

SPACE AND TIME IN THEATRE



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6

SPACE AND TIME IN THEATRE

A P P R O V A L S H E E T

The Visual Communication special project entitled
'Space and Time in Theatre' undertaken by Shilpa Raje
is approved in partial fulfilment of the requirement
for the degree of Master of Design in Visual Communication.

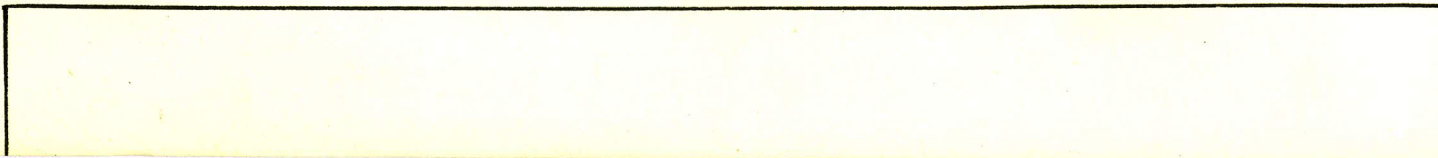
G U I D E

: MBhawani

D A T E

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Contents:

The Nature Of Theatre

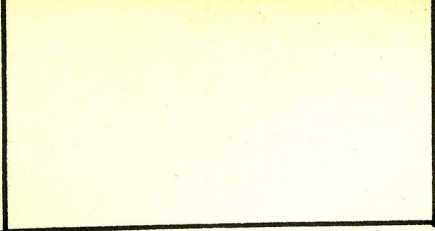
The Evolution of Modern Theatre

Space and Time

- . Language and Situation
- . Action and Tension
- . Dramatic Irony
- . Character and Idea
- . Presentment
- . Drama and The Novel
- . Decorum
- . Destiny
- . Action, Plot and Structure
- . Collaboration

The Stage

- . Light and Three Dimensionality



Theatre is nothing

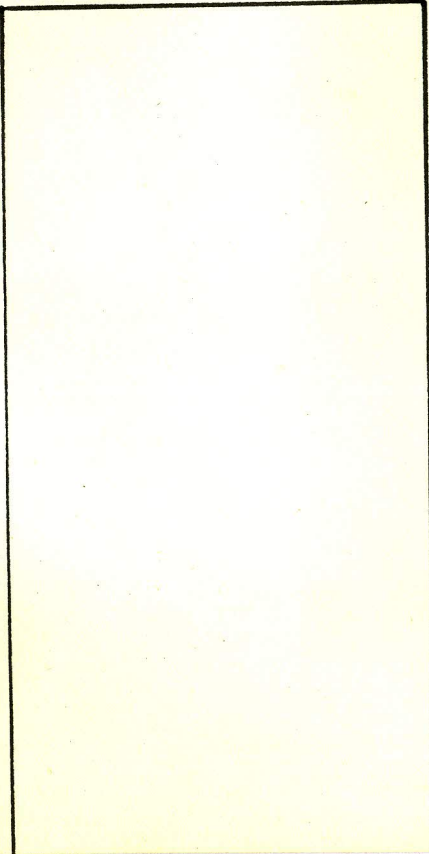
if not spontaneous

it occurs

it happens

stopping

it stops being theatre //



THE NATURE OF THEATRE:

// The theatre experience is that of perpetual present tense, it occurs, it happens. It is transitory in the fact that on stopping it stops being, unlike literature and the visual arts which are tangible, unchanging - the essence of this is to catch something in a moment in time and freeze it, this being impossible with theatre as it is a performing art - an event and not an object. //

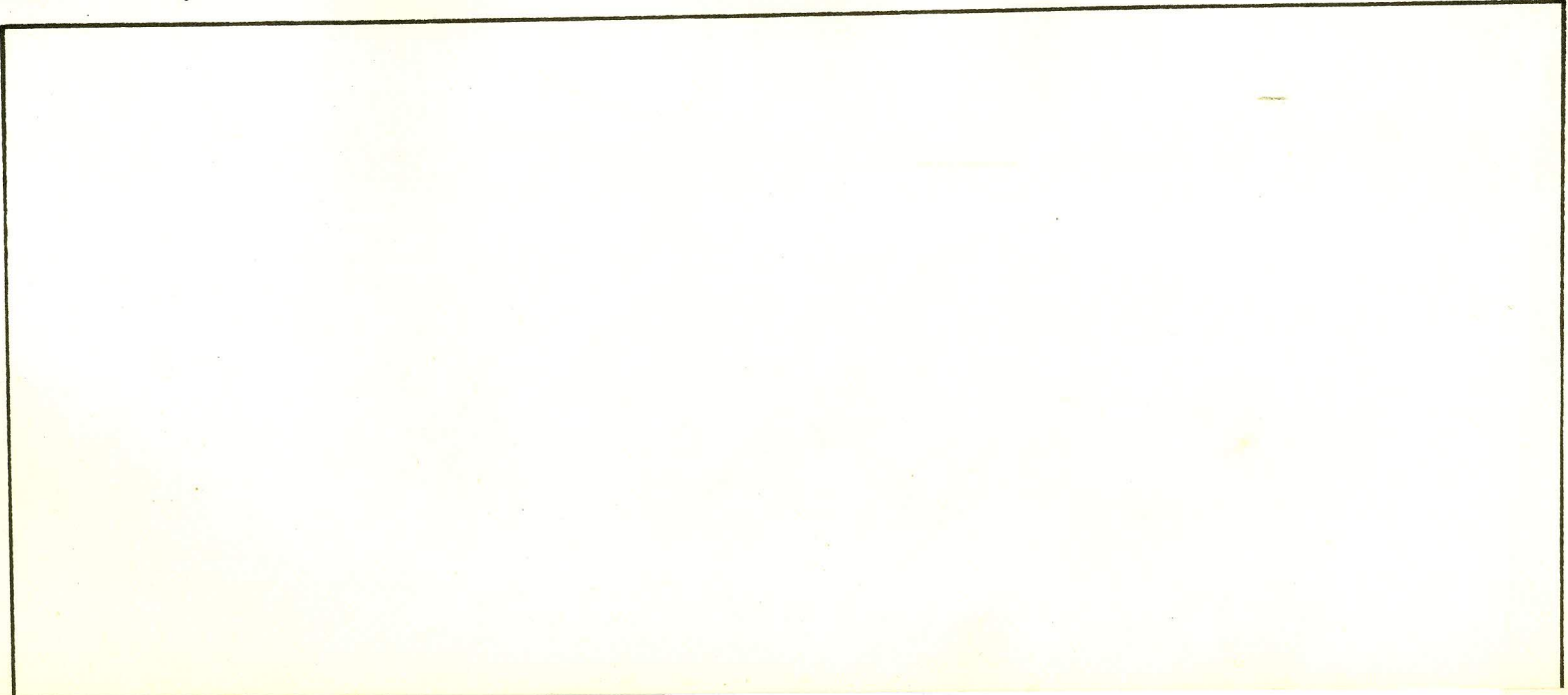
// With music nothing persists except as it moves through time. A note cannot be held forever. Music is created by perpetual shifts of notes through repetition, variation, and accumulation of effects. Similarly theatre occurs through time - A cumulative series of sights, sounds and impressions creates theatre. //

Objects like costumes, props, scenery and script are a part of theatre, but none constitutes the art. Its permanent features are not theatre. The script is an outline for the performance - unacted the play remains incomplete. The experience will always be different as building occurs everytime. Physical production affects the performance. The experience really lies in the performance itself."

The performance is a result of tangible and intangible forces coming together
- physical presence and expressed emotions. //

The performance is variable yet must be true to the spirit and the meaning of
the play. The work is realized only in performance.

The elements of theatre comprise the audience, performance, environment, character
and structure, purpose and point of view. At every point in time the elements
intersect, fuse and combine to produce theatre. //



Theatre is a performer spectator exchange. It engages both the groups in communication which is immediate and personal due to the presence of both the parties. It is characterised by involvement, the liveness of the audience counts the group experience requires a group assemblage, where independent responses are overshadowed. This crowd phenomenon encourages reactions of a collective mind. The illusion created by theatre is completed by the audience. Responses are one directional. Theatre affords the audience an opportunity to be transported outside themselves and look deeply inside themselves, the conscious personality vanishes.

Adjustments such as drastic shifts in space and time are accepted by the audience.

For e.g. a man going in circles to simulate a long journey. One accepts rapid movements back and forth in time. For example flashbacks - abrupt movements from present to past and back, anachronism - playing a person or event outside proper time sequence (character from past speaks in the present). These shifts in time are accepted as a matter of course.

Theatre operates on the level of symbol, metaphor and dreams.

When metaphor succeeds we see before us a complex creation which mirrors life. A crucial ingredient in one theatre experience is the fact that our shared knowledge and experience is much larger than we realize.

In the acting of a dramatic speech the audience is liberated from physical restraints and emotional inhibitions which limit the response to literature as merely cerebral. Theatre requires responsiveness of mind and body.

It is physically uninterrupted for a certain length of time which calls for a sustained demand on our attention and progresses in a linear fashion.

THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN THEATRE:

/ Aristotle placed drama among the imitative arts. This gave rise, during the renaissance, to the idea that the audience was in some sense deluded or deceived into believing that what happened on stage was really happening and that drama should be limited as far as possible and practicable to probabilities of real life. This led to the promulgation of unities of time and space, which in extreme form have limited the duration of action to the duration of performance and space to single area equal to the stage area.

Technical development of theatre made possible an increasing degree of naturalism in stage settings. By early 20th century it came to be accepted that for a modern play the norm was a picture frame stage arranged so as to closely resemble a room with a wall removed, on which actors reproduce actions and speech of 'real life'. Drama belonging most naturally in this theatre dealt with social problems in a predominantly middle class milieu. Decline of this drama (commercial theatre) is the central thread which runs through the history of modern drama.

SPACE AND TIME:

Drama emerges in a space and time context. It is woven into the fabric of time and is linked to painting and dancing with a stress on visual impressions and the spatial relationships of the audience and actors. "

/ Space and time are perpetually being created in theatre where the unities are also physically inherent in the performance of a play. /

/ In the dramatic context space and time become malleable elements.

Tempo, accent and rhythm involve relationships in time. Patterns of time condition our responses. It lends a new dimension to things seen or transforms them completely.

/ Manipulations of space and time result in the creation of dramatic forms - comic, pathos, ritual.

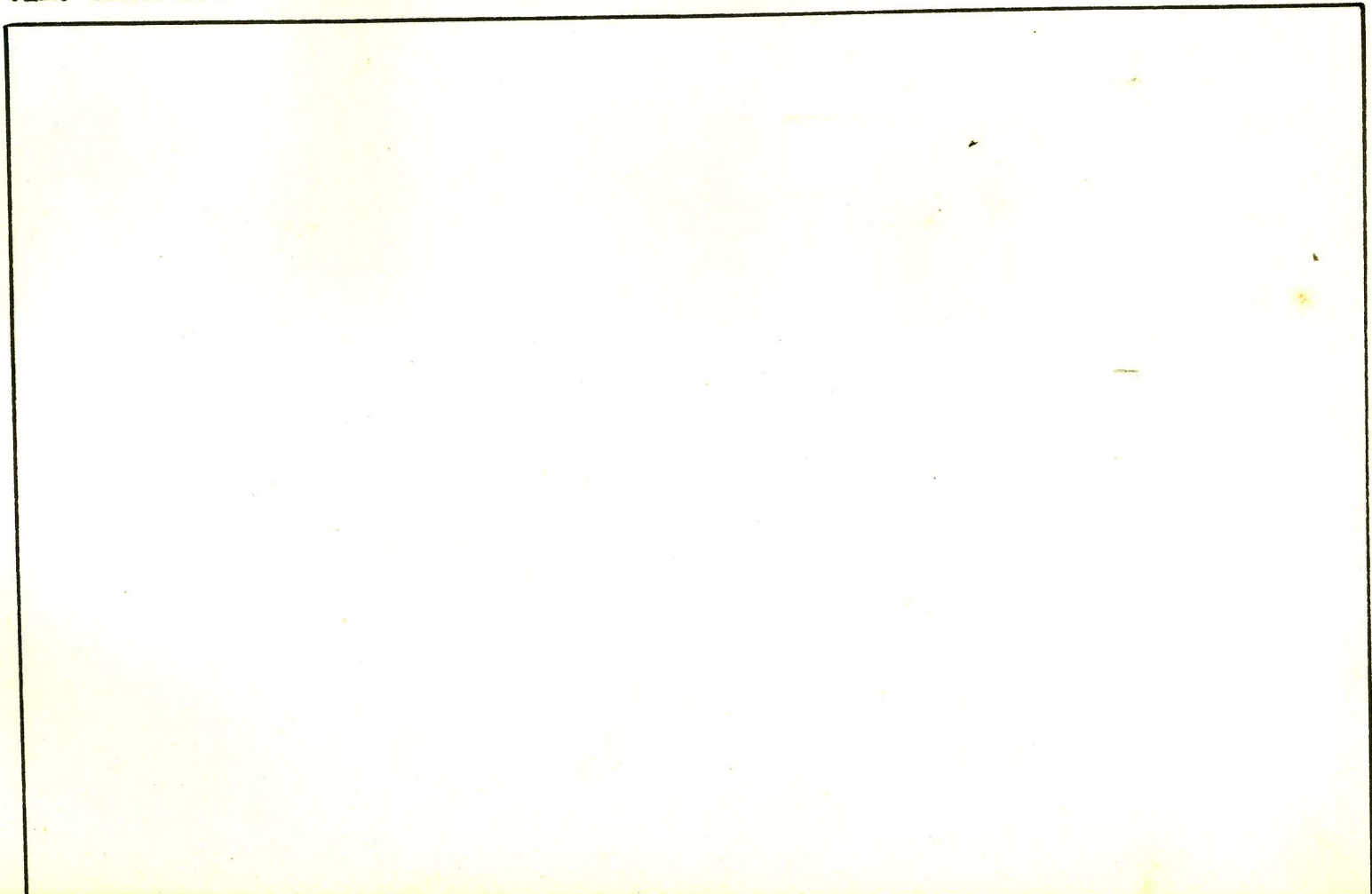
/ Time is not simply an interval in which a particular action takes place. But a malleable element to be shaped into patterns, shortened, extended, accelerated or even invented. /

/ Drama is non manipulative, unlike film. It offers a sequence of events but does not control the visual field. Affirmation of spatial existence does not constitute the total content of spatial articulation. /

/ Manipulation of space has a range of expressive potentiality. It articulates itself and the individual's attitude towards the world and the material being worked with. It could reveal the structuring of ideas and emotions. It could inject reason, add intensity and convey expressive content. /

^ In theatre illusions are created through manipulations of space and time in terms of the various aspects of theatre. /

^ The following areas are an examination of how, within these categories space and time entities are created using dramatic devices. /



LANGUAGE AND SITUATION:

Language creates the situation and embodies the action. The situation is not described, it is presented, enacted. In the presentation of situations there is a liveness of enactment. The utterance, movement, intonation are those of the talking voice - which are dramatically evocative. They are capable of creating an ambiance - suggesting space and creating time. ' '

The language is the situation. A narrative can create a sense of immediate action - implied physical movement, questions, exclamations, arresting changes of tone. /

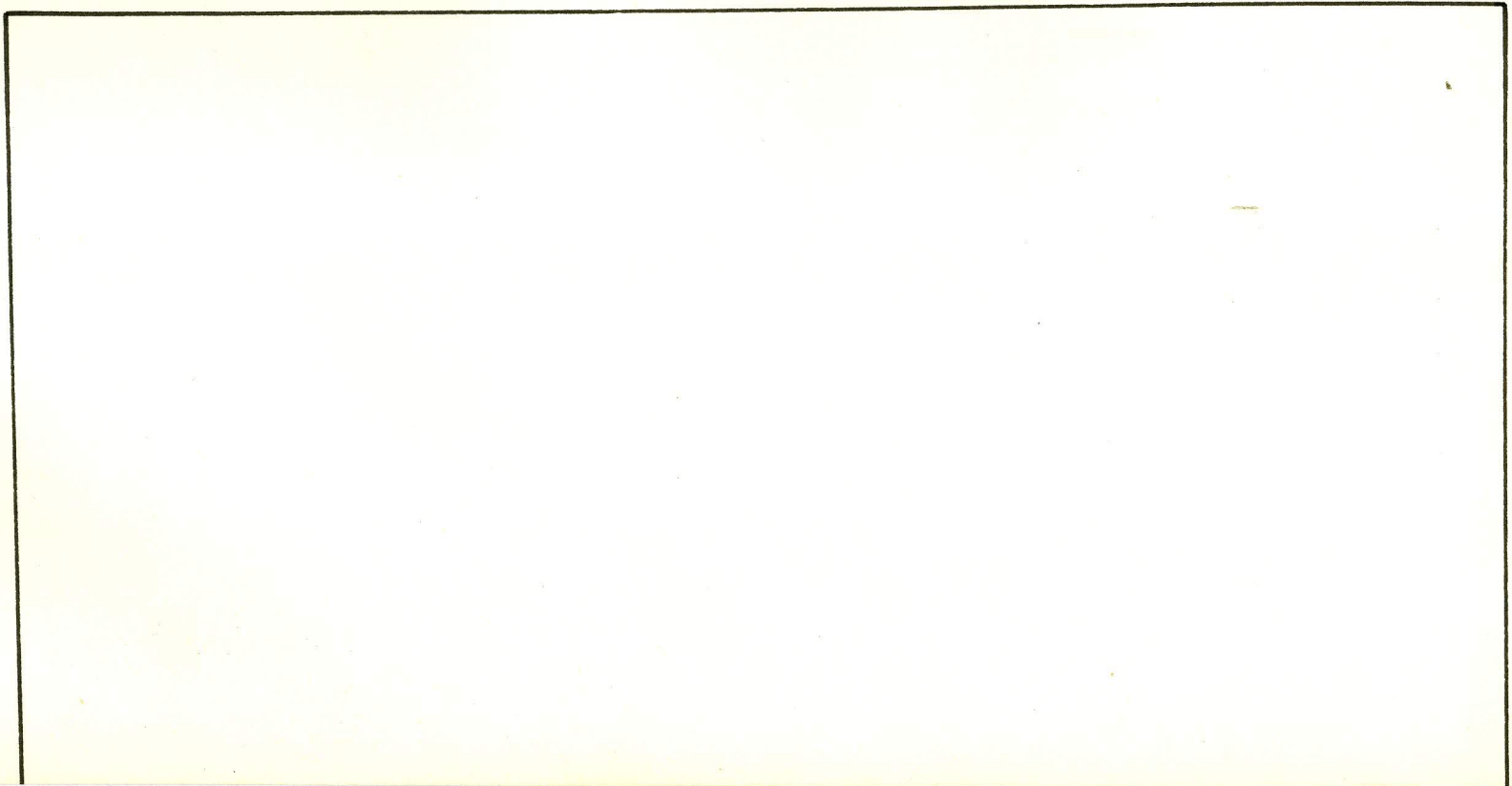
Verbal exchange between more than two characters creates a more complex situation.

Dramatic language has force and immediacy. The function is to create space - the world in which the action takes place. The plays world determines what can happen within the play. It limits possible situations, the range and depth of action.

The action may take place within a room of a house but the language could create further space by suggestion of rooms leading off which have windows leading on to the city backdrop, which forms the context of the world being implied. Language makes objects solid and tangible. Language can create a universe of energy and things.

ACTION AND TENSION:

Space and time may be manipulated in the fact that the dramatist establishes limits of the world which the play will inhabit simultaneously seizing attention by an interesting situation and arousing expectations of further situations which may develop out of it. During the course of an activity the situation defines itself and one becomes aware of short and long term expectations:



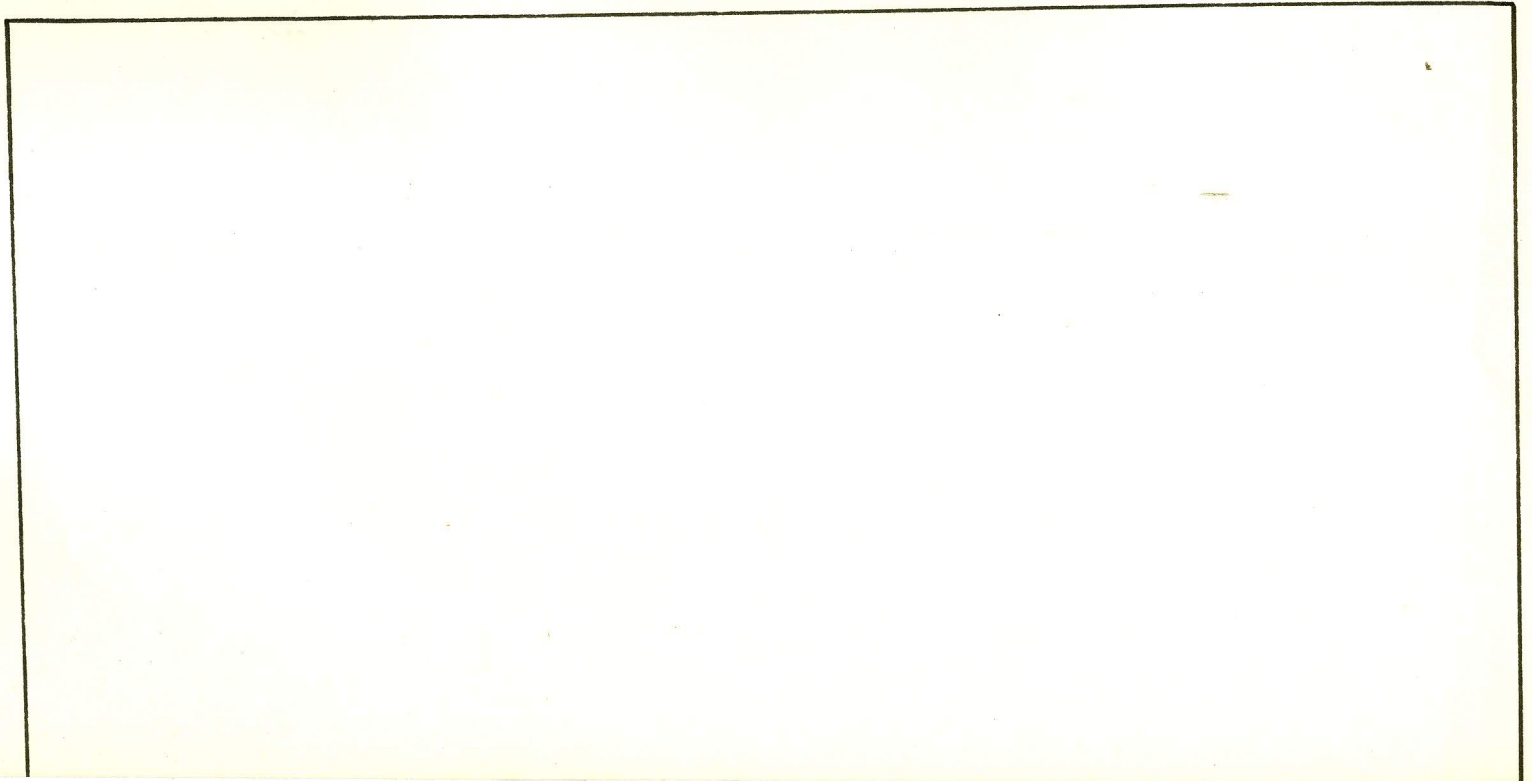
Dramatic situations contain potential. The past, present and future are simultaneous. The sense of what is happening is indistinguishable from the sense of what will or may happen.

We do not contemplate action. We are drawn into it. A peculiar tension is created between the given present and the unrealized consequent. The essential dramatic illusion - that of a visible future is created in every play.

The future already appears as an entity embryonic in the present. In drama the relation between the parts is essentially that of tension.

The underlying tension exists between the situation at any given moment and the complete action.

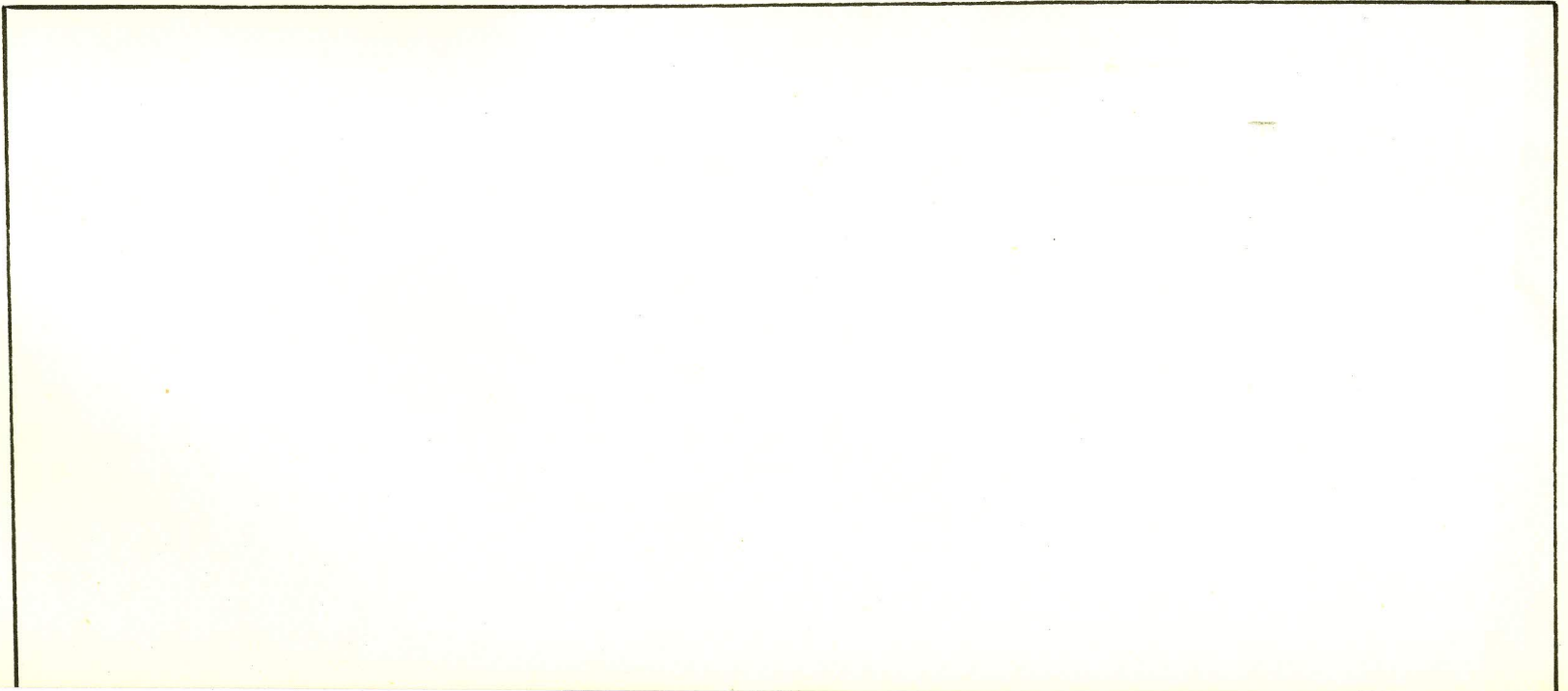
The play remains in incomplete equilibrium until completion of action. The art of the dramatist lies in using time to create an underlying sense of what the action must be, which does not emerge into full consciousness until at last the action is physically complete - so that there is a perpetual tension between this and what is happening at a particular moment.



The conclusion of a play is like the final major chord of a symphony which exists throughout in potentia but is not heard until the end and sets a seal on our intuitive understanding of what has gone before.

The dramatic structure forms a relation of situations to one another and focuses attention so as to unify situations into an action.

As one situation grows out of another the new situation points to something in the old which one might not have usually seen.



DRAMATIC IRONY

✓ Dramatic irony is a tone of voice which moves in several directions simultaneously.

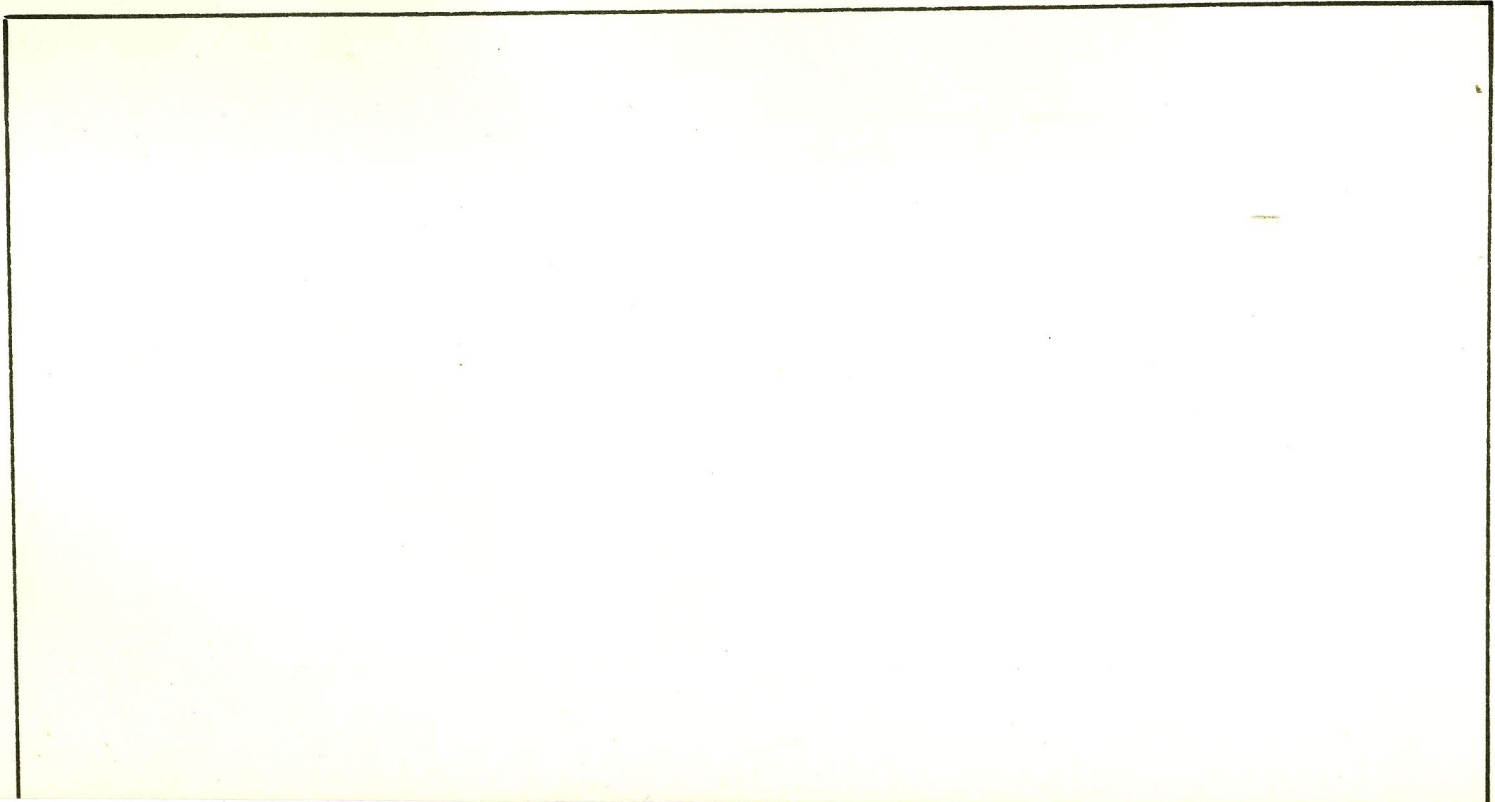
It establishes common ground between the playwright and the audience which is not shared by the actors.

It is a device used to establish shared knowledge between the author and the audience, where the audience assumes omnipotence.

CHARACTER AND IDEA

✓ The character lies in the language of the play and the situation which the language creates.

✓ Typicality, stereotypes and cliches are broken by individualization of the character through language. The responses of the characters are situational - elicited by the event - this helps to build the complex whole of the play.



Character may be subject to personal interpretation. / The value of the character is expressed through the words used. Yet the character is not an end in itself but only a means to create and manipulate the play - The space and the time. /

The character is a necessary condition and a complex idea - a living attitude and action.

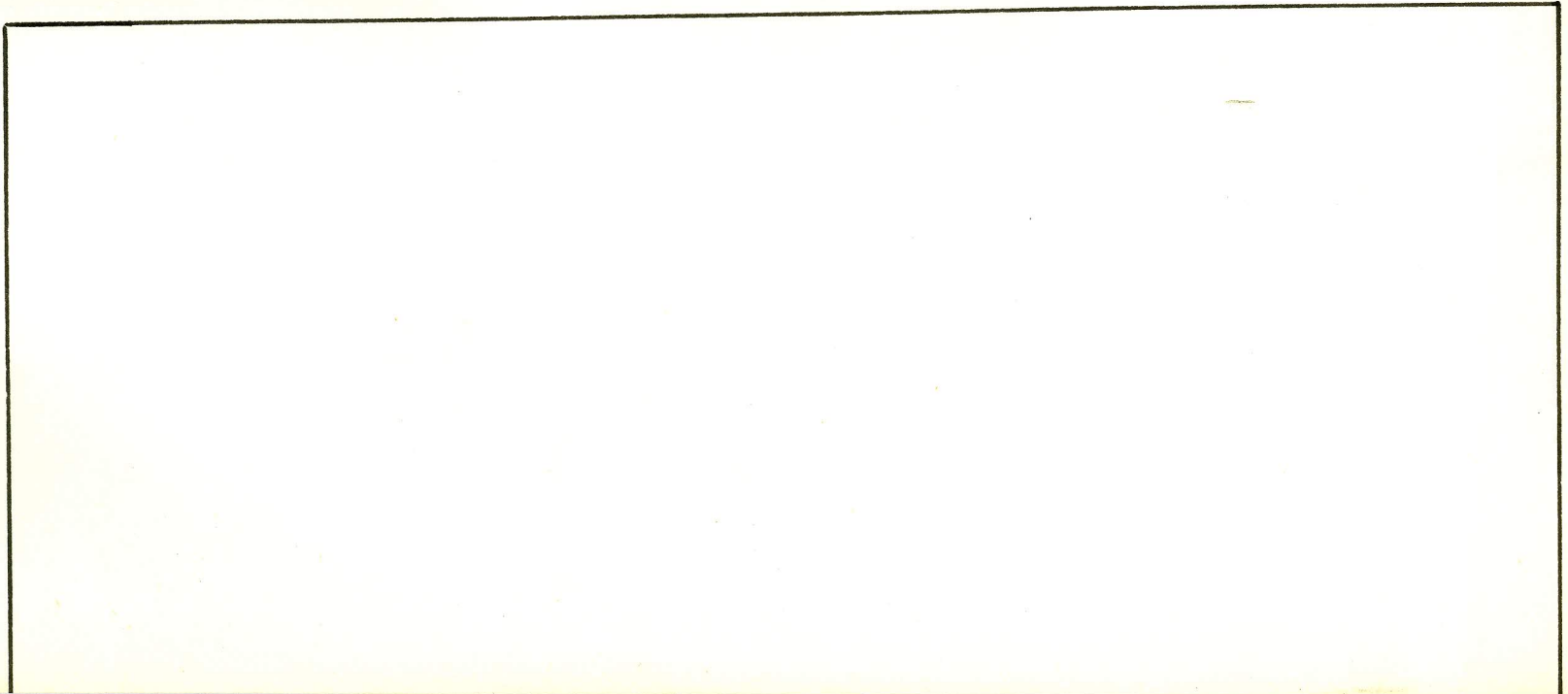
/ The character helps to create the reference points in the movement of time as is hoped to be felt in the play. /

/ It also helps to articulate the space as it exists and as is implied. /

PRESENTMENT

(The dramatist beginning with the situation expresses himself through characters allowing the idea to gradually define itself through the medium of language - letting it grow in time and space rather than forcing a form upon it.

Through language the audience enters the life of dramatic characters. A situation is composed of complex tension - here the situation acts as a beginning and the characters are involved with expression. The idea is defined through the language.



DRAMA AND THE NOVEL:

/ Drama is a major dramatic form and the novel a major literary form. /

/ In both the forms space and time manipulation helps to create the specific differences which are inherent in the two mediums, in the novel action takes place on a shifting stage - where the narrative passages are the means by which the stage is shifted and the descriptive passages set the stage. The novelist has two resources unavailable to the dramatist - reflective comment and interior consciousness, but has to do the work done by actors in terms of facial expressions, gestures and movement.

✓ The dramatist is required to hold the audience more continuously and for a shorter time with the assistance of actual physical presence. ✓

They differ in pace. Novel is leisurely, drama has to be more vivid. The dramatic function of dialogue varies in drama and novel.

Drama of the novel is not so dependent on dialogue. Novel is flexible and various and private. / Drama is essentially collaborative. It creates a communal experience. /

DECORUM:

Every play establishes its own decorum by demonstrating in itself the space and time conventions within which it has to be judged.

A breach - may be used to create effect. The effect subject to the sense of decorum.

Every age fosters its own sense of decorum and may suitably react to breaches of conformity.

DESTINY:

Destiny is a virtual phenomenon. There is no such thing in cold fact. In real life a series of events lead one to talk of destiny. In drama it becomes a mode of understanding.

As the play progresses the events which follow seem to fall correctly into place.

From what happens we make sense of what is to follow. Time in terms of the future is inherent in the present.

ACTION PLOT AND STRUCTURE:

Action is what happens at a given point. It is the whole play as is seen at any given instant. One cannot abstract a part. Every part belongs to and shapes the whole.

Plot is the soul of drama. Structure is the technique used to relate parts to each other and to the whole. (In all the three cases the time and space usage shapes the effect. (

COLLABORATION:

/ Drama is a collaborative activity yet it is non participative. Drama draws the audience powerfully into the world it creates yet there is a preservation of distance.

/ Paradoxically to enter into the world of the play one has to remain outside it. Any invitation to join in destroys the integrity of the world of action. ✓

/ It is collaborative upto the point where the audience naturally accepts and collaborates in drastic shifts in space and time or manner of presentation of the entities. ✓

A physical equivalent to the field and frame device which manipulates space and time in film is light, as it can be used effectively to act as a guiding device on stage it could add three dimensionality, ambiance and suggest different times and moods.

The aesthetic problem of scene design is a plastic one. The task is to relate forms in space, some of which are static, some mobile.

The stage itself is an enclosed space. Organization must be actually three dimensional, therefore the cannons of pictorial art are value less.

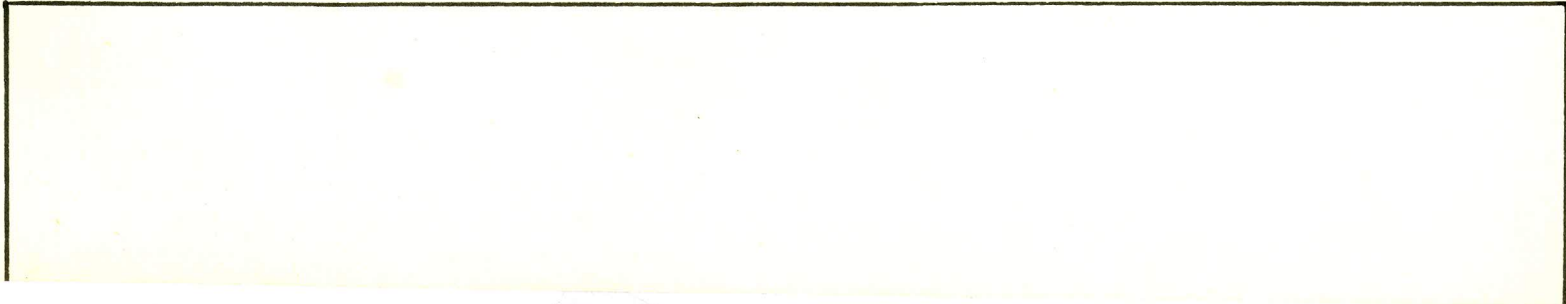
The painted illusion of three dimensionality is valid in pictures which are painted where it can evoke both space and time and mass. It is negated when the stage is set where the third dimension is real.

The plastic elements involved in scenic design are the perpendicular painted scenery, horizontal floor, the moving actor, lighted space in which they are confined.

The aesthetic problem is that of combining the four elements in space to produce a unity.

Plastic elements remain irretrievably at odds if left to themselves.

The scene painter snipped his original picture into different pieces and expected the actor to find his way among them. The painted backdrop was not a compromise. The scene painter was interested in putting up as many stretches of canvass as possible. The centre of interest was at a point half way between the horizontal floor and the top of the stage where according to the line of sight the audience attained maximum pictorial effect. But the actor works on the stage floor at a point where the painted decorations are least effective as painting.



As long as the emphasis of stage setting is on painted decoration, The inanimate picture is no more than a coloured illustration into which text, animated by the actor is brought. The two collide, they never meet or establish any interaction of dramatic value, whereas they should be fused.

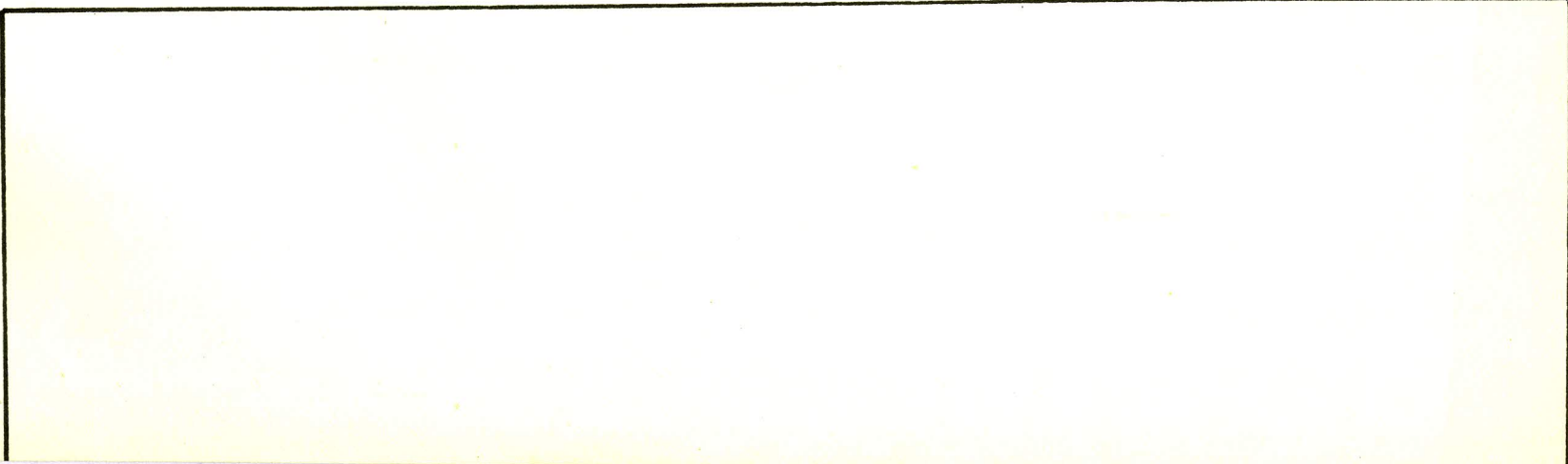
"Living feet tread these boards and their every step makes us aware of how meaningless and inadequate our settings are."

The better the stage set is as a painting the worse it is as a stage setting. The more completely it creates an illusion of three dimensionality by pictorial conventions of painting. The more completely a three dimensional actor destroys that illusion by every movement he makes.

For no movement on the actor's part can be brought into vital relation with objects painted on a piece of canvass.

Painted decorations are not only at odds with the actor but also with the light that illuminates them. Light and vertical painted surfaces nullify rather than reinforce each other. There is an irreconcilable conflict between these two scenic elements.

The more the vertical painted surface is to be seen the more it is to be lit, and the more brilliantly lit it is, the more apparent is the lack of unity between it and the actor. To create articulate space, what is required is a denial of painted simulation of the third dimension a place in theatre and the banishment of the scenic painter and painted architecture from the modern stage.



The actor could act as a unit of measurement. Unity could be created by relating every part of a setting to him.

He is three dimensional. Therefore the entire setting would have to be entirely and consistently three dimensional.

The stage setting could have no true aesthetic organization unless it was coherently plastic throughout, the stage should be set on the stage floor not in mid air. It should be set where the actor works and moves. It should be broken up into levels - hummocks, slopes, planes, to support and enhance his movements.

The stage floor then becomes a completely fused plastic unit.

Dramatic values of light:

The unity of stage setting is completed by plasticity of light itself.

Lighting if controlled can establish a completely unified three dimensional world on stage. Diffused light produces black visibility, in which we recognise objects without emotion. But light blocked by an object casts shadows and has a sculpturesque quality that by the vehemence of its definition, by the balance of light and shade, can carve an object before our eyes, capable of arousing us emotionally because it can so emphasise and accent forms as to give them new force and meaning.

Light that casts shadows alone defines and reveals.

The unifying power of light creates the desired fusion that can make the stage floor, screen and actor one - an articulation of space.

Light is subject to minimum of conventions and so is able to reveal vividly in its most expressive form eternally fluctuating appearance of a phenomenal world.

Light is an ambient medium. It fills space and possesses actual volume. It acts as a bond which fuses the actor with everything around. However and wherever he moves. The plastic unity of the stage picture is made continuous. Light has flexibility, fluidity, a shifting emphasis. This is valuable for the power of suggestion. It could suggest an ambiance, season, bring forth the importance of a certain actor etc.

Light enables the audience to see the same reality that the actors do. Atmosphere is an integral part of stage. Instead of dwarfing the actor it is directly related to him as a human being.

Shadows can be used to dignify and envelope form, to translate emotion into atmosphere, moods and to define by suggestion.

Light is directly expressive. Variations in light affect our senses.

Light helps to model faces and carve expressions. The plastic power of light may carry a theme or support it.

Light is a scene builder and not a scene painter. It makes even the third dimension flexible. Space is no longer absolute, distance can be created by varying intensities of light volumes.

The actor stepping from bright light into half shadow may succeed more perceptibly in creating the illusion of distance than if he walked fifteen feet.

Light can contract the deepest stage or extend a shallow one. Shadows suggest mass and weight. Light and shadow transform the stage into a vista into the unknown, into boundless space.

✓ The dynamics of light can be used to create illusion of actual extension of space.

Light may also be tactile in effect. ✓

Even at its most vaporous moments modern setting is three dimensional. Continually relating actor to the space in which he moves, it is an extension of his body and a symbolic projection of his state of mind.

Emotional reaction to drama is intensified by aesthetic emphasis on space and time extension, either reproduced or suggested, expressing dynamic patterns of human beings in action who move through fluctuating planes of light - creating a dynamic interplay of contours and forms. /

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