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Postmodern Design: An Analysis of Trends in Scenography

by John Hofland

During the past few decades American theatrical design has undergone marked change. Influenced especially by Eastern European designers, American designers have begun shifting from realistic theatrical design to more of a metaphorical design style that has gone by such names as Action Design or Postmodern Design. The shift is by no means complete, as recent design exposi-

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tions and publications have shown. But ever since the stir created by Czech designer Josef Svoboda's designs for the 1968 World's Fair in Montreal, interest in a new, less realistic design style has been growing. As Ian MacNeil's recent Broadway design for *An Inspector Calls* illustrates, even mystery-thrillers, which have always seemed to require cozy, realistic designs, can be successfully designed in a new, non-realistic style. Thus, postmodern design deserves our attention, and if it deserves attention, it also deserves analysis.

In order to proceed with such analysis, however, it is necessary to begin with some common agreements about theatrical production. It must be understood, first of all, that theatrical production is more than the utterance of a script. Plays are more than words. The comment we all make, "I went to *see* a play," suggests that. The visual elements of a production ought to be considered as much a part of the text as the spoken word.

Secondly, all of what a person does is connected to his or her philosophical viewpoint, and, therefore, theatrical design grows out of an understanding of what is important and true in the world—it grows out of one's worldview—out of what one considers to be the essential aspect of reality. In order to demonstrate this point, I will use examples from theater history to show a connection between the theatrical style of a given period of time and the religious/philosophical outlook of the time.

Thirdly, the world we presently live in is undergoing (or has undergone) an important religious and philosophical shift. The world around us is

shifting from a reliance on scientific rationalism (the hope that scientific discoveries will improve or save our world) to postmodern relativism. As this happens, the style of theatrical design we have called realism is becoming a thing of the past and postmodern design is becoming the emerging style. I would like to describe some of the theories that drive the postmodernist movement in stage design.

Last of all, postmodern design, which is based on some assumptions that might be said to undermine our (Western) culture, nevertheless offers us exciting tools for interpreting the world through the perspectives of the very culture it might be intending to undermine.

The Meaning
a Play Conveys

First of all, then, let us consider how a play conveys meaning. When we go to see a play, what do we go to see? The words penned by some distant writer? The grace and skill of an actor? Or a combination of words and actors? Or is there more to a play than just the words and the actors who say them? How does a play convey meaning?

It may be helpful to ask a similar question about dreams, if we can assume that the dreamer, the lover, and the play producer are of imagination all compact: that they all deal in allusive, metaphoric language. How do dreams manage to upset us or fill us with inexplicable euphoria? Let's use dreams to help us talk about plays.

When I was a youngster I had a recurring dream. In this dream, I found myself in my father's barn, in the large, dark, open area where the cattle were sheltered during the winter storms. The floor was clean of straw and manure, and the small windows on the north wall let in square shafts of dim, dusty light. As the dream began, I peeked over the manger, past the milking stalls on the other side of the barn, towards the front door. And who should be guarding the doorway to the farmyard, keeping me in the barn and keeping everyone else out? Adolf Hitler. There he stood, complete with his dark uniform and red arm band, glaring at me. Terrified, I rehearsed the only means of escape I knew. I slid back down behind the manger, and began walking across the empty cattle barn, my trunk bent parallel to the floor, my arms out-

stretched. I walked faster, faster, faster. Finally letting my left leg float up behind me, I did a little hop on the right leg, and sure enough, I floated off the ground. Satisfied with the experiment, I cautiously approached Adolf Hitler and the front door.

"I know how to fly," I mumbled.

"You what?" he bristled. "Don't try to fool me."

"I can fly. Would you like me to show you?"

First he laughed at me. Then he growled, "Show me your flying."

"Where?"

"Right here!"

"But sir, I need more room. "There's not enough room in the barn to fly." Eventually I convinced Adolf Hitler to let me fly out of the front door of the barn, promising, of course, to fly back when he said I had flown high enough to satisfy him. I leaned over, began walking, threw my leg back, skipped on my right foot, and flew out the door and high over the farmyard, barely missing the electric wires that stretched out from the barn. Soon the little tyrant, by this time only a tiny speck in the doorway behind me, was calling, "Come back! Come back right now or I'll shoot!" But I, nearly out of earshot, was also beyond the range of his gun, and free. I flew on, grinning at the speck behind me.

I always woke from those dreams feeling giddy with relief.

How does one explain this dream? What did it mean? How should one go about analyzing it? One could analyze it piece by piece. The Hitler element is easy to explain. In school I had been learning about World War II. We had seen movies about the fierce little man with the rigid salute, and about his death camps. But the cattle barn with its dust, its dry hay in the manger, its wet spots on the floor, and its cracks in the wall—why was that in the same dream with Hitler? The barn was an open place where we played in the summer—never a place of terror. Odder yet, how did the business of flying become part of the dream? The closest I had ever gotten to flying was when I had fallen out of the hay loft. And why did I end up feeling such relief at the end of the dream? The odd collection of pieces doesn't seem to fit together. The piece-by-piece analysis is not very satisfying.

So we think further. There must be some Freudian or Jungian significance to flying. Maybe

Hitler is an archetype for fierce authority figures. Maybe the dream was filled with sexual connotations—maybe the barn symbolizes the dark womb. Maybe the dream was about all kinds of adolescent sexual turmoil, and maybe Hitler represented sexual repression. In this case the flight must point to escape from such repression. Unfortunately, however, this dream was one I had already at the age of nine or ten, and adolescent sexual turmoil was a thing still to come, so this Freudian interpretation is likely a failed attempt also.

If you look at my meanderings through dream interpretation, you will see that both of my rather fruitless efforts have one thing in common. Both have operated from the premise that the dream meant something—that something about the dream had a metaphorical quality, and that the dream/metaphor pointed to something in real life. Both have noted that the dream was about a tension-filled situation that ended in relief.

The metaphorical quality of the dream is worth further consideration. It is helpful, first of all, to remind ourselves that metaphorical thinking creates a new understanding, puts daily life in a new setting, and casts a new light on it. Thus, it is also true that if we consider the dream as metaphor, some of the puzzles of our previous analyses are accounted for. For example the fact that the dream includes both reality (a barn and a dictator) and fantasy (the ability to fly) is okay since they combine to produce one metaphor. A jail or a torture chamber might have served just as well as the barn, and Goliath or King Kong might have represented the terrifying creature guarding the door. It is not the parts that are important so much as the whole.

Any one of these might have helped create a story of release from dangerous obstacles. The point is that the dream is not a series of symbols as much as it is one overall symbol. The elements of the dream must not be considered as a series of disjointed parts but as a total emotion-gripping pattern. It is the totality of the dream that grips us. It is the totality of the dream that filled me with a sense of relief. It is the totality of a dream, and not just one of its parts, that becomes the metaphor.

So why did the dream fill me with such relief? Of what was the dream a metaphor? What did it remind me of when I woke? Let me explain that I grew up in the days of McCarthyism, of the Red scare, of bomb shelters being built in the back yard. Thoughts of how Communists like the shoe-pounding Khrushchev might come to overthrow my quiet Iowa life terrified me. When I plowed my father's Iowa corn fields in the spring and watched the gulls fly robot-like over the naked, black earth I imagined them to be feathered Communist machines swarming over to spy on us, and it didn't take much to believe this might be true. I imagined Communist troops marching up our road, stopping at our farm and dragging me off to tortures reserved for innocent star-spangled patriots.

Theatrical design grows out of an understanding of what is important and true in the world.

The dream, which came to me in one intense, terrifying moment, was more vivid than the scattered bits of reality that it reflected. It helped me recognize my fears and hopes. While it is true that such recognition didn't really change anything, it is also true that this odd conglomeration of images that formed my dream were a way for me, the dreamer, to communicate with myself, to see my life in a new way. But it was not the parts of the dream that created the impact. It was the overall pattern. When we tried to interpret the dream in a logical, piece-by-piece fashion, the dream made no sense. It was only when we looked at the overall pattern, at the dream as one complex image, that the dream made sense.

The same is true of a play production. If we as viewers or producers of plays consider a part of the play to be the whole production—if we consider the text, for example, to be the only part of the production that is really important—we are ignoring a part of the production or a part of the possibilities for a production.

The reason a play moves us is not that the words make so much sense. Plays often cannot be interpreted on a rational, literal level, just as the dream couldn't be interpreted by saying that the barn meant this, and Hitler meant that. Instead, their overall production pattern makes a kind of irrational, mysterious sense that moves us on a different level than any logical argument ever could.

It is the whole experience—not a few of its parts—that combines to move us. The meaning of a play is that which causes the individual parts—the stage craft, the words, and the acting style—to become one image. It is this essential meaning, then, that orders the action, defines the scenic images, and finally is the whole.

If we realize that the enacted script and the scenography combine to shape a story, and that they are both part of the text of the performance, then we are ready to look at how religious outlook has influenced play production throughout history.

The Influence of Religion
on Play Production

Let us begin our survey with the Greeks. Greek theater, as you know, seems to have grown out of the spring worship ritual honoring the dismemberment and resurrection of Dionysus, and the ritual was intended to bring regeneration and empowerment after the long death of winter. But when the Greek citizen worshiped Dionysus, the son of the god Zeus and the woman Semele, they worshiped a half god, half man creature and they honored him not just because he was supposed to bring new life and fertility in the spring. They worshiped a god who was half man—half like themselves—and by worshiping him in their drunken orgies, they believed that they too could rise above their mundane earthly existence and become god-like.

Is it surprising then, that these Greeks had a lofty idea of who they were? Imagine the grand kind of art that must rise from thinking that one can become like the gods. And grand it was. Consider their sculptures—Apollo, Hercules, Zeus—all present an ideal form. Every muscle bulges with life, every face is focused and confident, every stance commands the space around it. How perfect is this image of man, how beautiful, how strong!

Imagine the kind of theater that must grow out of this thinking. What a dignified picture of man it would present! Notice how the following text from Sophocles' *Antigone* exalts the human race.

Numberless are the world's wonders, but none
More wonderful than man; The storm-grey sea
Yields to his prows, the huge crests bear him high;
Earth, holy and inexhaustible, is graven
With shining furrows where his plows have gone
Year after year, the timeless labour of stallions.

. . .

Words, also, and thought as rapid as air,
He fashions to his good use; statecraft is his,
And his the skill that deflects the arrows of snow,
The spears of winter rain: from every wind
He has made himself secure—from all but one:
In the late wind of death he cannot stand.
(Clay and Krempel 36)

Man described in this play is not ordinary, everyday man; this is Man—with a capital *M*. Furthermore, this play will not be about the petty disputes held during breakfast. It will be about the meaning of life and death, about man's relationship to the state.

How did the Greeks stage the stories of this dignified sort of Mankind? What kind of space did such a story require? What kind of props? What kind of makeup?

Let us begin by looking at the theater itself. The open-air, ancient Greek theater had a seating capacity of up to 30,000 people. If the important thing in life was that humans are more than life-sized, they could build a theater whose size reflected this. In addition, props like kettles, fireplaces, and chairs—the stuff of everyday life—were not needed in such a story. Instead, the only scenic element was an altar set in the middle of the huge, circular stage; the rear of the otherwise bare stage was bounded by a grand, temple-like facade.

But it was not only the nature of the story and the size of the theater that reflected man's god-like status. The costuming, the makeup, and the props also did. The Greek actor did not spend time in front of the mirror straining to make sure that his wrinkles looked real. Instead, he donned a mask as big as a helmet whose exaggerated—indeed, grotesque—features would tell the people in the back row what his main character trait was, as well as his social status, his mood, his sex, and his age. Moreover, he wore a full-length costume that hid him so that he could give up his own identity to represent gods and heroes.

Imagine what kind of acting one would have to do to communicate through the mask and costume to the back row. One would not be able to curl his lip to show disdain, or lower his brow to show confusion. The mask would hide all that. It would take a whole body to show such emotions. So you see, everything—the text, the staging, and the movement style—was used to create a story that was larger than life, that reminded the Greeks they were god-like.

We could say much more about the Greeks, but let us conclude by noting once again that all parts of the production served the same metaphor, that the overall pattern of the performance reflected a picture of what was true about the world: in the Greeks' mind, man had the potential to be god-like, and in fact *was* god-like.

Let us shift our attention to the Middle Ages. As with the Greeks, one thing seemed most important to the mindset of this time: man, in his time on earth, was preparing for eternity. Present time was less important than eternal truth and eternal destiny. We see an example of this kind of thinking in the painting of the time. In the Minneapolis Institute of Arts hangs a triptych called "Pieta and Panels of Saint John and Saint Catherine." The triptych depicts the burial of Jesus, but for the modern viewer the painting holds several surprises. Most odd to the modern viewer is what happens to the sense of time in this painting. The background to Jesus' tomb is the Medieval city of Bruges, not 30 AD Jerusalem as one might realistically expect, and the people in the painting not only wear medieval dress, but some of them also are Medieval people. Two people pictured in the central panel are understood to be the donors of the painting. The point is *not* that the painter failed to understand that the crucifixion happened long before his time, but rather that the donors were people who honor the Christ. Temporal reality was used to point to an eternal truth.

A similar thing happened in Medieval theater. The type of theater from the Middle Ages that we are probably most familiar with is the Mystery plays, the plays that were performed during the feast of Corpus Christi and that told various stories from the Bible. What characterized these plays is that they brought together two worlds—the world of sacred theater and the world of secular theater—and as they brought these two forms together into one play. Their entire production again reflected their view of the world, just as the productions of the Greeks had reflected theirs.

What characterized these two types of theater? Let us note first of all what characterized the sacred dramas of the time. The drama of the church was iconographic, and not unlike the

iconography found in Orthodox churches today. The icon of John the Baptist that one finds in Russia's Pskov Pechera Assumption Monastery depicts a saintly, elongated figure of John the Baptist simultaneously at two times in his life—as messenger of the coming Christ, and as martyr murdered by Herod—not in realistic time. The calm faced John the Baptist pictured in the icon is winged and carrying an unrolled scroll to represent his task as forerunner of Christ. But the same figure also carries a head—John the Baptist's own head—in a golden bowl to represent his martyrdom. In iconographic art like this painting, images are presented in an atmosphere of calm and

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*Letting my left leg float up
behind me, I did a little hop
on the right leg and,
sure enough,
floated off the ground!*

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restraint. Human emotions and actions fade, and impersonation is incomplete. Thus, the characters pictured in an icon become symbols or types, rather than realistic persons.

In this sense, the church dramas of the time were iconographic. An example of the sacred theater—the Easter trope—has often been described for us. A simple drama, it used four priests or monks to act out the part of the resurrection story that begins, "Whom do you seek? . . . We seek Jesus." The acting was restrained and ritualistic, the speech a kind of chant.

We are probably less familiar with the secular theater of the time. It stands in direct contrast to the style that characterized the sacred theater. It was highly physical, and included crude slapstick farce, obscene humor, fights, dances, and audience participation.

The genius of the Medieval Mystery Plays is that they borrowed from both these traditions to create a drama that accurately represented the Christian faith of Medieval man. If a character, such as Cain, were unfaithful to God he would be patterned after the style of the secular drama. Notice how physical and coarse Cain's opening speech is as he drives his team of horses and oxen on stage.

What, will ye no farther, mare?
(the horse collapses)
War: Woah! Let me see how Down will draw!
(beating his animals)
Yit! Schew! Yit! Pull on a thraw!
(the ox relieves himself on CAIN's foot)
What? It seems of me none stand in awe!
I say, Donnying, go fare!
Aha! God give thee sorrow and care!
Lo, now heard she what I said!
Now, Yit, art thou the worst mare
In plough that ever I bred. (Cohen 39)

The actor playing wicked Cain was probably wearing ordinary plowman's clothes as he played his part. By contrast, godly Abel very possibly was wearing church vestments or carried a symbol to show that he was faithful to his God. His speech uses the restraint tone would expect in a church drama. Rather than using coarse vernacular language, he speaks in pleasant rhymed couplets, reminding us of his faithfulness.

Dear brother, hear my saw
It is the custom of our law,
All that work as they are wise
Shall worship God with sacrifice.
Our Father us Bade, from him have we learned
That our tenth should be burned. (Cohen 40)

By both their language and their costume, we are reminded that these two are destined for two different places, heaven and hell. And as if language were not enough of a reminder, the staging often included both places. Heaven might be an area above the stage or to the right of a series of stages. Hell, complete with fire, smoke, and demons, would be represented on the opposite side. So you see, once again, that the staging of these plays as well as the ways they were acted, written, and staged, reflected the faith that was current at the time.

If we were to look at a type of theater that followed the Renaissance—the theater of the French court at the time of Moliere, Versailles, and King Louis XIV, we would see a similar connection between faith and performance.

The people at the court of Versailles were confined there—King Louis kept his courtiers there so he could keep an eye on them and avoid intrigue against himself. Therefore, there was only one thing that counted at this court, only one thing for people to put their faith in, and that was not God, or eternity, or the church—though these were paid their due. The one thing that people needed to maintain themselves at court, the one thing they lived for, was status. They lived to curry favor from the king, and one way to do it was to show that they were people of Culture—of High Culture—people whose Culture displayed their rational skills.

Life was a status game, and to play the game one followed the rules governing every element of life. Even theater was governed by rules, rules designed to establish the status of both the artists and the audience.

One could talk about how these people fashioned rational rules to govern script writing, vocal delivery, and movement, but let us take the time to look at only one element, the staging. One-point perspective was a drawing method new at the time of the Renaissance, and in the theater, it was used to establish the status of the audience. If a set is built of two-dimensional elements that use one-point perspective, there is only one point in the audience in which the picture looks perfect. Guess who sat at that spot—the king, or whoever was the audience member to be held in highest regard. Others found their place in the audience as their rank allowed.

More could be said about this era, or other eras, but let us continue by taking a look at the theater style that has dominated the American stage for the last while. We have been enjoying a theater quite different from any of those described above. Our stages aren't designed to rank its audience's status. They are designed to look real, no matter where we sit. Our scripts aren't written to type characters as hell-bound or heaven-bound. They are written so that the actors can sound like real people. Our actors are not masked to represent gods and heroes. They look like the people we meet on the street.

We are people of the Twentieth Century, and in our theater, we have finally come to realize that people are not as god-like as a Greek statue. We realize that mankind has problems, "that we got trouble, right here" in the Land of Plenty, "and that starts with T and that rhymes with P" and that stands for pollution, and prostitution, and police brutality, and abuse and the list could go on.

Our image of man has shrunk from the exalted image sculpted by the Greeks. Now it is something more like Giacometti's statue, "Man Pointing," which stands in the Tate Gallery. Here man has lost all grandeur. The statue's pencil-thin limbs and fragile trunk are eroded; its stance is isolated, frozen, and uncertain. It reaches out and withdraws into itself simultaneously. This helpless, isolated man who has lost command of the space around him seems a fitting image of twentieth-century man.

How has the theater of the twentieth century responded? As might be expected, we have designed a theater to fit our rather desperate situation. Our theater is designed to help us solve our problems. You've got spouse abuse? We'll show you Ibsen's *Doll's House*. You've got disappointment? We'll show you Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. Are you feeling frustrated with your job? We'll show you Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Do you have family problems? Take your pick—William's *The Glass Menagerie* or O'Neil's *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

You see, we know we have social problems, but we have been realists. And realists also have known how to solve these problems. Step one has been to study the problem, and then, out of the study has come step two—the solution. It's a modern, scientific method, not unlike going to a doctor. We go to the doctor, he studies our throat and says, "Hmm, you've got a cold." Then he writes the prescription. "Here," he says, "take these pills." In the same way, we realists have understood that if we can define the cause of our social ills, we will be able to find the cure.

So how have we used our theater to do this? Theater, as in the examples I just cited, helps us see the problems in life around us. How does it go about doing this? It presents us with realistic people who face realistic problems. They talk like real people, and we watch them acting out their story in a real setting—real light switches, real running water, and real thunder storms that wet the actors' clothes. Even those who have not been to the theater know what a realistic setting looks like if they watch television dramas, since realism is what is also commonly used there.

The idea has been that if we can see the problems around us clearly enough, we will be equipped to find the solution. It all leads to a pleas-

ant sense of progress: if we identify the problem, we will find a solution, and then life will improve.

Of course, we have had a few guidelines that we follow also, just like everyone from the Greeks on down have had. Emile Zola has reminded us that "there is more poetry in the little apartment of a bourgeois than in all the empty, worm-eaten palaces of history; . . . that everything meets in the real" (Bentley 365). In order for our dramas to be real, according to this thinking, our stories also ought to be logical. They should start by showing us a situation and its problem, provide a few surprises along the way, and then end with a logical resolution.

Religious outlook has influenced play production throughout history.

Secondly, the play should try to make a point—it should intend to show us something about our society's troubles, and about those who are guilty of creating those troubles.

Finally, since the play is trying to make a point, it should be built around a unified concept, in the same way that an essay is. Therefore, the set for A *Doll's House*, for example, should look like a real house, but it should be a real house whose parts are chosen to make a point. If, for example, the point of the production is that the woman of the house is too confined by her overbearing husband, we should make the house look confining, and place the husband's space in such a way that his position is indeed overbearing.

Like the types of theater we looked at before, this type of theater rests on a kind of faith also. This time, it is faith in human reason. If we study our problems in a reasonable, scientific way, or so the thinking goes, we will be able to overcome them. Such reason asks us to get rid of all subjective contaminations—our feelings, our prejudices, and our beliefs, for example. Used in this way, reason is also set against tradition, authority, and prejudice. Rather than saying that Nora, in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, ought to know what a woman's place is, and ought to accept that, or be guilty for wrongdoing, this reasonable way of working coaxes us to put our preconceived notions aside, calmly study the situation, and see what life is like for Nora.

There is a comforting certainty in this kind of theater. This reasonable approach lets us see that every cause creates an effect, that every domineering Torvald husband creates a miserable, resentful Nora wife. We can see universal laws at work in these plays.

Nevertheless, rationalism and the realism it has engendered—the realistic sets, the everyday speech, and the logically presented stories—are increasingly being brought into question.

Postmodern Design:
The Emerging Style

What is the criticism of the realistic theater, and what do people have against realistic sets and their marvelously meticulous details? Those who read *Theater Design and Technology* or *Theater Crafts International*, two magazines serving the technical theater world, probably already have a sense of the change that is in the works. Recent design featured in the magazines have highlighted several non-realistic designs. Instead, *Theater Crafts International* has featured designs like Tony Tripp's design for *High Society*, in which a huge birthday cake shape opens to reveal a frothy, fanciful domestic interior. The designs featured in *Theater Design and Technology* often tend to be even less realistic.

Those critiquing the realistic theater—which they would call the theater of the past—call themselves postmodernists. A central target of the postmodernist's complaint is the sense of certainty that is fundamental to realism. A sense of uncertainty pervades the new thinking.

Theater critic Robert Brustein would argue that this uncertainty began with as early a writer as Ibsen himself. In his play *The Master Builder*, an amazingly successful builder is explaining the origin of his successful career to a young admirer. A fire that killed his children and left his wife a living corpse had given him his first chance to practice his building skills. Notice the cause-and-effect pattern that he begins to set up.

> SOLNESS: You see, the whole business revolves about no more than a crack in the chimney.
> HILDA: Nothing else?
> SOLNESS: No; at least not at the start. . . . I'd noticed that tiny opening in the flue long, long before the fire. . . .Every time I wanted to start repairing it, it was exactly as if a hand was there, holding me back. . . . So nothing came of it.

> HILDA: But why did you keep on postponing?
> SOLNESS: Because I went on thinking. . . . Through that little black opening in the chimney I could force my way to success—as a builder. (Brustein 20)

The direction the story is going seems to be quite obvious. At this point, we are led to expect that a crack in the chimney started the fire that made him build a new house, that started Solness building all the houses, and that also left him feeling guilty. Simple, reasonable, cause-and-effect. But notice what happens next.

> HILDA: But wait a minute, Mr. Solness— how can you be so sure the fire started from the little crack in the chimney?
> SOLNESS: I can't, not at all. In fact, I'm, absolutely certain it had nothing whatever to do with the fire. . .
> HILDA: What!
> SOLNESS: It's been proved without a shadow of a doubt that the fire broke out in a clothes closet, in quite another part of the house. (Brustein 20)

In four lines Ibsen not only surprises us with a plot twist. He also shatters the assumptions that "cause A precedes consequence B, which in turn is responsible for catastrophe C" (Brustein 20). Rather than giving us what we have rationally expected, he suggests that the causes of a given event are so multiple and complex that we may never be able to know them.

Postmodernists would agree. Science, they point out, has not brought us the peace and happiness it promised. The sense of progress toward a better and better life has skidded to a halt. A new way of thinking, both theoretical and practical, needs to replace it.

Their call for a new way of thinking includes both theoretical and practical considerations. The tidiness of the scientific method, which has taught us how to study nature, is being questioned. It may come as no surprise to you that if you study a thing you change the thing you study. For example, if I watch you or study you, you will act differently than if you are on your own. There is a dynamic relationship between the scientist and the things studied, whether the object of study is a person or a molecule.

There is also a relationship between a body and the space and time around it, according to the dis-

coveries of quantum mechanics. "When a body moves, or a force acts, it affects the curvature of space and time—and in turn the structure of space-time affects the way in which bodies move and forces attract" (Unruh 64). Now that may sound like heady information that has little to do with theatrical design, but what it suggests is that the world around us is not static but dynamic. If the space and time of our world exist in a dynamic relationship, why not let a theatrical set be a dynamic, fluid, changing picture that is continually commenting on the dramatic action?

If life is full of such dynamic relationships, says the postmodernist, why build sets that are static? If people affect their environment, and if the environment affects people, and if we live in a world of change, why not build sets that take on a dynamic life that interacts with and adds to the story enacted by the actors?

Besides, argues the postmodernist, let's admit it. Static sets are boring. A beautiful, static set, says Czech designer Frantisek Troster, is "like a shout at the rise of the curtain that would never be heard from again" (Christilles 20). Why put all that work into a picture that talks only once? Why not design pictures that are continually speaking and adding layers of meaning to the story?

In designing the set for O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Czech design Jan Dusek added an element of chance to the dialogue between actor and setting. The walls of the interior where the play is set were built of plexiglass covered by wet wall-paper. As the wall-paper dried under the heat of the stage lights, it began to peel and fall. The effect was that as the actors exposed each other's faults and vulnerabilities, their home was also becoming transparent, and its walls provided no place to hide behind. The chance element was that no one could predict just when the unmasking could occur.

The first thing postmodern designers are calling for, then, is what Josef Svoboda calls a psychoplastic scenography, a design that changes with and comments on the story, a space that works like a second text in the performance. The result is a design that works with the script much like the pictures in a children's picture book work with the words. The story in a picture book works in stereo, part of the story being told by the text, and part of it told by the pictures. The two stories—the one incomplete without

the other—are not the same, but they complement each other to make one complete story.

That brings us to the next point. Theater, we would all agree, is in the business of communicating, of dialoguing with its audience. Why not admit, as I have tried to show in our hop-skip through theater history, that scenic design does speak to us—and at a deeply significant level—and then exploit that fact?

Postmodern Design:
A Valuable Tool

If stage design no longer is used to create a realistic place, but to create a meaningful text, what

> *Postmodern design offers exciting tools for interpreting the world.*

will this mean? First of all, it will allow design to do what all art does best: it will allow it to be playfully allusive. Rather than telling us that we are in a house (something we will likely know from the text anyway), it can comment on a family's fragility. Instead of telling us we are in a government institute, it can remind us that the thinking in that institute is upside down.

An example of this allusive use of design is Josef Svoboda's 1970 design for Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, produced at the Salsberg Festspiele. It has the obligatory hill and tree, but in addition, the stark setting Beckett calls for is backed by a mirror that covers the entire backstage area. The result is that, in a play whose second act seems to be a mirroring of the events of the first act, and in which every day is a mirror of the day before it, the effect is doubled. We see every event twice as it is being played—first on stage and then in the mirror. In addition, the audience, who can also see itself in the mirror, cannot help seeing itself as part of the futile world depicted on stage. In order to emphasize the audience's involvement in the futility described by the story, Svoboda has designed side walls on the stage that look like extensions of the Baroque walls surrounding the audience in the auditorium.

Secondly, if we are free from the need to create the unified concept required by realistic design and rational thinking, we will be able to face the

fact that a given play, if it is a good play, communicates more than one concept. (What, for example, is *the* meaning of *Hamlet*? Are there not, rather, many meanings and many stories in this play?) Why not let our designs point to more than one of these meanings, or even to contradictory meanings. Jaroslav Malina insists that his designs, rather than being unified, have elements that "stick out," because they will add to the dramatic tension. In his recent design for *Carmen* at the University of Kansas, he included a garish yellow box on the stage left side of a lovely pink, red, and white set. Why? The box served to remind this viewer that all was not well in Carmen's idyllic Spanish community.

While arguing that the post-modern style offers us valuable, refreshing tools, I must hasten to add that the thinking behind the style is not without its weaknesses. While we might criticize rationalism for tending toward scientific dogmatism, we must also point out that postmodernists tend to use relativism to deify the self. The accusation might also be made that postmodern thought could easily be used to justify thoughtless or meaningless art work. Maybe so. In that case, the advice of Chaucer's Chanticleer is appropriate here: one needs to study the movement, and then "Take the grain and spit out the chaff."

It is the advantages of postmodern design, the freedom from the constrictions of rationalistic realism, that I want to point out. The advantages of postmodern design seem to be these two: first, it allows scenic design to be constantly interesting because it is constantly developing, and second, it allows designers a scenic medium that is more allusive, more rich with meaning. To those wanting the theater to be a culture-shaping voice, the

new freedom to comment on and shape a production's direction seems to be a significant development. Of course, the scenic designer who uses the license provided by postmodernism to make meaningful allusions may prove to be the movement's own worst enemy, since such use of postmodernism's freedom could turn against the relativism that engendered it. If that is the case, postmodernism needs no longer be feared—by even the most conservative mind—as a culture-destroying movement.

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