The ‘Presence of Design’: 
Sets and Costumes are There Too

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When we think of ‘being there’ in relation to theatrical performance, I suspect most of us focus on the actor and the audience as phenomena, and tend to gloss over the impact of the design. However, the design (the space, imagery, costumes and style), in many respects, dictates the conditions in which the actors and audience engage. Clearly, in a basic material sense sets and costumes are as much ‘there’ as the actors. However, the ‘presence’ of an actor has often been understood as being more than just present-ness. Design has historically been overlooked in Performance Studies, at least in relative terms, and I will argue that the limited ways in which design has been written about also reflects a general lack of understanding of how designers work. A number of factors contribute to this situation, but in this paper I will argue that one significant reason can be linked to the nebulous ideas tangled up in our notions of the actor’s ‘presence’.

Having said that, I find it very encouraging that we had an entire panel on ‘design’ at this conference; perhaps the tide is turning. Certainly, a number of very interesting books have been published in the last couple of years. Not the least is Arnold Aronson’s 2005 book *Looking into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography*. However, not surprisingly, he comments on the lack of work in this field to date. In his introduction Aronson suggests that even though audiences respond strongly and instinctively to space and, as is often proclaimed, we live in an increasingly visual world, critics and academics often have little capacity to read the spatial and visual content of a performance. He argues this is due to a range of different things: that many critics and theorists come from a literary background; that there is still a puritan suspicion of the visual; that there is a long tradition of denigrating the spectacle—from Aristotle’s ‘Poetics’ to Modernist distinctions between High and Low art; and finally, that design is seen as a corruption of the ‘purity’ of visual art. Importantly, this is also the argument he makes for why theatre design, or scenography, has captured so little critical attention (Aronson 2005).

However, these arguments are by no means new. In Australia, practitioners such as Eamon D’Arcy have been decrying the lack of theoretical engagement with theatre design in this country for at least two decades (D’Arcy 2001). Pamela Zeplin (1989) has also pointed out the implications this has for the status of design and the designer. Even though Performance Studies departments have been established in major universities across the country, there is still a surprising lack of academic work that engages with design. We might expect that Performance Studies would have rushed to look at this
field, especially in its initial attempts to differentiate itself from literary departments; however, this has not been the case.

So, in addition to Aronson’s explanation of why design has been overlooked, I would like to add one more thing: the ‘presence’ of the actor. The many uses and meanings of ‘presence’ have been explored numerous times but fundamentally I will be dealing with the term as representing the unmediated ‘presence’ of actor and performer to each other in live performance. And certainly this broadly fits the notions of practitioners such as Grotowski and Artaud.

Here, however, I would like to evoke one of its other meanings and implications as well because I think on some level they are quite interconnected, namely the idea of charisma or the ‘aura’ of the performer live in the flesh. Performance Studies has a particular fascination with the actor; with the body of the actor; with actor training; the actor in performance; and certainly at Sydney University, with the actor in rehearsal. And we are all aware that the notions of ‘presence’ make a compelling argument for what makes theatre a unique temporal artform—not just because the performance is happening ‘right now’ but this actual bodily proximity of actor and audience.

Whilst it might seem very quaint (and possibly un-politic) still to be interested in locating an essence of theatre, I think on some levels we still are. It is because we seem to need to justify or defend our interest in performance, and also because most of us have had some sort of feeling of interconnectedness in the theatre, that may well be very difficult to talk about, but it is what keeps us going back.

Even the title of this conference—‘Being There’—seems to provide evidence that while we may have theoretical issues with the concept of ‘presence’, we still can’t give up the idea that there is something in it.

So, while I think we still need to search for ways to understand and write about this more intangible element of theatre, I would argue it does serve to be sceptical about the almost mystical claims that are made about ‘liveness’ and the ‘presence of the actor’. As Auslander points out in his work on ‘liveness’ (1999), there is a belief that somehow the actual ‘presence’ of a person goes hand in hand with notions of the ‘real’ and getting at the ‘truth’. The belief seems to be, that because the experience is live and unmediated, somehow it is purer, realer, truer, and more authentic. Roger Copeland even cites those who have argued that this gives theatre a moral superiority over film (1990, 32). And certainly in the ideal theatres of Artaud and Grotowski, the aim seems to be to create something actually ‘real’. Grotowski wanted to strip the actor of all pretence so they could reveal their true selves to the audience.

So what does any of this have to do with theatre design? Without trying to resolve the different ontologies at the basis of much debate about ‘presence’, I would like to suggest that once you take away the mystical properties attached to the actor’s ‘presence’, it becomes a lot easier to argue that design is as there, and as worthy of attention, as the actors. But more than that I would like to suggest that many of the ideas surrounding the actor’s presence have made design into an under examined aspect of performance.

To return to Grotowski and the ‘true’ essence of the theatrical endeavour: in *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Grotowski argues that, if you strip away everything superficial from theatre, what you are left with is the relationship between performer and audience. “It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, ‘live’ communion” (Grotowski 1968, 10). He critiqued what he called the Rich theatre – a theatre of excess and spectacle that diminished the relationship between actor and audience. And as Christopher Baugh also points out, “theatre histories have frequently presented the actor as being continually challenged and possibly threatened by technology and spectacle” (2000, 7). It is all too easy for all design to be tarred with this brush; by its very nature it must, at least in a
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relative sense, be inauthentic, planned, and artificial. At its worst, this can be seen as undermining the purity and potential of ‘true’ theatre. So, even for those who reject the mystical notions of ‘presence’, design has still been left soiled. Somehow, in some abstract place, design and the actor have been placed in an unresolvable competition with each other.

I don’t think it is any coincidence that there are links between the ideas of these practitioners (the ways that Richard Schechner picked up on the ideas of Grotowski and Artaud) and the origins of Performance Studies as a discipline. When you look at the literature about theatre and performance in the late 70s, 80s and 90s, there is even less published on design than previously. However, there is a rush of literature about environmental theatre (for example, Aronson 1981), site-specific theatre (Schechner 1973) and, more recently, about the use of technology, this engaging with notions of mediatisation and liveness (Auslander 1999). Although design and designers have been relatively ignored, this suggests that the importance of what are fundamentally design issues have not gone away. At the heart of what I am arguing is a systematic oversight, is a profound misrecognition and mistrust of what design is. I would speculate that even the situation of so much writing on design having been produced by designers, possibly defending themselves, indicates how widespread these notions are.

When I was a Design student at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (N.I.D.A.), director John Clarke used to always quote Grotowski, suggesting that all you needed for a performance was an actor and an audience. For Design students this seemed a put-down and an affirmation of what we all suspected: that N.I.D.A. was really an acting school and we were just there to make the actors look good. What Clarke didn’t seem to acknowledge is that theatre and performance must take place somewhere: a place of performance, along with an actor and an audience, is the third necessary condition for the theatrical event. As Gay McAuley writes in Space and Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre, we should include this third term and acknowledge that, if theatre involves communication between live actors and live spectators, then they must be present to each other within a given space (1999, 3-4).

Ironically, Grotowski and his collaborators actually developed some of the most interesting practical theorising of stage spaces in order to enhance the audience/actor relationship: Grotowski was fundamentally interested in design (1968, 20).

Performance Studies has picked up the ideas of bodies and space, phenomenology, actor-audience relationships, and so on. There has been plenty of discussion of place/space and how this relates to the body of the actor in live performance and also how this in turn creates relationships with the bodies of the audience (for example, Garner 1994). Interestingly, however, rarely is design and, more specifically, the designer, acknowledged or explicitly discussed in these explorations. For example, while McAuley discusses numerous actual theatre productions and events, she rarely names the designer or acknowledges their role in the creation of meaning making. I would like to suggest that, in many ways, this demonstrates what I have been arguing.

Following McAuley’s lead, the Department of Performance Studies at the University of Sydney has been the instigator of enormous amounts of fascinating work on rehearsal process, but again the focus of this work has tended to be on the actor and the director. The designer is often absent from the work, perhaps because they may not have had much of a physical, conscious, breathing presence in the rehearsal room. This is very much exacerbated by the production model of most mainstage theatre in this country. The design for a production is generally established by the first day of rehearsal and a set model and costume drawings presented to the assembled company. Most practitioners tell you that
they would prefer a different model, but the economic logistics of production schedules tend to make alternatives expensive and therefore not all that common. However, this state of affairs can be read in a number of ways. The one that seems to come up most often in my conversations with academics is, “who does this dis-advantage?” I would argue that it is not an ideal situation for anyone but the tendency is to see this as something that disadvantages the actor because a certain number of things have been put in place before their involvement and therefore compromising their work in rehearsal.

Again, I would suggest that this has a lot to do with design being somewhat compromising or corrupting. The implication is that what the actors do in the rehearsal room is purer and having a design in place will inhibit the potential of rehearsal, and the truth of performance. Design, even if physically present, is somehow a form of mediation that can corrupt the truth of the actor’s presence.

However, by taking away these ideas of presence, it is possible to look at this production model in other ways. While the system is compromised, it can still generate genuine collaborative relationships. Furthermore, a design can, in fact, give the actors and director an exciting set of conditions within which to continue to develop and work. Since spatial dynamics are so crucial to meaning-making and the phenomenological experience of performance, one would think it would make sense to collaborate with someone who is expertly skilled in those areas. Moreover, one would imagine that their contribution would be worthy of attention. And if there is something about the live encounter in performance—a way we respond to the actor in space—then we need to acknowledge that design is an integral part of how this happens. So how do we combat this intangible set of mis-conceptions, tensions and superstitions and put design back into the frame?

Clifford Geertz argues that

[i]f you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and certainly not what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do (Geertz 1975, 5).

As I suggested above, the tension between actors and design is an artificial or abstracted one that is not really backed up by my ethnographic research in the field. By taking on Geertz’s ethnographic rationale and actually documenting the work of designers, it will be possible to gain a clearer understanding of the role of the designer and the role of the actual design in performance. The inadequate ways in which design has been written about reflect a general lack of understanding of design process and the ways that design shapes the kinds of ‘being there’ that occur in performance.

Design is activated by the ‘nowness’ of performance but in a different set of ways than a ‘site’ or pre-existing ‘place’ would be because we must consider what doing ‘design’ implies. The designer is involved in a complicated creative and interpretive process, the before, the making of set models and costume drawings and the intimate collaborations between designer, director and actors.

This planned aspect of design implies a kind of corruption; however, most designers (and Josef Svoboda was particularly insistent on this) recognise immediately that their sets and costumes do not come into ‘being’ until activated in performance. As Sydney Theatre Company resident designer Ralph Myers put it:

[w]hat I seem to do now is create rooms . . . essentially . . . that have the possibility for great electric moments of theatre to occur within them (Myers 2006).

Myers recognises that it is a great privilege that the design is often the first aspect of a production to receive attention, but acknowledges that this also impacts on the way he will approach each design:
the way that theatre is created in Australia tends to be that the design needs to be con-
ceived really before anyone has really thought about the production, including the direc-
tor, so you need to be able to—and if that’s going to be the case and that’s how you submit
yourself to work in that system then—you have to create things that don’t limit the pos-
sibilities of what can happen in that space (ibid).

Myers admits to often wishing that he could design a set for a production after he has had the oppor-
tunity to watch the actors perform. Repeatedly, it is only at that point that he feels that he really un-
derstands how he should have designed the play. However, designers are not interested in competing
with actors and the rehearsal room, they are working within the confines of the industry to produce
the best outcomes, just like everyone else.

Russell Fewster’s article on the rehearsals of Neil Armfield’s production of Stephen Sewell’s The
Blind Giant is Dancing for Company B (Fewster 2002) and my own case study of the rehearsals of the
Benedict Andrews and Robert Cousins’ Threepenny Opera for the Sydney Theatre Company
(Heckenberg 2004) document the way that a design can enter rehearsal as a framework that develops
through the collaboration of actors, director and designer in the rehearsal room; a framework that offers
opportunities without limiting options.

Clearly, I have been talking about a particular type of theatre here; about designers working in
intimate settings with directors interested in collaboration. What about the large-scale commercial
theatre, musicals or opera? Certainly, the conditions of scale and style affect all the artists involved in
these productions, however, it is interesting to note that so far all the designers I have spoken to claim
that their actual design process remains the same no matter what the scale of the production they are
working on. And the designers who work on these shows are also doing all sorts of other theatre, car
shows, sports ceremonies, film and television, just like most of the actors involved, they are trying to
make enough money to keep working.

One of Australia’s leading designers of large-scale work, Michael Scott-Mitchell, went straight from
designing the South Australian Opera’s enormous mounting of Wagner’s Ring Cycle over four or five
years to designing a production of David Mamet’s two-hander Oleanna, for the Hothouse Theatre in
Albury-Wodonga. The set model of the first alone cost almost $250,000 (Powell 2006), while the
entire budget for the latter design was $3000. Scott-Mitchell suggests that this is quite a healthy thing
to do and makes it clear that what he thinks he is good at, and what he contributes as a designer to any
production of any scale, is an understanding of space dynamics and how to manipulate it.

I know how to pull and push a space around and align the dynamic of the space to the
emotional drive of the piece, and also to the practical requirements of the piece, and
those two things go hand in hand (Scott-Mitchell 2006).

A designer, then, can bring their expertise and another way of thinking to the collaborative process,
which can help solve problems, and contribute to the staging by bringing a visual literacy and sophis-
tication to the development of the production no matter what the scale.

One of the most interesting things that Myers spoke to me about was a number of staged readings
performed under the auspices of Wharf 2 Loud, the Sydney Theatre Company’s ‘experimental’ wing. Designers were not included in this process, the idea being that these performances would be cheaper and have more ‘raw energy’ than a fully staged production. However, one of the directors effectively brought a designer on board, but failed to acknowledge their contribution in the program. Myers compared this production to another without a design:
It was very successful because it solved a lot of the problems of not having a set through ingenious design ideas and the other one, which didn’t have a designer, ironically had much more stuff—lots of furniture, lots of crap they didn’t need which took up way too much space on stage and was rambling and horrible. It was a good example of what a good designer can do, which is to keep stuff out of the stage space (Myers 2006).

A skilled designer, it would seem, in any scale of theatre, can create potentials for staging that enhance, not inhibit, the rehearsal process.

In the doctoral research I am currently undertaking, my aim is to analytically describe the working process of the contemporary Australian theatre designer. Then, through a critical engagement with the creative and practical processes of specific designers, I hope to advance some new critical tools to engage with theatre design. I am interested in generating an analytical vocabulary out of ‘ethnographic’ research rather than imposing a product-orientated, critical model over the top of the final performance. I am asking two fundamental questions: one, what language and processes do designers use to develop and communicate their designs in the collaborative theatre process? Two, how can this provide the field of Performance Studies with some clues about how to write about designers and design?

I believe that a close examination of the practice of contemporary Australian theatre designers working in the current industry is an important task in its own right, but I also believe that it can give the Performance Studies researcher clues about how to critically engage with the actual designs activated in performance. The point of this approach, as I have indicated, is to uncover the different ways that designers develop and communicate their ideas throughout the design process (for theatre is always the product of a group of people working together, even if not always the ideal of collaboration many designers seem to crave) and then to look at how this can generate new analytic tools with a more sophisticated scope than the existing semiotic and formalist-aesthetic models. As any undergraduate doing ‘performance analysis’ might be quick to tell you, semiotic analysis does engage with design at the level of what appears on stage and formalist approaches do engage with a production’s aesthetics. However, I would suggest that in practice this has generated completely abstract theory or highly specific performance critique and presents a fairly limited approach to understanding design and virtually no insights into the practice of designing. This project hopes to put the lived experience of designers into design theory.

Just one final point: most designers will tell you that they are constantly amazed by how hard it can be to explain their design ideas to their collaborators, even when there is a detailed model of the piece and they are working with seasoned professionals. As Aronson points out, we may be surrounded by images and respond instinctively to space but, as a whole, we are not as visually literate as we might be. However, if anyone is going to have developed the tools to communicate design ideas it is theatre designers; it is part of their work, integral to their collaborative relationships and the success of the production as a whole. This is why I am placing so much emphasis in my research on engaging with designers during the design process. It is only when this is better understood that we can get rid of the false dichotomies between actors and designers and design can receive the attention it deserves.
Notes
1. For this paper I will use the term ‘design’ rather than ‘scenography’, the preferred term of European and American scholars. Whilst in general use across Europe, ‘scenography’ still has a strongly rhetorical function in English speaking countries and is rarely used by practitioners in Australia. The term is not widely understood in this country, perhaps underlining the lack of theoretical discussion and debate.

2. However, whilst there does seem to be a broader surge of interest in this area lately, much of it still comes from those with a background in design practice as had been the case with how-to books from the past. The ‘legendary’ American designer Robert Edmond Jones’ *The Dramatic Imagination* was republished in 2004, the first time since 1969, and last year saw the publication of Arnold Aronson *Looking into the Abyss* in America. And in England, both Alison Oddey and Christine White’s *The Potentials of Spaces: The Theory and Practice of Scenography and Performance* and Christopher Baugh’s *Theatre, Performance and Technology: The Development of Scenography in the Twentieth Century* were published last year. The forerunner, perhaps, was Pamela Howard who, as well as providing the introduction to the Oddey/White book, published *What is Scenography?* in 2002. Baugh and Howard are practising British designers and White is a lighting designer. All these authors are practitioners as well as being academics and teachers at universities.

3. For that reason, I don’t have any intention of trying to resolve any of these debates here today and I am not going to go into Derrida’s critique of presence but at the same time, some of the work of those with deconstructionist or post-structuralist leanings has been useful as I prepared this paper.

4. Interestingly enough, Grotowski’s later experiments—his para-theatrical events—seem to acknowledge that the frame of actor and audience would always defeat his aims to create something akin to ritual or liminal events.

5. The only designer discussed by McAuley is Mary Moore; even then, however, the page reference to Moore in the index is incorrect. In fact, there is not any other contemporary Australian designer listed in the index, unless you included Rex Cramphorn as a designer/director. Adolphe Appia and Casper Neher are the only other designers listed, in each instance in the context of their theoretical writing. And to some extent you can argue that the design is highly valued in such work—but perhaps instead of comparing the design budget to what the actors get paid, perhaps it would be more useful to compare what the designer gets paid to what the actors get paid.

6. Andrew Powell was Michael Scott-Mitchell’s Associate Designer on this project.

7. The first stage of this project has been to interview between 15 and 20 designers currently working in the Australian industry, asking them questions about how they view their practice and the process of designing. The second stage involves following a smaller number of designers (three) as they work through a specific project—to actually document the process of designing a production from the designer’s initial responses to the play to the bump-out removal of all traces of the set from the theatre.

References
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