Faculty Perspective

How to Read a Stage

By Arnold Aronson

Bertolt Brecht wanted an audience who knew as much about the art of theatre as sports fans knew about the events they watched. But how many spectators, even theatre professionals, can truly read a stage? Who in an audience is aware of the impact of the color of a wall or the placement of a door, the effect upon dramatic rhythm of the groundplan, the psychological response created by the texture of a costume or the quality of light?

And yet, we are spatial creatures; we respond instinctively to space. The moment of birth is a spatial experience as we emerge from a safe, enclosed environment into the vastness of an unknown expanse. Every time we confront a stage we are confronting the space—the abyss—we first confronted at birth. The stage, regardless of its configuration, functions as an optical focal point and creates the impression of looking through this lens into a boundless space beyond. In fact, for most spectators, it is the apprehension of space that may be the most profound and powerful experience of live theatre although, admittedly, it is often felt subconsciously. Yet theatre critics and theoreticians do not usually address the spatiality of the stage.

Those who write about theatre tend to come from the world of literature and so attribute dramatic meaning primarily to language and the ideas it expresses. But theatre is, first and foremost, a visual art. The very word "theatre" comes from the ancient Greek *theatron*, meaning the area where the audience sat. *Theatron*, in turn, comes from the root *theasthai*, meaning "to see." The *theatron* is thus "the seeing place." We still say, "I'm going to see a play." (Today we often call the equivalent of the *theatron* by its Latin name, auditorium; yet we do not go to "hear" a play.)

But beyond that particular locution, the visual component of theatre is largely ignored and even viewed with suspicion. We are told, for example, that a musical production has been a failure if the audience leaves "humming the scenery." But why is the pleasure of the eye considered not merely inferior to the pleasures of the ear, but somehow unseemly?

Part of the blame no doubt lies in a certain Puritan heritage and its Old Testament mistrust of graven images. And certainly the Western scholarly tradition that has valorized Aristotle, who relegated spectacle to the lowest rung on his hierarchy of component elements of tragedy, is a contributing factor. But Aristotle was writing about how to compose a tragedy, not how to stage one. Any reading of Greek drama makes clear that the tragic poets understood the potential and the effect of the physical stage. In fact, it was not Aristotle but his neoclassical apologists who laid the foundations of modern dramatic aesthetics and developed literal rules of playwriting based on a fundamentalist reading of *The Poetics*. These theoreticians were responsible for bringing drama into the world of literature, leaving the physical stage behind.

The problem is that critics (both literary and dramatic) have equated the scenic element of theatre with painting or other plastic arts and understood it as a corrupt subset of visual art. Scenography, however, is an amalgamation of the visual, the spatial and the literary. Visuality need not be limited to the elaborate illusionistic settings, clever machinery and spectacular tricks of the melodrama or the pictorial realism of the late 19th century. Shakespeare is praised for creating images in "the mind's eye" through language; the scenic elements of the Tudor stage may have been few, but the imagistic aspect was paramount.

But we tend to privilege the evocations of verbal imagery over the physical recreations or representations of scenographic efforts. We praise Shakespeare's simple verbal rendering of the dawn in *Romeo and Juliet* while smiling indulgently at David Belasco's attempts to achieve a specifically California sunset through stage lighting technology in *Girl of the Golden West*. In both cases, however, the meaning and intent of the performance is integrally tied to the success of the evocation of the material world.

Much modernist drama has tried to remove theatre from the context of the "real world." Tangible landmarks are eliminated; action occurs in a void. But such a thing does not exist. Theatre is visible—we see something and that something has a shape, a color, a texture. Even if everything is stripped away, the stage itself is still there, staring back at the audience. Absence of design is still design. Any arrangement of space or objects, any movement through or across that space, is design. Even if we remove the stage through the elimination of light or through, say, the medium of radio, then design continues to exist in the mind's eye.

The old adage applies: all that is needed for theatre is two boards and a passion. Those two boards exist in space, and the passion unfolds there through time.

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Comer Gift *continued from page 1*

even greater understanding of how we live on, and with, this planet."

On behalf of the University, President Lee C. Bollinger praised Comer's foresight and generosity in making this gift to the Observatory. "Gary Comer has made extraordinary commitments to the sciences, particularly in the area of climate change," Bollinger said. "Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty campus continues to be one of the world's leading centers for scientific research, and this gift will allow our scientists to remain at the very forefront of discovery."

Initial plans call for a two-story, 63,000-square-foot structure to house the various offices within Lamont-Doherty's Geochemistry Division under one roof. Laboratories will be designed to meet the best practices described in the Environmental Protection Agency's Labs 21 program.

"Columbia University needs a state-of-the-art geochemistry facility to remain one of the premier earth and environmental science centers in the world," said G. Michael Purdy, a geophysicist and director of the Observatory. "The current structure has outlived its utility. We look forward to the many new discoveries that have been made possible by Gary's generosity."

Scientists in the Geochemistry Division work to understand Earth's many complex and interconnected systems by studying the planet's history and the processes that have governed its past and present environment. Samples of air, water, biological remains, rocks and meteorites are studied in order to address a broad range of scientific issues. Geochemists at the Observatory work on a variety of projects—from determining the chemical composition and toxicity of pollutants emitted by the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, to revealing clues about past climate changes locked in ice and sediments cores, to identifying the fundamental chemical and physical processes involved in the formation of Earth's mantle and core. Columbia's geochemists have also contributed greatly to our understanding of the socioeconomic issues associated with the environment, from the causes and remediation of arsenic in the groundwater of Bangladesh to the accumulation of industrial carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

Fittingly, the new facility will be designed in a way that takes into account environmental considerations and preserves the beauty of the campus and surrounding area. The University is now engaged with local community groups to ensure that the new building complements its physical setting while also upholding the Observatory's important research mission.

In Memoriam

Ray Crist, atom bomb researcher, dead at 105

Ray Crist, known worldwide as a scientist, researcher and educator, died July 23 at the age of 105 in Carlisle, Pa., after suffering a stroke.

Crist went to Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pa., where he majored in chemistry but also took liberal arts courses. In 1925 he received his doctorate in chemistry from Columbia University, where he taught upper-level chemistry courses until 1963, with a leave of absence from 1941–1947 for the Manhattan Project. He directed the Columbia Group in 1945–1946, which worked on separating the active uranium isotope needed to help detonate the atomic bomb.

Crist later said, "You do what you have to do to survive and for your country to stay alive, but [my Columbia colleagues and I] were very unhappy." He felt responsible when the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Many years later, he visited Nagasaki for a scientific meeting.

In 1946 Crist left Columbia for the private sector. He returned to teaching in 1963—a career he pursued up to age 104, at two of his alma maters: Dickinson College and Messiah College (he attended the latter as a child, when it was a Bible school).

Scholars in Crist's field believe he was the oldest publishing research scientist in history. At one time, he conducted research with his son, DeLanson R. Crist, when the latter taught chemistry at Columbia.

Crist was honored many times for his academic achievements and for overcoming the challenges of aging. His memoir, *Listening to Nature: My Century in Science*, was published this year.

Self-effacing, Dr. Crist said he was "just a farm boy who went to school at age 4 and never stopped learning." He attributed his long and active life to his "inherent curiosity." At 102, he waded into streams to collect algae for research. He believed that "age is a matter of mind; if you don't mind, it doesn't matter!"

Robert A. Maguire, leading authority on Gogol, dead at 75

Robert A. Maguire, 75, Boris Bekhmeteff professor emeritus in the Department of Slavic Languages, died July 8 from cancer in Calvary Hospital, the Bronx. He lived in Morningside Heights.

Acclaimed, at his retirement in 2003, as a dedicated teacher of Slavic languages and literature, Maguire was known as a hard but understanding taskmaster. He had been a visiting professor at Harvard, Oxford, Yale, Princeton and the University of Illinois.

A well-known authority on 19th-century Russian satirist Nikolai Gogol, Maguire found translating his works "painstaking," according to a longtime colleague, Robert Belknap.

Maguire's 1995 work, *Exploring Gogol*, brought recognition from the Modern Language Association. His many books on Gogol include a translation of the masterpiece *Dead Souls*, a humorous satire on serfdom in Russia. He was a past president of the American Gogol Society.

Shortly before his death, Maguire finished a translation of Dostoyevsky's *The Demons* for publication by Penguin Books.