The Art of Theatre

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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Muncie, Indiana

April 2000

Expected Date of Graduation
May 2000
Abstract

This discussion is concerned with the inter-relationships between visual art and theatrical design. It explores some of the visual artists that have been involved in the theatre and their cross-disciplinary work that is often over looked as “art” because of it’s inability to be categorized. Finally, there is an analysis of influential theatre artists and hypotheses on the direction a theatrical artist might take on the journey to create true “art.”
Acknowledgements

Thank you to Michael O’Hara for helping me find the courage for the rebellion that has led me on this artistic journey. And thank you also to the rest of the people in my life, professors, parents and peers, that have given me the pieces to build my philosophy upon.
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INTRODUCTION

In today’s world, where colleges offer specialized degrees, businesses run on position titles, and the work place is rigorously defined by job descriptions, the artist is often forced to label and categorize themselves: a painter, sculptor, or graphic artist, a dancer, musician, actor, or a designer. But where, then, does the sculptor who creates performance art fit, or the architect that builds livable sculptures, or the even the visual artist putting his or her work on the theatrical stage? Are any of these a “lesser” art because they do not fit the strict definitions of specific genre? Does the classification make more difference that the ultimate success of the piece? The ideal answer to both questions is no, but please indulge a young artist as she wrestles with these questions. The answer, from my perspective seems to be yes, a situation that harms both artistic growth and expression.

The “true” artist has a creative mind that encompasses everything they do, and the wider the range of disciplines to draw from, the greater the possibility that new, revolutionary ideas may come forth. It is just this cross-disciplining that gives the “true” artist the widest possible creative base and allows for a higher degree of dexterity in the artistic world. Because the “system” tends to discourage alternative combinations, individual artists must strive to bridge disciplines to work together in collaboration with other “artists.” On the academic level, individual professors must develop programs that help students bridge departments to work together in collaboration with these other
“artists.” They must keep trying to expand horizons instead of narrowing them with definitions. Art is, after all, all about pushing the boundaries.

Because a cross-discipline approach can only be accomplished by first encouraging a communication between groups, these people and their work provide a common link between the fields of art and theatrical design and furnish the overriding concept in my range of work. In this exhibition, I have tried to create a display of the work created by myself and past artist/designers that show the link between these two fields. With this project I hope to show that art and theatre can be combine to the benefit of each and encourage a more active collaboration between the departments.
THE ARGUMENT OF HISTORY

There is an alarming trend in the professional and academic artistic worlds to draw definitive dividing lines between areas of the fine arts. Drama, musicals, and dance have become isolated elements of theatre, which in itself has become separate and disjointed from other related arts such as painting, sculpture, or architecture. Theatre has been exiled to the category of entertainment, cut off and separate from "legitimate" art, and the number of plasticians (painters and sculptors) who have worked in the theatre has been rapidly declining since the Second World War.¹

This isolationistic trend may be explained by the presence of two prevalent opinions in the artistic world. First, the fine art community covertly regards theatre as something of a bastard child, even openly refusing, on occasion, to recognize the theatre as art at all. Thomas Spoerner, the chair of the Art Department at Ball State University, says that art is an "individual statement by artists for other artists."² His statement generally excludes the majority of the public that theatre tries so hard to reach. While at the same time, the theatrical community feels a sense of superiority over other forms of art, isolating itself by maintaining that line of division, even between it's own forms. Edward Gordon Craig, one of the gurus of modern theatrical direction and design, writes that, "In the Theatre they study from the Theatre. They take the Theatre as their source of

² Thomas Spoerner, Personal Interview, April 27, 2000.
inspiration.”

This isolation/exile of the theatre from the artistic world has begun to deprive the artistic community of a poignant form of expression and the theatrical community of its ancient roots and possible practitioners. Even Arnold Haskell, author and ballet critic and one of the co-founders of the Comargo Society, says, “...the art [of ballet] exists in a glorious isolation that has no influence on painting, music or theatre. It can still enchant the balletomane, but a first night no longer shocks the intellectual into a heated discussion, giving a new vision to a whole generation....”

Theatre has attracted a wide range of artists in the past, often in unconventional combinations. Many plastic artists have been involved with the theatre in a design capacity especially. Conspicuous names such as Chagall, Miro, Matisse, Picasso, and Warhol are among a multitude of other artists that have been found on a playbill. Denis Bablet, author of the book The Revolutions of Stage Design in the 20th Century, speculates that “perhaps the stage fascinates certain painters and sculptors because the theatre permits them to reach a much larger audience than do the art galleries.” However, their cross-disciplinary work is often overlooked as “art” because of its inability to be categorized. Nevertheless, these people and their work provide a common link between the fields of art and theatrical design and furnish an overriding concept that is ideal for a young artist/designer to strive for.

One of the most successful collaborations in the fine arts was the Ballet Russes. One would be hard pressed to find another body of work that embraces such a wide variety of talents. Serge Diaghilev, the founder of the Ballet Russes, was a man who was able to search out and inspire greatness in others. Charles Spencer, historian and author,

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describes him as "...a man seized by the demon of creation, who united prodigious talent in his quest for new artistic horizons—Stravinski, Bakst, Debussy, Folkine, Piccaso, Cocteau, Ravel, Massine, Braque, Satie, Benois, Strauss, Balanchine, and Matisse...."  
This list is by no means complete, and it begins to read like a roll call of some of this century's greatest artistic minds. They formed new thoughts on theme, movement, set design, music, and costuming. But, these ideas were absorbed beyond the scope of drama into the reaches of "new drama" and avant-garde performance as well as the visual arts and even fashion and popular culture.

Diaghilev knew the power of the creative mind and trusted his artists to fulfill his dreams on stage. He had picked them not by titles or positions or even reputation, but by the talent he found within them, and the philosophy behind their work. He then convinced them to delve into the theatre by giving them the freedom to create the way they would in their own studios, using their artistic creativity. "Give painters their freedom; they know what they want. It is they who will pave the way even for musicians...,” Diaghilev once said. He called on contemporary artists of the time; Futurists and Constructivists, and theatrical design advanced parallel to the plastic arts, influencing rather than just following trends. He picked his production teams because he knew they would provide the fresh ideas he was looking for. "Surprise me" he asked of Jean Cocteau knowing full well that what Cocteau gave him would be great. Diaghilev was encouraging the expansion of the artistic horizons.

5 Bablet, 265.  
7 Bablet, 156.
The artists each brought their own creative genius to the stage and produced many new works of art for Diaghilev, works that reflected their individual styles and visions. These pieces influenced both the artistic world and pop culture in a way mere paintings or sculpture could not with wider audiences, and a presence unlike that of static visual art. Fashion and decorative trends, as well as the visual art trends, followed the examples found in the theatre.

One of these artist/designers, Pablo Picasso, worked extensively with the ballet on a number of pieces. He grew both as an artist and as a designer during his period of collaboration and continued to be interested in the theatre even as a theme for some of his own artistic work. His early works, like many visual artists, were merely paintings on stage with little attachment to the action of the dance (see fig. 19-22). But eventually he figured out how to synthesize the scene to be an integrated part of the performance (see fig. 23). Cocteau said of one of Picasso's latter pieces,

...the decor did not simply 'attend' the ballet, it enacted it. The scenography became an integral part of the performance and another means of its expression like the music and choreography. And the costumes were no longer simple clothing but together with the dancer formed a single expressive totality. The ballet went beyond the movements of the dancers to become a single entity whose expressive power grew out of the way the various elements counterbalanced each other in time and space with out giving up their independence.9

Other successful collaborators in the dance field include Martha Graham and the artists she commissioned to design for her. Graham worked with famous mobile artist, Alexander Calder, and extensively with a modern sculptor named Isamu Noguchi. Calder

8 Bablet, 155.
9 Bablet, 170.
created for her, in his setting for *Nuclea* (see fig. 7), a series of large tubular structures on a stage dominated by an immense mobile that was to symbolize the destruction of a post-atomic world. The setting reflects many of the principles that Calder’s other work illustrates and creates another dimension to the dance as a moving piece of scenery that functioned almost as an inhuman performer.

More notably, an extensive pairing for Graham’s scenes came from Noguchi. This sculptor not only created settings for her, but costumes and props. A few of the earlier scenes were merely his sculptures transplanted to the stage like his setting for *Herodiade* (see fig. 14). But there were also more integrated set pieces like the one for *Seraphic Dialogue* (see fig. 18) that helped create the whole flavor of the piece as the choreography followed the lines of the setting. Even his prop furniture is put on display along with his other sculptures for they look as appropriate in a gallery as they do on stage (see fig. 16). His instillation art pieces (see fig. 15) are more like sets taken off the stage and put among common people, away from the “actors” very similar to the happenings of modern theatre.

Many other plasticians have been involved with the theatre, one only need look for they are to numerous to reiterate. However, a few other notable names include Chagall, Dali, Kantor, and Miro whose works are visually similar to the paintings they are famous for (see fig. 8, 10, 12, and 13). Also worth mentioning are Oskar Schemmer and the Bauhaus. His dances were sculptural explorations of space and his costumes for these turned the dancers into moving pieces of art (see fig. 24). Bablet says the “what the sculptor or painter contributes is his vision, his sensitivities, and the materialization of
However, just because they had careers outside of the theatre as well, does this make them any more of an artist? What of the theatrical artists that do the very same thing... do they not take into account form, space, color, mood, and theme just as the plasticians do?

The idea of an integrated theatrical performance is upheld by many artists of the theatre, both painters and sculptors as well as designers. Both Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig, two major influences of modern theatrical design, strove to take theatre out of the realistic mode and make it into a more illusionistic expression. Appia believed, as I still do, that society had become departmentalized, contributing to the downfall of the arts. He says,

Culture recoils from our civilization, which resembles a large cardboard filing case with many differently labeled drawers... We must not try to make it fit the departmentalized elements of our civilization. Nothing originating in art is fragmentary; everything is integrated; the discipline of living art, far from being an isolated manifestation, exerts a general influence... it does not matter which aspect of art is to be the guide as long as the artist has a sense of responsibility that integrates his work with all other activities.\footnote{Adolphe Appia, 72.}

This man, while know for his theatrical artwork, was truly an artist. One thing that leads me to this conclusion is his renderings (see fig. 1). Not merely sketches to assist in the building of the scenery, his drawings are pieces of art in themselves, evoking mood, theme, and emotion. But, this is no surprise in relation to his opinion that the scene artist must be “equal in rank to first-rate artists in other fields... his artistic passion, his creative urge, are as indomitable as those of other artists...”\footnote{Appia, 42.}

Craig felt that theatre should be abstract and that man should no longer be the

\footnote{Bable!, 265.}
\footnote{Adolphe Appia, 72.}
\footnote{Appia, 42.}
supreme center of it, but should exist as one factor of expression among many others.\textsuperscript{13} He was a bit extreme in his vision however, saying, “I believe in the time when we shall be able to create works of art in the Theatre without the use of the written play, without the use of actors...”\textsuperscript{14}

Both these patriarchs of modern theatre wanted more than a reproduction of life on stage, but instead to incorporate artistic ideas of expression, symbolism, and abstraction. In a sense, to make the stage a piece of art that had theme and meaning beyond scant reality that theorized on the deeper insight to human nature not available with sheer sight. Appia said, “Art is, as its name indicates, an artifice which we learn to utilize for the purpose of doing greater justice to life than we could under the rule of accident.”\textsuperscript{15}

Fernand Lerger, another revolutionary of his time, strove to create a mechanical choreography and mobile décor that would oblige the audience to be interested in the entire stage and not the dancers alone. He wanted to make “objects art” and treated performers as part of the material available for the creator’s disposal.\textsuperscript{16}

Other philosophers included Scribian who dreamed of a synthesis of the arts and Girshia who was convinced that the time had come for more fruitful joint efforts between the director and modern artist. Even the avant-garde painters and musicians of the time were inspired by Wagner’s ideas of a “total theatre.”\textsuperscript{17} Many visionaries of the time saw the need for an active collaboration and the direct connection between the plastic arts and the theatre. Again Girshia said,

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{13} Bablet, 175.
\textsuperscript{15} Appia, 71.
\textsuperscript{16} Bablet, 172.
\end{flushleft}
The essential role of the painter in the theatre, as in front of his easel, is to combine forms and colors according to their internal logical development, a dialectic which is valid in itself and not just in relation to the play being presented. In short, it is a question of combining plastic and dramatic values to form a harmonious synthesis, one which has not previously existed.\textsuperscript{18}

Nevertheless, the modern theatre has failed to reach this ultimate unity between the fine arts. If anything, it seems to be falling even further away from it with its isolation/exile from the fine art community. What has become of the theories of Appia and Craig, or Girshia and Wagner? What of the painters and sculptors like Picasso and Noguchi... do artists just not have time anymore to branch off, or is the system so restrictive that they can’t exist in today’s artistic community?

\textsuperscript{17} Bablet, 175.
\textsuperscript{18} Bablet, 278.
PERSONAL CRUSADE

In our search for the flame of aesthetic truth we had to extinguish, one after the other, the false torches of a false artistic culture. Now our own fire—yours and mine—can relight those torches.

Adolphe Appia

The animosity between the various fields of the fine arts can be felt almost anywhere. Even if there is not open hostility, there is definitely a caustic disregard for the other affiliations. Dr. Donald Lacasse, the chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance at Ball State University, says, “Artists get so focussed on their work and forget sometimes to look around…the same is true with our [theatre] students.” And Spoerner says that stage art is definitely a different form of art than what the visual artist does. Since neither community seems to openly embrace the other, but rather, keep each other at arm’s length, the opportunity for active collaboration is very low.

According to the Undergraduate Catalogue, at Ball State University, the undergraduate degree-seeking student is asked to take a minimum of 126 hours to fulfill graduation requirements. Of that 126 hours, 41 of them are University Core Curriculum consisting of basic Math, Science, History, Literature, etc. In the Department of Theatre and Dance, to major in Theatrical Design and Technology, the student must also take 56

19 Appia, 33.
20 Dr. Don Lacasse, Personal Interview, April 27, 2000.
hours of Theatre classes, only 26 of them being "technical theatre" classes. In the Department of Art, the student must take 54 hours to major in Art and 84 to receive a Bachelors of Fine Arts (B.F.A.). For a regular major that only leaves 29 or 31 hours to take additional areas of study. That doesn't sound so bad until you consider that the Department of Art will not allow a non-major or minor to take classes in its department. This exclusion of non-majors means that the Theatre student who wishes to take some art classes must commit to at least 24 hours or 8 classes (the required number for a minor), the first four classes of which are introductory. Yes, when we look at the numbers, this does seem feasible, but then take into consideration that most students change majors at least once before they settle on the one they will finish with and will have a handful of classes that no longer fill any of those requirements. On the other hand, the Art student is able to pick and chose among the Theatre classes with the only restriction that they observe pre-requisites.

As you can see, it is not a hospitable environment to the student who wishes to learn from multiple disciplines, especially the theatrical design student. The arts have the possibility to provide a wonderful example of an exchange among means of expression, materials, and techniques. Just as the art galleries offer a whole range of styles, media and experiences, so does the stage designer transplant these elements to the stage to visually express the presentation in a language that today's audiences can understand. The connections between these areas provide a vitality to the other. Similarities such as color, form, balance and rhythm that are known to the visual artist and utilized by the stage designer in the various trends. The use of movement and even the concept of

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21 Thomas Spoerner.
audience are now being transplanted to the art gallery from the theatre in installation art and performance art.

As a designer I look to other visual artists for inspiration rather than other designers. In my theatrical work I have tried to focus on utilizing the artistic training I have received more than the theatrical, for it proves much more useful in creating an interesting piece that way. One must still take into account the period, theme and action of the play, but looking at the artistic trends in the period sometimes leads me to a design. In my designs for *The Innocent Mistress*, for example, (see fig. 32-35) being a period play, I looked at the artwork of the 17th century. Now, creating an independent artistic expression based on this work was not very successful, as it did not become my own work, only reproductions of that period. The same is somewhat true of the stage design for *Moon Over Buffalo* that I recently created (see fig. 38). While more an expression of my own creation rather than just period, it became a piece dictated by the script rather than artistic statement.

Other examples, however, are more fruitful. The scene design for *Night of the Iguana* that I produced went much farther towards this goal of integration (see fig. 31). The original collage (see fig. 30) gave me a good visual start as merely a piece that showed concept in abstract visual terms and forms that I was able to use as I delved into the deeper meaning of the play itself. Additionally, the costume renderings for the ballet, *The Firebird*, although unrealized, were also a worthy example of my objective (see fig. 25-29). They not only took into consideration the world of modern Fantasy Art which I had based the production on, but some of them became pieces of sculpture that were bodies of dancers, molded into contorted organic forms.
I also included in my exhibition, two other stage designs, which were enthusiastically received. The unrealized scene design for Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* was based on the artists of the Vienna Secession, primarily Gustav Klimt (see fig. 36). And, while it didn’t duplicate the works of those artists, it definitely projected the feeling that was found in the pieces. The produced stage design was a setting and costumes for a new ballet piece called *The Engagement*, choreographed by David Prudham in Perth, Australia (see fig. 41). This design took the period of World War II and the place of Australia and created a dream world based on them through my artistic sight. It is neither realistic, nor a reproduction of another artist, but most purely my own visual dream, on stage.

Other pieces I felt it was important to show in the exhibition were my animatronic sculpture (see fig. 37) and the medieval chair (see fig. 39), which while both are properties designed for the stage, fit surprisingly well into the art gallery and were used as some of my sculpture class projects.

The “true” artist is neither concerned with public labels or categories, but creates his or her art as a means of expression. The artist does not make a painting simply to paint, but to make art, in search of a personal happiness that comes from making art. The same is true of a theatrical artist creating stage art. They do not simply make a room on the stage because that is what the script calls for, but tries to create a philosophical place that upholds the concepts behind the action and the director’s metaphysics. Using form, color, balance and rhythm among other artistic principles, the design is forged from the creativity of the theatrical artist.
A theatrical artist should not be limited then by reality and a sense that they do not have as much freedom of expression as any other type of artist. And the painter or sculptor should be able to try their hand at design for the stage for they are no less qualified than the stage designer is. Push the boundaries and do the unconventional to help the stalled revolution of stage design. Once the rigid lines between the areas of the fine arts are broken, the arbitrary labels will no longer apply and then the arts can begin to be a true exchange again.
APPENDIX
9. Craig, Edward Gordon. *The Vikings at Helgeand* by H. Ibsen, Act II. Dir E.G. Craig. 1903
The ART of THEATRE
Wendi Johnson

Opening Reception • April 3 • 4:30-5:30p.m.
April 3-9, 2000
University Theatre Gallery
List of Works Consulted


