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 spec- tators realize—or could they possibly 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 are we spatial creatures? We respond instinctive- ly to space. The moment of birth is a spatial experience as we emerge from a safe, enclosed environment into the vast- ness 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 sensi- tion 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 experi- ence of live theatre although, admittedly, it is often felt sub- consciously. Yet theatre critics and theoreticians do not usu- ally address the spatiality of the stage.

Those who write about theatre tend to come from the world of literature and so attribute dramatic meaning pri- marily to language and the ideas it espouses. 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, derived from the root theatos, meaning “to see.” Theatron is thus “the seeing place.” We still say, “I’m going to see a play.” (Today we often call the equivalent of the entrance to a play by a Latin name, auditorium; yet we do not go to “hear” a play.)

But beyond that particular locution, the visual compo- nents that are basic to the immersiveness and the even- viewedness of a theatre are often taken for granted. We are told, for example, that a musical production has been a failure if the audience leaves “humming the tunes.” But what has happened to the evocative power of the visual? What has happened to “visual” space?

The old adage applies: all that is needed for theatre is two actors, a space, and a text—any movement through or across that space? Who in an audience is aware of the impact of the stage? Who in an audience is aware of the impact of the stage? Who in an audience is aware of the impact of the stage?