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Space and Place of Performance

Theatre cannot exist without a physical location and always involves some arrangement of the performance space. As McAuley (1999) suggests, space is part of “the basic apparatus of theatre...human beings in a defined space watched by other human beings” (245). The location of a performance and the definition of its space, or what Ubersfeld (1999) calls a “theatrical locus” directly influences conditions of performance and conditions of reception and is filled with ideological significance *a priori*. Consideration is required as to why a specific performance is occurring in a specific space, how the space has been constructed, and how these conditions affecting the meaning. Careful examination, both of what it means to *make space* for a performance, and how a performance *takes place*, are significant in performance analysis.

The performance site is a social space full of ideological encodings that both reflects and mediates relationships. Ubersfeld (1999) states that the site “confronts actors and spectators in a relationship that is closely related to the shape of the hall and the kind of society” (96). Knowles (2004) expands on this, stating that “space and place impinge directly on both production and reception...silently inscribing or disrupting specific (and ideologically coded) ways of working, for practitioners, and of seeing and understanding, for audiences” (62-3). In our analysis, we should be cautious not to take for granted the characteristics of space and place and how they shape the performance. This echoes Lefebvre’s (1991) theory that space is not neutral, and that space is the product of relationships (93-4). Inherent in theatre’s “basic apparatus” (McAuley 245), the ideologies of the space are foundational pieces of meaning making.

An examination of the making of theatrical space in late medieval drama, specifically the use of the *locus* and the *platea* provides an example of how spatial differentiation can define

and add meaning to action and dialogue in a performance. *Locus* is “a scaffold, be it a *domus*, *sedes*, or throne” (Weimann 74). Functionally, *locus* was often used to represent a fixed location. Physically separated from the audience, it served as a focal point of dramatic and symbolic action. In contrast, the *platea* is “a platform-like acting area” (Weimann 74), which was usually non-representational, not localized, and provided a broad and general area for action to take place. The upstage *locus* is “mainly a place for authoritative pronouncements,” whereas the downstage *platea* serves as “a place for characters to become informal and intimate with the lower-class audience” (Fortier 161). In analyzing the manuscript and stage directions of the early 15th Century play, *The Castle of Perserverance*, Wiles (2003) describes that the spectators in the *platea* “inhabit the world of sin that surrounds the Castle, and their impulse to cheer on the comic devils or invade the playing space binds them to that world” (189). The positioning and relationship between the *locus* and *platea* define “the degree to which an audience is constructed as a full participant in the making of meaning or is, quite literally, ‘talked down to’” (Knowles 75-6). The decoding of how the *locus* and the *platea* are defined and how they serve to define each other is key to the understanding of how space shapes meaning.

The environment of a performance is a construction of physical semiotics and serves as a foundation for the theatrical experience: “The entire theatre, its audience arrangements, its other public spaces, its physical appearance, even its location within a city, are all important elements of the process by which an audience makes meaning of its experience.” (Carlson 2). Drawing on examples from medieval performances, Carlson (1989) discusses the implications of “new dramatic presentations built upon the connotations already present in a space created for nondramatic purposes” (15). The medieval city lacked specific structures for theatrical performance, “allowing those producing a performance to place it in whatever locale seemed most suitable” (Carlson 14). Performances (usually liturgical) were staged in a variety of settings: parks, markets, halls, cathedrals and streets, all of which were usually oriented to the points of the compass. The architectural orientation to the compass assigned symbolic meaning

to areas within the space and influenced movement. Combat took place on the East-West axis; the East representing Heaven, West representing Hell. The North represented of sins of the mind, the South represented sins of the body (Wiles 187).

The transformation of public place into performance space brings with it ideology and existing relationships. As Normington (2007) discusses, city residents lived, worked, played and worshiped within a narrowly defined geographic area. This narrowness affected the reception of performances set in everyday spaces, such as a cathedral, where the cathedral, as centre of the community, brought to a performance a specific cultural spatiality. Similarly, performances set in a marketplace had connotations to the space being a secular heart of the city. Processional performances would transform the city as a whole into a theatrical space, encouraging participation from the citizenry. The result of these transformations is a meaningful dialogue between the individual, the performance, the public space and the public-turned-performance space (35).

Space and place are fundamental components of performance and have a significant role in the creation of meaning. Performances are shaped and received differently because of the characteristics of their physical environment. Space is social, multi-layered, active and full of energy and tension. Space is a cultural production which reflects society and mediates relationships. When we make space for performance, the space directly impacts how meaning is created within the space. When a performance takes place, it takes meaning from the place around and about it. We cannot escape, and should not ignore how space and place contribute to meaning.

Works Cited

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