Part 1

Elements

Chapter 1

What is scenography?

The origins of the term 'scenography' are associated with both scene painting and architectural perspective drawing.[1] In the twentieth century the term has gradually gained currency by drawing attention to the way stage space can be used as a dynamic and 'kinaesthetic contribution' to the experience of performance.[2] This suggests a difference in intention from the static and pictorial scene design of previous centuries. Architect and scenographer João Mendes Ribeiro says that scenography is concerned primarily with the 'inhabitability of the space'; that is, the creation of spaces with which performing bodies can interact: 'The scenographic concept, as currently understood by the majority of artists, is a far cry from the pictorial two-dimensional scenography and focuses much more on the three-dimensional (architectural) nature of the space or the scenic object and its close relationship with the performers.'[3] Contemporary use of the term has also been influenced by the work of theatre designers such as Josef Svoboda. His concern with the actualisation of a play rather than the decoration of the stage underlines the need to consider scenography as a component of performance: 'True scenography is what happens when the curtain opens and can't be judged in any other way.'[4]

> 1   My great fear is that of becoming a mere 'décorateur.' What irritates me most are such terms as 'Bühnenbildner' or 'décorateur' because they imply two-dimensional pictures or superficial decoration, which is exactly what I don't want. Theatre is mainly in the performance; lovely sketches and renderings don't mean a thing, however impressive they may be; you can draw anything you like on a piece of paper, but what's important is the actualization. True scenography is what happens when the curtain opens and can't be judged in any other way.
>   Josef Svoboda in Jarka Burian, *The Scenography of Josef Svoboda*, p. 15

Pamela Howard's *What Is Scenography?* (2002) reflects a continuing debate about use of the term. In this work she used her extensive experience as a designer to articulate a practice of scenography defined thus: 'Scenography is the seamless synthesis of space, text, research, art, actors, directors and spectators that contributes to an original creation.'[5] For Howard, scenographic

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aspects are central to both compositional and production processes of per-
formance and also to audience experience: 'The scenographer visually liberates
the text and the story behind it, by creating a world in which the eyes see what
the ears do not hear. Resonances of the text are visualised through fragments
and memories that reverberate in the spectator's subconscious, suggesting
rather than illustrating the words.'[6] The assertion is that scenography extends
and enriches audience experience of performance through images which operate
in conjunction with, but in different ways from, other aspects of the stage.

In this book, scenography is defined as the manipulation and orchestration
of the performance environment. The means by which this is pursued are
typically through architectonic structures, light, projected images, sound, costume
and performance objects or props. These elements are considered in relation to
the performing bodies, the text, the space in which the performance takes place
and the placement of the audience. Scenography is not simply concerned with
creating and presenting images to an audience; it is concerned with audience
reception and engagement. It is a sensory as well as an intellectual experience;
emotional as well as rational. Operation of images opens up the range of
possible responses from the audience; it extends the means and outcomes of
theatrical experience through communication to an audience.

Scenography, mise-en-scène, theatre design and visual dramaturgy

Scenography has affinities with other terms which describe the visual, concep-
tual and organisational aspects of performance; in particular mise-en-scène,
theatre design and visual dramaturgy.

'Mise-en-scène' refers to the process of realising a theatrical text on stage
and the particular aesthetic and conceptual frames that have been adopted as
part of that process. The mise-en-scène is a means of staging the text through
'the physical arrangements which articulate and set a frame to the activity
within them'.[7] Scenographic concerns, clearly, form a major part of the mise-
en-scène. But they are not limited to this. The mise-en-scène does not refer
to the performance itself. It is 'a *synthetic* system of options and organizing
principles' which will be apparent in the performance, but it describes 'an
abstract theoretical concept' rather than what actually happens at the point
of performance.[8] Scenography, as shown, is defined in its realisation and
performance rather than its intentions.

Pavis points out that a traditional approach to the mise-en-scène is one
where performance is discovered in the text:

These philological positions all have in common a normative and derivative vision of mise-en-scène according to which mise-en-scène should not be arbitrary, but should serve the text and justify itself as a correct reading of the dramatic text. It is presupposed that text and stage are bound together, that they have been conceived in terms of each other: the text with a view to a future mise-en-scène, or at least a given acting style; the stage envisaging what the text suggests as to how it should be performed in space.[9]

This is the approach that has dominated the general practice of theatre design and one which can be found reflected in most handbooks on the subject.[10] Individual designers, such as those referred to in this book, have resisted this rather simplistic approach. They have sought to investigate the potential of scenography as an expressive and affective agent of performance. Svoboda explored how to harness new materials and technologies in order to find ways that make the play work in a given time and place[11] and, in doing so, went far beyond what playwrights might have envisaged for their texts. For Svoboda it was the theatre itself, and what happened on stage as much as the text, that inspired scenography. This condition defines the essential difference between scenography and theatre design: 'Scenography must draw inspiration from the play, its author, all of theatre. The scenographer must be in command of the theatre, its master. The average designer is simply not that concerned with theatre.'[12] In a similar way Bertolt Brecht identified the difference between an approach to design where the aim was to 'evoke an atmosphere, give some kind of expression, [and] illustrate a location'[13] without much thought given to the performance itself. He and Caspar Neher worked together and let the designs evolve through rehearsal. Here, design ideas were dialogical interventions in the rehearsal process which led to the development of presentations, situations and characters, which influenced audience and reception. It is this second approach that is scenographic in its orientation; it is one where the space of the performance and the bodies of the performers can interact. Ribeiro says that the 'inhabitable spaces' which scenography creates are 'determined by the circumstances and purposes of the action in question and by the movement of the bodies within the space, in order to create a formally coherent and *dramatically* functional system'.[14] The scenography is part of the performance.

The concept and practice of scenography does not promote existing hierarchies of roles and functions in the creation of theatre, dance or performance. Scenography and its production sit uneasily within the existing functions of writer, director, choreographer, designer and performer because each, or any combination, of these roles is capable of producing scenography in ways that will not accept restriction implicitly imposed by such singular identities.

Creation of theatre design by its designer does not necessarily accept adoption of the above scenographic criteria or principles in its execution. Even though there is potential for much overlapping of territory and content between scenography and theatre design, the different identities are essentially defined by a different purpose and by the nature of its realisation. In any case, existing structures within professional theatre contexts are changing. New technology is having the effect of expanding and blurring the roles in production teams. In the light of this, it is perhaps more productive to focus on the intentions and outcomes of scenography rather than the functions of particular roles and jobs.[15]

Contemporary, experimental forms of theatre are often seen to utilise scenography rather than theatre design. Hans-Thies Lehmann has examined 'postdramatic' theatre and new forms of theatrical performance, evolved since the 1960s, which do not focus on the dramatic text. Here, visual dramaturgy replaces dramaturgy which is determined by a theatrical text. Traditionally, dramaturgy refers to the process of realising literary text as a performance. Visual dramaturgy differs both in form and in the manner of its operation: 'Visual dramaturgy here does not mean an exclusively visually organized dramaturgy but rather one that is not subordinated to the text and can therefore freely develop its own logic.'[16] The logic of visual dramaturgy develops through 'sequences and correspondences, nodal and condensation points of perception'[17] rather than linear narrative structures. Scenography is often the central component of visual dramaturgy.

Elements of scenography

The particular materials and resources which scenography draws upon overlap with those used in theatre design. Broadly, these include the scenic environment, objects, costumes, light and sound. However, because scenography focuses more specifically on performance, other elements become equally important. Consideration of space and time are central to scenography. Regard for the performer within the scene underlines the essential three-dimensional nature of scenography and the way this evolves over the duration of performance. Even where scenography is not conceived as kinetic in a physical sense, from an audience perspective, scenography is capable of evolving in its impact and meaning as the performance unfolds.

Performers, too, may from time to time be implicated in the scenography. In performance terms, it is sometimes hard to distinguish clearly between what is achieved through the performer's body and movement of the performer's

costume. Does the performer animate the costume? Does the costume deter-mine bodily gestures? In similar ways, settings, costume and lighting can be seen to drift between categories. Non-naturalistic costume can behave like an environment for the performer; it takes up space and receives light.[18] Light can also be made to appear solid and can define and sculpt space as effectively as more resistant materials.

The multi-sensory aspect of scenography is important. Dorita Hannah, theatre architect, designer and academic, defines scenography as 'The dynamic role design plays upon the stage, orchestrating the visual and sensory environ-ment of performance'.[19] Although the visual aspect of scenography tends to dominate, it can also work with sound. There are also various ways in which aspects of space may be apprehended, such as the 'kinaesthetic' (sense of movement through muscular effort) and the 'proxemic' (pertaining to distan-ces between people) and the 'haptic' (understanding through sense of touch). Scenographies may also include smell and taste as part of the audience experience.

The audience is a vital component in the completion of scenography. Svoboda and others stress that scenography happens with audiences as witnesses. Vsevolod Meyerhold felt his productions were 'unfinished' when they reached the stage and required an audience to make the 'crucial revision'.[20] These comments suggest that scenography defines an active role for the audience. In some work, especially that which takes place outside a theatre building, scenography is used to shape a particular spatial relationship, a certain kind of encounter between audience and performance.

Scenography as an object of study

Although practitioners themselves have offered definitions and principles of scenography, it is only recently that scholarly study of scenography has begun to gain ground. Perhaps this is not too surprising given the ephemeral nature of the traces left by scenography. Models or drawings developed as part of the production process may remain, but what endures after production can only provide a partial impression of what actually happened. Photographs of productions may appear to provide accurate records, but in actuality they are selective and inadequate. Photographers make their own aesthetic judgements in framing and selecting static images that represent performance. Video recordings of performances are similarly problematic. Choices made regard-ing the number and location of cameras and the nature of editing mediate the original scenography and re-present it through another medium in ways

different from those in which it might have been experienced by observers who were actually present during performance. Video recordings do not replicate 'the perceptual discourse of the spectator's eye'[21] because the camera determines the limits of what the viewer can see. In the theatre, spectators are free to look wherever they choose. According to Peggy Phelan, once performance is recorded, documented or represented it 'becomes something other than performance'.[22] In recordings, the multi-sensory experience of live scenography is altered. The auditory and visual are prioritised while spatial dimensions involving depth, scale and proportion, so crucial to the reception of scenography, are adapted. Factors such as vital reference points for appreciation of the spatial, dimensions and dynamics of the performance venue, and the sensing body of the spectator are all downplayed, if not lost, as the live event is edited for the screen.[23]

Despite the above caveats, retrospective exhibitions of scenography (and their associated publications) have provided a valuable way of preserving and examining scenography.[24] Nonetheless, until recently, it has been perceived that within the study of theatre and performance, scenography has been marginalised.[25] This, however, has begun to change. Arnold Aronson has drawn on past and contemporary American work to analyse scenography as the physical and 'spatiovisual aspect' of the theatrical event in order to restore it to its 'proper place' as an element that is integral to performance.[26] At the same time, Christopher Baugh's examination of how theatre technology has influenced development of scenography in the twentieth century shows how this has affected development of theatre as a whole.[27]

This book aims to contribute to an understanding of scenography by examining practices and theories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The work begins by considering some of the practitioners, designers, directors and artists who have helped to shape notions of scenography. Some, like Antonin Artaud, are essentially theorists or visionaries, who left very little behind by way of practice, but who nonetheless have inspired others. Some, like Josef Svoboda and Robert Wilson, are practitioners who have helped define notions of scenography through their work. Between them key concerns can be identified that have influenced the development of scenography. Many of these considerations continue to raise pertinent issues for contemporary theory and practice.

Chapter 2

Twentieth-century pioneers of scenography

The previous chapter attempts to determine the nature of scenography and define its territory. In this chapter, emphasis is given to the means by which such definitions have been achieved. What were the influences and who created or promoted them to determine the concept and practice of scenography? It will not be too surprising to know that influences have come from people who represent a number of disparate sources which occupy some common and related ground. Between them they span a range of perspectives and include: artists, designers, directors, writers and performers. These individuals were and are pioneers in their thinking and vision of and for the theatre. Few of them have referred to their thinking in terms of scenography. It is the accumulative contributions of their work that enable such a concept as scenography to be recognised as relevant to the production of theatre today. Each of these pioneers concentrates on points of focus that are distinctive and relevant to the conceptual and practical development of scenography. As might be imagined, there is considerable overlapping of concern between their preoccupations.

Adolphe Appia (1862–1928)

Pioneers of theatre are often labelled as such because their inspiration, thinking and achievement often occur as a result of dissatisfaction with existing theatrical conditions. In the case of Adolphe Appia his frustration lay with the convention of elaborately detailed sets, created from a combination of painted flats, borders and backdrops that fringed the stage and purported to create the illusion of a real place and, in fact, did nothing of the kind. Around 1902, Appia, in translation, wrote:

> Our present stage scenery is entirely the slave of painting – scene painting – which pretends to create for us the illusion of reality. But this illusion is in itself an illusion, for the presence of the actor contradicts it. In fact, the principle of illusion obtained by painting on flat canvas and that obtained by the plastic and living body of the actor are in contradiction.[1]

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For Appia there needed to be fusion between the actor and the performance space. Effectively, he considered that the three-dimensional actor performed against a two-dimensional painted backdrop in which the occupied space was not considered. Such settings with their so-called naturalistic details only served to deny the theatrical illusion that they were supposed to create. Appia thus became involved with elements of scenography that were capable of producing the necessary three-dimensional harmony to realise his vision.

> 2   IN EVERY WORK OF ART there must be a harmonious relationship between feeling and form, a perfect balance between the idea which the artist wishes to express and the means he uses to express it. If one of the means seems to us clearly unnecessary to the expression of the idea, or if the artist's idea – the object of his expression – is only imperfectly communicated to us by the means he employs, our aesthetic pleasure is weakened, if not destroyed.
>> Adolphe Appia in Barnard Hewitt (ed.), *Adolphe Appia's Music and the Art of the Theatre*, p. 2

Appia's developing vision became inextricably linked to the work and thinking of Richard Wagner (1813–1883). His early ideas about scenography were developed through his work on detailed scenarios and designs for Wagner's operas, which although rejected by the Wagner family,[2] form the basis of his theoretical writing. For Appia, the strength of Wagner's work lay in the location of 'the center of gravity in the *internal* action, to which music and *only* music holds the key, but of which, nevertheless, the actor must remain the corporeal embodiment on the stage'.[3] Even so, realisation of this relationship only served to exacerbate a much deeper and pivotal contradiction which was that 'during performance, there is a continual compromise between the music and the actor, between the art of sound and rhythm and the art of plastic and dramatic movement, and any attempt at traditional stage setting for this drama can rest only on a compromise, a compromise which must somehow be transcended if aesthetic truth is to be attained'.[4] The value of music to Appia's conception of the life of the drama was summed up by the notion that 'a dramatic idea requiring musical expression in order to be revealed must spring from the hidden world of our inner life, since this life *cannot be expressed* except through music, and music can express only that life'.[5] Appia considered that the musical score, the actor, the spatial arrangement and lighting constituted an organically composed hierarchy in which 'music, the soul of the drama, gives life to the drama, and by its pulsations determines every motion of the organism, in proportion and sequence. If one of the links of this organic chain breaks or is missing, the expressive power of the music is cut off there and cannot reach beyond it.'[6] For Appia, Wagner's vision of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or integration of the arts of music, drama and painting

through theatre, was hampered by the staging practices of the time and so there was still the problem that the stage settings, no matter how well executed, offered nothing to fuse with Wagner's powerful and 'wondrous' scores.

Appia's concerns therefore focused upon the relationship between the actor, space, light and music. The most important of these points of focus was the actor. Three-dimensional reality created by the actor's body was the most critical starting point in Appia's consideration of the three-dimensional stage. Whatever happened on stage, according to Appia, needed to make its own contribution to creating three-dimensional harmony through the actor.

Space may be differently conceived by different cultures at different times for different purposes. Appia's preoccupation with space was not merely concerned with an abstract concept but with its physicalisation. How was space to be demarcated if the two-dimensional, painted backdrop settings of late nineteenth-century theatre were considered to be inadequate? The key to the definition of space for Appia lay with the actor in motion and the spectator's perception as determined by use of light and timing as dictated by the structure and rhythms of music.

3   Of the three elements of production, painting is without any question the one subject to the narrowest conventions. It is incapable of revealing any living and expressive reality by itself, and it loses its power of signification to the extent that the rest of the setting plays an active part in the scene; that is, to the extent that lighting and the spatial arrangement are directly related to the actor. Therefore, lighting and the spatial arrangement of the setting are more expressive than painting, and of the two, lighting, apart from its obvious function of simple illumination, is the more expressive. This is so because it is subject to a minimum of conventions, is unobtrusive, and therefore freely communicates external life in its most expressive form.

Adolphe Appia in Barnard Hewitt (ed.), *Adolphe Appia's Music and the Art of the Theatre*, p. 22

Although selective use of light helped to contribute to the harmony of the actor in space, the concomitant use of shadow also aided three-dimensional definition of that harmony. Light not only helps to give life to the actor but it is also the means of bonding the actor with his space. Just as the actor's motion conditions definition of scenographic space, so does music help to define the time-scale and its delineation by which fused harmony may occur.

Appia proposed that the domination of painted flats be relegated. Effort was required to direct attention away from the depiction of a scene towards creation of the scene's atmosphere. Starting from the actor's presence and