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ASPECTS OF THEATRE AND TELEVISION

PRODUCTION DESIGN

National College of Art and Design

My concern here is to extend my vocabulary and understanding of Television and Theatre production design language - so ensuring more vital and meaningful interpretation of dramatic works of the past and present. My interest is with general principles and not with a collection of Theatre and Television reviews, or of articles on plays and playwrights.

The prime requisite for success in Television or Theatre production is an awareness of the medium's inherent "personality". To make the most effective use of these media, I must know what they can do, what they can do best, and wherein their weaknesses lie. The limitations as well as the great potentialities should be taken into account.

The same things apply in building a Television or Theatre production as apply in building a house. The production must be built on a solid foundation or it will fall apart. The workers concerned must know how to use their tools. The materials of which it is constructed should be chosen with feeling and understanding. It should be "suitable" for the time and place, and for the audience it is intended to reach.

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a foundation on which to build, to become aware of the limitations and potentialities in order to make the most effective use of Television and Theatre.

TELEVISION

What do people want?

The argument is tacitly accepted, that people mostly want the sort of material which in fact predominates on Television; thriller, adventure, variety shows, music, quiz shows and the like. Therefore, the peak viewing hours on Television are crammed with that popular sort of material, which receives heavy financial backing through advertisements. People are then presumed to be happy; they are getting, it seems, what most of them want. Perhaps the fault in this presumption is the failure to realise and examine this very notion of want. What constitutes a human want?

Much of what is on Television is a finite statement, I would like to see a development statement more often - as many of our wants need to be stimulated, but not necessarily fulfilled, rather than demands, which, when fulfilled are satisfied.

A person's openness to further experiment in some area of human experience is worth more to him than another that can be very clearly defined. This is the sort of want which gives say, music some chance against beer in an individual's priorities. If we were to become at least more aware of this potentiality we might not so easily accept inferior material on Television. Nevertheless, there is a place for light entertainment on Television as there is in newspapers and magazines.

Most of what is available on Television can fall into two categories -

- (a) Quantity communications and
 - (b) Quality communications.
- (a) are the concern of news services - mainly provide information and comment on a range of facts outside the experience of any one individual. By expanding in this way they lay the basis for a community consciousness. They make a sufficient quantity of experience available to us for that consciousness to come into existence.
- (b) are achieved on the other hand in various occasions provided by society for such activity as debate on human problems, social, political, religious and entertainment. These mould the sensibilities of individuals and determine the way in which they experience themselves and their environment. They achieve not so much an expansion of personal experience as an intensification of it; they save individuals from insensitivity rather than from ignorance.

The pre-supposition to all communications is education. Unless we have attained a certain level of development, we simply cannot participate in social communications. A feature of Western and I would say, Irish society is that basic education has been made available to all citizens, and we are therefore in a position to participate in a common sophisticated system of communications. In fact, that theory has not been realized. The striking thing is how the gulf between 'high' and 'low' culture is evolving. It is possible that this gulf is undesirable because it breaks up and introduces class division.

Characteristics of Television and Theatre production design.

One of the most important characteristics in the art of Television is movement - mobility of cameras in, and around, even through, objects. Each of these camera movements gives the viewer that magic feeling of being in an invisible cloak, so that he can follow the characters around when they refer to things, and while listening, go over, and inquire into the object in question in the greatest detail.

It is this quality of camera movement that makes designing for Television so very different from designing for Theatre. In the Theatre you see everything from a fixed angle - and nothing in detail. The finest artists in the Theatre are those who create impressions with big bold strokes, theatrical props that "read well" or "get across" are when viewed closely, coarse and convincing. But twenty feet away they are magnificent. In Television close-ups are all important. Designers spend much time filling sketch books and photo files with records of all the little details they see in different locales - that give them the key to the characters that inhabit those rooms and walk those streets. The art of Television lies in the use of movement in light and shade simultaneously with light and shade in sound to create a dramatic effect upon the viewing audience. The chief difference between Television/Film and stage is that Television possesses two major qualities unattainable in the Theatre. Nor are these qualities imitated in other art forms, and in the use of them lies the "secret" of Television.

- a. The possibility of making "close-ups" of faces and objects in action in order to achieve emphasis.
- b. The possibility for an artist to control the entire dramatic action and "mise en scene". When it has reached the perfection required by him it is permanent. Therein lie the various endeavours of the production designer.

To set a comfortable proportion is essential in both Television and Theatre.

Television designers deal with the small frame, shifting all the time, yet they like stage designers must create full stage sets too. The Television designer fights the same battles as all creative people must fight. The respect a Television designer earns, will, in the final analysis, depend not only on work, but on the strength and intelligence of his producer. Style is an all-production element. Stylization demands consistency in all programme phases from make-up to writing.

The aesthetic effect of a set is more or less the special touch of the artist in the conception of a production, and in turn shows his peculiar stylistic traits in the execution of scenery. The designer interprets a mood or a feeling of the script into visual and atmospheric terms. Much of the information the designer needs must be painstakingly extracted from the script, as often the Television writer has neither the literary inclination nor the time to write set descriptions. If he could do that the role of the designer might become obsolete. This possibility would be very unlikely.

The producer, director and designer further unify the script for "business" involving scenery, transitions and other incidental information.

Television designers do not always attempt to be too versatile,

so many productions fall off because the designer attempted scenes about which he had insufficient knowledge. Although a designer or art director can satisfy most producers with a good design to suit any subject, it is perhaps better to get a reputation for being a specialist on certain subjects.

Designers see scripts essentially in terms of pictures. Some producers are able to anticipate this; they too see their work in terms of pictures from the start. Others simply don't know how they are going to use a set until it is assembled there in the studio, ready-made for them. They are not visually conscious, and they lean heavily on their designers in this respect.

To avoid the original conception of a script becoming completely lost through the gradual corrosive intrusion of so many technical hands, team-building is the hub of good Television. Of course the team-builders have to be forceful and capable of working within and communicating as a team.

Television production design

Production design within Television follows very practical lines. Costs have to be assessed not in terms of money alone, but of available work effort, (man hours, time schedules, materials, space, facilities, storage, transportation etc.) and in conjunction with other facility usage of other productional requirements.

Staging needs to provide optimum shot opportunities for cameras to enable smooth, effective production techniques to take place. Many Television directors, having indicated their broad requirements, leave staging and lighting details to the respective specialists, devising their shots within the total scene. Some analyse their intended camera treatment as specific pictorial arrangements, and the set designer provides the environment to fit these shots.

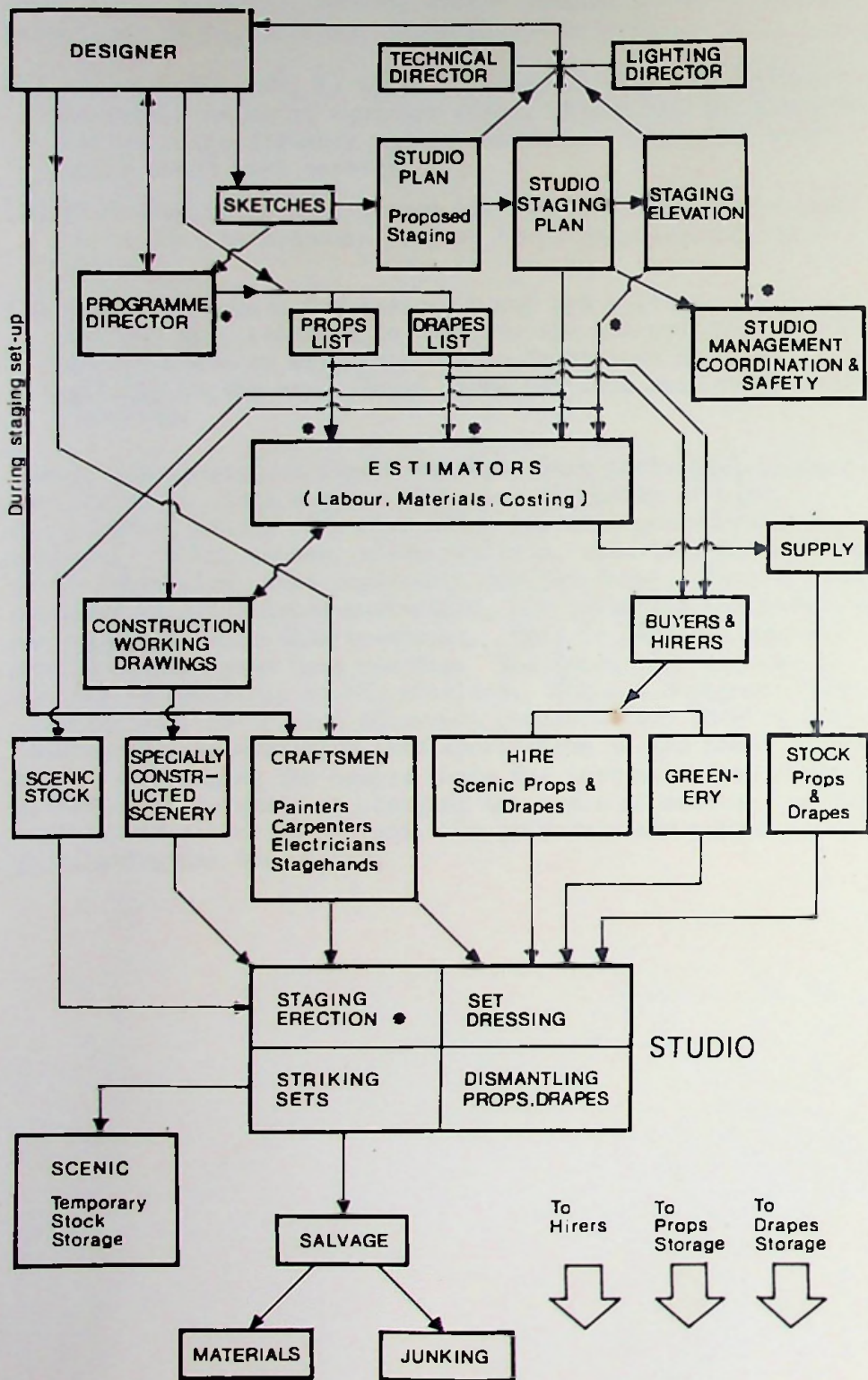
Sets should take into account the technical and artistic problems that arise from studio mechanics and operations, the limited Television picture size, and the performance characteristics of the Television camera.

Camera lens angles modify the viewers impression of size, proportion and perspective. A wide angle lens (short focal length) exaggerates distance and special illusion, while a narrow angle lens (long focal length) seemingly contracts and compresses space and depth. These idiosyncracies can be turned to advantages. Lighting and sound pick-up requirements must be considered in the set design process.

Staging techniques can be directly influenced by the way in which the show is to be produced. Presentation may be live, devised as a continuous recording, or devised from an edited recording. In live performance, smooth continuity of operations is essential, any changes being made rapidly but quietly.

Space may prove to be too limited for the needs of a particular production. Consequently, the show itself may have to be modified, e.g., rescripted, scenes cut, or staging devices used to circumvent

4A



* reference back to designer

SCENIC ORGANISATION

Designer's work

A typical work-flow pattern for the set designer. Many important associations have been omitted for simplification (e.g. graphics, special effects, costume design, etc.).

problems. Ultimately, production effort could extend over several days, i.e., rehearse, record, strike staging (take set apart), set-up (erect new sets), relight, rehearse and record.

- (1) "Staging height", is often limited, so that the designer must introduce means to restrict shots. Otherwise the director has to avoid distance and low elevation viewpoints which would shoot past scenery.
- (2) Distribution of sets around the studio should enable scenes to be shot in sequence, and so avoid intertwining camera cables.
- (3) Equipment access for camera, sound and lighting should be allowed for, relative to both storage and operational use. Camera shots or movements may be frustrated by flats getting in the way. Sound booms may lack room to operate properly.

Design interpretation itself can be a very individual matter. One can often stage a given show in a diversity of ways. The inherent nature of a show often dictates presentational methods. Talks, quizzes, piano recitals, televised throughout world Television, take remarkably similar forms. This is partly a matter of established convention, but primarily the result of rationalised production treatment. This is the case because such treatment gets best results. The "news" for example is readily recognisable on all stations. The set designers task, nevertheless, is to keep recurrent presentations looking fresh, interesting, eye-catching, and appropriate to the needs of the show. By changing the camera shots for instance, from close-ups to medium close shot, or changing the style of costume, or the texture and colour of the set, the programme can remain interesting for the viewer.

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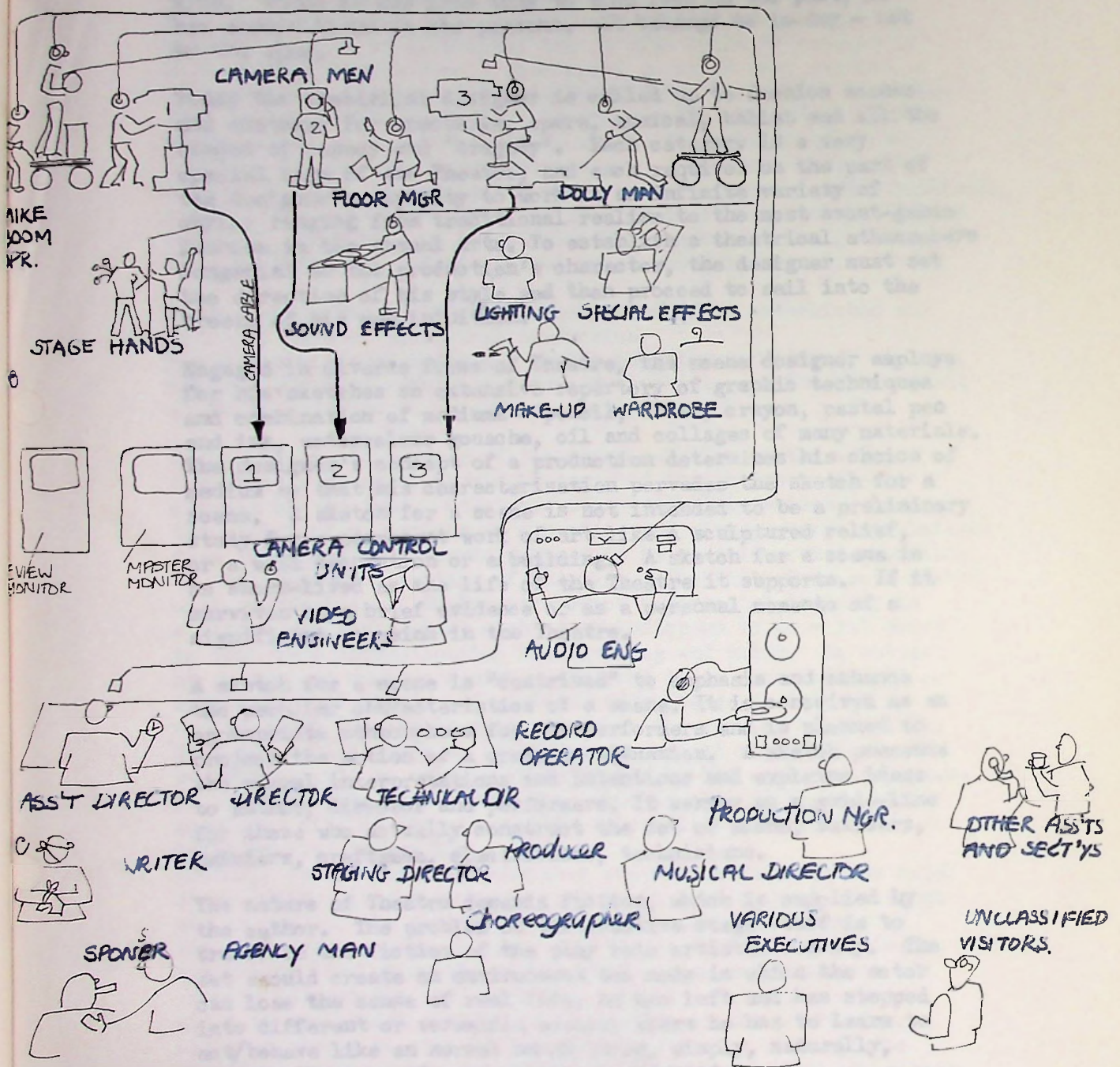
What is Television?

Technically Television consists of 3 processes:

1. At the transmitter, analysis of scene or picture into a sequence of tiny elements of various light values; translation of these elements one after the other, into electrical impulses of corresponding values, and amplifying these tiny electrical impulses millions of times.
2. Transmission of the sequence of impulses in some manner, by wire or radio, to a distant receiver.
3. At the receiver, these now attenuated or weakened electrical picture-element impulses are absorbed, in the sequential order. They are again amplified millions of times, after which are spread over the surface of a screen, in the same order and location as in the original picture. Finally, we view the integrated effect on the screen.

Memory plays a vital part in Television. At the transmitter there is physical memory or retentivity in the light-sensitive surfaces of the Television camera, over which the fine pointing finger of the pick up electron beam sweeps swiftly. At the receiver, physical memory is implanted in the fluorescent surface to retain the picture elements painted there by the invisible cathode beam, which sweeps back and forth with immense speed. All this adds to the physiological memory of the retina of the human eye which in turn, views separately each picture element as laid on the screen, but retains them until all the elements appear to the eye as a complete, integrated picture, a reproduction of the distant original.

The T.V. camera



The T.V crew.

Theatre

The Theatre is one of the most adaptable and flexible of the Arts. While it may from time to time feed on the past, it has always lived in the present. It belongs to to-day - not to the ages.

Today the theatrical designer is called up to fashion scenes and costumes for spectacle, opera, musical, ballet and all the ranges of comedy and 'tragedy'. Each category is a very special form of the Theatre, and each requires on the part of the designer a capacity to work in an infinite variety of styles ranging from traditional realism to the most avant-garde fashion in the visual arts. To establish a theatrical atmosphere congenial to the production's character, the designer must set the direction of his style and then proceed to sail into the breeze of his own intuition.

Engaged in diverse forms of Theatre, the scene designer employs for his sketches an extensive repertory of graphic techniques and combination of mediums - pencil, conte, crayon, pastel pen and ink, watercolour gouache, oil and collages of many materials. The designer's concept of a production determines his choice of medium so that his characterisation pervades the sketch for a scene. A sketch for a scene is not intended to be a preliminary study for a permanent work of art like a sculptured relief, or a wall decoration or a building. A sketch for a scene is as short-lived as the life of the Theatre it supports. If it survives as a brief evidence or as a personal memento of a significant occasion in the Theatre.

A sketch for a scene is "contrived" to emphasis and enhance the peculiar characteristics of a scene. It is conceived as an appropriate atmosphere for the performers and is planned to project the action of a dramatic situation. A sketch presents the visual interpretations and intentions and explains ideas to author, director and performers. It serves as a guide-line for those who actually construct the set or scene, builders, painters, craftsmen, electricians, technicians.

The nature of Theatre demands fiction, which is supplied by the author. The problem of the creative stage staff is to transform the fiction of the play into artistic reality. The set should create an environment and mode in which the actor can lose the sense of real life, he has left and has stepped into different or versatile scenes, where he has to learn to act/ behave like a normal human being, simply, naturally, organically correct, and without constraint.

A good stage set is created by those conditions which are best adapted for stage representation, it is "scenic" in the best sense of the word. Scenic, in short, is everything that helps the actor's play and the performance as a whole. A recreation of the life of the spirit of the play should be the aim. This life has got to be convincing. It cannot possibly take place in conditions of barefaced lies and deceptions. If a lie is stated visually, it must become, or at any rate seem to become

truth on the stage before it can be convincing. And truth on the stage is what the actor, the artist and most important the spectator believes to be true. Therefore, stage sets must bear a resemblance to truth, that is to say, be credible, and the actor himself and the spectator must believe in them. A good set should be beautiful, but it also could be remembered that it is not what from a theatrical point of view dazzles or stupefies the spectator that is beautiful. When it is the stage that is concerned, beautiful, is what exalts the life of the human spirit on the stage and from the stage the thoughts and feelings of the actors and spectators. I feel that it doesn't matter whether the acting and theme are realistic or impressionistic, conventional or avant-garde, so long as it is convincing, that is truthful, credible and beautiful, these represent the genuine life of the human spirit without which there is no art.

Stage design should by now be recognised as an established and integral part of theatrical production. New dramatic forms which use subtle mutations of acting, singing, dancing and mime require a visual equivalent, and the achievement of this, I see to be a constant challenge.

If we accept the premise of the inter-relation of the arts, I feel that a designer should be aware of the entire aesthetic climate of the time. Otherwise the possibility arises, where the making of a pastiche of a period, and plays, operas and ballets from the classical repertoire need to be re-interpreted according to the taste and fashions of the time. The Victorians were served with productions of Shakespeare which interpreted the play in a manner and style which might seem ludicrous to us - but which to them were unquestionably illuminating and valid. In matters of scenic and costume design, style and taste prove often to be ephemeral, and public and critical taste change rapidly in a medium where novelty is often mistaken for genuine originality. When the curtain goes up (if there is one) on a production, the audience should be able to grasp instantly the style - atmosphere of what is being presented. When this is made to happen the spectator will be sympathetically oriented to the world that is being created before him.

Jointly, the producer and designer are responsible for the total stage entity. (lighting being considered both as part of design and as part of the producer's dramatic needs). The unity of vision between scenic elements and the rest of the theatrical components (including the music) will depend on the degree of empathy between the collaborators. Besides finding a way in which to complement scenically the spirit of the production, a designer should be able to provide the director with all the practical requirements necessary for him to manoeuvre his actors in a way convincing to them and the audience. A work is capable of an infinite number of interpretations, as we can see by comparing the extraordinary variety of readings it may be given. No one conception will endure for more than a brief span as the definite one. A play, opera or ballet which survives to become part of the classical repertoire will, over the years, be subjected to periodic re-interpretation.

I believe it is difficult to catalogue satisfactorily the more obvious trends in modern stage design, for, while there is a wide stylistic range, comparatively little has emerged which is not

derived from previous scenic forms. Perhaps though, the exceptions are the current pre-occupation with and awareness of materials recently invented, e.g. polystyrene, and a new awareness of the potential of stage machinery (built to a designer's requirements with the technical assistance of an imaginative consultant engineer) as a means of creating a more mobile type of scenery.

The Theatre, which can be an arena for great purity of expression, should also be a place where we can satisfy an atavistic need for ritual and visual splendour, and many works written for the Theatre have this in mind, the senses, through the eye, delight in being ravished, e.g., Marat/Sade. Besides using the Theatre and an entertainment/educational medium, I would like to see people giving serious consideration to the possibility that Theatre could be therapeutic activity and valuable especially in today's environment. The spectacle that attends much opera production is at least part of the attraction for the vast audiences which are drawn to this form of Theatre. Further evidence of this is seen in the large-scale musical, e.g., Jesus Christ Superstar and West Side Story. At the same time, it is true that some of the most original and important theatre of our time is the antithesis of the visually splendid and lavish, as in "Waiting for Godot" Abbey Theatre 1977, but it is perhaps this very range of Theatre forms that guarantees the Theatre its future - and creates the need for a wide spectrum of designing styles.

A Personal Comment

I feel that there is a strong tendency in both Irish Television and Theatre to be very direct and crude about making a point whatever it might be. Not only is comment made once, but it is brought home to us many times. The prime example of this might be the Television series "The Spike". If a person in real life is somewhat 'vacant', when the same person is represented on stage or on the small screen, he become a half-wit. When an attempt is made to portray real life, the production often becomes shallow and unconvincing. We see this particularly in advertising. The Theatre production of Marat Sade in the Project Theatre February 1978 had the same short-comings. Initially I was impressed with the feeling transmitted around the Theatre. Though the set and costumes were effective they looked tired and shabby. Indeed, it was the second last night of the run but that should not be an excuse for an unprofessional production. Contrasting with this production was "You never can tell" G.B. Shaw, Abbey Theatre April 1978 and "The Ballet Rambert" in Sadler's Wells Theatre March 1978. Both these productions showed a tremendous harmonization of movement, acting, lighting, sound and set which result in magnificent and powerful presentations.

One of the major weaknesses of some Irish Television and Theatre productions is the fact that they are often overstated and raw. Perhaps a reason for this might be that so many people involved with productions do not fully understand their work, and secondly that they underestimate the intelligence and imagination of their audience.