

Scenography, a Special Form of Art and Basic Component of Total Theatre

Răzvan-Petrişor DRAGOŞ •

Abstract: In classical theater, the dramatic text, the direction and the interpretation prevail over the other elements of the show. Scenography, an area of particular interest in the present article, represented a minor direction of theatrical development until the 20th century, so that, with the proliferation of modern, postmodern and especially post-postmodern art, it would become a basic condition and a landmark of total theater. The hybrid and eclectic character of this interpretative artistic form implies not only the coexistence of theater with dance, music and visual arts, but also with new technologies, from electric lights and projector, to computer-assisted devices through highly performing (often responsive) software. Over time, the scenographer was an architect, engineer, craftsman, fashion designer, visual artist (sometimes recognized on all meridians, as in the case of Picasso), and in the last (three) decades he became a graphic designer, digital artist or even a programmer. The fact is that between the actors and the public there is an interdependence relationship, which leads in the theatrical plane to solutions that move the artistic discourse from the convention to the immersive (sensory). For this reason, contemporary theater is at an unprecedented point in its history of over two and a half millennia, to reconfigure itself according to the “modern” times or to exalt traditional values.

Keywords: scenography, total theater, immersive art, sensory art, *laterna magika*

Introduction

For disambiguation, the term “total theater” has been (and still is) used in variable contexts, but with convergent meanings. According to the dictionary, we are dealing with a term coined by Richard Wagner to describe the unification of several different forms of art in an unusual form of spectacle¹. One of the earliest attestations of that phrase in a specialized text dates back to 1930.²

In agreement with this interpretation, today total theater is considered a type of show that incorporates several forms of art to create a complete and captivating experience for the audience, mainly based on a set of theatrical conventions, but can also take immersive forms (of sensory art). Total theatre is often used as a way to tell

• Associate teaching staff at The „Ovidius” University from Constața

¹ The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance, Ed. Oxford University Press, 2010

² It is titled „Concerning Total Theatre - a Concerto for Man” and was mentioned in Jean-Louis Barrault book, *Reflections on the Theatre*, Ed. Rockliff, 1951.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

a story or to convey a message through elements adjacent to classical theater, such as music, dance, visual art, puppets, lights, projections, etc.

The coexistence of the classical with the modern should not surprise us, because historically, theater has always been considered a hybrid form of expression, consisting of an amalgam of several artistic disciplines, supported by the technologies available at a certain time. If manually, animal or hydraulic operated mechanisms have been replaced by electric ones, if the music played in real time has been replaced by the recorded one, or if the sound of the old amphitheater has passed into the sector of activity of sound technicians, these changes did not affect the theatrical essence.

Dramaturgy, whether ancient or contemporary, involves writing, staging and interpreting plays, an ensemble in which the verbal message prevails over all other constitutive factors of the theater, which also particularize it over other forms of literature. While the text is communicated by the sound and motion of the scene through sight, the senses are subject to intelligible reasons.³

The words (texts), passed through the filter of theatrical conventions, were considered the intellectual basis of the genre show, and the scenography was treated as an atmosphere element in which the dramatic narrative is projected, which can be renounced and (almost) entirely, by performing on an empty stage, in neutral color combinations.

The words (texts), passed through the filter of theatrical conventions, were considered the intellectual basis of the genre show, and scenography was treated as an atmosphere element in which the dramatic narrative is projected, which can be renounced and (almost) entirely, by performing on an empty stage, in neutral color combinations.

Analytical Landmarks

Along with linguistic and gesture codes, scenography is one of the most conservative systems of signs and symbols associated with the art of performing. Unlike strictly theatrical conventions, those related to text and narrative, scenography is largely based on intellectual, historical or artistic references, but also on the sensory, nonverbal dimension.⁴

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critica rațiunii pure*, trad. de N. Bagdasar și Elena Moisuc, Ed. Științifică, București, 1969, p. 258. Kant refers to the possible interference between the interpretation of the sense-world, of phenomena, perceived through the senses, and the noumenal world, intelligible and rational, exclusively intellectual. “*With regard to phenomena, intellect and reason can undoubtedly be used, but the question arises whether they have any further use when the object is not a phenomenon (but a noumenon), and in this sense it is taken, when thought in itself, only as intelligible, as given only to the intellect and not to the senses.*”

⁴ Jawad Sadiq Hammoud, “Representations of Scenography in the Contemporary Theatrical Discourse in the *Imagine That Play*”, in *Eurasian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol 8, May, 2022, p. 185

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

Nowhere can one observe the relationship between scenography and convention better than in the ancient Greek theater. The conventional-minimal scenography, corresponding to it, is limited to at most some “landscape” stage or with useful functions elements, commonly used, such as, *makhina*, a crane through which the gods made their entrances and exits, as characters, (from which the famous phrase, *deus ex machina*), *ekkyklema*, a cart used to introduce dead characters to be seen by the public, various hatches or similar openings in the floor through which certain characters on the stage, *pinakes*, painted wooden panels, hung between the columns to create decorations, *thyromata*, the more complex image of a room with windows (represented illusionistically), embedded in the stage at the second level (the third level from the ground), or various symbolic props, such as mask or phallic objects, used in satire plays, symbolizing the fertility related to Dionysos.⁵

In the ancient Greco-Roman world, theater played an important role in the social life of the citizens, the spaces dedicated to the public being extremely generous (it can often accommodate over 10000 spectators). Roman theaters were complex buildings, being closer in design to modern theaters than the Greek ones. The semicircular structure of the auditorium in the Greek theater (around the orchestra) was preserved, but the stage building was raised to the same height and United with the auditorium, creating a sense of enclosure similar to that of a modern theater.

The feeling of closure was accentuated by the fact that small and medium theaters were totally covered, and large ones often had canopies (*vela*). Roman architecture involved the construction of substructures below the ground level, which meant that the seating sectors and the space for interpretation were served by complex systems of passages and stairs. The scene and the corresponding building were, however, the most spectacular parts of the ensemble. The scene was deep and extremely wide, and the behind-the-scenes wall was decorated with niches, statues and columns floors, as immovable scenographic elements.⁶

With the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, the theater suffered a strong recoil, especially in the early Middle Ages, and then, toward the Renaissance, experienced a revival, with the rediscovery of ancient values. Of course, in the present text we are interested primarily in scenography and only in the subsidiary in the history of theater. We note that with the Renaissance, the noble residence became the physical host of the theater, which meant that both the spaces intended for interpretation and those for the public were considerably reduced compared to those of antiquity.

From a scenographic point of view, in the Renaissance court theater, for the situation in which the action takes place outdoors, usually in urban settings, there were unlimited graphic solutions of decor that could induce the spectators the illusion that

⁵ Britannica Dictionary, *satyr play*, <https://www.britannica.com/art/satyr-play>

⁶ Frank Sear, *Roman Theatres. An Architectural Study*, Ed. Oxford University Press, New York, 2006, pp.1-9

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

they were in the respective spaces. Each image had its own vanishing point, which made its representation plausible anyway, meaning that the viewer perceived the perspective trick only by directly comparing the image with the physical size of the characters. The illusionistic aberrations due to the need to expand the stage space available are scenographic parameters that had to be taken into account in the interpretative act.

English literature uses terms such as *relief perspective* or *solid perspective*, for which there are no Romanian translation, which refer to three-dimensional models that have suffered, at the scenographic level (through two-dimensional transposition), a perspective deformation⁷. In Romanian jargon, the phrase “scenographic perspective” is sometimes used, a hybrid term that includes a variety of techniques designed to create three-dimensional constructive effects in which the accelerated convergence of perspective is obvious compared to the one that would occur naturally through visual perception. Through the so-called scenographic perspective, background spaces are constructed illusionistically most of the time as extensions of real spaces whose fictional depth refers to ideal, urban or conventional architectural spaces.

A partial conclusion of the previously presented ideas is that in ancient times, scenography was a field for architects, engineers (given the mechanisms used, sometimes complex) and craftsmen, and that, starting with the Renaissance, the artists, mainly painters and sculptors, were responsible for the visual part, alongside the tailors (fashion design will appear a few centuries later). The transition from one stage (category) to another occurred both gradually and naturally, the true paradigm change being of avant-garde, modern, minimalist and especially postmodern nature (depending on the relation to various classifications and periodizations).

If in the middle of the 20th century, the scenography was still limited to the decor and the costume, over the course of only a few decades, the situation fundamentally changed. Nowadays, the scenographer, who can be just as well an architect or visual artist, is often consulted within the first steps in the process of staging a piece, his choices being thought out at an early stage. This implies his complete information about the directorial intentions, which means that modern and contemporary scenography is no longer an applied form of decorative art and that the professional stage designer becomes a main character in the interdependent system of theatrical production relations.

Understanding scenography begins with assessing the potential of the empty scene. With the utterance of the words, with the eventual music and with the movement of the actors, the empty space turns into a performance hall. The demands of the text, explicit or inferred, lead to the “equipping” of the scene with various

⁷ Cornelia Leopold, “The Development of the Geometric Concept of Relief Perspective” in Nexus Network Journal, vol. 21, 06. 06. 2019, pp. 227–252

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

objects, specific images, shapes or colors to be put together in a spatial composition corresponding to the directorial vision of the text. We must not forget that scenography is designed to “live” only simultaneously with the interpretation.⁸

Exhibited in a context other than the theatrical one, be it a museum one, the scenography can preserve at most its documentary or decorative virtues, where appropriate, by ceasing to maintain its connections with the performing arts, those for which it was conceived. Under the conditions mentioned, the queries regarding the nature of the scenography, as major art or applied branch, are fully legitimate.

Generally speaking, conditionings cannot lead to authentic forms of art, but here, as an analogy of the discussion of the relation between phenomenon and noumen in Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason” (brought up previously), it depends what we mean by conditioning. At the morphological level, any work (work of art) will be conditioned by the physico-chemical attributes of the materials used. Dance, as an art form, also depends on rhythmic, harmonic and melodic conditioning, just as theatrical interpretation is tributary to dramatic text and directorial vision. From the point of view of the special order, the fact that Bach, for example, has been hired to periodically “deliver” a number of musical works (which turned out to be masterpieces)⁹, in no way affects the artistic quality of his compositions, as is the case with the papal command of the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, made by Michelangelo.

Beyond philosophical or linguistic interpretations, because theater is a hybrid form of art, the coordination or subordination relations between the “component parts” are subjective decisions. Thus, in theatrical productions insisting on the magic of the show, scenography can play a leading role.

Bringing into discussion the interferences between (visual) art and magic, as a metaphor, Răzvan-Constantin Caratănase considers that art has the capacity to trigger emotion, which, from the point of view of the phenomenon, implies a shutter for loading and one for unloading (of the produces effect), the effect involving, paradoxically, removing the emotion with the unloading. “The artist has the freedom to leave certain emotions not unloaded, which means that the viewer will leave the theater outraged by the bad habits of the characters on stage or the exhibition, horrified by the grotesque way in which Goya represented the members of the Spanish royal house.”¹⁰ Although the author uses theater as an example to highlight a phenomenon common to several art forms, we believe that his model masterfully supports the theme we have set out to analyze, that of the encounter between visual and art of the show, carried out under the aegis of scenography.

One of the most spectacular collaborations in the history of performing arts is the one occasioned by the staging in 1917 of the ballet “Parade” by the famous

⁸ Pamela Howard, *What Is Scenography?* Ed. Routledge, New York, 2002, p. XIX

⁹ Russell Hancock Miles, *Johann Sebastian Bach: An Introduction to his Life and Works*, Ed. N. J. Prentice, Englewood Cliffs, 1962, p.57

¹⁰ Răzvan-Constantin Caratănase, *Explorări creative în grafică*, Ed. Eurostampa, Timișoara, 2022, p.31

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

company of Sergei Diaghilev, “Ballets Russes”. The script (in one act) was written by Jean Cocteau, the choreography was signed by Leonide Massine (who also danced), the music was composed by Erik Satie (and directed by Ernest Ansermet), and the costumes were created by none other than Pablo Picasso, who made together with futurist Giacomo Balla a series of painted background decorations.¹¹

This multinational “team”, made up of leading personalities from various artistic fields, best demonstrates the eclectic character of the theater, anticipating what today is called by a part of the literature “total theater”. Moreover, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who wrote the program notes for the Parade, described Picasso’s scenographic interventions as “a kind of surrealism” three years before surrealism developed as an artistic movement in Paris.¹²

When Picasso makes the costumes or sets for the theater (or ballet), the idea that scenography is a step-sister of the major arts becomes hard to claim, all the more so as the important cubist artist “worked” for the performing arts only when he thought he had something (artistic) to say. After 1924, when he collaborated with the same Massine and Satie (for the ballet “Mercure”), Picasso did not focus on stage art until 1946 when he collaborated with the choreographer Roland Petit on “Ballets des Champs-Élysées”.¹³

Scenography is more than just material works. Theorists of the past few decades put more emphasis on images than on the physical support on which they were worked. One of the most interesting theories on this topic belongs to the art theorist W. J. T. Mitchell, who argues that we still do not know exactly what images are and especially what their potential is in relation to human nature. In the spirit of this idea, the projection of images (previously created or captured and possibly in a different context than the one in which they are used in the theater show) can completely substitute for classical, material scenography.

The most eloquent example of this is *Laterna Magika*, considered the first multimedia theatrical project in the world, which involves a type of show that combines film with real-time performance. It is a synthesis of pantomime, dance, music, projections and “smart” lights. The audience is drawn into a story by non-verbal means, by projecting panoramic images, and by fantastic (theatrical) scenes that cross the boundaries between fantasy and reality. In this case, the scenographer is a multimedia artist.

¹¹ Nancy Hargrove, “The Great Parade: Cocteau, Picasso, Satie, Massine, Diaghilev and T.S. Eliot” in *Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, nr. 31, 1998

¹² Richard Friswell, “Washington’s National Gallery of Art with Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, 1909–1929”, in *Artes Magazine*, June 29, 2013

¹³ Friswell, *ibid.*

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

Laterna Magika was originally a representative cultural program designed to promote the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic at Expo '58.¹⁴ The project was entrusted to stage director Alfréd Radok and stage designer Josef Svoboda, who marched on the apparent interaction of actors, dancers or musicians with various pre-recorded images (where appropriate, in several languages) projected on screens in their proximity. Among those involved in the project were future successful directors Miloš Forman, Jan Svítáček and Ján Roháč. *Laterna Magika* still operates today as an ensemble of the National Theatre in Prague. In the multimedia scenographic context presented, the human body is regarded as a metaphor of the landscape.¹⁵

Conclusions

In conventional dramatic theater, the forms of applied visual art, for example, the making of costumes and sets, have not received the same recognition as other constituent elements, for example, oratory qualities, music, or dance, although the experience of seeing is decisive in the act of reception. In the stated context, the term scenography is used in relation to the articulation of a general visual language related to the quality of performance and which includes all the visual aspects adjacent to it.

In the avant-garde theater, the hierarchy that places the author and the actors at the top of the pyramid (and implicitly the other highly qualified professionals, such as the scenographer, below them) has been challenged by numerous playwrights and directors, who have treated the theater as a unified audio-visual experience, bringing the scenographer into a position of key player in achieving the total theatrical experience.

The scenography and costume were not brought into contemporaneity by simply moving the focus on them, but by finding a specific role to “play”, a bearer of meaning in the general economy of the total theater. We must not forget that between theater and various forms of public manifestation based on real-time action and associated with visual arts, such as *happening*, *performance*, *action painting* and so on, there is an insurmountable barrier. The theater is based on narrative and word, while the mentioned forms of artistic manifestation in the field of visual, on action and improvisation (often with a militant character, but always keeping the non-verbal character).

Beyond repositioning the scenography in the context of total theater, an indirect conclusion of the research topic proposed in this article is that contemporary theater is at an unprecedented crossroads, a phenomenon due to the proliferation of digital and virtual technologies, that has exponentially amplified both the possibilities of expression of the actors in the shows, as well as the expectations of an audience,

¹⁴ Major international exhibition event, which took place between 17 April and 19 November 1958 in Brussels.

¹⁵ The official website of *Laterna Magika*, as a department of the National Theatre in Prague. <https://www.narodni-divadlo.cz/cs/soubory/laterna-magika?t=1736225> consultat pe 1 martie 2023

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

increasingly difficult to capture. Today, originality seems to be a result of reformulations, context in which the emphasis on the eclectic dimension and the technological infusion diverts the theatrical performance from the basic notions of the conventional drama.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barrault, Jean-Louis, *Reflections on the Theatre*, Editura Rockliff, 1951
Caratânase, Răzvan-Constantin, *Explorări creative în grafică*, Editura Eurostampa, Timișoara, 2022
Howard, Pamela, *What Is Scenography?* Editura Routledge, New York, 2002
Kant, Immanuel, *Critica rațiunii pure*, trad. de N. Bagdasar și Elena Moisuc, Editura Științifică, București, 1969
Miles, Russell Hancock, *Johann Sebastian Bach: An Introduction to his Life and Works*, Ed. N. J. Prentice, Englewood Cliffs, 1962
Mitchell, W. J. T., *What Do Pictures Want?*, Editura University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005
Sear, Frank, *Roman Theatres. An Architectural Study*, Ed. Oxford University Press, New York, 2006

Periodical Publications:

- Friswell, Richard, “Washington's National Gallery of Art with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, 1909–1929”, în *Artes Magazine*, June 29, 2013
Hammoud, Jawad Sadiq, “Representations of Scenography in the Contemporary Theatrical Discourse in the Imagine That Play”, în *Eurasian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol 8, May, 2022
Hargrove, Nancy, “The Great Parade: Cocteau, Picasso, Satie, Massine, Diaghilev and T.S. Eliot” în *Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, nr. 31, 1998
Leopold, Cornelia, “The Development of the Geometric Concept of Relief Perspective” în *Nexus Network Journal*, vol. 21, 06. 06. 2019
Yoshitake, Ryūichi, “The Movable Stage in Hellenistic Greek Theatres” în *iDAI.Publications / Archäologischer Anzeiger*, nr 2, 2016

Dictionary / Websites:

- Britannica Dictionary, <https://www.britannica.com/art/satyr-play> , consulted on 2nd of March 2023
The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance, Ed. Oxford University Press, 2010
<https://www.narodni-divadlo.cz/cs/soubory/laterna-magika?t=1736225>, consulted on 10th of March 2023