4.3: Setting the Stage

Inextricably influenced by architecture, set design is concerned with the creation of the dramatic world in which a play takes place. It is the world in which the actors breathe life into their characters and the canvas on which directors paint their stage pictures. While actors and directors are intimately associated with the dramatic world, they are essentially users of it.

A set design is expected to be not only pleasing to the eye, but also functional, evocative, and part of an overall production concept. The set expresses the dramatic world as a kinetic space through which the actors move under the watchful eyes of the audience, who can frame the scene for themselves by taking in small details as well as the big picture. If the set moves, or changes, over the course of the play, its movements help to convey the rhythm and pace of the production. The set also becomes part of the performance through the actors’ interaction with its elements —doorways, stairs, furniture, and boundaries.

This has not always been the case, nor is it necessarily the norm in theatre around the world. The role of the set in a performance, and of the set designer in particular, is a fairly recent development in the long history of theatre. In many global theatre traditions, scenery reflects a sense of and respect for continuity. Chinese opera, for instance, frequently features a simple arrangement of two chairs, a table, and a rug. Although these simple elements might be set up in different configurations, they are not intended to represent or evoke any particular setting or location. The way that they are used by the actors allows them to define any environment that might be called for by a particular play, from a room in a temple to a mountaintop. The stage used by Japanese noh theatre conjures up associations with a Shinto shrine with its highly polished cypress floor, distinctive curved roof supported by four pillars, and a modest backdrop with a painted pine tree. These pillars help actors in full masks to orient themselves while the audience knows that certain pillars are associated with certain characters and prominent actions. Portable scenic elements are used sparingly to create specific locales as needed.
Though Western theatrical traditions followed a different path than those of Asia, a similar continuity and conformity can be seen in stage and scenic design in European and American theatre until the middle of the nineteenth century. Unlike the conventions of China and Japan, Western theatre has privileged innovation, but this is more the result of meeting audience expectations and following patterns that proved successful than of preserving historical practices. Yet even as Western drama evolved and progressed over the centuries, scenic elements—the dramatic world in which the play took place—was not seen as a critical aspect of performance until well into the eighteenth century; a short list of somewhat standardized settings served the needs of most dramas. Scenic elements were often the result of pragmatic financial considerations rather than artistic analysis.

The theatre traditions of Asia and Europe both originated in a context of festival and ritual, strongly influencing the “look” of the environments in which their plays were performed. The theatres of ancient Greece were at first only temporary structures set up for the City Dionysia, an annual religious festival. Though the theatres were eventually built as permanent structures, their use remained tied to the festivals. Questions of décor or representation of specific locales does not seem to have been an important element in the Greek theatre; the architectural elements of the buildings behind their stages seem to have served as scenery for whatever plays were performed. Doorways in these façades indicated the houses or palaces occupied by the characters of the plays. The direction an actor used to enter or exit the stage gave a sense of location—an actor entering from stage left was understood to be coming from the harbor while an exit stage right led to the city. This idea of place was also supported by the costumes worn by the actors and the language of the plays.

The Romans adapted the Greek approach to theatre design and practices. However, they built structures that were significantly more elaborate and ornate. While the theatrical performances of Rome were somewhat disconnected from the religious setting of the Greek theatre, the Romans also felt little need for the sort of detailed scenic environments we are accustomed to today. With the fall of the Roman Empire, records of theatrical activity in Europe effectively dried up and we are left with a temporary impression of theatre coming to an end. The more likely story, as contemporary scholarship is helping to establish, is that theatre continued to be created and performed, but in a much lighter and more easily transportable form that could adapt easily to different social environments.

Theatre began to reemerge in the middle of the eleventh century, now called the late medieval period. Seeking new ways to explain the lessons and meanings of Christianity and the Bible to a largely illiterate population, churches in Europe began staging dramatizations of particular biblical stories on specific festival days of the liturgical calendar. These dramatizations were included in regular church services in conjunction with the reading of scripture passages, at first as a kind of pantomime performed by priests or monks. These performances took place within the churches using symbolic spaces along with clerical objects and attire to recall events such as the Nativity or the Resurrection. These performances soon developed into original dramas—plays based on Christian teachings, but not necessarily based on scripture—and by the thirteenth century had begun to be performed outside the church proper. With this move, theatre once again found a need and an opportunity to create a special environment—a dramatic world.

These performances often involved an entire community. Because there were only a few occasions throughout the year that a large portion of a community’s populace would gather—market or trade fairs, as well as certain feast days in the liturgical calendar—the performances were scheduled to fill as much of these special days as possible. This was fulfilled by the presentation of several short plays, each treating a different saint’s life or biblical story in sequence. The actors were drawn from the community at large, and seldom did any actor perform in more than one play.
To make the performances as accessible as possible to the whole community, two different approaches were adopted. In the first, “fixed” stages were composed of an open, unadorned playing space surrounded by small scenic units designating biblical locales. The open playing space was known as the *platea*, and the small scenic units were called *mansions*. In the medieval pattern, the actors from each story would enter the *platea* from their appropriate *mansions*, thereby informing the audience of the play’s locale. This sense of place was also reinforced by references in the play’s dialogue.

In the second approach, plays might be mounted on a special wheeled platform known as a *pageant wagon*, or simply *pageant*. Similar to the floats used in parades today, the *pageants* were drawn from place to place around the community throughout the day, meeting small clusters of the populace and performing their designated play before moving on. Unlike the *mansions*, the *pageants* could be quite elaborate, sometimes including a second story or a space beneath the “stage,” and particularized to the needs of a specific play/story. Both of these approaches to staging drama strongly influenced the performance conventions of theatre in England in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, for instance, was built around a largely open stage; his plays require little in the way of scenic elaboration or embellishment, and his texts generously provide significant details to help the audience imagine the locale and time.

With the great interest in all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman culture that characterized the Renaissance, questions of theatre architecture, play texts, performance, and scenic design were prominent in the emerging culture. Classical texts were closely read, and societies sprang up in many cities with a passionate interest in recreating the arts of the ancients. One of the earliest theatres of the Renaissance was the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, Italy. Designed by Andrea Palladio, this late-sixteenth-century theatre featured an audience area arranged as a semieirele open to a broad raised stage backed by a three-story *scaenae frons*, an elaborate architectural façade found in classic Roman theatres.
Yet the theatre designers of the Renaissance also displayed a degree of creative flexibility in their quest for the classical and made several adaptations to the ancient plans to accommodate the newly understood applications of linear perspective. Within a generation, the Teatro Farnese opened in Parma. Like the Teatro Olimpico, this theatre was patterned on a classical Roman plan, but the audience semicircle was elongated into a horseshoe shape and a wall with a large opening was erected between the audience area and the stage. With this first appearance of a proscenium arch, scenery became an inescapable part of the theatrical performance, and scenic design began to take on importance.

Another important influence was Sebastiano Serlio’s publication of his multivolume Architettura (1545), which included information on his system of three stock settings. Inspired by his readings about the ancients’ use of periaktoi, a triangular prism with three different painted scenes, Serlio advocated one unique stock setting each for tragedies, comedies, and pastorals. In this use, stock suggests a set design guided by the genre of the play (comedy or tragedy, for instance), and that the appropriate stock set would serve the scenic needs of any play of the genre. All three scenes represented exterior locales and emphasized right angles and straight lines, and all were painted so that the edges of the shapes appeared to converge toward a central vanishing point. Many theatres, in fact, even sloped the floor of the stage so that the elevated upstage contributed to the perspective illusion; such stages are “raked,” in today’s parlance. In addition, all three scenes depicted masses that were quite sizable, representing buildings and trees. Yet because of the tricks of perspective, the buildings supposedly farther away were actually painted smaller, an illusion easily shattered by an actor standing in the wrong place. As a result, all of the scenery was placed upstage, behind the proscenium, while actors remained in front of it. Serlio’s system proved immensely popular and was quickly put into use throughout the major cities and courts of Europe.
Though the English tended to follow the performance practices of the late medieval period through the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, they too began to build the proscenium-equipped theatres popular on the Continent. And while the theatre continued to adopt and adapt to technological advances, little emphasis was put on developing new approaches. Scenic demands were handled by skilled painters, but very few unique set designs were created for specific productions. Set design as a profession would not arrive until the mid-nineteenth century.
Two major developments in the nineteenth century challenged the primacy of painted perspective scenery and opened the door for theatrical artists specifically qualified to capitalize on them. The first was the adoption of the box set, which represented an interior space by enclosing the stage with three walls of scenery. This environment more realistically accommodated the actors and allowed them greater freedom to interact in a “natural” manner with their dramatic environment. The second was the rise of an intense attention to historical accuracy in all aspects of production, especially scene design. The increasing interest of historians, news reports of archaeological finds in exotic lands, and the steady publication of new books on historical costume, armor, and interior decoration all helped this trend. Set designers began studiously researching their interiors, exteriors, set dressings, and properties with great attention to historical accuracy and authenticity. Whenever possible, actual historical artifacts were acquired for use in performance, but if historical objects were not available, facsimiles were constructed to look like the originals.

A computer rendering of a box set. 2008 production of The Late Henry Moss, St. Louis Actors' Studio, set design by Patrick Huber.

Over time, the set designer became a more important member of the theatrical creative team. The emergence of the variety of visual styles, starting in the early twentieth century, demanded artists who understood not only their principles but also the peculiar demands of mounting a theatrical production. At the same time, new and inventive theatre genres appeared, each requiring its own scenic needs. And while realism continued to be the dominant style through the middle of the century, the experimentation and turmoil of the first half of the century had sufficiently matured by the end of World War II to effectively challenge that style. As the boundaries of theatre expanded to contain all of these changes, the opportunities and the need for the set designer were clear to all.