinct groups. 1) *The Contractor*, *The Changing Room*, *Home*, *Life Class*, *Cromwell* which are explorations of public spaces and work. 2) *The Restoration of Arnold Middleton*, *In Celebration*, *The March on Russia*, *The Farm*, *Sisters*, *Mother's Day*, *Stages*, *Early Days* which explore private space and intimate relationships. They all revolve around a single environment that changes with use, but still remains the same. A portrait of that space is built as seen and experienced by the characters. *Cromwell* is a more abstract play that examines the notion of nation, but the characters are still occupants of the land that they are trying to make a life on. *Early Days* is also an abstract play that deals with the spaces of the mind. In what way do inhabits of the stage inhabitants the mind of Kitchen? All but one scene show the family according to his view and the other according to their point of view. *Sisters* examines two sisters reclaiming control of their lives by seizing control of a whore-house. Storey points to a field of peoples' mental attitudes and feelings during the play's duration. His plays are still lives of the places and people of the world around him. He harnesses his skills as a painter and integrates them with his prose to create stage works that depict the emotions of people and the atmospheres in which they inhabit.

Cultural and artistic influences

Storey was born in 1933, to a Yorkshire mining family. He has held a variety of jobs ranging from professional footballer, to schoolteacher, to marquee erector. He is both an award-winning novelist and playwright, most prominent during the 1960s and 1970s.[267] He is now in retirement, though his work is still in the public eye—his latest novel *A Serious Man* was published in 1998 and his play *The Changing Room* was revived by the Royal Court in 1996. As a young man he refused a scholarship to attend Reading University to become a schoolteacher as his parents wished, opting instead to attend Wakefield Art School. With the money he earned from a rugby-league contract, he was

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[267] Among his awards for fiction are the Macmillan Fiction Award (1960) for *This Sporting Life*, the John Llewelyn Rhys Memorial prize (1963) for *Flight in Camden*, the Somerset Maugham Award (1963) for *Radcliffe*, the Faber Memorial Prize (1976) for *Pasmore*, and the Booker Prize(1976) for *Saville*. His plays *The Contractor*, *Home* and *The Changing Room* each won the New York Critics Best Play of the Year Award.

able to attend the Slade School of Fine Art, in London on the weekdays and work as a Rugby League player in the Industrial North on the weekend.[268]

Storey attended the Slade School of Art in London from 1953-1956, studying under Tom Manning. He won a Summer Composition Prize in October 1954, a book prize at the Steer Prize submission and a travelling award in 1955. In March of 1955 Lawrence Gowing said of Storey's work that it was the best of the top row.[269] During this period, he became immersed in the concepts of the gesturalist school of painting. According to Peter Snow, a lecturer of painting and theatre design, both Storey and his close friend Philip Sutton were the influenced by the work of Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff.[270] Gesturalism is an offshoot of expressionism—a mode of painting, in which realism and proportion are overridden by emotion, resulting in distortions of line, shape, and colour. A gesturalist object becomes a record of the artist's emotions projected onto the subject.

The principles of gesturalism are best exemplified with the teachings of David Bomberg.[271] He "taught his students to aim, not at accuracy, correct measurement or finish, but at an organic structure expressive of what he called 'the incomprehensible density of cosmic forces compressed into a small space,' or put more simply, 'the spirit of the mass'".[272] He favoured the evocation of the feeling and energy within the object through the weight, thrust and density: "The 'spirit' which was to be conveyed in lines and marks was that tactile sense of the structure, presence and otherness of the model which is rooted in present and previous experience".[273] After close observation and "once the student had achieved an 'idea' about the thing drawn, he or she proceeded to make 'throws' at the parts that composed the whole. The movement of the line was to equate

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[268] His article "Journey Through a Tunnel", in *The Listener,* 1 August 1963, pp. 159-61, reflects on his days travelling back and forth by train to Wakefield.
[269] Letter from Steven Chaplin, the Slade School archivist, 3 September 1996.
[270] Storey has remained close to Sutton often writing the text to Sutton's exhibition catalogues. See *Recent Paintings by Philip Sutton,* London 1965; *Philip Sutton: Paintings/ Drawings/ Prints,* Bristol 1970; *Philip Sutton: paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures,* Folkestone, 1970; *Philip Sutton,* Sheffield 1971.
[271] Even before this time Storey was fascinated with Wyndam Lewis who was both a contemporary and admirer of Bomberg. In "Journey Through a Tunnel", *ibid.,* Storey tells of his chronic rereading of Lewis' autobiography on his trips North for his weekly sojourns with the Rugby league.
[272] Frances Spalding, *British Art Since 1900,* London: Thames and Hudson, 1986, p. 162.
[273] *Ibid.*

with the movement of the eye as it ranged over the subject, and thus expressed the artist's involvement with it".[274]

Aura and atmosphere overwhelm any naturalistic qualities of the image, because the artist projects his feelings upon the depicted subject. Take for instance Auerbach's *View from Primrose Hill* [**figure 5.1**]. At first glance the muddied mass at the top of the painting appears ambiguous. One must look again and see the ways in which the furrows at the base of the thick pools of paint guide the viewer's eye to move over the painting, the indistinct mass of the city rising up from below. The mass is not constructed to be identifiable as buildings, but rather as the weight of the dark colour (brown, black, ochre) bearing down on the base of the hill from the top third of the picture. Indications of shape and mass formed by a brush stroke describe the blocks of flats closest to the park and towering buildings off further in the distance.

Gesturalist images in general are not static. They are contained energy. For example, in Kossoff's *Stormy Summer Day* [**figure 5.2**] the street curves in the lower left corner, and the lines shoot around it like the rapids of a river with splashes of colour and solid masses riding the crests of water. The atmosphere around the cars is charged with colour that distorts their mass and thus becomes an indication of speed. This is formed by the stroke of the brush cutting its way through the viscous layers of paint. The contrast between the objects and background is stark; the buildings are weighted with colour. The viewer's eyes rapidly follow the lines of the road and then go to buildings, which have the most defined appearance. The 'spirit of the mass' as shown in the almost formless objects, renders the complexity that permeates everyday life, but is not seen. What may look like sketchy blots of paint in the upper left is all that is necessary to convey the idea that individual buildings and streets continue off into the distance. The clarity of line disappears because it would distract from the atmosphere and energy that the artist wants to capture. The gesturalist artist highlights the unseen emotions contained within humanity's relationship to objects and places. They try to catch the spontaneous in a way that is unique and unpredictable. In that improvisational manner they struggle to capture the allusive qualities of their emotions in relation to the object depicted. Auerbach and

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[274] *Ibid.*

Kossoff immersed Sutton and Storey in the techniques exemplified in Bomberg.[275]

Storey's painting, mentioned above, that won him the praise of Lawrence Gowing was an

example of this influence in that it reflected the expressionistic phase with which Storey

was experimenting. Stephen Chaplin, a Slade student noted in his diary:

> Its creation of space and that this particular painting is
> the simplest he has painted, with planes in perspective,
> ambiguous and painted in various grey, with two pin men
> figures of no known form or position. The whole
> sophisticated, accomplished, pleasant.[276]

From what few available examples there are of Storey's painting, the influence of the

traditions of gesturalism and similarities to Philip Sutton's techniques are apparent.

Sutton's *Jazz* [**figure 5.3**] shows the use of line, mass and colour to capture an emotional

state. Storey's poster for the production of *Stages* (1988) echoes the line and mass of

Sutton's painting [**figure 5.4**]. Here the mass of a formless man floats on a pastel

background as an evocation of the content of the play. The figure depicts the character

Fenchurch, who confronts his past in his mind. During an interview, Stephen Bent, a

performer in the 1996 production of *The Changing Room*, brought out a small pastel

drawing that Storey gave him as an opening night gift.[277] This drawing was one in a series

of rugby figures in various moments of play. It depicted a figure, similar to the figure in the

Stages' poster, against a pink background. The focus was on the figure, but not on his

individual identity. The mass of the figure against the pastel background elicited a

nostalgic impression of playing rugby. Storey's *Still Life* is an example of his uses of

gesturalist technique as a form of expression [**Figure 5.5**].[278] Notice the ochre in the

upper left corner, and opaque grey and white of the solid masses. It is also notable that

there are so few splashes of primary colour. The red and orange stamens are the only

guideposts to make sense that the white and black shapes must be the petals of flowers.

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[275] At the time they were both exhibiting their building site studies completed during the early 1950s.

[276] Chaplin, *ibid.*

[277] Interview with Stephen Bent, 12 March 1996. Bent told me each cast member received a drawing on the opening of the production. Unfortunately, this cannot be reproduced at this time.

[278] Storey has often been quoted as complaining about the realistic pictures the publishers of his novels print on their book jackets. For example, on the cover of *This Sporting Life* there is a Rugby League player dressed for a game sitting in a changing room. Storey feels this misleads his readers about the content and spirit of the novel.

What comes through strongest is the darkness and mass of the right flower's petals and the brightness and mass of the left flower's petals in contrast to the background.

While in London, Storey would have been exposed to the conflicting artistic practices emerging at the time. On one extreme was traditional naturalistic landscape art, and on the other was pop art and advertising that emerged from the Royal College of Art. Curiously, both these strains can be found in Storey's creative output. His untitled landscape [**figure 5.6**] is one such synthesis. It combines elements of expressionism with a traditional landscape. Bomberg's series of Cornwall landscapes (see *Trendrine, Cornwall,* [**figure 5.7**] as an example) most closely resembles Storey's use of paint and exploration of feeling through mass. Though the horizon dominates in Storey's painting, in both paintings the colour is barely blended and the shape retained from its application holds on the canvas working its way up towards the upper right corner. The amorphous clouds of colour in each painting capture the passionate emotion both painters hold towards their subject. Bomberg's choice of autumnal colours carries with it metaphoric overtones of hot embers smouldering and Storey's choice of whites and blues carries with it overtones of unease. These images are not about the landscape they portray, but a spiritual landscape the artists project upon this land. The land is a way of conveying the indescribable, innate states of human emotion.

Storey's plays have that naturalistic attention to reality in them. His plays have the semblance of naturalism, and also the emotionalism of the avant-garde. This synthesis of the schism lends to his unique power to captivate with the mundane, yet still leave the spectator unsettled afterwards. As T. E. Kalem succinctly sums up, "One of . . . David Storey's avocations is painting, and as a dramatist he depicts still lives. His detractors emphasise the 'still'—nothing happens in a Storey play. His admirers emphasise the 'life'—everything that constitutes the experience of a life time has been distilled into two hours of stage time".[279]

Overlapping expressive systems as theatrical composition

In his final year at the Slade, Storey "was frustrated by the two-dimensional element of painting and began working on constructivist pictures incorporating plaster of

Paris and metal objects onto the picture surface".[280] He went from being the favourite

pupil to an outcast almost immediately. Discouraged by conventional thought and

limitations within the painted medium, he stopped painting soon after graduation and

began to write as a novelist. Though he gave up painting, he continued to create quasi-

gesturalist images in his prose fiction. His novels and plays are filled with many striking

images that bring alive the world in which the characters live. He uses prose to create his

gesturalist images:

> The houses themselves had been quite small, formless,
> almost without shape. Now most of them had been
> restored. White, gleaming fronts confronted each other
> across narrow streets, or, in the case of the square,
> overlooked the cultivated patch of the central gardens.[281]

The gesturalist habit of using darkness and weight for background and bright colours to

highlight the emotions emanating from the figure also finds its way into Storey's prose:

> Like Kay herself, though reflective even introspective by
> nature, he wasn't a person given by temperament to self-
> inquiry. His natural tendency, once his capacity for hard
> work was exhausted, was to wait and see. Even now he
> couldn't help but think that, whatever his present
> circumstances, the outcome would inevitably be for the
> good. The gloom was only there to emphasise the light.
> He only thought he was going mad during those
> moments when his distractions could find no other
> relief.[282]

As Martin Price comments, the visual image "never departs from the circumstantial detail

that we expect of realism, but never gives us the amount of detail we seek . . . the result is

a series of events that are almost obsessive and almost hallucinatory".[283] This

hallucination renders a picture as full of emotional distortion as one by Kossoff or

Auerbach. Storey capitalises on this type of imagery not only to depict the action, but also

to depict the emotional state of the character.

John Stinson points out, "The landscape generally mirrors the psychic climate of

the characters, at times one landscape will symbolically contrast with another, especially

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[279] TE Kalem, "On to the Triple Crown", *Time*, 5 November 1973.
[280] Anonymous, "The Long Journey Home", *The Independent*, 22 June 1994, p. 23.
[281] David Storey, *Pasmore*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1976, p.19.
[282] Storey, *Pasmore, ibid.*, p. 23.
[283] Martin Price, *The Yale Review*, Summer, 1974, p. 557.

city/ country, to highlight Storey's dualistic themes".[284] Storey capitalises on this type of

imagery to get at the complexity of Radcliffe's overwhelming emotional conflict:

> By some mysterious orientation the sun was now shining
> directly at the northern flank of the Place and therefore
> straight into his window. It was a white ball of rabid
> intensity set against a smooth and impenetrably black
> sky. White drops fell from its phosphorescent interior,
> draining against blackness until they touched the earth in
> luminous explosions . . . The next moment, it seemed the
> Place itself spun around, swung ponderously on some
> central pivot of stone.[285]

The spatial environment of the Place becomes the apparatus for conveying the mental

state of Radcliffe. As is common with novels, the text lets the reader feel the perceptions

as much as describing the perspectives. This use of gestural imagery as a pathway to

observing the emotional landscape of the characters finds its most economical use in

Storey's plays.

Years after Storey stopped painting and he began producing his plays he found,

to some extent, that "playwriting emerged from the constraints he felt as a painter".[286] He

relates that it "had something to do with the proscenium arch. I felt aesthetically excited

by it. There was a three-dimensional element; you can go up and down, in and out".[287]

The theatre seems to have given him a ground where he could render his spatial vision

using both figural techniques and three dimensions. The move to theatre was a synthesis

of his novelist's prose and painterly vision. Storey, after a period of writing for his novel,

would find he could write a play: "On a slow day with the novel, he would find another play

spring fully formed into his head".[288] He has a skill for producing a finished product with

few changes; all his plays are written in less than five days. He told the Sunday Times

that "he had lately turned to painting again, at moments of despair".[289] The successful

composition of his plays is "thanks partly perhaps to his experience of painting, he could

form in his mind a three-dimensional image of how the interrelationships might be brought

to physical realisation".[290]

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[284] John Stinson, "Dualism and Paradox in the 'Puritan' Plays of David Storey", Modern Drama 20 (1977), p. 142.
[285] Storey, Radcliffe, Middlesex: Penguin, 1965, p. 232.
[286] Anonymous, "The Long Journey Home", The Independent, 22 June 1994, p. 23.
[287] Ibid.
[288] Anonymous "World Without End", The Sunday Times, 26 September 1976, p. 35.
[289] Ibid.
[290] Ronald Hayman, Playback, London: Davis Poynter, Ltd., 1973, pp.11-12.

Storey is quoted as saying that he begins to write plays from an image and not from any intentional intellectual planning. Storey told William Hutchings in an interview the ways in which the world of the play is created:

> It really is the material that determines the way it comes out. It's more an organic choice than an intellectual one, and the way the material comes out is just a matter of starting with the first page and seeing what happens. The material really just shapes the form . . . Each [work] is true to its own material.[291]

It is from that image that the intellectual discourse of the play emerges. As Hutchings goes on to say, "many of his plays developed, Storey explains, from a single central image— Such as . . . the tent in *The Contractor*".[292] As everything that emerges comes from an image, the text does everything it can to illustrate that image. The tent is the space within which the actors perform and the visual world and the blocking are implied by way of character dialogue and proscribed action in the playscript. For example, Ewabank directs the workers traffic:

> There's a ladder out there, Fitzpatrick.
>
> *Marshall has come in with the third box which he places by the thrid tent polr. Fitzpatrick goes to fetch the ladder.*
>
> (*Calling after him*). And don't put it down until I tell you. (*To Kay.*) Have these been fastened off? (*Indicating poles.*)[293]

Storey uses playwriting as an outlet for experiences or expression that cannot be contained within the constraints of prose fiction, painting or sculpture. His painting, sculpture and fiction techniques are combined to create a form that looks like conventional theatre but operates with a hybrid spine. His opus serves to show the ways in which he harnesses the expressive capabilities of both literature and painting and merges them in the hybrid expressive form of theatre.

Metatheatrical composition

In *Life Class* (1974), Storey depicts a professional artist at work. He creates a metatheatrical event that suggests that plays can be viewed in the same manner that one views the visual in fine arts. Austin Quigley remarks, "The ambiguous title of the play, *Life*

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[291] William Hutchings, "'Poetic Naturalism' and Chekhovian Form in the Plays of David Storey", in *Within the Dramatic Spectrum; The University of Florida Department of Classics Comparitive Drama Conference Papers*, Karelisa V. Hartigan, ed, Vol. 6., 1986, pp. 79-80.
[292] *Ibid.*, p. 80.

Class, directs our attention to an ambiguous classroom event in which students learn about life by trying to translate it into art, and learn about art by trying to distinguish it from the simple reproduction of life".[294] The action that he surmises the students engage in, is the very process that Storey wishes us as spectators to participate in. In general, critics place *Life Class* into a category with *The Contractor* and the *Changing Room*, which they define as Storey's "plotless" plays. Ruby Cohen, Susan Rusinko and William Hutchings approach *Life Class* by questioning the ways in which the themes in the play are essential to understanding what Storey believes to be the role and task of the artist and art in society.[295] Hutchings, in particular, suggests that its thematic statements "concern *how* the play is to be understood . . . rather than specifically what the action of the play means".[296] He sees it as a statement instructing spectators to understand the play as 'uneventful' rather than as an 'invisible event'. In other words, instead of thinking of the plays as without plot, the "central action is the formation and dissolution of a collective bond as his characters are united—though *only temporarily*—through a common purpose and a shared endeavour".[297]

Hutchings' ideas can be taken even farther. The play is more than just a theatrical invisible event—it is a work of visual art that can be understood as a series of still lives. *Life Class* asks the spectators to look at the theatrical medium as they would look at a piece of visual art. However, instead of merely looking at a static image, as they would with a painting or sculpture, they can look at many images made up of interrelating figures. Storey uses the dramatic medium in *Life Class* to depict an artist, Allot, at work. He teaches a life study class at a provincial, Northern technical college, where he must help aspiring artists learn to draw from nature. Allot pontificates an aesthetic philosophy that revolves around the 'invisible event'. This 'invisible event' according to Allot, is

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[293] Storey, *The Contractor, Plays One*, London: Methuen, 1992, p. 62.
[294] Austin Quigley, "The Emblematic Structure and Setting of David Storey's Plays", *Modern Drama* 22 (1979): 274.
[295] There are three significant articles that address the role of the artist in the work of Storey. They are Ruby Cohen, "Artists in Play" and William Hutchings' "David Storey's Aesthetic of *invisible events*" in *David Storey: A Casebook*, New York/ London: Garland Publishing, inc., 1992, and Susan Rusinko's "A Portrait of the artist as Character in the Plays of David Storey" in _British Drama 1950 to the Present: A Critical History_, Boston: Twayne Pub., 1989.
[296] Hutchings, *David Storey: A Casebook*. New York/ London: Garland Publishing, inc., 1992, p. 116.

something that takes place when spectators watch the minute and seemingly mundane interactions of life transpire. Throughout the first act no dramatic action of any note takes place. The immediate task at hand is to set up the easels and draw the posing nude model—his eight sophomoric students, belch, burp and lewdly joke their way through the day as they draw.

The different trends in art practice and theory during the 1950s and 1960s are shown through various characters' idiosyncratic behaviour. Allot's students are poor disciples of the avant-garde. Saunders uses plumb-lines and grids; "Look at all those plumb-lines . . . Anybody'd think he was going to reconstruct me . . . build me in concrete somewhere else", (he sounds like he uses Coldstream's methods).[298] Catherine, without a mark on her paper, claims she was "pin-pointing the principal masses".[299] While Warren breaks the drawing into its principal masses and is described as "Crushing it to bloody death, it seems to me. (*Turns the drawing upside down.*) The Black Hole of Calcutta . . . See it?"[300] The rest have similar efforts. Even the headmaster Foley wants Allot to set a classical pose for them to draw, not some "straight up and down nonsense".[301] Allot advocates the more radical departure from the traditional constraints of fine art practice.

Beyond the frame of the proscenium arch is the stage setting of the play. The playscript describes it as:

> A Stage. Off-centre, stage right, is a wooden platform,
> some six to eight feet square, on castors. Beside it are
> two metal stands, about six feet high, each equipped with
> vertical flat-plane heaters. Scattered around the platform
> are two or three easels and several wooden 'donkeys':
> [these are] low, rectangular stools with an upright T-
> shaped bar at one end. On one, folded, is a white sheet.
> There are two hessian screens, one upstage centre, the
> other centre left. Upstage left is a rack with coatpegs.[302]

Though the specific placement of the set pieces is probably taken from Jocelyn Herbert's design for the first production, all of the components are used during the course of the play. These items must be present in the on-stage environment. Added to this image are

[297] *Ibid.*
[298] Storey, *Life Class*, in *Storey*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980, p. 187.
[299] *Ibid.*, p. 184.
[300] *Ibid.*, p. 189.
[301] *Ibid.*, p. 190.
[302] *Ibid.*, p. 153.

characters and the props they carry on with them. Spectators are presented with a picture of artists in the activity of drawing. What makes this staging different from other plays is that very little else happens through the play. Storey stages these images so spectators can look through his lens at his depiction of the gathering of students studying art. The characters inhabit the stage environment, which is a dilapidated art studio. Characters go on and off stage throughout. Other teachers come in for cups of tea, the model poses and takes a break, and students go in out for no particular reason.

The characters fill their time with adolescent flirting, joking and showing off:

> **Catherine**: You ought to see what he's drawn, Jilly.
>
> **Brenda**: Better not.
>
> **Warren**: Cop a handful of them each evening.
>
> **Gillian**: Shut your mouth.
>
> **Warren**: Tits the size of Windsor Castle. [*Standing, peering over.*] Cor blimey. . . get the Eiffel Tower between two o' them.
>
> **Mooney**: Piss off.
>
> **Brenda**: [*To Warren.*] Upset him.
>
> **Mooney**: Piss off you as well.[303]

Occasionally, their conversation drifts from gossip and speculation to more serious matters of art and life; such as why are there not more famous women artists. As with the other plays, the characters' plausibility is not as important as what their presence adds to the whole of the play. Allot even says something of that nature, "It's merely a question of seeing each detail in relation to all the rest . . . The whole contained, as it were . . . in a single image. Unless you are constantly relating to the whole . . . a work of art cannot exist".[304]

The result of all this activity is the creation of moving sculptural images for spectators to watch. Characters will stand close, as they talk of something intimate. Or, they touch to flirt and move apart:

> *[Matthews] grapples with [Brenda]: takes her.*
>
> **Brenda**: Get off! . . . Get on! . . . Get *off!*
>
> **Carter**: Here. Here. Here. What's going on in here? [. . .]

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[303] *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.
[304] *Ibid.*, p. 176.

> **Mathews**: She's molesting me, Kenneth . . . Ever since I
> came in . . . Follows me around. Just look.
>
> *Having been released by Mathews at Carter's entrance,
> Brenda has followed him around to hit him back: now,
> however, she moves off.*[305]

They put on clothing and take off clothing:

> [*Catherine . . .takes off gloves. Brenda has disengaged
> herself from Carter: she crosses over to Catherine.*]
>
> **Brenda**: Did you bring it with you?
>
> **Catherine**: Here, then: have a look.
>
> [*She gets a hat from the straw bag: tries it on for
> Brenda's approval*].[306]

Or they sit down and stand up. These ever-changing interrelationships of figures give
spectators an impression of the space, an impression of the activity of drawing, and an
impression of the characters that inhabit the space. The phantom climax of the play
comes in the second act, when the model appears to be raped. It is not entirely clear if it
occurs or if the situation is just staged as a gag by the students, but Allot makes no effort
to stop it. Because of his aesthetic principle, he does not intrude on this invisible event.
Rather, he believes that the seeds of ideas that are generated by the event will blossom in
some untold creation.

To Allot, art takes place in the mind as an inwardly conscious event. In the artistic
process, it is not the product that is the key, but the act of observing and exerting an
influence over something. He tells one of his students:

> The problem, Catherine . . . isn't to pin-point . . . nor even
> to isolate . . . it's to incorporate everything that is
> happening out there into a single homogeneous whole . .
> . There's a great deal happening . . . Not in any obvious
> way . . . nevertheless several momentous event are
> actually taking place out there . . . Subtly, quietly, not
> overtly . . . but in the way that artistic events *do* take
> place . . . in the great reaches of the mind . . . the way the
> leg, for instance, articulates with the hip, the shoulders
> with thorax; the way the feet display the weight . . . the
> hands subtended at the end of either arm . . . These are
> the wonders of creation.[307]

Allot advocates that the artist must observe everyday human interaction and then
incorporate it into a piece of visual art. In a recent introduction to the play, Storey
comments that the students

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[305] *Ibid.*, p. 156.

[306] *Ibid.*, p. 158.

[307] *Ibid.*, pp. 184-185.

Have found their way into what might be described as his
allegorised arena (i.e., on his 'canvas')— a
phenomenological act, and perception, which Allot
concludes, is, like all art, expressive—an embodiment—
of his time.[308]

Allot has given up painting and drawing. To him, just to experience or to influence what is
going on around him in a room is art. The aim of the creative process, that is to say the
subject of art, is not just to leave something on canvas, but to be a part of the total
experience. To illustrate this point, another student, Mathews' offers to model so that Allot
can draw him. Mathews assumes a pose and Allot draws on the pad in front of him. After
Allot is done he leaves the room and Mathews talks with another teacher:

Mathews: First time I've seen his drawing.

Phillips: One of the leading exponents of
representational art in his youth, was Mr. Allot . . . you'd
have to go back to Michelangelo to find a suitable
comparison . . .

[*Mathews stoops over pad: peers closely.*]

Mathews: There's nothing there . . .

Philips: Now of course . . . an impresario . . . purveyor of
the invisible event . . . so far ahead of his time you never
see it.

Mathews: I've been posing there for half an hour![309]

As Philips explains, Allot applies his artistic talents to his pursuit of an avant-garde ideal
that art is more than the product that is created. Such practices are not received well
because the intended viewers are not accustomed to seeing the world in this way. When
Allot returns, Mathews inquires about the drawing:

Mathews: I was just looking at the drawing, sir.

Allot: There isn't any drawing . . . or, rather, the drawing
was the drawing . . . perhaps you weren't aware.[310]

The event is the thing and its product is only incidental. The artist's act is contained in the
experience of the act of creation. In other words, The artist's mediation and processing of
the creative act is the artistic experience; nothing else matters. Allot observed the pose,
went through the physical motion of drawing what he saw, except that he did not use any
medium to record the movements of his hands.

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[308] Storey, *Storey: Plays Three*, London: Methuen, 1998, p. xii.
[309] Storey, *Life Class, ibid.*, p. 216.
[310] *Ibid.*, p. 219.

The students never see Allot practising the techniques he professes and rumors

abound about what he produces. Catherine finally asks:

> **Catherine**: What sort of paintings do you paint, sir?
>
> **Allot**: I don't
>
> **Catherine**: Do you do sculpture, then?
>
> **Allot**: No.
>
> **Catherine**: What do you do, then, sir?
>
> **Allot**: It's my opinion that painting and sculpture, and all
> the traditional forms of expression in the plastic arts,
> have had their day, Catherine . . . It's my opinion that the
> artist has been driven back—or driven on, to look at it in
> a positive way—to creating his works, as it were, in
> public.[311]

The product of art is not the production of a material object for private perusal, but a

transient event meant to be experienced. Here Allot describes what is essentially a

'happening'— that is to say, a fine art practice of creating a controlled environment for

spectators to enter and in which to participate. The ways in which the event transpires

depends upon the reactions of the participants to the stimuli. Art becomes a lived,

phenomenological experience guided by the constraints of the form of the event.

Towards the end of Act I, Philips asks if he has figured out how to sell his artwork,

but Allot has not yet determined that.[312] Perhaps, Storey has; he brings spectators into

the theatre to watch his transient composition, otherwise understood as a play, be

recreated each evening according to his plans that exist in the form of a playscript. Allot

elucidates the process in another conversation with Catherine:

> Just as Courbet or Modigliani, or the great Dutch Masters
> . . . created their work out of everyday things, so the
> contemporary artist creates his work out of the
> experience—the events as well as the objects—with
> which he's surrounded in his day-to-day existence . . . for
> instance, our meeting here today . . . the feelings and
> intuitions expressed by all of us inside this room . . . are
> in effect the creation—the re-creation—of the artist . . . to
> the extent that they are controlled, manipulated,
> postulated, processed, defined, sifted, *refined* . . .[313]

Allot explains that he is the one in control of the events in the classroom, but Storey is the

real artist who has created a play that requires the actors to behave and say certain

things. This is metatheatrical contemplation on the ways in which writers create and

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[311] *Ibid.*, pp. 188-189.

[312] *Ibid.*, p. 202.

[313] *Ibid.*, p. 188.

control artistic expression. The play is the playwright's piece of visual art whose creation is revealed in performance. Storey's control is manifest in subtle ways; what goes on stage depends on what needs he has for the characters. Catherine leaves the stage to fill her pen, Mathews and Gillian dance together, and Allot critiques the students' efforts at drawing. As stated previously, the ways in which they draw is based on their peers' comments in the dialogue. Spectators are presented with what looks like a naturalistic play, but like *tromp lo'oeil* painting—it only is perceived as naturalistic. They do not learn anything concrete about the characters or their background as one might in a naturalistic play. It is in the ambiguity of the actions and the images, that leaves the composition open to interpretations by the actors, directors and spectators, thereby, offering possibilities in which to engage with the experience. How did Allot arrive at his aesthetic? Does Allot commit suicide after he is fired for the rape? Does he ever paint again? We do not know and the play will never tell us. It may be that Storey does not know himself. The play becomes a riddle for the spectator to consider and project opinions. It is an artist's depiction of the ways in which he sees a life class and the ways in which the characters behave, interact and occupy that space. The event is the feelings and intuitions that the theatre spectator experiences while watching the playwright's work performed. Seeing that unfold is the act of watching the creative processes of an artist.

The techniques used to portray this life class are similar to the principles that Allot advocates for perceiving and understanding art as distinct from life. By watching the physical movement of the actors through the stage environment, such as when the students sit quietly observing Stella as they draw, and listening to the aesthetic philosophy of its protagonist when he outlines the invisible event, the spectator is confronted with images of artists at work. While watching this depiction, one can begin to question the visual mechanisms that are at work in its presentation; "Why am I watching actors observing a nude model?" Like the avant-garde practices in the visual arts during the 1970s, the playwright creates an artwork that is concerned with the act of watching. It is self-reflexively contemplating its theatrical form. It shows what it is, the ways in which it is what it is, but leaves what it all means to the reception of the spectator. In this case the spectators are students being asked to consider their part in this creative process. It is the ways in which the spectators see what they see that constitutes the artistic event.

Life Class is about the activities these students and teachers carry out each day.
It asks the spectator to look at daily life as constructed by the playwright and watch the
minute and seemingly mundane for all that is happening there, whether seen or unseen.
Bent, who played Warren in the 1974 production, liked the idea that Storey might be
painting with people:

> Ah, that's a very good way of putting it. Is that blob in the
> corner a person, or is that bold stroke in the left-hand
> corner an act? It is like painting with people and it almost
> becomes a dance as well. In Life Class people go on
> and off stage throughout. Other teachers come in for
> cups of tea, and students are going out for no particular
> reason. It just moves around in a circle.[314]

After watching this dance of three-dimensional painting, the spectators are left to consider
what they saw. It is a process of leaving questions unanswered in the end. It is exactly in
the vein of the expressionists to render visible through artistic means what is invisible and
felt.

Painterly composition

The Contractor (1969) is a play about workmen from a contracting firm
constructing a marquee for the boss' daughter's wedding. Again, Storey uses a single
fixed-set which changes over the duration of the play and then returns to its natural state.
An enormous tent is erected within the framed box of a proscenium stage [**Figure 5.8**].
The figure depicts Ewbank and his mother inspecting the tent as Glendinning finishes
putting plants around the pole. Spectators are confronted with a three-dimensional
installation whose front plane is similar to that of a painted canvas. Like the
impressionistic painting les raboteurs de parquet by Gustave Caillebotte [**figure 5.9**],
Storey depicts workmen in an environmental context. The painting sheds insight into
Storey's technique. What Caillebotte achieves with paint and canvas, Storey creates
through the integration of live actors, a set and words. Though their media differ, the
spectator's invitation to perceive the pictorial organisation is the same. The play is a living
painting that offers a series of images and allusions for spectators to make associations
with work and the cyclical nature of mortality.

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[314] Bent, ibid., p. 11.

The subject of *les raboteurs de parquet* is the stripping of wood from a parquet

floor by three men in a large room during summer. As Kirk Varnedoe describes,

> The 'stripes' in the floor are dry wood exposed by the first
> step in the process, the passage of a heavy-duty, two-
> handled plane, the *rabot*, over buckled edges of the
> planks. The right-hand worker here holds the *rabot*. The
> broad light area at lower left is the result of the second
> step, the overall scraping.[315]

The workmen carry out specific tasks in the environment. The three steps of the process

are depicted simultaneously. A static image encapsulates a multi-step process that

occurs over time. Varnedoe goes on to suggest that the three men in Caillebotte's

painting not only represent three stages of the floor restoration process, but also are the

same man in three stages of the refinishing process. Caillebotte uses the conventions of

narrative painting to place the men in three sections of the composition doing three jobs to

carry the viewer through the entire process in a single image. He uses the constraints of

the painting medium to express time through a static image. In the same way, Storey

shows the characters' interactions and relationship to the work-site to explicate the play's

possibilities. The contrast allows for a discourse to emerge. Storey uses time to show the

spectator the entire process of erecting the tent, and in turn suggest the stages of a

working man's career. There are three men (Old Ewbank, Ewbank, and Paul) and three

stages of life (youth, middle age, and old age). They represent three work ethics, three

places of contemplating life and three alternative ways of approaching a task. During the

course of the first act, Old Ewbank reminisces about the past because he wishes he could

still work, Ewbank is on the cusp of retirement and looks back on what he has created,

and Paul contemplates what type of life he wants to create. At the close of Act I, the

workmen exit leaving Paul alone in the half-built marquee.

> *It grows silent.*
>
> *Paul stands gazing round at the interior, grows
> abstracted.*
>
> *Sits on a bag of muslin, arms resting on knees.*
>
> *Begins to whistle quietly to himself: a slow, rather
> melancholy tune.*
>
> *After a while the lights slowly fade.*[316]

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[315] Kirk Varnedoe, *Gustave Caillebotte*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987, p. 54.
[316] Storey, *ibid.*, p. 155.

The spectator is offered an image of Paul shown resting and contemplating his fate in the world that he inhabits. Paul is born of the manual labourer, yet educated to live a life of leisure. He has yet to find an identity and a place he feels valuable. Seen in the garden of his house amidst the half-built marquee, he is left to figure out how to complete the construction of himself and come to terms with his upbringing.

Storey lays out the actor's movement throughout the play with the highly technical mechanisms of constructing the marquee, where steps must be followed to erect it properly. At the opening of the play the stage directions instruct:

> The stage is set with three tent poles for a marquee,
> twenty or thirty foot high, down centre of the stage at right
> angles to the audience. The poles should be solid and
> permanently fixed, the ropes supporting them, from the
> top, running off into the wings. Each pole is equipped
> with the necessary pulley blocks and ropes, the latter
> fastened off near the base as the play begins. Two ridge
> poles, to be used for the muslin, are set between the
> poles.[317]

Storey is explicit in his direction of the tent construction. As Lindsay Anderson, the director of the first production at the Royal Court Theatre in 1969 explains,

> Looking back, I'm not sure how we did it. I certainly
> couldn't have done it if David hadn't been there, because
> he knew from experience how tents were erected. I had
> the feeling— I don't really know how correct this was—
> that the actors needed to discover the play and the
> physical practical activity at the same time, so we had a
> preliminary day when a professional came down from the
> firm who supplied the tent and showed us how it was
> done.[318]

The actors had to follow the tolerances and parameters that Storey laid out, to find out the ways in which to make the rhythms of the dialogue and the interactions work.

With the entrance of each actor, layer upon layer of detail is added as with the ways in which a painting gradually develops organically into a unified whole. For example, the play starts at a stasis. The stage is bare with poles on it. Then Storey adds a figure to the composition:

> Early morning. Kay enters. He's a big man, hard, in his
> forties, dressed in working trousers and a jacket, not at
> all scruffy. He's smoking, just off the lorry, and comes in
> looking round with a professional eye at the scene, at the

[317] Storey, *The Contractor*, in *Storey Plays: One*, London: Methuen, 1992, p. 113.
[318] Ada Brown Mather, "Celebrating Good Playwriting: A Talk with Lindsay Anderson", in William Hutching, ed., *David Storey: A Casebook*, London: Garland Publishing, 1992, pp. 9-10.

poles. He tests one of the ropes, checks another, casual, in no hurry.[319]

When he enters and inspects the pulley lines, he draws the spectator's focus to the job at hand. **Figure 5.10** shows a moment latter in the play when the tent is up and the men come to check the lines. Marshall enters with props that are going to be added to the poles and jokes around with Kay. With each entrance of each character, the props they carry add to the on-stage environment. Slowly the set becomes filled with various tools of the trade that also may communicate information about the people using them. Storey's living-painting builds beat by beat of the actors' performance. As with the painting process, dabs of colour in the form of figures and props are being added to direct the viewer's focus to the central image of the composition. The production team has leeway in the ornamentation of the construct; that is to say, the choice of actor, clothing and pace, but the elements direct the spectator's focus to the work process, the marquee, and the house grounds. The spectators gradually learn the social hierarchy of the men and the actions and words point out the environmental conditions.

One way that Storey is able to organise the play's images is by defining different spaces. Each character added to the image also helps define the place, domain, and paths of movement. Ultimately, what are created are an on-stage place and several off-stage domains. The place of the play is the tent construction site seen by the spectator on-stage. It exists in a domain that also contains Ewbank's house, the lorry, the neighbouring town, the wedding banquet, and the invisible off-stage lives of these men. Early on, the stage directions dictate the necessity of two paths on-stage and off-stage. The men must be able to enter and exit to the lorry and the family must be able to enter and exit to the house. As William Free notes,

> The imaginary path linking the off-stage house and the on-stage action connects the two spaces in only one direction. The family come and go at ease, but the workers never exit the stage to the house. It is a territory closed to them, one which defines them in conventional class structure. They are workers, the Ewbanks are bosses. The workers remain separate.[320]

Besides these conventional class separations there is also an issue of the ways in which the characters enter and exit to these off-stage places. Ewbank crosses freely between

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[319] Storey, *The Contractor*, p. 113.

the two worlds, yet his behaviour gives the impression that he is more comfortable out with the workers. Old Ewbank seems to be excluded from both worlds. He has to be under the supervision of his wife or one of the children, because he lives in his memories of the past. He is free only in the domain of his memory. Glendenning, perhaps because of his mental infirmity, is also allowed to venture up to the house. He does so with as much ease and vigour as when he runs off to the lorry or to town. Paul is the only character who seems to feel equally ill at ease in both the house and the work site though he has every right to be in either place. The movement conventions make manifestations of social class visibly tangible.

The men's idle banter almost is incidental to the action of the construction. The rhythm of the dialogue, as Richard Cave and Lindsay Anderson explain, is subjugated by the rhythm of the work. The conversation serves to propel the action forward and occupy the time during the tedious day while the work moves them into different sculptural configurations. To accomplish this an actor playing Marshall might think, "I must team up with Fitzpatrick to make fun of Kay, so I must move close to him to illustrate that." Styan's definition of stage dialogue, "that in stage language 'the words go somewhere, move towards a predetermined end . . . [and] advance the action of the play", does not fit Storey's use of text.[321] Rather, the dialogue reflects Bronislaw Malinowski's definition of 'Phatic Commune' — that is to say, they are using words that "serve to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the need of companionship and does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas".[322] The phatic commune occupies the minds and ears of the spectators as they watch the images unfold. The play grows in detail to a point where the portrait is conducive to the spectator's probing and questioning of work ethic and class distinction. Ewbank's fascination with the divots of grass, or the men's fascination with Kay's prison term is to be perceived by the spectator as nuances of meaning rather than blatant articulation of thematic importance. They allude to a larger discourse embracing life's structure, or life's circumstances as represented by Storey.

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[320] William Free, "Space, Language and Action in *The Contractor*", in Hutching, *ibid.*, p. 205.
[321] Free, *ibid.*, p. 202.
[322] *Ibid.*, p. 160

Storey creates a picture that is integrated with text and functions in a similar way to Caillebotte's framed composition. The images contained therein are suggestive of a multitude of motifs and themes. Quigly suggests that the image of the men working for Ewbank is a metaphor for the contractual obligations workers have for their employers.[323] The poses and identities of the actors become emblematic of ideas concerning changing conceptions of a work ethic. When watching *The Contractor*, as one would view a painting in a gallery, the construction and dismantling of the tent is to be seen as a representation of the life cycle. A marquee is not a permanent construction, as human life is fated to end. That which takes place during the event of building will fade with time. Fitzpatrick and Ewbank reflect upon this premise:

> **Fitzpatrick** [*coming in*]: A lot of holes you have in here . . .
>
> [*Looking round*].
>
> **Ewbank:** Aye. Well. It'll grow again. Come today.
> Gone tomorrow.
>
> **Bennett:** Everything in its season.
>
> **Ewbank:** Aye. That's right . . .[324]

Everything took place on the lawn, and yet afterward there is little evidence that anything occurred. The lawn is a little worse for wear, but that is to be expected. In the same that way that each character moves on after the event, and time and tide has its effect, the circumstances of life, work, and living do not change. The stasis of the empty stage seen at the beginning of the play resumes. What little intrusion the construction and the party have made are incidental. The divots of grass are pushed back into place and all traces of the party on this spot will disappear with the passing of time.

The experience of the play points to the metatheatrical contemplation of the observation of art objects. The dramaturgical composition is designed to encourage an awareness of the artistic composition. Storey recounts: "Watching the contractor from *behind* the heads of the audience I was struck by the nature of an event in which the viewer views the viewer viewing the object (performance art, at the time, very much to the fore)".[325] He observed that the activity of watching was as much an element of the artistic experience as the event / object on stage. The spectator's response to the artist's view is

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[323] Quigley, *ibid.*, pp. 259-276.
[324] Storey, *The Contractor*, p. 219.

a component that endows the experience with the expression of human emotion towards objects and spaces.

Spatial portraits

As Ned Sherrin reports, *The Changing Room* (1971) "was acclaimed for Storey's accuracy in capturing the sporting rituals inside the dingy locker room of a Rugby League club before, during and after a Saturday game".[326] Among the numerous reviews of the play since 1971 are accounts by athletes of the ways in which the activity, behaviour and characters are authentic. Others report on the lingering smell of liniment and ruddy bottoms steamed by the bath. Its naturalism leads to scholarly discussions of the physical and psychological changes the men go through as they enter as individuals, unite as team-mates, fight for their lives on the field, bathe and then depart as individuals again.[327] Bent's summary of the play suggests why the critics focus on the documentary style:

> There is no plot in *The Changing Room* as such. When you leave the theatre, nothing's really happened apart from a game. A rugby match that you don't see has happened off-stage, but you are aware the players have gone through tensions before they go on, things happen that when they come out of the bath jubilantly and that they've won. Nothing really happens on-stage, the action really happens in your head or off-stage. That's the sort of through-line that David seems to have. It doesn't matter where it happens, you can actually show an audience how you feel about it, how you react to it or about it or against it.[328]

As no overt action occurs on stage, discussions of the play focus on the personalities of the players as they change both clothing and social function. A less obvious connotation of the title is that it also suggests a spatial aspect of the production, namely the change that the room goes through. Not only does its appearance change because of the differing light that enters the window as the afternoon passes and the sun sets, but it also changes appearance as it is used as a dressing place, training ground, and surgery, from empty to full and dirty to clean. As it transforms, its energy changes and it takes on feelings of claustrophobia or spaciousness depending on the number of people filling the space. Storey conceived the play as he sat watching *The Contractor*. He states:

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[325] Storey, *Storey Plays: Three*, London: Methuen, 1998, p. xi.
[326] Ned Sherrin, "The Changing Room" *Sunday Express*, 18 February 1996.
[327] See Quigley, *ibid.*, pp. 259-276.
[328] Bent, *ibid.*, p. 2.

> It had also struck me that the activity I was observing was not unlike that associated with any performance—not least, since I had at one time played rugby league football, that of a professional footballer: *he* came into a room, changed from private individual (conspicuously) into a public performer (he wore a uniform), went out, performed, returned, reverted to his previous persona— and departed: simultaneously the room itself underwent a not dissimilar transformation: empty to begin with, gradually filling, emptying again, the room, in short, both object and subject, active and passive: it changed those within it and, in turn, was changed itself.[329]

The play's focus is the spatial dynamic of the room and its occupants. The spectators' understanding of the room changes as they see the ways in which the different characters feel about the room.

Storey describes the basic structure of the play as follows: "*The Changing Room* begins and ends with an empty room. When I sketched the play, I had the intention of beginning with an empty room—and then to see, how life leaves it again".[330] Harry, the caretaker, enters first, carrying out his duties at a slow pace. He is the one human constant in the ever-changing flow of players and coaches that filters through the room. In contrast to Harry's slow pace, there is Patsy, an aggressive hotshot who in his youthful arrogance behaves as if he runs the place. He goes directly to his locker, unfolds his clothing and complains that he does not yet have a towel. Once he has checked his equipment with fastidious care, he goes to the fire to warm up and then to the mirror to primp. After chatting to Harry, he takes off his overcoat, finds he does not have a hanger and explodes, "Haven't you got a bloody coathanger? Damn well ask for one each week".[331] The others have a range of rhythms, ranging from passive behaviour to explosive behaviour.

Other players straggle in, first Fielding slow and easy going, then Morley in a nervous rush to the toilet and Kendal lost in his own world. A while later, the characters enter as groups gradually increasing in number. The atmosphere changes as each new element is added; Kendal drones on about mundane household matters, and Morley and Fielding wittily joke around.[332] A new set of attitudes and energy is thrown into the mix. It

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[329] Storey, *Storey: Plays :Three*, *ibid*, p. ix.
[330] Horst Vollmer, "The Changing Room" program Germany.
[331] Storey, *ibid.*, p. 4.
[332] *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

becomes a moving mosaic of the room's characteristics, which adds another dimension to

the room. As Storey explains,

> I like to write about things which apparently do not
> happen. In other words: in every play the unmentioned is
> much more important than the mentioned. The room
> between the lines is, so to speak, the plot—not the line
> itself, which only triggers the plot.[333]

All of the mundane actions that occur are in aid of an expression of the rhythms of the

space. Each character provides a different dynamic to the image. The other players add

varying degrees of energy to the room as they enter. Some are friendly, some fast, some

fat and some thin; Jagger is a sturdy, medium built man with a perky attitude, Fenchurch

is a small man and Trevor is a quiet, sturdy school teacher.[334]

The integration of text and image specifies the ways in which they feel about the

game, the room and themselves. Bent who played Clegg in the 1996 production,

recounted how with so little to build their characters upon, the actors still managed to find

'sign-posts' to aid in their creation of their characters:

> Like in the way the coach talks to you, "You're not doing
> your job right". I noticed very early on, Sir Frederick
> Thornton who owns the club, never talks to me and never
> looks at me . . . That gave me something to work on.
> Everyone had something like that, whether they were
> constantly praised, whether they were the young whiz-kid
> who was going to take someone's place, whether the
> substitutes were going to get on instead of you, or
> whether injury would ruin your career . . . So, from these
> mere snippets and snatches of conversation, you build
> up a canvas, which slowly gets painted. If we do our job
> right then you should come out feeling that you've seen .
> . . a piece that has hidden depth. Although it is not there
> in the lines, it is there in the attitude of each character.[335]

There is layer upon layer of minute worry that each character carries around with him

during the show. Clegg needs the job and his behaviour reflects his desire to retain it.

The game is for some a way out of the poverty they live in. The manner that their inner-

monologues reflect this influence and their interrelation with the others subtly makes an

impression on the spectators. The text sets a context with which to make associations

with the images that are being viewed.

The effect that Storey achieves by structuring the play to communicate in this way

is comparable to the effect that Kossoff achieves in his painting *The Flower and Fruit Stall,*

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[333] Vollmer, *Ibid.*

[334] Storey, *ibid.,* p. 14.

Embankment, August [**figure 5.11**]. Spectators discern the life of the room by the swirl of activity within it, much the same way a viewer can make out Kossoff's feelings for the Embankment by the swirl of colour animating its entrance. Storey's play has the luxury of taking place during time—he introduces each character one by one. Once they are all assembled, there are so many views given all at once that it takes on a swirl of activity. For example, right before the men are ready to go out onto the pitch:

> Crosby is moving amongst the players; now all of them
> are almost ready: moving over to the mirror, combing
> hair, straighting collars, tightening boots, chewing,
> greasing ears, emptying coat pockets of wallets, etc., and
> handing them to Crosby, Sandford or Luke.[336]

The Kossoff painting uses the rosy mass of cobblestones to imply action and life. The station stands coldly in the background as a setting for the action of life. As the viewer of the painting never will know exactly what the individual figures in front of the station are feeling, the spectator of the play never will know exactly what each player feels. Spectators see an indication or a sketch of each figure's attitudes that are differentiated through action and dialogic exchange. It is through the integration of text and image that the atmosphere or character of the space and its inhabitants comes to the surface. Kossoff too defines each individual, even when we just see a brush stroke depicting the mass of a body. A sketch of a crowd of individuals, is composed of parts that when seen together make up a picture of a whole.

The changing room is a place similar to the Embankment where people filter in and out. Quigley argues, Storey

> Dramatises the temporary and contractual nature of
> social relationships . . . when the warning bell rings for
> the start of a game, the transformation of the
> independent parts into a single unit is given visual
> embodiment as the players, now dressed alike, line up in
> the sequence dictated by numbers.[337]

The men no longer are teachers, mechanics, nobleman or bankers. They enter into a new arrangement to accomplish a task. The ways in which one is involved with the game, the job or the room changes from day to day and person to person. What remains a constant is the setting of the action within that space. It is an institution of sorts, which changes through time as much as the people who use it change. Storey does not judge

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[335] Bent, *ibid.*, pp. 2-3.
[336] Storey, *ibid.*, p. 34.

the institution, but merely points us to a lens that focuses on various attitudes and energies of the people who inhabit the room.

The final few minutes of the play perhaps show the clearest indications of the ways in which the play is as much about the characters' relationships to the room and the game, as it is about the activity seen. Again, as in *The Contractor*, the men talk of everyday life, which in turn becomes emblematic of their feelings:

> **Crosby**: How're feeling?
> **Owens**: Stiff.
> **Crosby**: Bloody past it, lad, tha knows.
> **Owens**: Aye. One more season, I think: I'm finished.
> *Crosby laughs.*[338]

They are not talking about anything that will propel the plot forward in any traditional way, or even imparting much information, but they are sharing a moment, which renders a feeling between the men tangible:

> **Crosby**: Another bloody season yet.
> *Puts out the light.*
> Poor old Fieldy.
> **Owens**: Aye.
> **Crosby**: Ah, well . . . this time tomorrer.
> **Owens**: Have no more bloody worries then.
>
> *They laugh. Crosby puts his arm round Owens. They go. Pause.*
>
> *Harry comes in, looks round. He carries a sweeping brush. Starts sweeping. Picks up one or two bits of tape, etc. Turns on the Tannoy: light music.*
>
> *Sweeps.*
>
> *The remaining light and the sound of the Tannoy slowly fade.*[339]

Owens and Crosby exit leaving the room to Harry, who waits for it all to begin again. The spectator is left with the sense that the room is more than a space, more a place imbued with unseen energy.

A momentary pause as they leave provides a glimpse into the play's attachment to the life of the room and for what it symbolises. Bent explains the way in which this is accomplished:

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[337] Quigley, *ibid.*, p. 267.
[338] Storey, *ibid.*, p. 91.

> At the very end of the play when we leave, we each
> wanted to leave as an individual. We wanted to take
> away from the picture. We wanted to put on minus signs
> on there, saying look how the room is less for that
> character: "Look how that one who was quite noisy in the
> corner is quiet now because the two people who he
> reacted with most in the evening have gone home". It
> leaves him a solitary figure, so he's different. It is quite
> sad how they go back to being individuals with homes
> and wives and misery and happiness or whatever they
> have. Each player leaves until finally only Harry
> remains.[340]

Little by little, the bustle of activity is minimised to the emptiness at the beginning, except

we feel different towards it because we have got to know it. A common history is forged

and a superficial facade becomes a portrait. Storey has put us 'there' for a time, as if to

say, "This is the way it was, make of it what you will".

Intimate spaces

Despite the highly dialogic form of text, several principles in the composition of the

dramaturgical structure remain the same. A single setting can contain the emotional

interrelation of the actors to each other and their memories within that space. A dwelling

is endowed with the feelings that the occupants ascribe to the events that take place

there. One's family home, for example, carries with it its memories. As Bachelard

professes in *The Poetics of Space*, the different nooks and crannies of the house collect

the memories of the time spent in that space, that is to say that the house is an emblem of

the human psyche in the form of spatial memories.[341] Bill Viola also recounts the ways in

which space has played a role in memory throughout history— to remember a speech or

treatise the ancients would picture the different part of a temple, where the section of the

argument was housed.[342] A walk through the temple is a walk through the argument, and

could thus be recalled by picturing the temple.

In his plays, *The Farm*, *In Celebration* and *The March on Russia*, Storey brings

together families at home in order to express the emotions of the family when they are

brought together in that space. Over the course of the plays, the children in each play

return home for a celebration and as the event takes place, the demons of the family's

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[339] *Ibid.*, p. 92.
[340] Bent, *ibid.*, pp. 15-16.
[341] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

past emerge and each member of the family must cope in one's own way. *The March on Russia* will serve as an example of the ways in which Storey uses the space of the home to trigger the characters display of emotions that reflect their feelings towards the memories within that space and towards each other. Overall, the expression of emotion created through the integration of language and image colours the spectator's awareness of the family home, thus creating a gesturalist composition.

After viewing the National Theatre production, the newspaper critic John Wilders reported that nothing happens in *The March on Russia* (1989). While that is true in terms of physical dramatic action, the true action occurs on an emotional level accessible through small actions performed by the actors. The play is set in the Pasmore's retirement bungalow, on the occasion of their diamond jubilee anniversary, when their three children, Colin, Wendy and Eileen pop in for an unexpected visit. The spectator never learns exactly why there is so much tension in the house, why the parents do not get along or why the children are angry with their parents. There are intimations in the text that Mrs Pasmore did not appreciate her husband's laborious coal mining and that Mr Pasmore has never been able to give her anything but the bare essentials. As Wilders suggests in his review, the play is a perfect production of utter bleakness.[343]

Underneath the everyday bickering of the characters lingers untold hostility. The effect upon the spectator of watching Pasmore get yelled at by his wife for using a tea towel to polish his shoes is unbearable. Storey never does more than sketch an explanation for why the characters are behaving the way they are in any given situation. Rather than let the play become a sentimental portrait of old age or a family reunion, the spectator is left with a feeling of pure gloom.

Through most of the play, the banter of the characters reveals little more than the mundane workings of their everyday life:

> **Pasmore**: I only slept in after I gev up work. (*He indicates the fire.*) Stayed in, bit o' coal on.
>
> **Mrs Pasmore**: We ought to order another ton. It's running out in the bunker.

[342] Bill Viola, *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973-1994*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995.
[343] John Wilders, "The March on Russia", *Times Literary Supplement*, 14-26 April 1989, p. 396.

Pasmore: I'll do it. Leave it to me.

Mrs Pasmore: If I left anything to you it would never be done. Have you had any breakfast?

Pasmore: What I want.

Mrs Pasmore: I only want a piece of toast. (*She goes into the kitchen.*)

Pasmore: The kettle's boiled. (*He picks up his cup of tea which is standing, hot, on the mantelpiece.*) The piece of toast is already cooked.

Mrs Pasmore: How did you know I'd want one? (*She turns the radio off.*)

Pasmore: Toast is usually on the menu. This morning, I assume, no different from any other.[344]

Life goes by—the grandchildren send postcards, tea gets made, coal brought in and arguments brew over dirtied towels. Storey uses the conventions of staging banal patterns of domestic interaction. Social and cultural codes guide the characters' actions and patterns of spatial utility. The characters interrelate over tea, and the spectator sees five people on a realistic set, performing realistic actions of clearing teacups, lighting the fire and browsing the content of the room as they speak. The emotional landscape and differing perspectives is seen much the same way the strokes of the paint brush are visible in the dried paint on the canvas. The expression of images and emotion create ambiguities within the conflicting emotions that build up over the play. Storey introduces one character after another, with different problems and memories, brewing up a storm of interrelationships and web of tension. These different attitudes and problems only point to a range of possible ways of understanding what is happening in the play regarding sibling rivalry, retirement, abusive memories and depression.

The balance between realist theatre and expressionistic painting guides the spectator into an experience of the conflicting emotions of the characters. At the end, the spectator is left to contemplate the home they have just visited. The final image of the play is of Mr and Mrs Pasmore standing alone in their living room:

Pasmore weeps.

Mrs Pasmore: Oh, now, Tommy.

Pasmore, his face still shielded, is silent.

Mrs Pasmore: Tell me—that time—when you marched in Russia.

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[344] Storey, "The March on Russia" in *Storey Plays: Two*, London: Methuen, 1994, pp. 191-192.

Pasmore: Russia.

Mrs Pasmore: General Denisov.

Pasmore: Denisov.

Mrs Pasmore: He came aboard at Odessa.

Pasmore: Odessa

Mrs Pasmore: In tears

Pasmore: In tears.

Mrs Pasmore: With his wife.

Pasmore: His wife.

Mrs Pasmore: As the ship sailed out . . .

Pasmore: As the ship sailed out . . .

Mrs Pasmore: As the ship sailed out . . .

Pasmore: He took her hand. (*Pause.*) He said.
(*Pause.*) 'Oh, where are we going to my love?'

> *Her gaze, full of tears, is turned to her husband; his
> grief-stricken face is turned on hers. The anguish of their
> past and present life is evident between them.*

> *The light slowly fades.*[345]

The story they tell between them is a way of illustrating the jumble of emotion they feel for

each other. The General's feelings towards his wife, as expressed through his gesture of

holding her hand and the spoken comment reminds the Pasmores of the tenderness and

love lost behind the facade of fighting and hostility they present to the world. This story

brings out a deeper emotional dimension beyond the image of two old people standing

and crying. The final vignette / portrait is worth far more than a thousand words of prose

Storey could write to express what he said in this simple image aided by text.

Visual techniques, impressions and gestures make up the expression of the play.

Figure 5.12 shows the front cloth that Storey painted for the National Theatre production

of *The March on Russia*.[346] In one sense, the naturalistic appearance of his work that the

critics focus on is central to a spectator's understanding of it—the characters are on-stage

performing actions in a space made to look like a retirement bungalow. But on the other

hand, there is the internal world of the characters that is made manifest during

performance. Spectators will watch the characters go about their business, and never

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[345] *Ibid.*, pp. 258-259.

[346] Storey has often been quoted as complaining about the realistic pictures the publishers
of his novels print on their book jackets. For example, on the cover of *This Sporting Life*
(Middlesex: Penguin, 1962) there is a Rugby League player dressed for a game sitting in a

learn who they are. Only by watching carefully are the occasional innuendoes and ebb and flow of character movement noticeable. They reveal themselves in much the same way, in fits and starts, as humans reveal personality in everyday life. For example, when Colin is talking with his sisters he makes a mistake about sending a letter that shows that there is more going on than meets the eyes: "Perhaps I didn't. (*He sits, abstracted.*) I intended writing a letter (*He exchanges a look with Wendy. Then:*) Bloody freezing up there last night. There is no heat in that bedroom."[347] An accumulation of moments like this creates a conception of character.

As the characters are presented on a stage, all of the action, both implicit and explicit, the interaction and the exchange of dialogue add an emotional weight to the pictorial expression. Their emotional life, though not explained, begins to distort the naturalism. The front-cloth image is not a photograph or a sketch of a village bungalow, but a gesturalist landscape with grey and blue hills in the distance. In the foreground on which the pink houses, "almost without shape" are placed, a deep purple ground fades into black as it reaches the bottom edge of the painting.[348] The houses are masses that we make out to be houses because they have what look like chimneys, but are just as easily crabs on the seashore. Its scale lends expression to the emotion laid out over the setting. The colour palette that Storey chose for the house and background creates a contrast. The pastel orange gives the houses life and warmth, and stands out from the pale, cold landscape. The sky casts its shadow over the houses, as would the edge of a storm about to break, but the houses grouped together endows them with a look of security. They seem to be protecting each other from the lonely alien world surrounding them. The viewer's immediate impressions are of the picture's environmental aura, rather than of the physical characteristics of the mountainscape. The painting can be looked at as a visual expression of the emotional downpour that may occur inside the house of the two senior citizens whose lives are reaching their sunset.[349] Though the family is made up of individuals and separated like the houses, as their arrangement together as a unit

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changing room. Storey feels this misleads his readers about the content and spirit of the novel.
[347] Storey, *ibid.*, p.218.
[348] Storey, *Pasmore, ibid.*, p. 19.
[349]Malcolm Pittock's "Storey's Portrayal of Old Age: *The March on Russia*", *Neophilogogus* 78 (1994), is an interesting discussion about the couple's sense of mortality.

creates a bond against the cruel world surrounding them. It would be too much of a simplification to think of it only on that level, but it is a useful way of gaining an impression of what is the interrelation of its subject and figures.

Furthermore, the picture of Storey painting the front-cloth for *In Celebration* [**figure 5.13**] illustrates the compositional similarities to, and therefore intentions of the gesturalists. Note the way in which Storey's picture's thrusts of the streets and distorted forms of the architecture are reminiscent of Kossoff's *Demolition of the Old House, Dalston Junction Summer* [**figure 5.14**]. The lines characterise the masses as tottering and disintegrating. We learn as much about the appearance of the building as the experience of being in and around them. Looking at the plays of Storey with this in mind, we can start to put a finger on the elusive emotions that shape our experience of them.

Integrated systems of expression

Storey's work is a filter between realist theatre and the coterie expressions of avant-garde happenings. We are offered a picture of a recognisable world with a chance of finding our own path and concrete reaction to a work of art. Quigley sums up the strength of Storey's drama:

> Is not in the solutions it offers but in the subtlety and variety of the perspectives it provides on the dilemmas inherent in social contracts and social commitments. And the foundation of that dramatic strength is not a simple reliance upon inherited devices, but the utilisation of emblematic structures and settings of striking originality.[350]

Storey claims the plays write themselves. As the text grows, the image is given a more elaborate explanation. The playwright's process is much like the spectators' process— images slowly emerge and clarify themselves. Once the tracks are laid out, the spectator can contemplate the action of the play in retrospect and define why they responded the way they did to the play.

Storey's plays are an integration of fine art principles with text created to capture in three dimensions over time the atmosphere of spatial environments as experienced by its inhabitants. He uses the theatrical form to create a flow of images. These images are filled by the activities of daily life and animated by the rhythms of the characters that move

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[350] Quigley, *ibid.*, p. 276.

through them. While his plays appear to be naturalistic, the activities and language build a complex emotional atmosphere. The space becomes the subject of the composition, rather than the context of the composition. Conversely, the human activities and conversation provide the context with which to view the space.

Storey uses the theatre as an outlet for expression that is beyond the capabilities of the traditionally conceived constraints of the fine arts and the constraints of prose fiction. The theatre provides him with a malleable medium that can balance language, image and movement. This forum can depict an environment and also provide an emotional perspective; spectators can both see and feel the space as they would outside of the artistic context. Bent said it best when he told me the spectators have to take an active part in the plays, because Storey "leaves a lot of things up to the audience. It is up to you to decide what the history was, why the character is like that, or what bad experience made him that way. It is criminology watching these plays".[351]

All successful playwrights have a sense of spatial awareness. They all use techniques that best serve their chosen expression. Visual stimulation is something we all deal with from birth. Spectators are visually literate in that they can read culturally constructed proxemic behaviour. On a daily basis, the average human is bombarded with visual stimulation from mass media. Throughout his career Storey's work has challenged preconceived notions of spectatorship by striving to find the best mode of expression to render his vision of the world. He has reacted to critical misunderstanding of his plays and attempted to teach spectators the ways in which his works can be viewed. As spectators become more aware of the visual world of his work, the clearer the abstract arguments about class and social hierarchy will become.

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[351] Bent, *ibid.*, p. 8.

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Figure 5.1; *View from Primrose Hill*, by Frank Auerbach, in *Frank Auerbach*, London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978.

Figure 5.2; *Stormy Summer Day*, by Leon Kossoff, in *Leon Kossoff XLVI Venice Biennale*, London: The British Council, 1995.

Figure 5.3; *Jazz*, by Philip Sutton, from calendar reproduction.

Figure 5.5; Production advertisement for *Stages*.
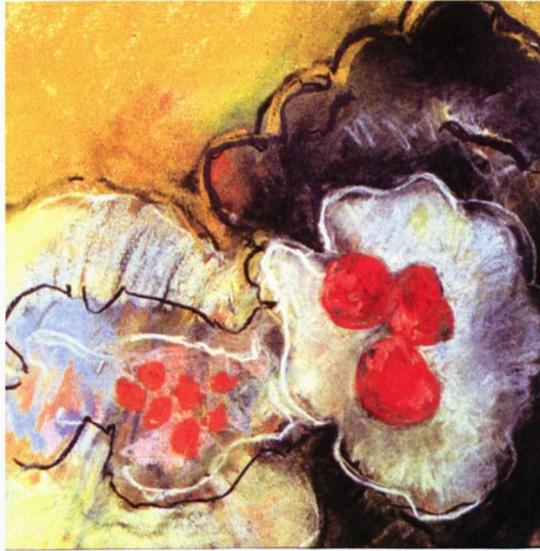
Figure 5.5; *Still Life,* by David Storey, from cover of *Storey Plays: One*, London: Methuen, 1994.

Figure 5.6; *Untitled Landscape*, by David Storey, in *Storey's Lives: Poems 1951-1991*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1992.

Figure 5.7; *Trendrine, Cornwall*, by David Bomberg, in *David Bomberg: The Later Years*, London: The Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1979.
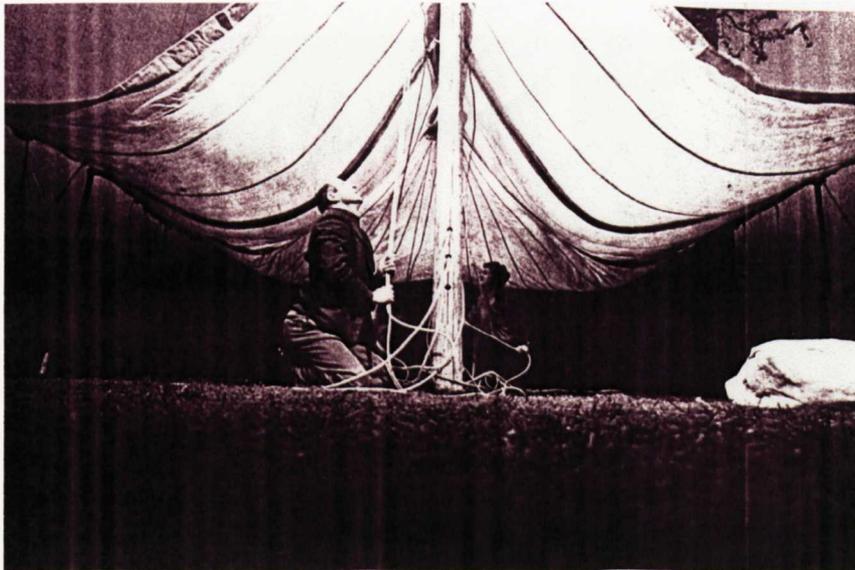
Figure 5.8; Production photograph from *The Contractor*, Theatre Museum Archive, London
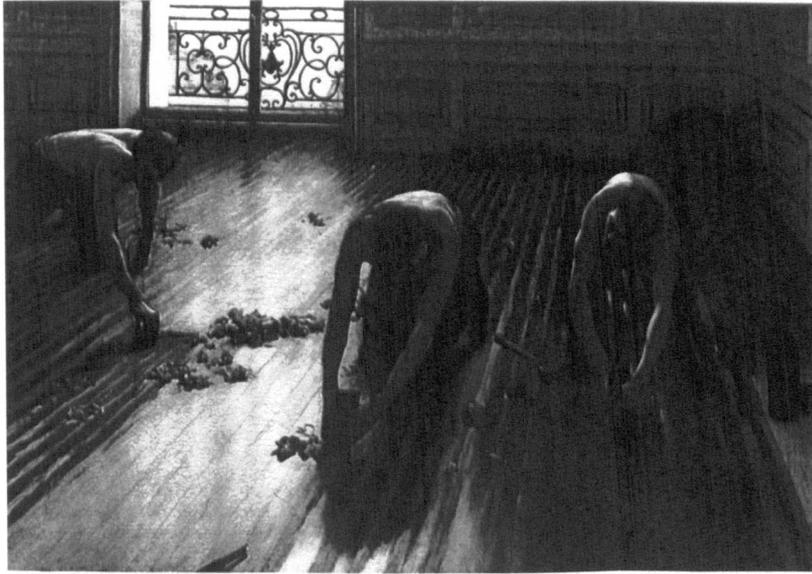
Figure 5.9; *les raboteurs de parquet*, by Gustave Caillebotte.

Figure 5.10; Production Photo from *The Contractor*, Theatre Museum Archive, London.
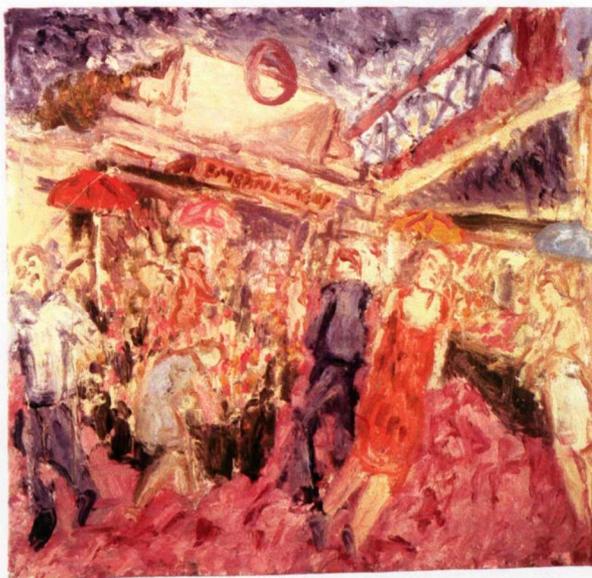
Figure 5.11; *The Flower and Fruit Stall, Embankment, August,* by Leon Kossoff, in The British Council, ed, *Leon Kossoff XLVI Venice Biennale*, London: The British Council, 1995.
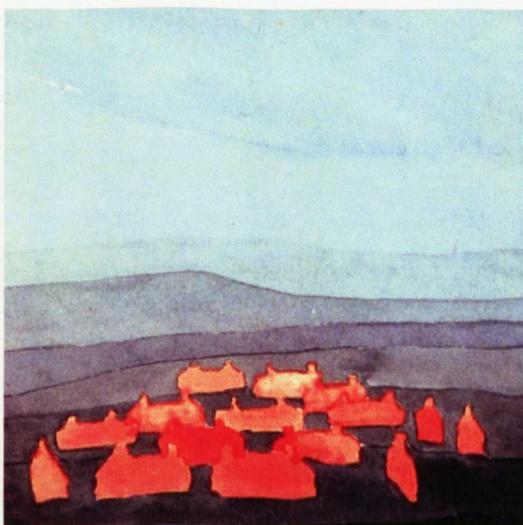
Figure 5.12; front cloth for the National Theatre production of *The March on Russia*, from cover of *Storey Plays: Two*, London: Methuen, 1994.

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Figure 5.13; Front-cloth for *In Celebration,* Theatre Museum Archive, London.

Figure 5.14; *Demolition of the Old House, Dalston Junction, Summer*, by Leon Kossoff, in *Leon Kossoff XLVI Venice Biennale*, London: The British Council, 1995.

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Chapter 6

The Questioning of Spatial Utility: Architectural space and the plays of John Arden

John Arden uses his architectural aesthetic to design and utilise stage space. His plays, are for the most part, conventional, yet the multiple styles that are included in the structure are held together by a spatial concept of presentation. Rather than building an argument based solely on plot and dialogue, the environments themselves and the uses to which they are put reinforce the purposes of each play's expression. In this chapter, three strategies will be explored for using space as a means of organisational structure that questions the practical use of social and urban space.

Arden's drama creates a world where his Everyman characters both emulate and illustrate a dichotomy of ideas. He uses spatial organisational principles to piece together the diverse styles, thereby offering a multiple-point-of-view of a multifaceted intellectual debate. He creates a play that conjures up a social space and raises questions through the character's actions within that space. From his first professional production in 1957, when the Royal Court presented *The Waters of Babylon* without décor, he mixes ballads, low comedy and even elements from Roman comedy. His form shares more in common with the traditions of medieval passion plays and Music Hall than the naturalistic and realistic drama that have predominated since the turn of the century in West-end English theatre.[352]

Most often, however, Brecht is cited as an influence over Arden. They both harness similar theatrical traditions of the employment of ballads, overt theatricality, a style that distances the spectators from the characters, didactic situations and the depiction of insoluble dilemma. These devises are employed by each, however, for slightly different effect.[353] Brecht's technique is a Marxist strategy clearly aimed at presenting a didactic story in light of the dramatist's political beliefs, while Arden's technique is more concerned with showing a range of political beliefs in the context of a

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[352] See Dan Rebellato, *1956 And All That*, London: Routledge, 1999, for a description of the Angry Generation's connection to the post-war theatre in Britain.
[353] Already, Arden's technique had found its full form before his exposure to the Berliner Ensembles' visit to London in August 1956.

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story. His politics are only a single dimension of the play.[354] Arden states outright:

> Yes, although I don't use him as a model. After I started
> writing plays, I discovered that Brecht— particularly as a
> theatrical technician— was inspired very much by the
> same sort of early drama that was interesting me. That
> is the rather conventionalised plays of the European
> Middle Ages. That is the Elizabethan writers and various
> exotic styles such as the Japanese and Chinese
> theatres.[355]

The two playwrights share an interest in non-realistic theatre and thus their work shares

many techniques in common. Arden's use of these older theatrical models can be better

understood in the context of his architectural training. What makes his opus distinctive is

his proficiency at fusing together these traditions into a product that actively engages the

spectator's intellect. This ingenuity, in part, can be attributed to his training in

architecture. Design and planning skills are apparent in the logical construction of his

dramaturgy and the use of ballads or emblematic characters are the building materials

that he exploits for the purposes of each play's expression.

There have been many comprehensive researches on Arden and on his

collaboration with Margaretta D'Arcy. Predominantly, Arden is thought of as political

activism and approaches his opus with an eye towards championing Marxist political

thought. The most significant researches are those of Ronald Hayman, Simon Trussler,

Albert Hunt, Frances Gray, Malcolm Page and Javed Malick.[356] Arden's career can be

divided into three periods. 1) Early work— of which I am primarily concerned;[357] 2) Co-

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[354] Though Javed Malick demonstrates the ways in which Arden has a Marxist agenda
throughout his opus. See *Toward a Theatre of the Oppressed: The Dramaturgy of John
Arden*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.
[355] Walter Wagner, ed., *The Playwrights Speak*, London: Longmans, 1967, p. 206.
[356] See Ronald Hayman, *John Arden*, London: Heinemann, 1969; Simon Trussler, *John
Arden*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1973; Albert Hunt, *Arden: A Study of his
Plays*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1974; Glenda Leeming, *John Arden*, Harlow: Longmans,
1974; Frances Gray, *John Arden*, London: Macmillan, 1982, Malcolm Page, *John Arden*,
Boston: Twayne, 1984; and Javed Malick, *Toward a Theatre of the Oppressed: The
Dramaturgy of John Arden*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.
[357] *The Waters of Babylon* (1957), *When is a Door not a Door?* (1958), *Live Like Pigs*,
Serjeant Musgrave's Dance (1959), *The Workhouse Donkey* (1963), *Iron Hand* (1963),
Armstrong's Last Goodnight (1964), *Left-Handed Liberty* (1965), and *The True History of
Squire Jonathan and his Unfortunate Treasure* (1968). *The Happy Haven* (1960) was
originally billed and published as being written solely by Arden. Some years later it was
decided to add Margaretta D'Arcy's name to the credits. How much she was involved can
never be known, though one critic cites a comment by Arden that Mrs Phineus' hopscotch
game was originally a skit by D'Arcy that Arden co-opted into his own material. All his
plays from that point on openly acknowledge D'Arcy's contribution.

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authored plays with D'Arcy;[358] and 3) Novels.[359] His compositional techniques found maturity in his partnership with D'Arcy and are developed further as prose episodes in his novels. The spatial mechanisms that are evident in his early work also are evident in his later work. His early work, however, is more useful for analysing the relationship of his architectural training to his spatial concepts since D'Arcy's influences are less overt.[360] His fine art perceptions figure predominately in his choice of subject as well as in the execution of their form. *The Waters of Babylon* (1957), *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959) and *Live Like Pigs* (1958) will demonstrate the ways in which Arden uses diverse theatrical styles as cohesive artistic expression.

Architectural frames

Arden has been interested in playwriting since he was sixteen, when he would fill up exercise books with plays set in historical periods. Despite winning a scholarship to read English, he decided to study architecture when he attended Kings College, Cambridge from 1950-1953. He did not "see why [reading English] would help [him] to be a writer more than anything else," besides "architecture was a professional training which [he] found interesting in itself".[361] He recognised that there is "no recognised period of training for writing—you either are or you aren't, and you don't know at the age of eighteen".[362] Training in architecture was meant to provide him with a profession to turn to if he failed as a writer.

After his tenure at King's College, Cambridge Arden returned to Edinburgh and

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[358] *The Business of Good Government* (1960), *Ars Longa Vita Brevis* (1963), *Friday's Hiding* (1965), *The Royal Pardon* (1966), *HaroldMuggins is a Martyr* (1968), *The Hero Rises Up* (1968), *The Ballygombeen Bequest* (1972), *The Island of the Mighty* (1972), *The Non-Stop Connoly Show* (1975), *Vandaleur's Folly* (1978), *The Little Gray Home in the West* (1978), and *The Non-Stop Connolly Show* (1975).

[359] *Cogs Tyranicus* (1992), *Silence Among the Weapons* (1982), *Books of Bale* (1988), and *Jack Juggler and the Emperor's Whore: Seven Tall Tales Linked Together for an Indecorous Toy Theatre* (1995).

[360] See Tish Dace, "Who Wrote 'John Arden's' Plays" in Jonathan Wike, *John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy: A Case Book*, London: Garland Publishing, inc., 1995 for a critique of what she sees as a critical conspiracy to exclude D'Arcy from discussions of Arden's plays. She cites D'Arcy's collaboration as authorship.

[361] Tom Milne, "Producing Arden: an Interview with William Gaskill", *Encore*, 12.5 (Sept-Oct 1965), p. 23.

[362] *Ibid.*

finished architecture school at Edinburgh College of Art from 1953-1955.[363] His

knowledge and conception of space was conceived early on when, notably, he undertook

to design an open-stage auditorium as his final thesis project, consulting Mr Richard

Sutton of the Department of Theatre Planning, International Theatre Institute, Mr Walter

Hoges, stage designer and author, Tyrone Guthrie and Anthony Quayle.[364] The use of

space within a play and the way he manipulates stage space are at the forefront of his

technique. Many of his plays are written for presentation in open space theatres and are

best suited to open staging and alternative theatre spaces. He explains:

> I like an open stage, with the audience in the same room
> as the stage. The proscenium arch is not a very happy
> medium for staging the sort of plays I want to write.[365]

An open-staged auditorium demands a different type of awareness by the spectator than

one has of a proscenium arch.[366] His plays have been performed in traditional

proscenium theatres, community centres, a railway roundhouse, pubs and auditoriums.

The staging requirements and production practices indicated in each preface point to a

preference for alternative spaces. *The Happy Haven* (1960) was written for a converted

squash court, *The True History of Squire Jonathan and his Unfortunate Treasure* (1968)

was performed in a pub environment, *The Business of Good Government* (1960) was

performed in a church basement and *The Royal Pardon* (1968) was performed in a small

room.

After Arden finished his architecture degree, he moved to London to work for

Ronald Ward & Partners (1955-1957).[367] He recalls:

> A large private office which was putting up a lot of these
> nasty office blocks that one sees: not a very ethical
> office, but a pleasant place to work as I liked the
> people.[368]

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[363] Here he began to write again, finishing a "pseudo-Elizabethan tragedy on the Gunpowder Plot, which was very bad, a sort of academic play in verse, an unsatisfactory mixture of the Elizabethans and T. S. Eliot" and having his *All Fall Down*, a "Victorian piece, about the building of a railway" produced by the college theatre group. See *Ibid.,* 23-24.
[364] Dean Adrian Napper, Edinburgh College of Art, Heriot-Watt University, Private Correspondence, 11 June 1996.
[365] Tom Milne and Clive Goodwin, "The Voice of Vital Theatre", *Encore* 8 (1961), p. 35.
[366] Perhaps this is one reason why his works have such an awkward reception when staged at the Royal Court
[367] Napper, *ibid.*
[368] Milne and Goodwin, *ibid.,* p. 24.

During this time the BBC produced his play, *The Life of Man*. After a rejection of a play

based on Arthurian legends, a colleague suggested that he write about the experiences

at the architect's office. He took up the suggestion and wrote *The Waters of Babylon*

(1957) and later *Wet Fish* (1961) based loosely on the hypothetical life of a mysterious

Polish co-worker. After *The Waters of Babylon* was successfully staged, he quit his

architecture job and began writing full-time.

Arden follows an architectural methodology to conceive, design and construct a

play. The principles of architecture not only serve as a useful analogy for the processes,

devices and techniques of playwrights, but also are useful as a description of the working

structures of dramatic composition. Take for example Arden's own description of the

affiliation of his training as an architect with his creative writing:

> I think I find a definite relation between planning a
> building and planning a play— but that, of course, would
> apply to almost anything— creative structure in any
> sense. If you plan a building, someone gives you a
> schedule of accommodation. He wants two living-rooms,
> three bedrooms, kitchen, bathroom and so forth; you are
> given a site, then you have to put it together to ensure
> that it works on the inside—all the rooms open out of
> each other at the right place—and at the same time it
> looks attractive on the outside. Planning a play is rather
> similar. You start, perhaps, with a story that divides it
> self naturally into half-a-dozen scenes (the rooms of the
> house) which you have to put together so that they work
> on from the other, and the same time the whole thing has
> to add up to a complete whole.[369]

Arden says that "a play is a conveyance of an idea, whatever the idea is", thus he must

begin by asking what expression he wants to communicate in the same manner a

customer asks for what he or she wants built.[370] Once he does this he can decide which

characters need to be present as the elements of expression, thus producing a schedule

of accommodation. From here he goes back to make a structure upon which to lay his

bricks, thereby creating the environments within which his characters perform their

actions.

Arden works best when he is commissioned for a particular space and theatre

company. He can assess which techniques they utilise best and design with these in

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[369] *Ibid.*

[370] Arden, et al., "Playwriting for the Seventies: Old Theatrics, New Audiences, and the

mind. He comments,

> I always take longer to write things that I'm not doing for
> anyone specifically. But when I have been
> commissioned by a theatre to provide a play, I work
> better.[371]

He chooses to construct a form for the script that suits the raw material of the company's

production skills with which he has to work. Numerous problems arise when one has to

face a hypothetical spectator or consumer— with *Wet Fish* a director was changed and

Arden was not allowed to participate in the production. Arden worked with the original

director previously and had not fully completed the script because he assumed on past

experience that he was to be involved during rehearsals. Therefore, the script was not

ready to be produced on its own accord. He had not provided a strong enough structure

in which the director could work.

Arden's analytical writings suggest many connections between architecture and

the design of plays. In an essay entitled "Ben Jonson and the Plumb-line" he describes

Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1950) directed by George Devine:

> The overall action of the play was so clear, the setting of
> the fair and its habitués so precise . . . the main
> impression that I retain is one of having actually been at
> a fair (rather than having seen a play about some
> fictional people at a fair), and a fair full of very curious
> happenings and juxtapositions of persons, which
> emerged, as it were, from out of the crowd and then sank
> back into it.[372]

Arden became conscious of Jonson's use of space as a spine to dramaturgical

expression. The scale of the production and the ways, in which it provided him, as a

spectator, a framework for understanding Jonson's purpose excited him. The critical

reaction of the press towards *Bartholomew Fair*, however, characterised the production

as unfocused. It was is a clear indication of what were the accepted conventions and of

what constituted a good or bad play. Arden encapsulates what the style of a play

indicated about authorial intent in the 1950s:

> If you were an intellectual you would fill your plays with
> very serious people talking very seriously and having
> moral debates: if you were a popular hack you could well

Politics of Revolution", *Theatre Quarterly,* 6.24 (1976), p. 52.
[371] *Ibid.,* p. 66.
[372] Arden, *To Present the Pretence: Essays on the Theatre and its Public,* London: Eyre
Methuen, 1977, pp. 31-32.

bring in lavatory humour, and no one would mind.[373]

For Arden the dichotomy of the styles connected by a spatial structure, were an experience that contemporary practice seemed to lack. His contemporaries used dialogue alone to create ideas, rather than use a hybrid of dialogue and visual action to create a sense impression for the spectator to experience. Arden's technique is best understood in the context of his architectural training.

Towards an architectural conception of drama

Arden's architectural conception of drama is that the play is a loose blueprint for the production team to manufacture. It was when his guidelines were ignored, to the detriment of the ways in which he understood his work that led him to boycott writing for the London stage.[374] On first glance, it appears that Arden is overprotective of his work, not trusting that anyone else is capable of its presentation. He has tried to make explicit his intentions in each play with extensive prefatory notes and stage directions, but before a play is first produced there are still problems in the script that need to be worked out during rehearsal.[375]

Jonson embodies the earliest, most consistent inspiration for Arden's stylistic conventions, and it is useful to quote at length Arden's philosophical conceptions of composition as derived from Jonson's technique.[376] On the most superficial level Arden, like Jonson, takes care in preparing his manuscripts so that his intentions are preserved. Arden includes extensive prefaces and notes to control the tolerances and parameters of his playscripts. He goes as far as to attribute Jonson's compositional techniques to his apprenticeship as a bricklayer. He explains:

> It does seem to me that bricklaying is very much the kind
> of early skill that one would deduce from the finished
> plays. A bricklayer needs to be patient and precise, his
> work is slow and repetitive, but every brick must be
> exactly laid (and brick after brick is heavy business for

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[373] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

[374] In 1973 Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy picketed their own play, *The Island of the Mighty*, to try and reclaim control over the content of the work.

[375] Arden has always felt that the playwright designs a piece to be performed and that with the first production he is the only one who is sure of what the piece was designed to accomplish.

[376] Arden, *To Present the Pretence, ibid.* His essays explain the ways in which he was searching for an author whom he could emulate.

the muscles). If one row of bricks is allowed to be set out of alignment because the worker is tired or lazy, then the whole wall gets more and more out of alignment as it goes up, until in the end one finds oneself with a sort of Leaning Tower of Pisa. A bricklayer who becomes a scholar and a poet is likely to be pedantic, heavy and over-conscientious.[377]

Arden uses his architectural insight to understand Jonson's dramaturgy as if it were the same process that a workman follows to construct a building. It is the care in planning that insures the play will stand on its own long after the playwright has lost contact with his script. Arden outlines Jonson's structural form to express intellectual arguments:

It is not surprising to find that when Jonson wrote verse he set out the sentiment in prose first, and then turned it into metre. (A bricklayer would never simply start piling up his bricks one on the other— the line of his wall must first be marked out by pegs and taunted string, and as he works he must always keep his plumb-line and spirit-level handy.) But a bricklayer is not an architect— the design of the building has been made by someone else. A poet on the other hand has not only to build his play— he also has to determine what the play will say and through the mouths of which characters.[378]

It is clear from this passage that Arden considers and applies the logic and techniques of an architect to the playwright's task. The playwright determines what ideas that are to be communicated and then he constructs a situation and characters that will best embody those expressions.

Another important indication of Arden's use of fine art principles is his comments about narrative within painting in an essay entitled "Ancient Principles". He describes Pieter Bruegel's The Battle between Carnival and Lent [Figure 6.1], as an "allegory of abstinence contrasted with over-indulgence", but goes on to say "but there is a good deal more to it than that".[379] Bruegel has portrayed a market place filled with the population of the village—Bakers, Priests, women men, fathers, mothers and children engaged in revelry. Arden describes the portrayed action as "an emblem of death in the midst of life . . . Tragedy: and Comedy: combined in the one image".[380] What is important about this description is its insight into Arden's own work. His plays can be distilled down to simple messages of exploitation and identity or social order and anarchy, but there is a good

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[377] Ibid., p. 29.
[378] Ibid., pp. 29-30.
[379] Arden, "Ancient Principles" in To Present the Pretence, ibid., p. 12.

deal more to them than that. Arden continues to describe the painting:

> Because it is really an *emblem*, rather than the
> naturalistic genre— painting that at first sight it may
> seem to be, it is essentially theatrical in its form. All
> these people are *playing parts* which, taken together,
> add up to the complete allegory. Some of the parts they
> play are those of persons playing parts— the fat man in
> 'real life' is perhaps a butcher, and the lean woman
> keeps a fish shop (or a bakery, for the feet of her chair
> are surrounded by biscuits and twists of unleavened
> bread): but they have been chosen by the painter to
> personify the protagonist and antagonist of the seasonal
> / moral drama. Within the main play of their enacted
> combat are three other subsidiary plays.[381]

Arden's plays work in a similar way, showing action that makes the characters

emblematic of their interests. In other words, the total experience of the event is made up

of the simultaneous depiction of multiple episodes contained within the whole. Arden

creates a linear theatrical event where the different events are shown one after the other,

creating a multifaceted view of the situation—contradictions and all. Sheer theatricality

raises his drama from naturalistic well-made form to the level of emblematic performance.

The characters may be playing parts like the characters in the painting, for example,

Baulkfast in *Wet Fish* is an architect, but they have been chosen to personify protagonists

and antagonists in the drama.[382] Their external appearance and actions within an

architectural environment are used to show the themes and ideas of the theatrical piece.

He creates spaces in which the actors reflect different types of people, and in that space

a variety of conflicts ensue, triggered by the ways in which societal interaction occurs.

Arden's illustrations from *The Island of the Mighty* are good examples of his

conception of pictorial organisation. They are composed without perspective, much like

the pictorial composition seen during the medieval period. Arden's illustrations display a

place shown through props, behaviour and the presence of human figures actively

engaged with each other. The picture of the camp depicts a pot over a wood fire, various

spears, swords and daggers strewn around [**Figure 6.2**]. There are tents with banners

flying; soldiers and an armed horseman in battle gear carrying shields and spears; and

birds flying in the sky in the distance. There is a conception of an exterior camp designed

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[380] *Ibid.,* p. 13.
[381] *Ibid.*

to house and feed warriors who are on alert. Without using text, the setting gives a partial implicit narrative. In the battle picture, there are corpses covering the burning field and a structure burns on the right [**Figure 6.3**]. Men in battle gear brandish weapons and a torch. Again, the environment and the action contained within it offer a pictorial narrative of the ways in which an environment is used. These pictures were intended as backdrops to the play's action. Their presence carries within a mini-narrative that affects the spectators' perception of the activities that are to be carried on in front of them.

Another example of Arden's compositional aesthetic is represented by "Moses" by Frida Kalo, which adorns an edition of Arden's plays [**Figure 6.4**]. The central focal point of the composition is a baby in the womb positioned for birth. The sun shines over head and the baby is on the seashore below. Surrounding the left and right sides are religious and painterly icons at various levels. The picture is fraught with religious and art historical meanings that must be deciphered. Arden's plays work on much the same principle translated into a theatrical medium. They are made up of focal points, tied together by the composition of the play. He uses multiple- mechanisms such as dialogue, ballad, costume and setting to present variable views of a thematic situation. Historical icons make their way into the compositions to suggest other possibilities of interpretation. The plays are thus able to function on many different levels simultaneously. By seeing the many sides of the experience, a sense of the whole comes clear.

Much of Arden's solo work is preoccupied with similar principles: *Left-Handed Liberty* was commissioned by a city to celebrate the Magna Carta and the city's role in its creation; *The Workhouse Donkey* shows multiple settings, the use of space as a commodity and the adaptation of existing spaces to other uses; *Squire Jonathan* is a play about commodity of love as represented through material wealth and property; and The *Island of the Mighty* depicts multiple nationalities fighting for a particular landscape as their own. All of these plays use human character interaction in a particular designed architecture or landscape to show issues of architectural and urban planning and possession. Arden shows a range of ideas and experiences within both public and private spaces to raise questions of the societal responsibility of considering the ways in

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[382] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

which space is regulated. His major concern is the ways in which people are affected by the way that governments deal with urban space and property ownership.

Spatial utility

Arden uses the locales of his composition as more than mere set decoration. His choice of location and the ways that it frames the characters' activities are meant, in part, to call attention to the multiple uses of urban space. *The Water of Babylon* (1957) is set in multiple locations. Each space is used for many more activities than for which it was designed: A lavatory becomes a changing room; a tenement becomes a crime den and a brothel; and the town hall is used as a front for a scam. By staging these activities in a variety of locations used for multiple purposes, and by inhabiting them with architects, town managers, menial workers and politicians, the city becomes a place of social regulation, commodity and exchange. The play, in turn, generates a series of questions: What financial value is placed on space? In what way does economic status dictate spatial utility? What are the ways in which architectural settings generate money? Who benefits from these exchanges? In what way can these transactions better work? When do social spaces fail to function properly?

The plot of *The Waters of Babylon* revolves around Krank, a Polish immigrant, who works as an architect's assistant by day and as a pimping slumlord by night. He leads a cast of politicians, prostitutes, terrorists and rogues through an intricate plot worthy of a carry-on film. Krank must raise five hundred pounds to pay off an old debt so that Paul, a terrorist who wants to blow up Khrushchev and Bulganin on their visit to England, will not build a bomb in his tenement home. To raise the money, he recruits the aid of his parasite Conor Cassidy and the politically conniving Charles Butterthwaite, an ex-Yorkshire Napoleon, to rig a lottery scheme. In the process, Bathsheba, a West-Indian prostitute, Teresa, a high-class harlot, and Councillor Joseph Caligula are engulfed into the roguery while Henry Ginger, a patriotic English man, Henry Loap, an influential Member of Parliament and Barbara Baulkfast, Krank's boss, trail along complicating events inadvertently.

Unlike other contemporaneous plays, such as Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*,

that consist of characters interacting realistically in a single location, *The Waters of Babylon*, is set all over the city, action is shown more than spoken, and the language is elevated to poetry and heightened prose. Arden uses his organisational and design skills to construct a multiple-points-of-view framework as an organic theatrical event. That is to say, like Caro's sculpture, the sculptural objects are shown from different vantage-points, thereby, providing the spectator with more than one context in which to conceive of the characters. Arden wants the scene setting to move rapidly between one location to the next. It is most important to capture the sense of the type of space that the action takes place in and where that space is located in the urban landscape. He explains:

> As the scenes in the play are, to some extent,
> unlocalized, the sets should be in no way realistic.
> Where it is necessary to indicate a particular locality, this
> must be done rather by suggestion than by outright
> illustration. The sort of scenery I had in mind was the
> eighteenth or early nineteenth century sort, which
> involved the use of sliding flats or drop curtains which
> open and close while the actors are still on stage— a
> method still in use in provincial pantomimes.[383]

Moving from one space to the next blurs the distinction between the spaces and their utility. Suggestion allows for the spectator to fill in the details and speculate about the use of space; 'Is this really a public lavatory? Why is business being conducted there?' As a result, ranges of associations open up into larger discussions about the uses of urban and private space.

When the curtain rises, Krank is presented in his living environment:

> [*Krank is discovered . . . he has a coffee-pot, a cup, and
> a sandwich. There is a mackintosh lying about. As the
> curtain opens, there is heard a crescendo then
> diminuendo of noise, as of an underground train
> passing.*][384]

Here the spectators see the way in which Krank keeps his personal living quarters and hear the surrounding sounds. His opening monologue localises the place in time and space:

> Half past seven in the morning. What kind of day is it?
> Cold, I think, yes, cold, rainy foggy, perhaps by
> dinnertime it will snow. No? Perhaps not snow, it is after
> all spring. March, April, May, even in London. I do not

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[383] John Arden, "The Waters of Babylon" in *Three Plays*, New York: Grove Press, 1961, p. 18.
[384] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

> think— even in North London, perhaps, not snow. [. . .]
> Why don't I wash my cups and plates more often than
> once a week? 'Cause I am a man of filthy habits in my
> house is why.
>
> [*Train goes past again.*]
>
> That's the electric train, it goes past. Metropolitan
> railway upon its embankment.[385]

Overtly, the text calls attention to the environmental conditions of the flat in a particular

time of day and place. A moment later banging is heard over head, from his neighbour

and employee Cassidy. Again, in the age-old tradition, noises and props create a

sensorial stimulation to evoke living conditions. The spectator experiences what it is like

to be situated in that environment. What is important is that the repeated attention to the

spatial environment becomes a primary subject of the play.

Krank also uses his living space for financial gain as an impromptu office and

business. Upstairs, he houses his employees and rents out rooms for lodging. He strictly

regulates the ways in which his tenants use the allotted space.

> **Krank**: Cassidy, you madden me with your noise. For
> your room this week, the rent is outstanding.
>
> **Cassidy**: And I'd come to pay it, so. Here y'are, fifteen
> silver shillings, count it yourself, all genuine and resonant
> like icicles. Ting, ting, jingle, jingle.
>
> **Krank** [*taking the money*]: You had a woman in with you
> last night. I'm not deaf. Is five shillings extra.
>
> **Cassidy**: There was nobody with me at all. There's all
> the second floors. Number six the Attic's after barring up
> and fastening his door. I couldn't be in at him without
> bursting the lock. What'll you do about that?
>
> **Krank**: Look, I let you pay reduced rent so you help me
> run these lodgings, I leave it to you what to do: O.k.?
> Five shillings extra for last night. I'm not deaf.[386]

The ownership of space dictates the use of space. Krank manipulates the ways in which

his renters can use his space because he owns it. The government regulates the ways in

which he is allowed to use space. Krank manipulates the law so that he can make

whatever business arrangements suit him and his tenants try to do the same with him.

There is a substratum of societal control that dictates the ways in which citizens are

allowed to live.

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[385] *Ibid.*
[386] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Krank hires Butterthwaite to determine the best way to keep the government from preventing his lucrative housing development. He seeks ways in which to resist regulation:

> **Krank**: My house, you've seen it. A well-conducted lodging- house. I have eighty people in it . . .
>
> **Butterthwaite** [*flabbergasted*]: In that house— eighty people . . .
>
> **Krank**: Certainly. The most of them West Indians, East Indians, Cypriots, so forth, so on. Thirty shillings a week, one room one bed, I provide packing-cases if they wish to make any additional furniture: one lavatory: one gas-ring every landing: and a tap for cold water.
>
> **Butterthwaite**: Well, I don't know: I say, I'm not surprised you're in bad favour with the Council.
>
> **Krank**: I *have* had to indulge in certain, ah subterfuges. Eighty people, they say, is too many for the one building. Also I charge extra if a lodger wishes a guest for the night. I don't see, why is that not legitimate? But yet I have had this trouble . . . they *will* talk about a disorderly house. To be frank, they are persecuting me.[387]

This use of space also shows the ways in which different cultural and economic groups are relegated to certain cramped living conditions. One must be able to pay for space to have a right to occupy it. Therefore, immigrants with little or no money or social standing are exploited.

The second scene demonstrates the ways in which the settings are used for multiple purposes. The public lavatory serves as a changing room for Krank to go from one stratum of society to the next. Cassidy works as an attendant there, and serves as a personal assistant to Krank's various enterprises. Each morning the location is used as a gateway:

> [*Krank comes forward as the scene opens. Discovered are a characteristic London Transport signboard, reading 'Baker Street' and another reading 'Gentlemen'.*]
>
> **Krank** [*walking round by one side of the stage*]: Baker Street Station. Here is that extremely convenient arrangement, a gentlemen's convenience with a door at either end of it. A most remarkable, and, I think, beautiful phenomenon. I am about to be reborn: in this twentieth-century peculiar ceremonial womb, glazed tiles and electric light beneath the golden pavement stones of London, hygienic underground renascence, for me, is daily routine. Where is the lavatory attendant? Wash

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[387] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

and brush-up fourpence.

[. . .]

[*He comes out from behind the screen, dressed in a dark
suit, made-up bow-tie, white shirt, carrying an umbrella.
He has changed his spectacles for heavy horn-rims. He
hands his original clothes in the hold-all to Cassidy.*][388]

The public lavatory is used for its designated function, as well as an ad hoc clubhouse.

Using the space as if it were his bedroom, Krank transforms his appearance through the

use of clothing from a poor slumlord to a respectable upmarket architect. Entering the

lavatory on one end he appears as a poor man and exiting on the other end he appears

as a businessman; he is able to blend into either environment like a chameleon.

Effectively, he belongs to two classes and he can transgress social spaces and

boundaries, thereby, providing an elaborate cover for his illegal dealings. In this way, he

is able to manipulate the municipal dealings with which he makes his living.

There are transgressions that can be overlooked by the authorities, such as over-

occupancy, because of the class of those affected, but bomb making affects the politics of

a nation. Krank does not want to give his space to Paul to make bombs, so he sets upon

the lottery scheme to raise money quickly:

> **Paul**: Yes: it is, perhaps, so large a sum, you cannot
> immediately realize it; so, I will permit you to pay me in
> kind.
>
> **Krank**: What kind of kind.
>
> **Paul**: The use of your house at the end of next month for
> the purposes I have already implied.
>
> **Krank**: No.
>
> **Paul**: Yes.[389]

Governmental scrutiny makes it difficult for Krank to conduct his side businesses and any

more illegal activity surely would lead to imprisonment. Yet, as he owes Paul five

hundred pounds, he has little choice in the ways in which he can regulate the space.

Class issues are paramount when regulating the ways in which space can be

used. This is shown when all of the characters go to Hyde Park, Speakers' Corner, a

public space set aside for the general use of the population, to hear the councillors

debate zoning issues:

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[388] *Ibid.*, pp.28-29.

> **Krank**: How wonderful a symbol of your English
> democracy: The Corner of the Park. So sylvan, so
> arcadian, so pregnant a lesson to the errant Totalitarian.
> So joyous an expanse of sweet Independent Liberty
> informed by true reason and the dictates of Conscience.

In the park, a public zone, the different classes mingle together. All of the characters discover each other in the same environment. Krank and Bathsheba try to juggle their identities to stay incognito while people from both economic situations interact with them. The danger of these manoeuvres is heightened by the police presence in the park. A policeman patrols the area and modulates the behaviours of the crowd, making sure that no one transgresses the boundaries of their station. The characters begin a farce of trying to remain unrecognised in a zone under surveillance. The multiple actions the characters take to remain hidden in this space are both entertaining and call into question the multiple masks worn according to the person one interacts.

Again, all of the various subgroups come together in the town hall during the final scene. The town hall is a meeting place of the people and the government, where public business is conducted. Krank's scheme is meant to disrupt the proceedings and take advantage of the situation. Police surveillance gives his scheme the appearance of propriety. Once the plot is fouled by drunken mishaps, all of the characters must cope with the revelation of their duel identities. The only pretence that remains intact is that of the lottery, because a policeman accidentally wins, thereby, making it legitimate. It is the public space that reveals the character of the humans that occupy it. The spaces are used to put into context the actions the characters carry out in them

In the play, zoning laws, municipal involvement, corruption and architectural process come to the forefront. These subjects, in turn, comment on living conditions and the ways in which spaces are used and adapted for everyday living by their inhabitants. The play is a portrait of the underbelly of the city, its cultural landscape and its economic subculture. All city spaces are unlocalised, since they can adapt to accommodate any use. Their design and regulation is subverted to allow for the transgressions of the characters.

Arden structures a phenomenological experience by allowing the characters to

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[389] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

interact within public and private environments. The different situations create an

accumulation of effects culminating in an overall experience of the conflicts. Joan

Blindheim describes the consciousness of spatial design:

> The dramatist's training as an architect has probably
> helped him to visualize the way in which a built-up set
> can be exploited for dramatic effect, as in the last
> 'discovery' in act II, where a flight of steps runs up from
> the rear of the stage (now the basement area of Krank's
> house) to a five-feet high platform across the back,
> representing the street. This provides a lively and varied
> stage picture, with a great deal of movement on the part
> of nine characters, between the two levels. It also
> enables two of them, Barbara and Henry Ginger, to
> observe the rest unseen, but in view of the audience. As
> far as can be judged by reading the scene, Arden
> succeeds in reconciling the movements required by the
> plot with a visually exciting pattern of movement,
> culminating in the ritual, spell-chanting circle of the stage
> by Bathsheba and Caligula.[390]

Like the different actions that Bruegel organises to create his visual Morality theatre,

Arden uses characters as emblems to question the workings of local politics and the

superficial appearances of the different interest groups. He shows the different

characters tumbling towards their ultimate fates.

Public and private spaces

Serjeant Musgrave's Dance (1959) is set in a small Victorian Northern mining

town cut off by inclement weather and has shut down because of a strike. A group of

deserter soldiers, led by Serjeant Musgrave, has come allegedly to recruit men for the

colonial wars. The soldier's presence in town triggers a range of reactions from the

inhabitants. The miners are mistrustful and fear the soldiers are there to break the strike,

while the town leaders are anxious to encourage the trouble-makers to join with the

soldiers and leave the town, but Musgrave and his men have other ideas. They want to

return the bones of their dead comrade to his home, seek retribution for the atrocities of

war they have experienced and make sure no others will repeat their mistakes by joining

the army. Arden creates several domains for the different classes of characters to

inhabit, suggesting a broader spatial metaphor of the role of a community in a war

environment. The town is an environment in which the social structure determines the

manner in which the community copes with insurrection.

Arden constructs a series of scenes to express the sensations he wants to evoke with his dramatic structure. In the interview "Building a Play", he outlined the basic process of designing the script for *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*:

> When I construct a play I think first in terms of a story, and then the main scenes that will develop out of that story. For *Serjeant Musgrave* I had three main visual images— the big market place scene, the scene with the soldiers in the stable at night, and the soldiers' arrival in the town. I find these almost "given" scenes— from the "muse" if you like— then the intellectual work comes in fitting them together; in finding out which characters are supposed to be in which scene, and how the scenes join up. In a sense this is the relationship with architecture.[391]

The three images can be thought of as the rooms required by his Schedule of Accommodation. Arden determines the ways in which these segments will fit together and function as a whole. The play is structured in three acts. Act one and two have three scenes each and the third has two. They alternate from exterior in one scene, to interior in the next. The first setting that the spectator sees at the rise of the curtain is of three soldiers on a canal wharf in the evening. The stage directions state:

> **Hurst** and **Attercliffe** are playing cards on the top of a side-drum. A few yards away **Sparky** stands, as though on guard, clapping himself to keep warm. There is a pile of three or four heavy wooden boxes with the WD broad arrow stencilled on them, and a lantern set on top.[392]

There are two focal points of action: 1) Sparky guarding, and 2) Hurst and Atterclife playing cards. Environmental conditions are made evident by Sparky's action of clapping himself to keep warm in the middle of a card game communicate the length of time they have been waiting.[393] Sparky's monologue adds more information about the context of the situation. "Once you've started, keep on travelling" clarifies that men are waiting to continue a journey.[394] The men's care of the boxes, one of the few items visible on stage, bears upon the proceedings. Despite the inclement conditions the men are at ease

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[390] Joan T Blindheim, "John Arden's use of the Stage", *Modern Drama*, 11 (1968), p. 307.
[391] Charles Marowitz and Simon Trussler, "Building the Play: an interview with John Arden", *Encore*, (July / August 1961), p. 32.
[392] Arden, *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, New York: Grove Press, 1950, p. 9.
[393] See Ronald Hayman's for a discussion of the elements of colour, cards and other symbolism prevalent in the play. *Contemporary Playwrights: John Arden*, London: Heinenman, 1968.

waiting. Their comfort in this outdoor environment is an indication of the role in which the outdoors plays in their lives. A soldier's domain is outdoors. It is clear from the dialogue, however, that they are uncomfortable at the thought of arriving at their destination where they will be stranded in a domestic community.

The second scene's setting is the interior of the Victoria and Albert public house, inhabited the Parson, Mrs Hitchcock, Annie, the Constable and various workmen. This is the place where they make deals while sharing a sociable drink. The Bargee leads the soldiers to the pub, earning himself a kickback from the owner, and additional money from the Parson for supplying him with useful information. The entrance of the soldiers into the heart of the town, that is to say the interior of the local pub, interlocks the soldier-units to the town-units. Musgrave's squad has come to this space to find men to join their cause. In the pub the soldiers become businessmen taking on the manner of behaviour suitable to this environment.

The next scene is outdoors in the graveyard where the soldiers are able to converse comfortably while surveying the terrain of the town. Once they return to their sleeping quarters, they are confronted with an alien, internal domestic world:

> *Interior of the Pub (stable and bedroom)*
>
> *Night. The stage is divided into two distinct acting-areas. The down stage area represents the stable, and is supposed to be divided into three loose boxes. If it is not practicable for the partitions between these to be built, it should be sufficient to suggest them by the three mattresses which are laid parallel, feet to the audience. The actors must not appear to be able to see each other from box to box. The forestage represents the central passage of the stable and is the only access to the boxes. Entry to the forestage can be from both wings (one side leads to the house, the other to the yard and coach-house.*
>
> *The upstairs area, raised up at least a couple of feet, represents a bedroom in the house. It is only large enough to contain a brass-knobbed bedstead with a small table or other support for a candle. The two areas must be treated as completely separate. Access to the bedroom area should be from the rear, and the audience must not be allowed to think that the actors can see from one area to the other.[395]*

The philosophising and banter that takes place is a result of feeling lost in a domestic

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[394] Arden, *ibid.*, p. 9.

setting. The space brings out in the men associations with their personal histories before joining the army and conventional family situations. The violence that ensues later in the scene is a physical manifestation of the men's uneasiness in their reintroduction into domestic space.

The next exterior setting brings all of the different characters together in a public space:

> *The Market-place.*
>
> *Early morning. In the centre of the stage is a practicable feature— the centre-piece of the market-place. It is a sort of Victorian clock-tower-cum-lamppost-cum-market-cross, and stands on a raised plinth. There is a ladder leaning against it. On the plinth are the soldiers' boxes and a coil of rope. The front of the plinth is draped with bunting, and other colours are leaning against the centre-piece in an impressive disposition . . . On one side of the stage there is an upper-storey window.*[396]

Public and private business is exposed. Each group reveals their true allegiance and the actions of the soldiers escalate the situation to violence. The community unifies itself against the soldiers to prevent outside forces from disrupting their social hierarchy. The sanctity of the town and its inhabitants overrides any desires by individual members to exact retribution in other than the accepted social constraints proscribed by tradition. The exterior community space dissolves into the interior of a prison cell. Serjeant Musgrave and Attercliffe are forced by the community into a public interior designed for the punishment of local laws.

> *A prison cell.*
>
> *The scene is achieved by a barred wall descending in front of the dancers in the previous scene . . . the lights change so that we cannot see past the bars.*[397]

The long quest to return home has placed Musgrave and Attercliffe into public custody. The priviliegde of having the outdoors as their domain has been removed.

By structuring the order of the scenes and what the actions that take place, the scopic expression of the images endows the whole with a monumental impact. For example, the hoisting of the skeleton in the market scene has its full effect because

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[395] Arden, *ibid.*, p. 56.
[396] *Ibid.*, p. 76.
[397] *Ibid.*, p. 100.

tension has been building over the content of the boxes since the start of the play. Anticipation on the part of the spectators heightens the experience. When Musgrave hoists up the bones of Billy, the image then has the impact of Goya's *Grande hazaña con muertos* [**Figure 6.5**], when Annie holds his bones in her arms the image evokes the passion of Giotto's *Disposition* [**Figure 6.6**]. Spectators have been anticipating these moments for a long time. When the different strands of the narrative dialogue come together the images take on the weight of an icon. As painting accomplishes this through the qualities of line, shading and colour, the mechanisms of dialogue and action in the dramatic medium enhance the imagery. The characters and their actions are elements that limit the range of associations that the spectators discern from the experience.

Arden uses an artist's work to describe the type of effect he wants in the production of the play.[398] The stage directions dictate:

> This is a realistic, but not a naturalistic, play. Therefore the design of the scenes and costumes must be in some sense stylised. The paintings of L.S. Lowry might suggest a suitable mood. Scenery must be sparing— only those pieces of architecture, furniture, and properties actually *used* in the action need be present: and they should be thoroughly realistic, so that the audience sees a selection from the details of everyday life rather than a generalised impression of the whole of it. A similar rule should also govern the direction and the acting. If this is done, the obvious difficulties, caused by the mixture of verse, prose, and song in the play, will be considerably lessened.[399]

Take for example Lowry's *Salford Street Scene* [**Figure 6.7**]. The painting depicts workers outside a factory on a grey day. The factory dominates the composition and the atmosphere is cold and oppressive. The atmospheric effect of the locales is more important than the naturalistic rendering of the details. With the play, the spectators are supposed to get a clear understanding of the environment and the ways in which the characters use that environment. This allows a range of associations and value judgements to form about those environments and the ways in which they are used. The influence on Jocelyn Herbert's design for the 1959 production is apparent in **Figure 6.8**. Here the town evokes the atmosphere of Lowry's painting.

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[398] Blindheim, *ibid.*, p. 309.
[399] Arden, *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, p.5.

What is apparent from the script is the presentational style that Arden intended the set to reflect. As Blindheim explains, "he again follows the principle of a set which is non-realistic in the sense that it is not complete, but only consists if items actually used in the course of the play".[400] Only essential props are used— the wooden boxes, a lantern, the cards, and a side drum. A sparse style in combination with poetic theatricality distances the spectators from their usual theatrical expectations. As the production photograph of the pub shows in **Figure 6.9**, the set consists of a few tables, a bar, a door and wood panelling. It is the space of social interaction— a place where friends meet and covert deals are made. In contrast, the graveyard sketch in **Figure 6.10**, depicts a desolate place with ghosts of trees and a cross tombstone— again this is a place of memorial to the dead, and the men marching in this setting becomes a visual reminder of the fate of most soldiers. Herbert describes that the first scene "got down to nothing but a ground row of weeds and grass" and the props such as gravestones were made of polystyrene; "it conveyed the right feeling but was not naturalistic".[401] The material appearance of the stage, leads the spectator away from thinking of the play in naturalistic terms, but rather towards the ways in which the environment affects the lives of the characters.

The spatial / visual mechanisms that are operating here are couched in traditional metaphorical and dialogic traditions. In the original production the critics expected the play to be naturalistic and the design and theatrical techniques used for construction overtly violated their expectations. Structurally, the play can support many different interpretations, but central to what it shows is the method in which the different groups go about trying to accomplish their aims in social spaces. Malick explains:

> The overall issue comes to be perceived,
> simultaneously, in its larger social aspect as well as in
> terms of the variety and diversity of responses that it
> evokes. These responses and perspectives in Arden are
> usually arranged in what may be described as a multi-
> focal and relational structure of significance, where each
> response receives its own full and direct emphasis and
> yet becomes meaningful only in relation to all other

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[400] Blindheim, *ibid.*, p. 309.
[401] Jocelyn Herbert, Cathy Courtney, eds., *Jocelyn Herbert: A Theatre Notebook*, London: Art Books International, 1993, pp., 40-41.

responses within a given play.[402]

It is the mechanisms that they operate by that become the clearest and the spectator is

left to question the ways in which the system works and whether it is suitable to live

with.[403] Arden used a spatial principle of alternating exterior and interior spaces to show

a group of soldiers interact in an alien environment. This structure can be analogous to

situations in foreign lands where soldiers enter into a native community and try to enact

change. The play's statement is not that war is wrong, but that armed forces in alien

communities are bound to cause trouble when they try to appropriate that space.

Spatial regulation

Live Like Pigs (1958) has not received much attention from academic critics,

possibly because it has been perceived as a failed attempt at a balanced representation

of social welfare abuses. It is set during the late 1950s and nominally deals with a family

of squatters who have been relocated into council housing. It triggered accusations of

presenting shamefully exaggerated stock characters that do nothing to earn the

spectator's compassion, and therefore unduly discredit the welfare state. This

oversimplifies the plot since the issue of governmental regulation of public space is also

considered. Arden places families from differing economic backgrounds in close

proximity to contrast two different ways of living and the ways in which the government

intervenes to keep control over the use of space. Live Like Pigs is the story of the

Sawney's, who are anachronistic

> descendants of the 'sturdy beggars' of the sixteenth
> century . . . put out of their fields by enclosing landlords,

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[402] Javed Malick, "Society and History in Arden's Dramaturgy", *Theatre Journal*, 42 (1990), p. 215.

[403] Dramaturgical structure serves in this case as a framework to support a variety of interpretations elevating the drama to almost mythic proportions. Several critics make insightful observations by examining universal mythic undertones implied in the text. Thomas Adler's "Ritual and Religion in John Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*" (*Modern Drama* 16 (1973), pp. 163-166) sees its similarities to a religious ceremony, Mary Karen Dahl's "*Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*: The Priest Adrift" (*Political Violence in Drama: Classical Models, Contemporary Variations*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1987 pp. 104-13) looks at Musgrave as a preacher of the Last Judgement, Mary O'Connell's "Ritual Elements in John Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*" (*Modern Drama* 13.4 (1971), pp. 356-359), and Honor Matthews' *The Primal Curse* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967) compares the play to Cain and Abel myths. All these large concerns find a place in the story because the dramaturgy supports multiple scale perspectives.

they found such an existence possible for four hundred
years. Today, quite simply, there are too many buildings
in Britain, and there is no room for nomads.[404]

They are forced by the local council to move from their condemned tramcar into a new

council house in the suburbs. Sailor is a longhaired seventy-year-old man with a limp; he

lives with Big Rachel, her son Col, her daughter Rosie with her daughter Sally, and later

Blackmouth, Old Croaker and Daffodil as well. Their housekeeping, garbage disposal,

comings and goings and proximity cause an outrage in the neighbourhood, escalating

until the whole community surrounds the house, throws rocks and finally attacks the

family.

Evidently, the play is loosely based on actual events. Arden describes the

situation that served as inspiration:

> Something which happened in Barnsley some years
> before, when a council house was given to a family of
> squatters. I didn't find out too many actual details,
> because I didn't want to be stuck too closely to a
> documentary form, but it was a similar situation, and
> certainly ended up like *Live Like Pigs*, with the house
> besieged by the neighbours.[405]

He elevates and exaggerates each family's living arrangements in the script in order to

emphasise the incompatibility of different styles of living and call into question notions of

social regulation of urban spaces. The form of the play is deliberately theatrical to

distance the spectators from the situation so that they can perceive the action impartially.

Yet, it was perceived as a glum, naturalistic, *Lower Depths* style piece. Eric Keown

attests:

> No one in his right mind would go to *Live Like Pigs* for
> pleasure . . . . We simply wallow in the filth of a bunch of
> boozy, lecherous, dishonest tramps . . . In spite of its
> incredibilities . . . and the maddening sandwiching of its
> many scenes with dreadful doggerel ballads, *Live Like
> Pigs* is powerful. But so is a cartload of manure.[406]

Perhaps as a housing official from the North suggested, it struck too close to real

problems and concerns to abstract it from its only accessible avenue of understanding.[407]

The critics the impression that the play addressed only problems associated with the

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[404] John Arden, *Live Like Pigs*, in *Three Plays*, New York: Grove Press, 1961, p. 101.
[405] Charles Marowitz and Simon Trussler, *Theatre at Work*, London: Methuen, 1967, pp.
39-40.
[406] Eric Keown, "Live Like Pigs" *Punch*. (8 November 1958).

welfare state, rather than fundamental issues of inter-personal communication.

It is easy to mistake the stylisation of the play as a shallow social realist experiment depicting only flat, stereotyped characters, but Arden's introductory note to the play states that Old Croaker, Blackmouth and Daffodil are to have the same effect on the Sawneys that the Sawneys have on the Jacksons.[408] The outrage the Jacksons feel towards the Sawneys would be echoed in the Sawneys' reaction to the Blackmouth-group, thus bringing the issue of incompatibility into a dominant position. If the play is presented in a style that creates the illusion that this is the way people live and speak in everyday life, it becomes a hopeless portrait of violence between unpleasant people. If on the other hand it is presented as Hunt suggests, as a piece of Music Hall, the play becomes a caricature of people in an intolerable situation. Hunt explains,

> Arden uses this music-hall idiom because he's not, in fact, interested in building up a detailed picture of what it's like to live in a council house in Barnsley. He is showing a social process at work: and so he takes characters that can be quickly read as accepted comic types, and then shows what happens to them when they are placed in unexpected situations.[409]

Arden uses gags and exaggeration from popular entertainment to make images of violence and intolerance tangible on stage. It is as if he is enlarging the situations on a photocopy machine and colouring them in bright red with a marker to magnify them. As Malcolm Page notes, *Live Like Pigs* was criticised for its lack of view point, but in fact Arden shows the quandary that faces all groups of people when they are confronted by people who are different from themselves.[410] He accomplishes this by making the spectators laugh at problems, in hopes that they can understand the processes that are at the root of intolerance. Subsequent productions, such as Pam Brighton's 1971 revival or Katie Mitchell's 1993 revival, that exploited music-hall techniques, have faired much better with spectators and critics. The inevitable violence of the plot was not only shocking, but also an extreme expression of the incompatibility of two ways of life.

Again, in the preface to the play, Arden makes explicit his vision of the setting:

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[407] Wilfred Lawson, "Sailor Sawney", *Punch*, (8 October 1958).
[408] Arden, *ibid.*, p. 101.
[409] Albert Hunt, *John Arden*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1974, p. 49.
[410] Malcolm Page, *John Arden*, Boston: Twayne, 1984.

The setting is the interior and exterior of a typical council house. I do not think it necessary to build a whole house on the stage. This was done at the Court, and had the effect of slowing down the action considerably. Distinction between upstairs and downstairs can be made quite easily by arranging the upstairs rooms behind or beside the downstairs ones with only a foot or so difference in level. I have written all of the stage directions in terms of a real house; but these can be modified by a producer without strain. The exterior scenes do not really need a complete front wall to be provided for the house (or required). The sort of council house I had in mind is the dull sort— not one of the agreeable designs given prizes by County Planning Committees. The housing estate has only too obviously been laid out by an unimaginative Borough Surveyor. It is wearisome to look at and contains no real feeling of a living town.[411]

This play is set inside and outside of two council houses. **Figure 6.11** shows the setting used in the original production. Two extremely different types of families use these two nearly identically designed houses. The Sawneys do not like living inside and transform the indoor environment into the environment in which they are most used to living. The Jackson's have certain expectations and assumptions about their own living environment, which is perfectly suited to their way of life. It keeps away the riffraff, and until undesirables moved in next door, it was a sanctuary away from the world. The interactions of the two families exemplify and become emblematic of class views and habits.

The council has placed the Sawneys in a type of structure in which they have never lived. The official expects that they will be appreciative, assuming that all people aspire to live in a house. The process of relocation is revealed through both the dialogue and comparison of the house with their prior living space:

Interior. Evening.

The Official is discovered half-way up the stairs, discoursing in the House. Rosie sits in the living room with the baby in a shawl and Rachel stands in the hall. Both women have brought in several untidy bundles.

Official: And up the stairs we're into the bedrooms. There's the two bedrooms, one big, one small; and there's your bathroom off the landing. You didn't have a bathroom down on the caravan site, did you? Mrs Swaney! I say Mrs Sawney; aren't you coming up to look at your bathroom? [*He comes back down into the hall.*]

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[411] Arden, *ibid.*, p.102.

> Oh, come on, missus, I've not got all day. Blimey, you'd think I was showing you round a condemned cell or summat.
>
> **Rosie:** Did you say it was a bathroom?
>
> **Official:** God help us. Of course, love, I said it was a bathroom.[412]

The Sawneys are out of their element in this space. It is a strange and new experience

for them to be allowed into a private home. They are unsure of the decorum of living in

an enclosed space.

The house is an unwanted change, but they have no choice but to acquiesce to

the demands of the government. Rachel comments:

> **Official:** Now look here, missus, do you want to see upstairs or don't you?
>
> **Rachel:** Why? We've no choice, have we? You've put us to live here. Why can't we take our own bloody time looking at the place? So what if we *don't* like it? We've got no bloody choice.
>
> **Official:** [*exasperated*]: Eh, God, I'm a reasonable man . . .
>
> [. . .]
>
> **Official:** But where did you get all this fat nonsense from, hey? 'No choice', 'put you to live here' — who put you to live here?
>
> **Rachel:** You put us. Coppers put us — all the lot of narks.
>
> **Official:** Now wait, wait. I'm not the police, I mean look at me, Mrs Sawney, did you see ever see a policeman my shape of figure? All that's happened is: Your old place down by the caravans has had to be condemned, well I mean: rightly — I mean a broken tramcar with no wheels no windows, I wouldn't put pigs — all the rain coming in on you and all, why . . .
>
> **Rachel:** Our place, mister.
>
> **Official:** But *this* is your place. *This is* your place. You've to pay rent, of course, it's not much, though. You'll easy afford it; if not, you can go on the Assistance, you see . . . Why it's a good house. It's only five years old at most: I mean look at it . . . [413]

The Sawney's expectations are in direct opposition to those of the governmental

apparatus. The manner in which the family settles into the house and adapts the space

to their needs are described in the next scenes. Most important is the manner in which

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412 *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.
413 *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.

they interact with their neighbours:

> **Mrs Jackson**: What do you think of the housing
> scheme?
>
> **Rachel** [*dourly*]: Housing Scheme, is it?
>
> **Mrs Jackson**: Well of course, I mean, we think it is
> lovely [. . .] Wide streets, bits of garden, and all. Of
> course, it's a long way from the shops and there's only
> the one public. But my husband, he reckons that's a
> good thing. He says—
>
> **Rachel**: Oh go to hell, you and your fizzing husband.
>
> **Mrs Jackson** [*stopped gasping in midstream*]: I beg your
> pardon! . . .
>
> **Rachel**: I says go to hell. You're not wanted here.
> Keep to your own garden, you like it so much.
>
> **Sally**: Mam, mam, she's fat as a pig, ent she?[414]

When Mrs Jackson crosses over into the Sawney's domain, she is treated badly and told

to leave. Salley's line also calls attention to the contrast between her impoverished

emaciation and the corpulence of the middle-class matron. The household does not want

any intrusions from the neighbourhood around them. One family thinks being friendly is

proper, the other thinks minding one's privacy is proper.

These incompatible ways of sharing space lead to complaints from the

community. They turn to government intervention to regulate the use and appearance of

the neighbourhood. The police and council are summoned to coerce the Sawneys into

complying with zoning regulations. For example:

> **Official**: You had a letter last week from the
> Department, didn't you? And you should have had
> another today. Aye, there it is, you've got it, I can see.
> Have you read it yet?
>
> [. . .]
>
> The fact is, Mr Sawney, you've hardly been in this house
> two months, have you? And it's in a shocking state. I
> mean, look at it . . . Eh dear. There's been complaints,
> that's all. And what are we going to do about it, eh?
>
> **Sailor**: Aye. What *are* we going to do about it, eh?
>
> **Official**: Well. My instructions, Mr Sawney, are to tell
> you that unless something is done, steps will be taken,
> Mr Sawney by the Department, to put you out; and that's
> that. I'm sorry. There it is.
>
> **Sailor**: And where will we go? The institutions, isn't it?
> Cos you've burnt the tram-car we used to live in. We

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[414] *Ibid.*, p. 113.

can't go on the road, we've two little kids with us. We've not got money for a wagon. So what do we do?

Official: If you take my advice, you'll clean the house. Hang some curtains up. Tidy the garden. And get rid of your lodgers.

[. . .]

It's no use trying to intimidate me. I told you before, I'm not responsible. If you lot get evicted, you've only yourselves to thank—[415]

The government has placed the Sawneys in an unresolvable situation, since they do not know how to live in any other way. They cannot lead the life they want because of the housing regulation, but they cannot escape because the caravan site in which they lived previously has been demolished. Forced institutionalisation is the only alternative left for them.

The Sawneys cannot change their usage of the space, nor can the Jackson's find a life-style that would include the Sawneys. The conflict leads to a riot where the women of the neighbourhood besiege the house and the police come to arrest various members of the family.

Ultimately, architectural design must take into account the ways in which humans regulate and utilise space. Arden explores the behaviour of people by placing them in situations that are reflective of their use of space. These plays bring into focus conflicts of ways of living— attitudes of living, in particular spaces. There are both cultural and physical uses of space.[416] Our conceptions of these cultural signifiers make up the landscape of our daily lives. Arden tries to make tangible these landscapes by questioning the ways in which different people conceive of and use space.

Aesthetic philosophies

Despite their initial poor reception, Arden's plays were slowly accepted by the critics. The resistance, in part, was a result of frustrated expectations. In the context of the usual fare on offer in the late 1950s, Arden's work asked for a different set of viewing criteria. Harold Hobson derided *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* for much the same reason

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[415] *Ibid.*, p. 165-166.
[416] Una Chadhuri is the best example of this approach to social conceptions of space in drama. She applies notions of psychic space to class, race and gender. See *Staging*

that the critics attacked Devine's production of *Bartholomew Fair*. As he sees it,

> The duty of theatre not to make men better, but to render
> them harmlessly happy . . . It is therefore simply no
> good at all for John Arden to come along to the court,
> and employ actors, and a director, as skilled as Lindsay
> Anderson to tell us war is wrong. We know that
> already.[417]

Hobson went to the theatre expecting a certain type of product and was confronted with

an unfamiliar theatrical style. Upset because it did not meet his expectations, the play

was not considered on its own merits. For example, Hobson distilled *Serjeant*

Musgrave's Dance down to that cliché "war is hell".[418] John Russell Taylor writes that he

cannot decide what side to come down on; "Arden's attitude to his creations is quite

uncommitted".[419] When Arden overtly stated in essays and interviews that there were

connections to contemporary social issues, such as 'squatters rights' in Barnsley in *Live*

Like Pigs, the comments were taken literally by the critics and misconstrued as

contradictory political diatribes. These political views were often fraught with contradiction

and none of the characters' viewpoints offered any ready-made answers for the

spectators. The characters' logic appeared flawed, because Arden did not convey a

value judgement by making them appear despicable or exemplary. In *Live Like Pigs*, Mr

Jackson hates the Sawneys' because of their slovenly habits, yet he solicits prostitution

from Big Rachel. This even-handed depiction distressed critics and often they did not

know the way in which to approach the plays.

These views are based on expectations that plays should present a moral point of

view. In reaction to these views, Arden uses his preface to *Live Like Pigs* to guide

spectators towards interpretation:

> On the one hand, I was accused by the Left of attacking
> the Welfare State: on the other, the play was *hailed* as a
> defence of anarchy and amorality. So perhaps I had
> better declare myself. I approve outright neither of the
> Sawneys nor of the Jacksons. Both groups uphold

Place: The Geography of Modern Drama, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.
[417] Harold Hobson, "Serjeant Musgrave's Dance", *The Sunday Times*, 25 November 1959.
[418] Hobson, "Serjeant Musgrave's Dance", *Plays in Review 1956-1980: British Drama and the Critics*, Gareth Llyod Evans and Barbara Llyod Evans, eds., London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1985, pp. 88-90.
[419] John Russell Taylor *Anger and After: A Guide to New British Drama*, London: Eyre Methuen, p. 84.

standards of conduct that are incompatible, but which
are both valid in their own context.[420]

He is not concerned with showing a journalistic rendering of the actions of the play, but

showing these types of characters are pitted against each other in this spatial / political

context— that is to say, by showing both sides of the situation. It is not a matter of not

being politically committed, but staging multiple views of people trapped in political

quandaries.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, spectators still were inundated with the

techniques and assumptions of naturalism and realism and resistant to unfamiliar ways of

seeing. The critics' arguments stem from the assumption that Arden's plays are to be

approached with naturalistic conventions in mind. *Live Like Pigs* can be produced as

naturalistic drama, but will fail, because it is, as Arden states, "in large part meant to be

funny".[421] Rather than using characterisation or Freudian causality, the humour and other

elements, such as ballad, are meant to reveal the heightened expression of the text.

Albert Hunt describes the reception of Arden's work by newspaper critics:

> They go to the theatre unconsciously expecting one
> 'style and type . . . of entertainment', and he offers them
> another. And this other style which he offers them
> happens to be one which rejects the basic assumptions
> the cultivated theatre-going public holds about what
> makes 'good' theatre.[422]

The plays superficially appear to operate with the same compositional principles, and by

those criteria seem not to be well constructed. The plays demand a closer inspection of

their structure to see the ways in which they can be approached.

A playwright's control

Part of the reason for Arden's lack of acclaim stems from his experimentation with

anti-illusionist theatre techniques at times when social realism and illusionist theatre were

in vogue. Spectators and critics are now more open to alternative structures. Arden was

a pioneer in theatrical form in Britain in the late 1950s and early 1960s, creating theatre in

the spirit of Brecht and ancient theatrical traditions. He sought to bring to life the world of

[420] John Arden, "Live Like Pigs" in *Three Plays, ibid.,* p. 101.
[421] *Ibid.,* p. 101.
[422] Hunt, *ibid,* p. 22.

the imagination and the palette of presentational theatre techniques. Acknowledgement of Arden's architectural aesthetic and consideration of assumptions of conventional conceptions of theatre suggest that Arden's plays are more than grim social statements about the inadequacies of the welfare state. Rather, they strive to show the interpersonal relations between competing interest groups within a given space. They whether these relations are the most efficient way to solve problems concerning that space. More often than not, when a community strays from those conventional systems the result is the anarchy that is associated with the situations of Arden's plays. Normally, a social system will put down the renegade groups regardless of the consequences. It is a well-intended action executed in the interest of preserving the larger whole. Consequently, Arden's plays ask what are the ways in which the system can be fixed and the world made a better place. Among the principal components of architecture are the construction and organisation of spaces for use by humans. A building is planned with its use in mind. Buildings are adapted over the years for a variety of purposes. Arden calls into question the regulation of existing structure and the types of activities that are expected to take place in them because the environments can affect the ways in which people interact.

Arden's plays are abstractly architectural. The structure is put together by a conscious design of both visual and verbal elements. More interesting though, is that he is preoccupied with the ways in which humans adapt designed spaces to their own needs. He is interested in the processes that lead to the organisation of towns, neighbourhoods and houses. He is interested in the requirements and expectations that people have for the spaces they inhabit. And he is interested in why we feel an attachment to nations, cities, town and plots of land. He uses the structures of his plays to highlight all that goes into the planning, shaping and use of the world around us. He manipulates a theatrical space to express a politics of space.

Though planning and design are an essential part of any writing process, Arden's work is marked by his architectural aesthetic. His numerous essays looking at others' work demonstrate his rectilinear architectural perspective on the organisational structures of writing in general. He uses this knowledge to highlight and propel relevant themes and ideas in his own writing. Its organisational principles have provided him with a methodical

precision in his writing. This is especially apparent in his novels. His latest novel *Jack Juggler and Emperor's Whore* (1995) is a tale that intertwines the autobiographies of three characters in different historical space. While telling the story of three plays, he alternates between perspectives, section by section, until all three are bound together and the reader is provided with three eyewitness accounts to the characters' lives.

Even in his fictional prose, the importance of space and social interaction within a space is a recurring motif. Arden basically believes in the established social structures of society and his plays examine how these structures operate in the face of disrupting forces. He presents more than one perspective of a situation in order to give as objective, or truthful impression of the event as possible. As each of the characters in Arden's *Cogs Tyrranic* strives to write the truth amidst so many contradictions in the surrounding world, so does Arden himself. This preoccupation often frustrates critics and spectators accustomed to plays which strive to show one view out of many in an attempt to make a comment in favour of a particular doctrine.

What is important about Arden's concentration on topics associated with architectural practices, is that the stage space can be used as an expression of spatial philosophy. While the effect of the space upon the characters creates a naturalistic explanation, the techniques to explore the effect of social spaces are presented by overtly theatrical means. Arden confronts and explores concepts of cultural theory and political criticism by means of visible artistic artefacts. He structures visual forms to approach complex philosophical and moral dilemma. Often, words and sentences have to be built up in a complex manner to describe simple visual relationships. Visual illustration can be a more simple and economical manner of expression. Architects draw renderings and sketch prototypes to show clients what the building project will look like. Different views reveal different characteristics; a side view reveals the height of the walls, or an aerial view characterises the interior layout. A playwright uses characters and settings to do a similar job of showing multiple perspectives. What is shown are the ways that people use a space and the limitations on behaviour imposed by that space. A dramaturgical structure that is organised around spatial principles is flexible enough to embrace a variety of theatrical styles. The performance mode becomes a way to call attention to the

structural underpinning of the space. Architecture can be harnessed for more

conventional description of the use of setting in theatre practice.

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Figure 6.1; *The Battle between Carnival and Lent*, by Pieter Bruegel.
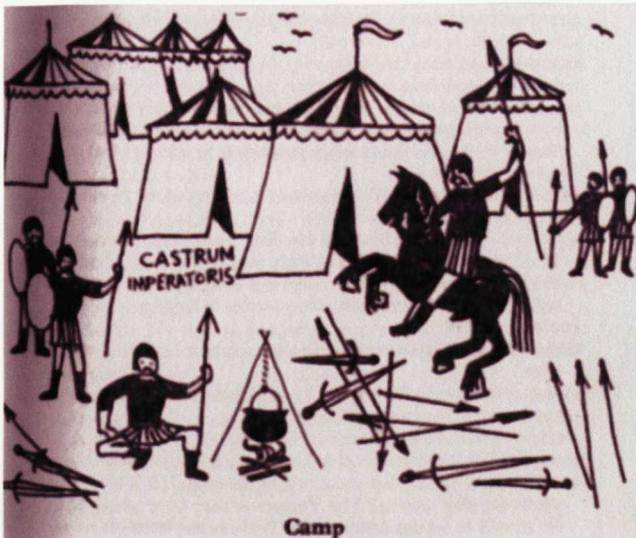
Figure 6.2; *Camp Scene*, by John Arden, in John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy, *The Island of the Mighty*, London: Methuen, 1974.

Figure 6.3; *Battle Scene*, by John Arden, in John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy, *The Island of the Mighty*, London: Methuen, 1974.

Figure 6.4; *Moses*, by Frida Kahlo, on the cover of *Arden / D'Arcy Plays: One*, London: Methuen, 1994.

Figure 6.5; *Grande hazaña con muertos,* by Goya.

Figure 6.6; *Disposition*, by Giotto.

Figure 6.7; *Salford Street Scene*, by LS Lowry.

Figure 6.8; Scene rendering for *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959), by Jocelyn Herbert in Herbert, Jocelyn, and Cathy Courtney, eds., *Jocelyn Herbert: A Theatre Workbook*, London: Art Books International, 1993.
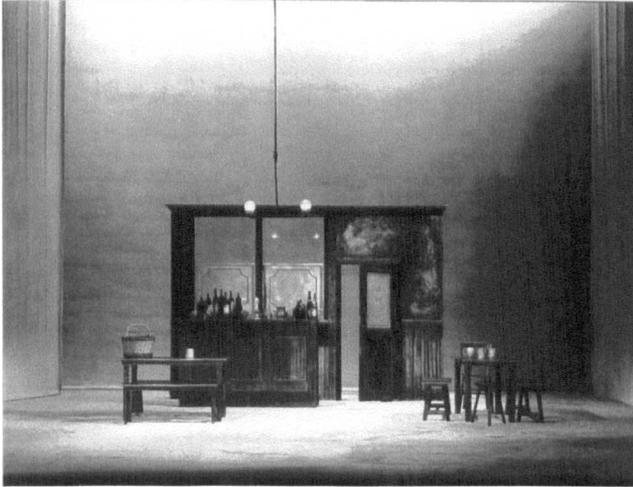
Figure 6.9; Production Photo of *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959), by Jocelyn Herbert in Herbert, Jocelyn, and Cathy Courtney, eds., *Jocelyn Herbert: A Theatre Workbook*, London: Art Books International, 1993.
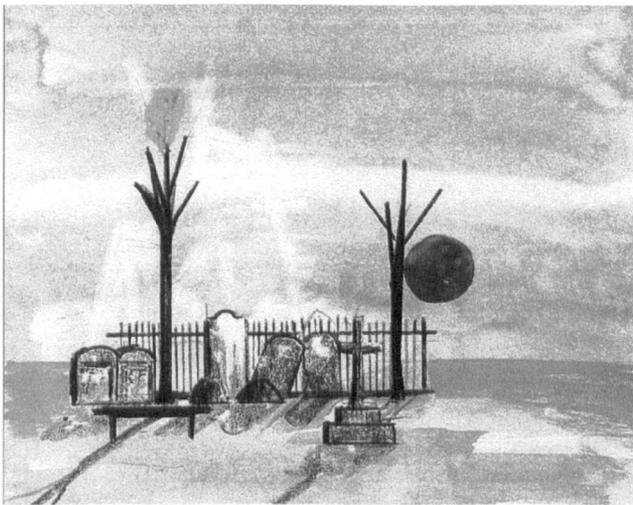
Figure 6.10; Scene rendering for *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959), by Jocelyn Herbert in Herbert, Jocelyn, and Cathy Courtney, eds., *Jocelyn Herbert: A Theatre Workbook*, London: Art Books International, 1993.

Figure 6.11; Production Photo from *Live Like Pigs* (1958), in At the Royal Court: 25 Years of the English Stage Company, Derbyshire: Richard Findlater, ed., Amber Lane Press, 1981.

Chapter 7

Visual Theatre: Transformations in the role of Spectacle as Dramaturgy

The approach used as an organising principle for this thesis has been the application of theory and techniques taken from the visual arts and applied to contemporary theatre practice. The works of Wilson, Fornés, Byrne, Storey and Arden share in common a heightened awareness of the ways in which the visible components of theatre can be harnessed as a form of expression. The art objects they create in the form of theatre are stimuli for spectators to experience. It is by those experiences that the spectator forms an individual interpretation of the play. That they autonomously create theatre that relies on visual means is an indication that playwrights in a contemporary context are becoming more aware of the role that the visible plays in theatrical expression. To what degree they use these techniques, depends entirely on the type of expression that they are trying to evoke. These mechanisms are not only a way of looking at visual composition, but at the playwriting process in general. Regardless of the visual content, playwrights are creative artists and create artistic products that are executed by production teams. The visual dynamics are a significant part of theatrical composition that often is dealt with on an intuitive basis; it is used but only designers make a conscious use of aesthetic concepts and traditions to manipulate the visible aspects of performance. These concepts are obvious to artists and designers, but taken for granted by theatrical artists.

Non-visually trained dramatists also use the concepts and techniques of spatial dynamics. Certainly, not all playwrights treat the theatre as a visual art, but there is always a certain amount of visual stimulation in live theatre. There are many studies of the linguistic and narrative elements of composition that explore the notions of theatre as drama. I have chosen to focus on the visible aspects of theatre to draw focus away from patterns of literary interpretation and consider visual stimuli as an alternative or supplementary pool of evidence with which to build interpretations of plays. By countering traditional historiography, we can show where it is best suited as a methodology and find evidence to support already well established conventional habits of

interpretation. The visible elements are another part of the compositional whole that aid in the evocation of dramaturgical expression.

Most often in Anglo-American theatre, scenography is used as decoration. However, while a playwright such as Beckett is heavily reliant upon meaning generated by linguistic constructions, even he restricts the visual life of his plays through stage direction.[423] A particular image is essential to the evocation of his stated intentions. These visible mechanisms work with the text to create a theatrical expression— he would have written a novel if he wanted to— he harnessed theatrical constructions to evoke a visual and aural expression. By developing a descriptive vocabulary for these techniques one can explore all of the possibilities of what the visible can offer. The space used may contain metaphors or imaginary places, but the three-dimensional qualities are expressive on their own. The visceral experience of the play in space shapes the linguistic evocations that are confined or expressed therein. The mechanisms provide a methodology with which to describe a range of performance practice that relies on visible elements as forms of expression. Many of theatre's practices such as circus, *commedia del'arte*, acrobatics, mime and puppetry use a visual form primarily as expression. When these are contained within a controlled environment, they take on aspects of the fine arts. Even street theatre, environmental theatre or stand-up comedies have parallels in developments in the visual arts. The theories and vocabularies applied to these artistic products can be applied to their theatrical equivalent. It is through this interdisciplinary experimentation that theatre finds its place in a contemporary and historical context. These concepts can only aid in broadening our understanding of the practices and performance conventions that we take for granted.

The visible in theatre is more than illustrative set decoration. It is the shaping of stage environments by the actor's body or by sculptural objects. It is the space between the objects, the temperature, the sound waves and the amount of light. When we are spectators in a theatrically shaped space, we assume each element is mediated by an artist or artists and intended to be a part of the whole. The event provides stimuli for the

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[423] Luis Fernando Ramos, "The Imaginary Space of Beckett's Stage Directions", unpublished paper presented at "Postmodernism in Scenography" Prague, June 1999.

body to sense and the eyes to watch. Increasingly, there is resurgence in the creation of form that subordinates text to the visual mechanisms. The visual mechanisms are stepping forward and taking more weight in the construction that emphasises vision over the other elements of production. The use of the visible in a theatrical context shares many attributes of the media from which they have been appropriated. As with the placement of two colours next to each other in a two-dimensional composition, when the mechanisms of each of the arts are combined or used in tandem, they work synergistically to generate a product greater than its constituent parts. The theatre is hybridisation of linguistic constructs and three-dimensional techniques, which gives it its unique expressive attributes.

Overarching the discussion is an assumption that the pictorial can constitute a dramaturgical structure. Pictorial dramaturgy is a theatrical script that uses the pictorial / spatial elements of the fine arts as a means of expression. Not all playwrights use these techniques and not all visual artists who work in the theatre use aesthetic principles gleaned form the fine arts, but those that do operate by different conventions than conventional literary drama. Pictorial elements become the base structure from which the production team creates individual performances. The sequencing of images is another way of laying out the basic structures of theatrical production; that is to say, rather than solely using text as indication of expression, a visual playwright uses images, stage directions and implied physical motion to create a playscript. Each of the five playwrights discussed creates their pictorial composition using different techniques. Wilson uses a storyboard of images. Fornés uses proxemics and extensive stage directions. Byrne uses text to regulate the movement of his characters. Storey builds in proxemics to ensure his compositions are worked out. Arden creates environments that will structure the reactions of the characters placed within.

Embedded within any text are physical actions that must be performed, such as, entrances, exits, sitting, standing, body contact, cooking or running. The actors will carry out these actions as specified by the stage action and culturally constructed conventions of appropriate human interaction. The actors must carry out a range of movements, which in turn limit their movement in the stage environment. As well, the available stage

environment dictates a particular range of movement or appropriate usage. Both architecture and installation play into this. Is the space a house, a garden or a dilapidated gym? Is the stage space divided into several domains? What types of action occur in which type of space? What is the relationship of the characters to this space? Do they belong? Are they visiting? Are they there by choice? The props that are necessary for the action of the play can control the images and use of space. What objects inhabit the space? How are they used? The type of lighting and colour that is indicated can control the images further. Is the space bright or dark? Is the environment manipulated by colour? Each of these elements is set up in the script through tolerances and parameters. The playscript establishes which set of conventions it will be using in its presentation and then exploits these constraints in the placement and execution of the performance and event. These techniques are becoming more common in contemporary practice and it is useful to use a vocabulary of the fine arts to describe the ways in which they operate.

The spectator's gaze

The role of the spectator and his or her gaze in the theatrical event is vital. One of the primary components of the theatrical experience is the presence of the spectator. A production ultimately is presented to the public, so inherent within it is the presence of, and eventual perception by observers. One can expect a range of response from the introduction of stimuli. Visual knowledge and pattern recognition should not be confused with conventions of artistic representation. As Louis Fontanills states,

> The human mind and its senses (the mechanisms whereby we gather stimuli about us are not unlimited). Being comprised of a particular set of constraints (being human) delimits that which can be absorbed and / or understood; it (the mind and senses) allows in (functioning like a sieve) only that which it can, from a near infinite set of probabilities / properties and reorganizes this within our inherent makeup and experiences. This inherent partial input / understanding does not describe that which 'absolutely is' but 'how it must be for me'. Much exists beyond our perceptual framework, of this I am sure.[424]

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[424] Lois Fontanills, "Art / Artifact", Asthetics-l listserve, 18 November 1998.

Another important consideration is the spectator's expectations. Attending a conventional play leads to one expected mode of spectator reaction. Walking through an art gallery leads to a different mode of spectator response. Artwork that treads between the two media complicates the conventional expectations for a spectator. It expects spectators to view and absorb, but it also expects them to make an intellectual engagement as well. The experience asks for a level of awareness that combines the experience of walking into a gallery to view paintings or sculptures and one of sitting and watching a play. After watching the Wooster Group's *House Lights* (1999), a friend commented that he liked it on a superficial level, but said it did not have enough energy to engage him on a intellectual level. He did not have the patience to dicipher, the interrelationship between video, film and live performance and the three texts. He was aware of the visual logic of the piece, but felt he only wanted to engage with the piece passively, as he would with a conventional play.

Many visual events are designed with the expectation that the viewer will become involved on a conscious level with the visual elements and interpret the stimuli according to his or her own reception of the piece. When producing complicated visual theatre experiences, it is important to be aware of the type of assumptions that the spectators' hold concerning the experience in which they will be participating. Some work is constructed with a specific interpretation to convey through the playscipt, while others present a range of ideas bounded by the playtext. It is the final ingredient of the spectator that defines the way in which meaning will be interpreted from the piece. There are multitudes of factors that affect spectator reception: culture, education, visual literacy, experience or physical condition. As spectators become more aware of visible mechanisms and are more exposed to the conventions of visual expression within the theatre, a larger spectator base will become literate in the forms and devices that are harnessed as means of expression. The ways in which spectators respond are being explored in visual culture studies across a range of disciplines. Until a vocabulary becomes common, it is difficult to know what one takes away from a visual art performance.

The emerging awareness of the functions of the visible within theatre is an indication that theatre is searching for techniques to reclaim its vitality. It is a form of expression that has survived over the centuries and has survived censorship, lack of theatre space and money by transforming and adapting to social, cultural and historical forces. Theatre is constantly in the process of appropriating developments in the other expressive media and incorporating them into its expressive form. Works such as Wilson's *Monsters of Grace* (1998) attempt to use their form to instruct spectators on different ways of looking. While the visible elements have always been in use in the theatre, it is now a matter of focusing on these elements rather than on the textual and thematic elements normally attributed to West End and Broadway productions. The spectator is expected to participate and engage in the artistic event.

Other directions in visible theatre

Wilson, Fornés, Byrne, Storey and Arden use the visible elements of theatre as a form of expression. To them the use of the theatrical space, the manipulation of sculptural objects and the presence of the spectator is important to the experience of their productions. The success of their work confirms that the theatre is a natural place for artists. The same basic concepts emerge in various guises. They use entrances and exits to create visual rhythms. They divide the space into different planes of action. They use colour and light as evocative mechanisms. They use stasis and change to chart the course of the action. They treat the actors as bio-objects that present themselves to spectators. Image, space and movement take on a central role in the organisation of the structure. Their playscripts are highly evocative of visual staging. In general, the interpretation of their pieces is pregnant with a range of meaning rather than any specific interpretation. Much of the piecing together of the projected stimuli of each play relies on the active participation of the spectators. They do not have any common aim, and they have not set out consciously to create spectacle driven theatre. They are creating drama using a pool of mechanisms that happen to highlight the role of the visible and spatial in its execution. Their work portends other directions in the evolution of theatre.

Contemporary artists are experimenting with the ways in which the theatre medium is used as a visual medium. They are breaking from the conventional

boundaries of theatre practice. There are many theatrical companies practising a form of theatre that relies on the spectator's awareness of space and image as stimuli to trigger interpretation. An acrobatic troupe, such as Keyassaine (1999), uses the space of a specially designed inflatable dome that they carry with them for their performances around the world. They use the180 degrees above the heads of observers to perform their act. They designed the tent and seating to accommodate visual nature of their performance— they control the semiotics of the space. The spectators are 'prepared' for the event by entering the space through the vapour lock. They sit in specially designed beach chairs positioned so that one's head looks up to the darkened dome. The figures suspended or flying through the air are picked out with light from follow spots. Their frantic activity takes on the appearance of human fireworks— they use sound in the form of live singing, to add tension and create an atmosphere for the actor. The flight path of the acrobats' bodies defines the dynamics above the spectators' heads. As the evening progresses, the feeling of the space changes according to the interrelationships of the bodies within the dome. This non-textual theatre form relies on the spectator's visceral reaction to what is seen and the tension that is built from the danger of flying through the air. It is exciting to watch the spectacles of bodies moving through space. There is not a large range of meanings inherent in the work, but it is exciting to watch. Lying back in my seat at a performance, I anticipated the physical feats of the performers. The sounds of hands meeting arms or legs punctuated the excitement. The visual exchange created an environment in which my senses were heightened. My body responded to what it saw and my mind imagined what might happen if something went wrong. Again, whatever meaning I brought to the piece was my own and based upon my interpretation of the aural and visual stimulation that I was exposed to during the duration of the theatrical experience.

An extreme example of the contemporary artist using the theatre as a medium is that of Franco B. He considers himself a painter, yet he uses live performance to create his living paintings, composed of images of bondage and biological captivity.[425] He paints and colours the environment using light, and using his body and props such as cages,

gurneys, chairs, braces and medical paraphernalia. He further adds texture and colouring to these images by smearing body effluvia over his body— thus colouring himself white and spraying fluids in a fine mist in the air. **Figure 7.1** shows a sequence of photographs taken as documentation of the *Mama, I Can't Sing (part III)* (1996) event. They show the transformation of an image over time. There is no linguistic or visual narrative, but the sequence of images triggers a visceral response within the spectator of the event. He uses his body as a sculptural form to be manipulated, painted upon and bound. It is a hybrid of live performance, live art and a theatre of sensation. This work is the historical descendant of the body art of Arcosanti, the light and space artists and traditional painting. As a self-professed painter, he uses the theatrical attributes as he would a canvas, paints and emulsion. Theatre allows him to control the time that the spectators look at his images.

Working with similar principles to those outlined in the previous discussions, DogTroep is a Dutch collective of artists that creates mediated live events using, sculpture, shape and colour. Many of the strategies they use to structure their works can be described using the devices and techniques outlined in the chapter on Wilson. DogTroep has performed only once in a traditional theatre. Though they create assemblages of local elements to create site-specific theatrical events, their work is purely visual. There is no sense of traditional narrative. Each time a semblance of a narrative was created it was subverted by purely spatial / visual means. For example, in *Camel Gossip II* (1993) men in a house bring pails out from an interior as it they are working, and then the image is interrupted with long trumpets that stretch over the heads of the audience from the back of the theatre. Illogical shifts change the focus away from any understandable narrative. They create fantastical objects, use bodies in inventive ways and confound all theatrical conventions. Instant shifts of images create humour. They use costume and change to shape human form, to create texture and to colour the performance environment. **Figure 7.2,** from *Assimil* (1995), shows a typical image that is generated from their performances. Human figures are overpowered by vast spaces filled with found objects. Here, clothing hangs all around and the figure manipulates a rope

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[425] Private conversation March 1997.

that is highlighted by light. The company often will transform objects from one thing to another. For example, a kitchen transforms into an outhouse, or dirt falls from the sky as rain. The stage environment was created in a surreal expression of changing visual arrangements of figure, objects and materials. The form of the presentation confounds any attempt to understand or interpret. What one is left with is a series of images, which revolve around a range of themes. What one takes away is completely dependent upon one's responses and associations with the material.

A more traditional group that creates theatre that fuses the aural and the visual into an integrated form is La fura del bas. They are a Spanish multi-media company that incorporates, sculpture, film, video, literature and theatre to create a dramatic composition. Each strand of media works to create a different range of experiences that contribute to the overall intellectual content of the play. It is a challenging invitation for spectators because it is necessary to look and choose which images to watch at any one time. The setting of *Faust@3.0* was a wall of scaffolding to the rear of the stage that had projection, live actors and sculptural objects on it. There was also a playing area in front of the scaffolding for sculptural objects and bio-objects. The creative images are all seductive on their own. They do not solely rely on text and actor to create a theatrical event, but use the visible as an active expression of the Faust myth. The function of spectacle is central in the evocation of the event. By understanding the vocabulary and aesthetic concepts of the visual arts, it is possible to identify and dissect the functioning of visible structure and become aware of the ways in which its stimuli trigger physical and intellectual responses to the production.

Stephen Mottrim uses these concepts and ideas as a vocabulary to devise his process of creation. He ascribes to the notion that humans have an innate visual sense. When these senses are given stimuli to react to, an instinctive region of the brain is triggered. Both Arnheim and Gombrich have descriptions of the type of physiological reaction in artistic spectatorship. Mottrim uses figures and images as the basis of his work, and uses movement and lighting to suggest that his objects are animate. **Figure 7.3** shows several automatons in action. Rather than use human actors, he uses puppets and automatons, so that he can do things that he cannot accomplish with human figures,

such as rip them apart. Mottrim deviates from conventions and these are sometimes shocking subversions of narrative form. Rather than tell a story, he inserts unexpected images; he chips off heads, has the figures metamorphose into something else. His use of darkness and illumination highlights the sculptural and movement qualities of the object. He wants the forms and shapes to be evocative on their own without distraction. The artifice is an essential part of the experience and even when it is obvious, people are still entranced and believe in the objects' live quality. He finds that very simple images are the most expressive because they leave the seeds of meaning planted within the head of the spectator to gestate according to the individual personality of the perceiver. He is both the artist and playwright in control of images, yet his work is still on the edge of art forms. It is art, it is performance and it is something in between.

A place in history

Prior the proto-baroque period artists crossed into several different media. This enabled them to innovate in the expression of their chosen form by using the techniques of the other arts. Contemporary artists are once again mixing and matching different media in an attempt to question assumptions about the production and reception of the artistic product. As artists strive to create something new, conventions of spectatorship are evolving. Wilson, Fornés, Byrne, Storey and Arden are participating in a larger movement that has emerged since the 1950s. They are harnessing the traditions and conventions of artistic processes and recombining them into forms of expression. These dramatists for the most part are exemplary of contemporary trends and techniques, and their work most clearly illustrates a range of practices common to the visible practices of theatre. These practices are stepping stones towards a conventional theatre that exploits the three-dimensional aspects of theatre mechanisms.

One of the central difficulties about talking of the visual is that it is describing images using language. We are grounded with linguistic codes. The expression of the visible components in theatre and art is an experience, and as spectators, we process that information in a much different way than we do language. It is a separate process of thinking as exemplified by Arnheim's visual thinking. Many of the artists are using the component visible elements to balance the composition and to create a temporal flow of

images that the spectators watch, follow and experience. Cultural contexts, experience and subjective interpretation guide understanding. The important part is that the visible structure is a thread of the drama that works in place of or in partnership with the linguistic to create a greater whole. There are many methodologies that attempt to define the dramatic experience. Semiotics chooses the best of several methods to get at different perspectives, but these perspectives are guided by our assumptions based primarily on philology. However, the visible elements require a broader phenomenological approach and a separate mode of reception. Only then can we augment our understanding of visual theatrical experiences through the use of the many different theoretical and cultural lenses available.

This is an ever-increasing age of visual communication. Everyday the average person is bombarded with millions of visual stimuli—from the proxemics of daily interaction to the messages that are flashed over television, the computer and on signs on the sides of roads. The average person has been making a thousand visual judgements each day, even before the proliferation of visual technology. A theorist cannot say definitively what anything means because there are a wide variety of responses to each visual experience. There can be no definitive proof that visual communication is understood. Is it really possible to describe the sensation of colour? The stimuli produce feelings and feelings are ever elusive, as is the medium of theatre. The images of theatre are created and then they are lost. It is a wave of feeling we make conscious decisions, but the experience is fleeting and cannot be recreated the same way twice. Theatre is a game of sensations. We have conventions that tell us what works and what does not. There is vision, there are living bodies filling the membrane, there is sound, there is the body speculating, there are the emotions triggered and there is the baggage that is carried into the theatre.

Once there is an awareness of the functions of the visible, new levels of perception become available. The eye is an amazing organ. It can adapt to whatever obstacles are placed in its way. Dyslectics learn to correct the confusion with which they see. If we are giving red spectacles, we soon grow accustomed to the coloration. As well, we can learn to focus on different elements within a composition or in space.

Walking through Bill Irwin installation at the Dia centre in New York City in 1998, I realised that I was being shown a different way of seeing the world. After spending a bit of time in the environment, my eyes grew accustomed to the form and allowed me to focus on the elements within the space in a different way. It is like the Wittgenstein drawing of the rabbit /duck face. It is all on the relation of the figure to the ground. When I exited from the Dia centre, I was seeing the space of the world in a different manner. The doorways began to take on a more three-dimension edge. The lines and shading of the outside world became heightened. I have heard similar discussions of the *HG* experience, where our way of seeing takes on a different significance. Their effects, however, are short lived because we are not accustomed to viewing objects in the unique context that the visual artist might present.

Literary quality is taken as a primary mode of expression of theatre, but there is no reason why visible structure cannot also be a primary mode of communication. These two strands are often so intertwined that it is impossible to disentangle them. Our five playwrights are particularly evocative of this means of visual communication because their training in the fine arts have made them more adept at creating visual images in a theatrical context. The vitality of the formal capabilities of theatre lay in the complex web of communicative medium. It is an alchemical brew of ingredients all coming together in performance to make an artistic product. This thesis illustrates some of the visible building blocks that theatre possesses. Pictorial dramaturgy deals with the design and construction of plays by combining visual theatre with playwriting. The awareness of the possibilities of the visible elements can strengthen our approach to the new theatre that is emerging in the age of mass visual proliferation.
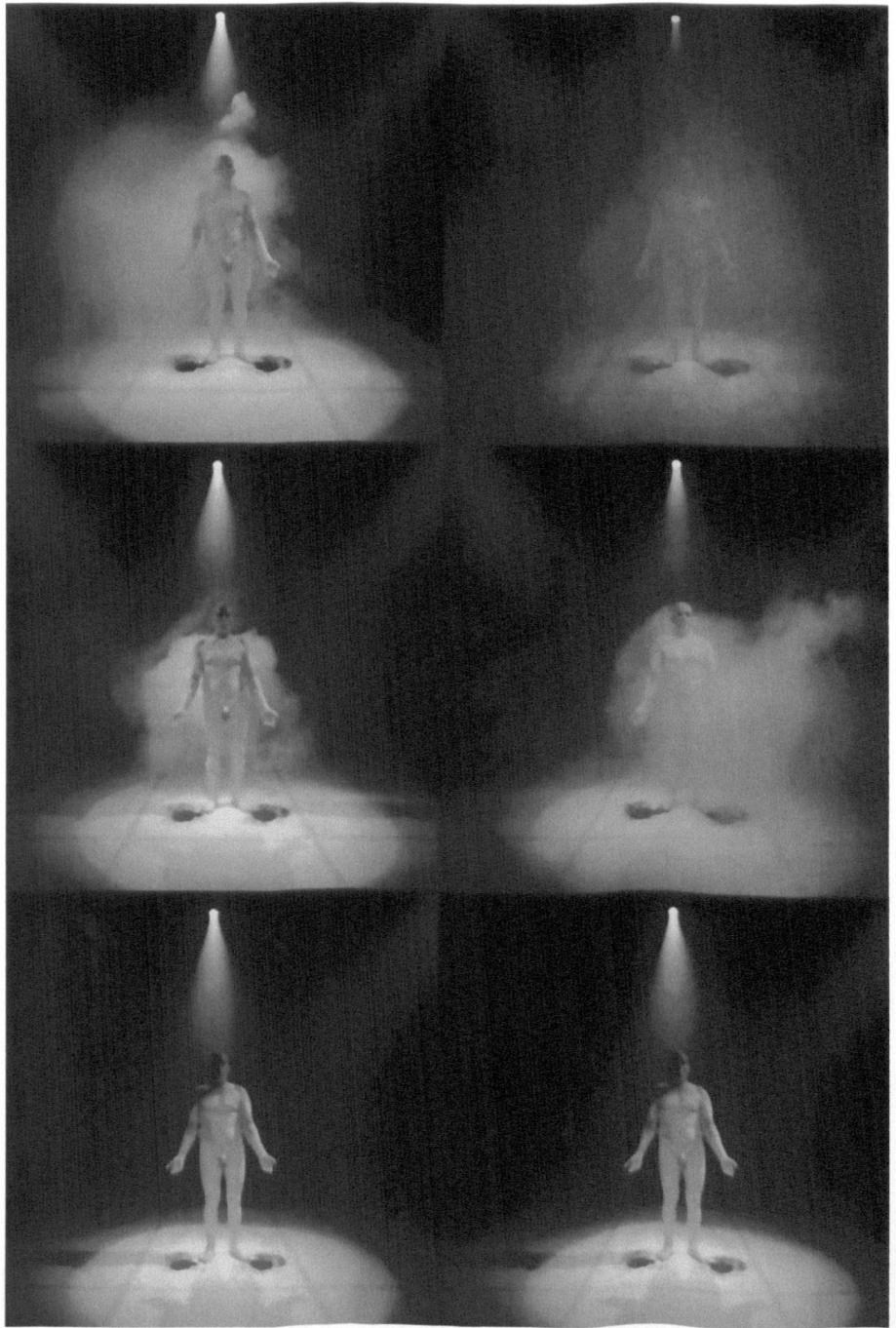
Figure 7.1; *Mama I Can't Sing III*, in Luis Keidan and Stuart Morgan, *Franco B*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 1999.

Figure 7.2; Production Photo from *Assimil* (1995), in *DogTroep: Photography 1991-1996*, Amsterdam: H&FB, 1997.

Figure 7.3; Advertisement for Stephen Mottrim's Seed Carriers (1996).

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