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Reflector and Reflected: Theatre Spaces and
European Worldviews before the Modern Era

Possibly the most influential work of theatre criticism in western history is Aristotle's seminal work *Poetics* in which he claims that a primary defining human characteristic is the urge to imitate and to take "delight in imitations" (7). This urge is why images, or imitations, representing even things which are themselves unpleasant to look upon can be viewed appreciatively. Drama, defined by Aristotle as the imitation of action and embodied in the dramatic text, is consistent with this human characteristic. As imitation, drama may be seen to hold a mirror to life. The characteristics of the mirror itself, however, may be seen to affect the image that is reflected.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle also identifies six elements that make up dramatic practice. Included in these is a term he uses to identify the visual aspects, commonly translated as "spectacle," which has no direct English language equivalent (9). Possibly the French *mise-en-scene* comes close, being the totality of those things that are seen, including their arrangement (Boggs 542). Understanding the visible qualities of theatrical spaces can promote the understanding of the events that transpire there. The physical nature of the theatre vis-a-vis its service as mirror of human action warrants some reflection itself.

The nature of a tool used for study will determine the view of the subject being studied. For instance, a microscope and a telescope both serve to magnify the image of their subject but

are not interchangeable. Those who have observed themselves in a fun-house mirror know that the quality of the mirror will affect the view that is seen. Similarly, the nature of the physical theatre space merits examination to better understand its role in the communication process that is theatre. As the frame and glass make up the mirror, the theatre space itself is part of the spectacle of the theatre.

This paper seeks to look at the mirror which is the theatre space more so than the images that might be reflected there. That is to say, the form of a mirror, whether convex, concave, flat or other, will affect the image the mirror presents. Similarly, different forms of theatre served to fill different uses and present different images of the people and stories they represent. This study will discuss four instances of pre-modern theatre types and the manners in which they can be seen to explicate aspects of the worldviews of the people who used them. The visual aspects of the theatre types and scenic design practices of the different periods will be offered as heuristic devices promoting the understanding of related social constructs. Potential applications of this principle as a tool of further investigation will be suggested.

Framing the Theatre Space as a Mirror

A worldview, from the German *weltanschauung*, is commonly seen as a comprehensive conception or apprehension of the world, especially one taken from a specific standpoint. Considering theatre as a process of creating meaning is consistent with a worldview “based on the assumption that communication itself is a vital vehicle in the social construction of reality” (Littlejohn 28). Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, in their work “The Social Construction of Reality,” hold that art and language can be highly significant in not only “constructing symbols that are highly abstracted from everyday experience, but also of ‘bringing back’ these symbols and [representing] them as objectively real elements in everyday life” (40). This paper

suggests that the characteristic worldview of a period can be seen in and was reinforced by the theatre and stage design characteristic of the theatre in that period.

The theatre space, as a forum for presenting images, has historically been central to the way cultures use images to form and affirm the worldviews that they hold. Susanne Langer finds that images are “our readiest instruments for abstracting concepts from the tumbling stream of actual impressions...they are our spontaneous embodiments of general ideas” (Key, 145). She notes that meaning can actually interfere with perceiving a thing itself, finding that as a symbol of femininity, a rose is easier to associate with girls than with vegetables.

Eli Rozik builds on Langer’s ideas to find ample justification for considering theatre a medium of visual communication (252-3). Although he does not discuss scenery per se, he notes that iconic symbols are imprints of actual physical entities where the difference between them is evidence of communicative function: what is a symbol for if not to communicate? Further, this occurs in a system that is socially controlled. His discussion of “images,” however, is limited to actors and their words.

Alan E. Knight is the editor of “The Stage as Mirror: Civic Theatre in Late Medieval Europe.” In his introduction he notes various senses for the term ‘mirror.’ Beyond the obvious, he also notes that a common meaning of the term during the Middle Ages was ‘compendium’, by which one “may view the drama of the late Middle Ages as a great encyclopedia of the knowledge and beliefs of those times” (1). He also notes a contemporary source which terms the theatre of the time as a mirror in the sense of model or example, one in which observers will actually see themselves. Theatre as a process, it follows, mirrors humans’ reflections upon themselves and the theatre space is the instrument of reflection.

The papers included in Knight's volume address aspects of medieval theatre practice including regional influence, producer's concerns, and play texts. None, however, deal with the scenic aspects. This type of oversight may have led Stanley Kahrl to place his tongue firmly in cheek when he wrote "Spectacle, as any follower of Aristotle knows, is the least important aspect of a play, that which fades quickest and that which the literary critic studies little if at all" (131). It may be shown that since its inception in ancient Greece, when the actor and script present the image of man, the analog of the physical mirror is the playhouse itself.

Two Ancient Theatres

Although the form would continue to evolve over time, it is commonly accepted that by the fifth century B.C. the basic form of the theatre structure used by the ancient Greeks had become fully established. Figure 1 shows one of the best-preserved ancient Greek theatres, located at Epidaurus, commonly accepted as representative of the Hellenistic period. This stone structure was built around 350 B.C. on the site of a previously existing theatre (Sporre 205). It is an outdoor venue, built into a hillside, totally exposed to the elements. The seating area, or theatron, held over 14000 citizens, yet the acoustics are said to be so perfect that a penny dropped in the middle of the stage can be heard throughout the theatre (Arnold 27). The circular acting and dancing area, or orchestra, was about 80 feet in diameter and fronted a skene—a building of undetermined



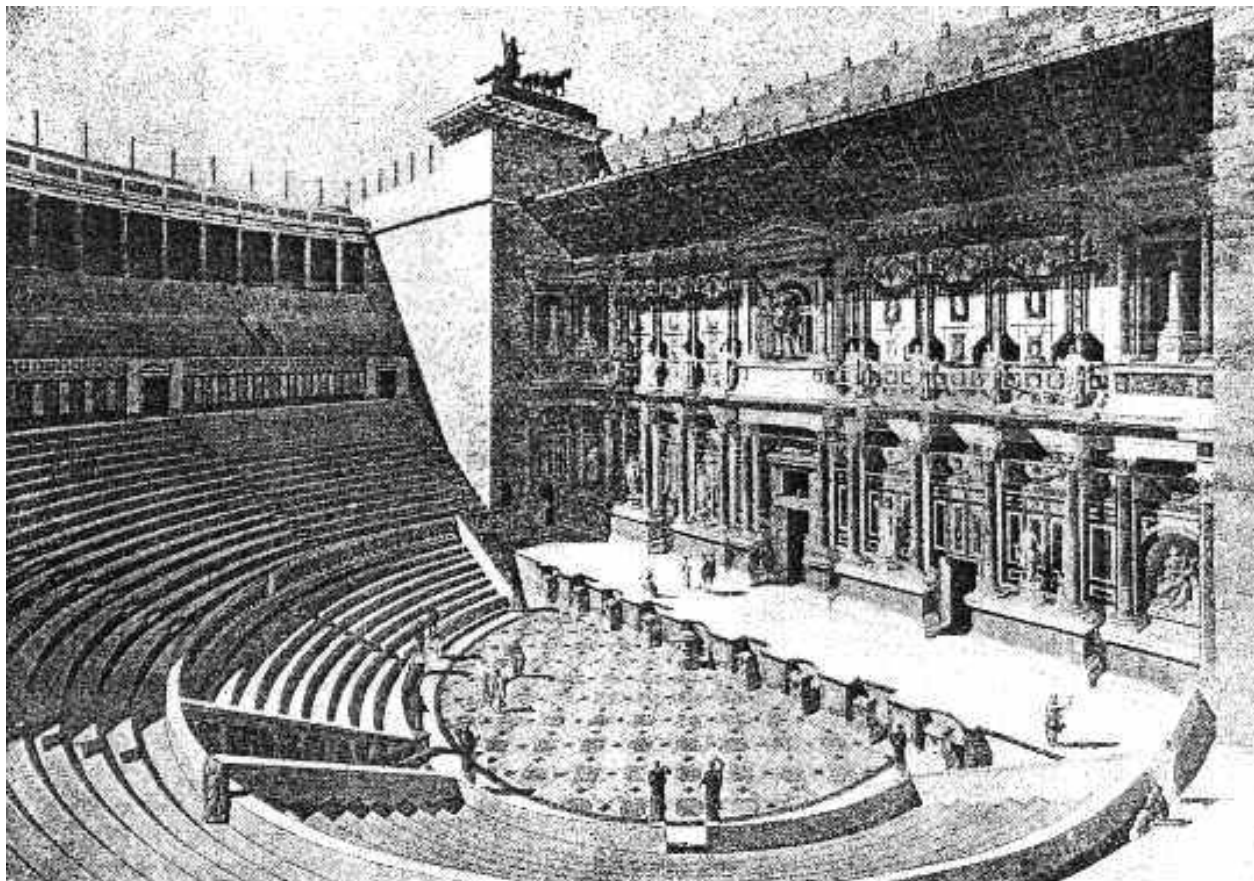
Fig. 1

form which may have served as a background during performance or at other times been part of the action (ruins of the foundation can be seen in the figure). The countryside beyond, which spectators held to be inhabited by a host of gods and spirits, was visible to the audience at all times.

Performances were offered during religious festivals and employed very specific conventions. A chorus played a ritual role, often functioning as a scenic element through dance and arrangement. Emphasis on the chorus decreased over time as individual actors became more prominent. While earlier machinery was simple, later stage effects included cranes and rolling platforms (Russell 27). While evidence regarding scenic aspects of the plays is “inconclusive” (Brockett 30), exaggerated costumes and masks emphasized the conventionalized aspects of the performance, supporting the contention that realistic illusion was not a visual goal. Rather, the

citizenry gathered at the center of their “geographic world” to witness or act in “plays that probed the internal nature of that world” (Arnold 27). Thus the significance of the placement of the theatre: “the eye [of the spectator] was not restricted to the interior of the theatre but rather was situated to see the theatre as part of that larger world whose” religious and ethical concerns were “symbolically played out on stage” (Brockett 31).

Thus, the Greek theatre was a place of investigation. Located amidst the forces which drove the uncontrollable aspects of the world, the theatre itself was a place where commonly held myths and legends could be employed or even retold to reaffirm or develop social constructs.



Reconstruction of the Roman Theatre at Ostia
From D'Espouy, *Fragments d'Architecture Antique*. 1901

Fig. 2

The first permanent Roman theatre was built in 55 B.C. A recreation of the Roman theatre at Ostia circa 20 B.C. is shown in Figure 2. Consistent with the other Roman arts, much about the Roman theatre was adapted from the Greek. Audience seating was raised as if on a hillside. The orchestra was present but had become a semi-circular area reserved for seating important members of the audience. A long, narrow, raised stage or *pulpitum* was located beyond the orchestra and served as the playing space. Above the theatre, a small canopy protected the stage and provided for improved acoustics.

Roman theatres suggest no affinity with natural elements. An awning was a standard fixture over the seating area (Russell 46), protecting spectators from the natural elements that the Greek audience sought to be part of. Also, the theatres were not built into hillsides, that is, did not rest on a natural foundation, but were built on a man made foundation through which ran the entrances and exits (Molinari 60). In this manner, the Roman theatres were not integrated into the landscape but rather were feats of engineering and heavy construction, which were *at*, rather than *in*, a location. Significantly, the massive and ornate *sceanae frons* behind the playing area, commonly three stories tall, closes off the theatre from the world beyond. For all its size, its only performance function was providing three doorways to the stage. More significantly, however, “It all reflected the Roman authorities’ desire to make a big impression” (60).

A great truism in architecture is that form follows function. Comparison of the Greek and Roman playing spaces shows clear similarities in their basic structures consistent with their similar uses as sites of presentation and the Greek influence on Roman cultural life. However, the reality of the Roman spectator was significantly different from that of the Greek. While adopted from Greek forms, from its start it was man-centered rather than nature-centered.

Further, the Roman theatre was well known as a place of spectacle, a practice that grew increasingly debased as time progressed. The growing emphasis on spectacle without substance (e.g., mock naval battles, gladiatorial and animal contests) demonstrates a worldview from which the moral underpinning was eroding.

“Dark” is a Theatre Term Meaning “Without Performance Activity”

Before the fall of Rome, the achievements of the great Greek tragedians and comedians had already devolved into sordid spectacles that were at times mere excuses for bloodletting and perversion (Molinari 75). Ancient influences had not totally died out, however, as theatre practice remained “formally organized and presented within the frame of festivals dedicated to pagan deities and frequently financed by members of the secular government” (Wickham 21). Following the fall of Rome, however, the combined influence of invaders from the North and Church authority worked to eliminate the debased forms, ending civic theatre and drama as it had come to be known.

Life in Europe following the fall of Rome—the “Dark Ages”—was very localized. Most Europeans lived in isolated settlements that they rarely left. Most travel occurred within seven miles of one’s home, being the furthest an average traveler could go and be sure of returning on the same day (Burke 23).

There was a general lack of organized theatre activity for 500 or so years following the fall of Rome. What there was was simple and localized, including juggling, singing, story telling, and the like (Molinari 75). Traditions of pantomime and dramatic characterization were kept alive by traveling troupes included trained animals and children (Artz 356).

For reality to be constructed or meaning to be managed, some sort of communication activity must exist. However,

Dark Age Europe was a land of darkness indeed, of almost impenetrable woods in which roamed wild animals: boar, bear, wolves and men too violent to live in the tiny clusters of huts scattered through the forest . . . Between the hamlets the Roman roads crumbled under the onslaught of bracken and bush. With no movement from one place to another, there was little point in maintaining them. The dwindling numbers of the population subsisted on what they could grow in the forest clearings, or ‘assarts’ as they were called, which poked like hesitant fingers into the shadows of the forests. Only the well armed, or those protected by spiritual courage, ventured into the woods. (Burke 22-3)

It is therefore entirely appropriate that there was no structured theatre activity at this time.

The Theatre of Later Christendom

Discussion of the Middle Ages is problematic for several reasons and so a disclaimer will begin this section of the paper: given the length of the Middle Ages (600 or so years), its indeterminate beginning and ending, and the breadth of the geography (present day Europe), that there are many exceptions to much of what will be presented is inevitable. The influence of Christianity was pervasive (hence the title of this section), but all else was regional and inconsistent.

For the purpose of this discussion, the Middle Ages will be considered as that period between the Dark Ages and the Reformation, or approximately A.D. 900 until sixteenth century. During this period, changing forms reflected the developing culture of the time. The earlier Romanesque style developed into Gothic of the Middle Ages. “The primary shift during the late medieval Gothic period was from a static, mentally stagnant, rural outlook to a more dynamic participation in the life of the past and the present” (Russell 67). The degree of integration of the

church onto European life during this time can be seen in that the people saw themselves not as living in Europe but in Christendom—literally, they were subjects in the kingdom of Christ on earth.

The Christian church is commonly seen as essential in reinvigorating theatrical practice during the Middle Ages. Tropes, being short dramatic interpolations of scripture, began to be introduced in the church as early as the tenth century. The earliest extant text is *Quem Quaeritis*, a three line enactment of the three Marys meeting with the angels at Christ's tomb. Enacted by clergy as a part of the Easter service, the church thus became the first theatre following the fall of Rome. Presented in Latin, they were “only visually comprehensible to most of the lay audience” (Gies 186). Beginning with simple impersonation, the presentations grew more involved with the passage of time.

Other tropes and playlets followed. As the extent of presentations grew in content and dramatic complexity the presentations moved first to the exterior of the church (Artz 357). Later development included building structures adjacent to the exterior of the church and adding vernacular dialogue (Gies 187).

Settings that had earlier been placed outside of the church were later placed on wagons to be hauled through town. The wagons were sometimes brought to circle round the central square while at other times mansions (individual settings) were built in place. Key to either practice, however, is the worldview that the particular implementation of the symbol was less important than its effectiveness in conveying the sense of its referent.

The world of Christendom was inherently dramatic, as

the concept of the *teatrum mundi* [world as theatre]. . . had informed the stage-conventions of liturgical music-drama in Christian basilica of the tenth and

eleventh centuries. The stage was expected to represent the whole of God's creation, and not simply the mortal world, the invisible worlds of heaven and hell had to be accommodated not only in physical and tangible terms, but in their proper relationship to the visible world of daily experience. (Wickham, 89)

A mysterious and threatening world was in view on the medieval stage.

In the Middle Ages, the representation of the particular was commonly seen as of little importance. Both playwrights and painters were commonly anonymous. Speaking of a medieval illustration of the Annunciation, E. H. Gombrich, writing on the common perception that medieval artists presented childishly, noted that

If, looking at such a page, we expect a vivid illustration of a real scene, we may well find it disappointing. But if we remember once more that the artist was not concerned with an imitation of natural forms, but rather with the arrangement of traditional sacred symbols, which were all he needed to illustrate the mystery of the Annunciation, we shall no longer feel the lack of what he never intended to give us. (134)

When Gombrich noted, "these artists were not out to create a convincing likeness of nature or to make beautiful things—they wanted to convey to their brothers in the faith the content and message of the sacred story" (120), he could have been speaking for scenic artists as well as painters. The unique qualities of neither the artist nor the art were considered of great import.

Figure 3 below, depicting the presentation of the Valenciennes (France) Passion Play in 1547, shows that in regards to the arrangement of forms and symbols, the painter and the scenic artist were alike. "The stage was unframed, and one place flowed into another. Encompassing Heaven, Earth, and Hell, the medieval stage symbolized the entire universe" (Brockett 91). In

typical use, the individual scenic units, known as sedes or mansions, were set up in large public squares. They were also commonly set on wagons and rolled to various locations around

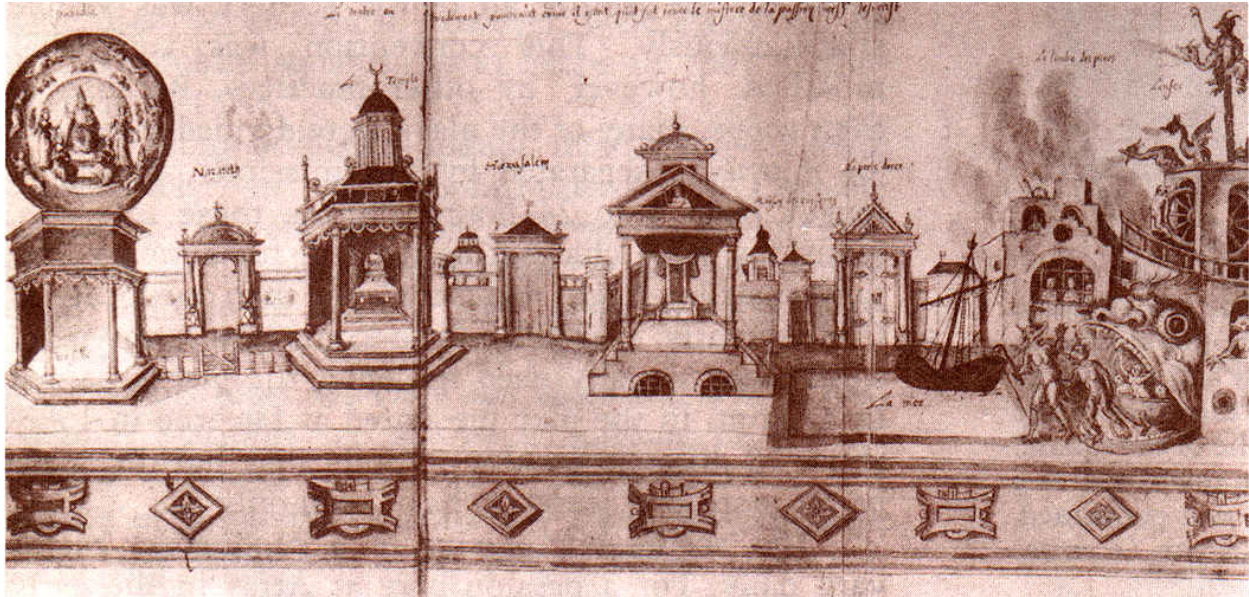


Fig. 3

the city. Plays often took on a carnival like atmosphere. The practice of successive and simultaneous presentation was the norm in medieval theatre theatre. The quality of atemporality was shared with the painterly arts.

Location was only of symbolic concern for the medieval theatre practitioner. Note in Figure 3 that Heaven, on the left, and Hell's Mouth, on the right, bracket the world. Each was made as spectacular as possible. From Heaven, angels 'flew' and concealed torches reflected off of gilt interiors to give the impression of ethereal light "emanating from within. [. . .] Fire, smoke, noise, and the cries of the damned issued from Hell, and devils sallied forth from it to seize sinners and thrust them into eternal damnation" (Brockett 92). Note also in the figure the proximity of Noah's Ark. In between were locations needed to retell edifying tales of Biblical mystery, saintly miracles, and allegories of earthly morality.

The performances also show a rising sense of community during the period. This was exemplified in 1511 when twenty-seven villages near Cambridge, England combined their resources to finance and present a play honoring St. George (Wickham 103). In addition to confraternities and guilds,

Other arrangements for theatrical productions include those in which responsibility was assumed by a town, a group of neighboring towns, the clergy, an individual, jointly by town and clergy, or by a temporary society formed for the express purpose of presenting a play. Thus, arrangements differed widely, but all involved many persons working together. (Brockett 84)

In keeping with Neo-platonic conception of the world, "...any individual object existing in this world was only an appearance, an approximation of the real exemplar, or 'form', which existed in a world beyond the senses" (Cook 31). This was reflected in scenic practice. First, no attempt at "really" presenting the world was needed, or even desired. Second, elements in this world, seen as mere figments of the important reality in God's mind, were portrayed discontinuously. Third, setting up in large public spaces, there was no "best seat in the house," because there was no house.

This section of the paper has highlighted the development of medieval theatre from the fall of Rome to the height of medieval theatre practice. The development of the production arrangements from simple tropes to complex presentations taking many days was shown to be consistent with the growing complexity of medieval life as it transitioned from simple agricultural existence to one that was increasingly urban (Artz 450).

Visual Representation in Pre-modern Theatre

Cook and Herzman find the most significant the break with the medieval past during the Renaissance was the one “caused by the scientific revolution beginning with Copernicus,” finding technology and science as the major factors separating the modern world from the Middle Ages (319). Marcia Colish concurs, basing her assessment of the times on the belief that medieval thought in economics, politics, education and literature has set the foundations for modern thought.

This was certainly not the view during the Renaissance, however. The terms “Gothic” and “Renaissance” originated in Italy during the fifteenth century to distinguish it from the period immediately preceding, which had lacked access to much of the philosophy and aesthetic theory of the ancients. The view held then was that the ancients were valid sources of truth. “It is quite wrong, however, to imagine that this study of Greek and Roman art *caused* the rebirth or ‘Renaissance’. Almost the opposite is true. The artists [. . .] longed so passionately for a revival of art that they turned to nature, to science and to the remains of antiquity to realize their new aims” (Gombrich 176).

For example, the development of perspective during the Renaissance drew heavily on Arab thinkers whose works flooded north with those of the ancient Greeks and Romans and were systematized by Filippo Brunelleschi and Leon Battista Alberti. Combined with Sebastiano Serlio’s adaptation of elements of Vitruvius’ recovered books on architecture, the new approach to perspective engendered a new approach to scenery. An example of the new scenic approach can be seen in the view of the Teatro Olimpico in figure 4.

The similarity to the ancient Roman setting is apparent. Also apparent is the result of the Renaissance designers’ additions to Vitruvius. The three doors of the *sceanae frons* have been

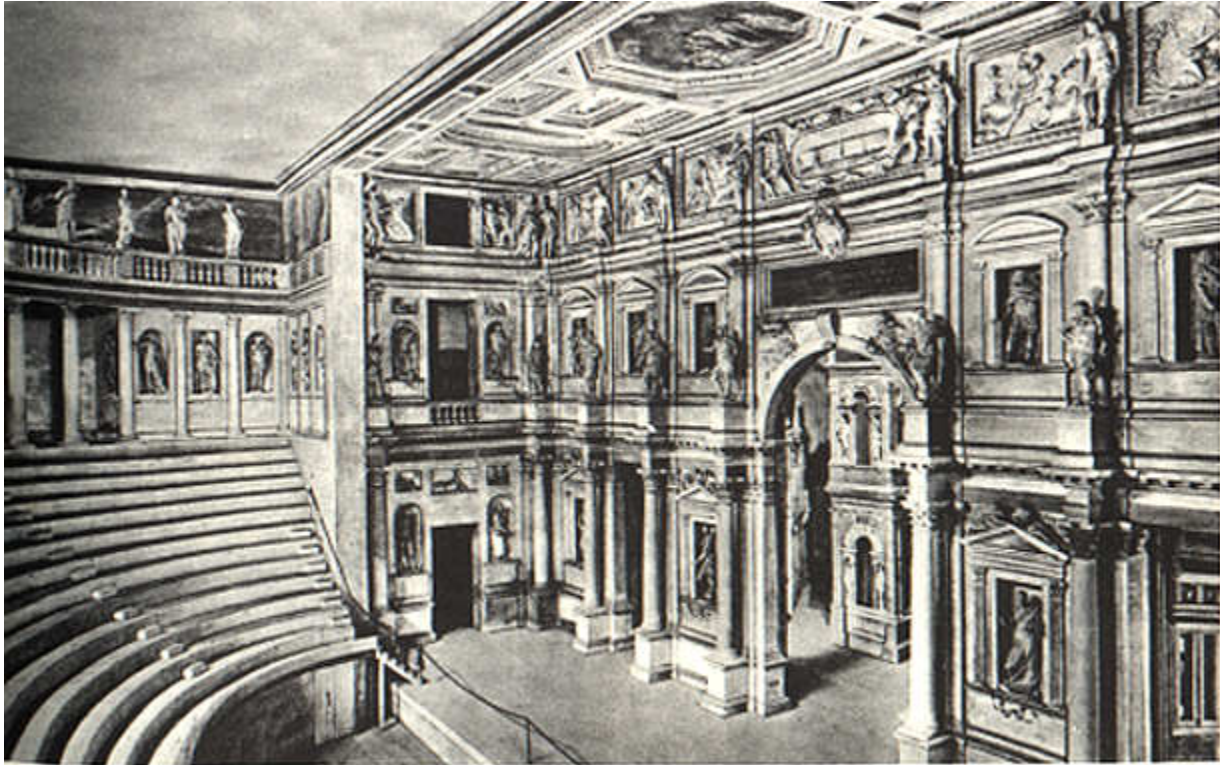


Fig. 841. Teatro Olympico, Vicenza

Fig. 4

replaced with permanent openings. Less visible are the scenic elements presented in painted perspective. Not visible in the image is an indication that theatre had now become proprietary. This setting is located in a private academy, something of a club for members of the growing middle class. This was a private, not a public, space.

Systematic perspective, the rise of the middle class and emphasis on the individual placed greater emphasis on individualistic points of view. No longer was the particular implementation of scenery unimportant. The ability to represent an individual point of view contributed to a foundational shift in the way perceptions of reality were constructed. Gone was the medieval pageant wagon. “Individual, subjective views of the world had been irrelevant, even theologically risky, but with the rules of perspective established they were on safer ground”

(Burke 78). Rather than the symbolic settings of the medieval marketplace, the new scenery was the reflection of the belief rediscovered from antiquity that the viewer lived in a knowable world.

The objective of visual perspective is to represent the world as “an actual, recognizable place” (Arnold, 426). Gombrich notes that the works of antiquity did not employ systemized perspective and so did not reflect the world in its most objective appearance even though near things were drawn larger, far things smaller (79). Sporre offers a popular conception that images produced before the use adoption of mechanical perspective during the Italian Renaissance often look “rather strange” or “rather primitive” because of the odd positioning of elements in the picture. The successful application of perspective, however, provides lends a quality that is “believable” (47). With the change in visual approach came a change in mental outlook.

Possibly the most significant consequence of the changes in the playing space is that theatre went from being a civic to a social activity. No longer did whole towns get together to produce theatre. Associated with the use of perspective is the idea of the observation point and there arose the “duke’s seat,” the one location from which all the painted perspective lined up correctly.

The Theatre Mirrors in History

Pope Gregory wrote that “to adore a picture is one thing, but to learn through the story of a picture what is to be adored is another” (qtd. in Cook and Herzman, 143). The theatre as a practice may be a source of endless fascination for some, but the opportunity to learn about the world through observing the theatre is open to all.

This study has shown that while the Greek and Roman theatres bore similarities on their surface, their underlying practices reflect different ways of viewing the world. The Greek theatre

was physically simpler but intellectually more demanding. The Roman tendency toward ostentation belied a system of core beliefs that did not at all run deeply. In Europe after the fall of Rome, the infrastructure required to support a structured theatre was lacking and so civic theatre floundered.

The atemporal, nonlinear qualities of the later medieval theatre are consistent with the Neo-platonic qualities of Christianity which were pervasive at the time. Christian influence was reflected in theatre practice of the era from the most simple to the most sophisticated. Consistent with systems of meaning prioritizing ideals, specific symbols and their earthly creators were de-emphasized in favor of the importance of the signified.

Renaissance theatre structure and practice of the sixteenth century reflected the changes that were going on in Europe at the time. The period was very backward-looking in its recall of ancient learning. In its exuberant misinterpretation of much of that knowledge (e.g., Vitruvius) and increasing emphasis on the individual (e.g., use of perspective scenery) it was consistent with increasingly modern trends.

John Durham Peters notes that the concept of communication gained new meaning in the seventeenth century through the development of the scientific concept of 'action at a distance' (77-8). Where the Latin *communicare* carried a general meaning of making common in the sense of sharing, 'communication' began to involve a sense of shared interiority of communicators.

Theatre before the modern era partook of the earlier sense of communication, where audiences came to a communal well. It was a civic rather than a social activity. This changed during the Renaissance as the world became, as it is still becoming, increasingly crowded yet still even more increasingly divided.

This paper will conclude with a suggestion for further study based on the supposition that it has been demonstrated that “theatre as mirror,” particularly when examined in terms of the use of physical space and related scenic elements, has been an effective tool for studying the public management of meaning.

This survey was necessarily broad and sketchy. A more thorough study of the practice of the periods discussed will surely contribute to a greater understanding of each. Connections only hinted at may be more fully developed.

Applying the perspective taken in this paper may prove useful in examining non-Western approaches to theatre. Traditional Asian practices downplay the role of place in the drama or present it in a highly stylized form. A more thorough understanding of representational practice could contribute to an understanding of these cultural worldviews.

The development of modern society traced through morphing physical spaces. The rise of modern economic and social systems may be traced through changes to theatre space and practices.

In our modern world, with its fractured affiliative structures, identifying and analyzing the mirrors in use today can help identify and clarify shared meanings in modern life. Analysis of the modern theatre mirror may help us understand the “we” we choose to reflect. Does the fact that theatre claims only the slight audience it does mean that we in a “dark” age? If cinema or television can rightfully claim the mantle of “mirror of choice,” are there implications regarding the way we see ourselves? Is the choice of cinema (say) over theatre a matter of style or substance? What underlying values are reflected in the growing trend in church theatre ministry as the new millennium begins? The need for further research is suggested so to apply timeless concepts in seeking a better understanding of modern life.

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