

**ACTING, DIRECTING
&
DESIGNING LIGHTING &
SCENERY
for
THE THRUST STAGE**

**PART FOUR
SUPPLEMENT
CHAPTER
TO**

ACTING IS ACTION

**by
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Various ideas for outdoor settings

ACTING & DIRECTING FOR THE THRUST STAGE

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Various ideas for outdoor settings:



Left, Play: *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Theatre: Furman University (A good example of an outdoor setting, notice the angled low garden brick wall units). Right, *Laundry and Bourbon*. Theatre: Furman University.(notice the compact house porch unit up center).



Left, Play: *The School for Wives*. Theatre: Furman University (notice the perimeter wall units, the brick pillar unit up left— much like a tumpie unit, the circular seating unit in the center, and the house exterior unit up center.) Right, Play: *The Three Sisters*. Theatre: Furman University (notice the scenic idea of an interior and exterior setting combined, with trees, furniture and chandeliers combined. The railing units visible are the audience modesty panels and not part of the set.)



Left, Play: *Wild Honey*. Theatre: Furman University (based on Chekov's play *Platonov* by Michael Frayn) (Notice the use, again, of trees to define the exterior setting.) Right, *The Water Engine*. Theatre: Furman University. (notice open feeling, even with a scaffolding unit up center and the platform unit center.)

ACTING & DIRECTING FOR THE THRUST STAGE

“On the picture frame the actors must play to the audience and only pretend to play to each other, while on the open stage their bond of relationship is direct, true and complete, and serves to pull the audience deeply into the experience of the play.”

— Michael Langham, THE UNWORTHY SCAFFOLD: THE STORY OF THE FESTIVAL STAGE.

In this section we will discuss staging for the thrust stage. This new relationship between the actors and the audience will present practical problems in both the blocking of the action and the technical aspects of the production—which we have already discussed.¹

In thrust staging, the relationship between actors and audience is very intimate. No audience member is more than five or six rows away from the actors and is usually closer. Some theatres have as few as three rows of seats. The acting in such a performance must be extremely natural and believable, much like the style of acting required by motion pictures.² Everything must be more subtle: makeup, costumes, projection, gestures, and the like. The thrust stage allows an intimacy between actor and audience, in which the slightest gesture can be observed and the full range of a voice can be heard. It challenges every actor: when Laurence Olivier visited the Stratford Festival stage, he stood on the Festival stage and remarked, “But there’s no place to hide!”

It is stated that Michael Langham, the renowned former artistic director of the Stratford Festival of Canada, said that it took him eight years to get every nuance of moving actors on the thrust stage.³

The three-sided location of the audience is the first convention of the thrust stage, to be sure, *but the second is surely the level of the stage*. The director must be aware of the changing aesthetics when he manipulates the playing area.

But also remember, as stated earlier, the other convention that operates in thrust staging that breaks down its illusory elements: members of an audience can fully see and watch many other members of an audience. Thus, as we said, the intimacy of thrust and arena staging is its prime convention. Yet the experience actually goes beyond that of the movie because it has no such barrier as the lifeless projection screen and can exhibit the flesh-and-blood actor in close-up to the voyeurism of an audience.⁴

Some people worry that shows in thrust staging might be too intense for the audience. The proximity of performers to audience might diminish aesthetic distance and frighten people. Aesthetic distance has little to do with the actual physical distance between the actors and audience, unless the actors are shouting in their faces or sitting in their laps—literally making physical contact with them. Aesthetic distance is a psychological attitude that the audience can maintain as long as they feel safe and anonymous—as long as the actors do not threaten them, or in the case of realistic plays, look them directly in the eyes.

One of the techniques in thrust and arena-style is for the actors to begin playing at a low level—as close to reality as possible—in order to draw the audience into the illusion, and then to raise the level gradually in size and proportion until the acting resembles what is seen on the proscenium stage. *Thrust and Theatre-in-the-round is not for the inexperienced amateur but for the capable and trained actor*.

Even though the audience views the action from three sides, the basic principle of blocking remains in force: If you understand the organic blocking concept (instead of the pictorial), you will have little difficulty in arranging on the thrust stage everything from the ground plan to composition and movement. Actors move toward or away from one another, creating movements which illustrate the emotional relationship between the characters. Now, however, all of the principles of movement that relate to the audience viewpoint and make it easier for the audience to see the actors’ faces no longer have any meaning. Gesturing with the upstage hand, crossing downstage of another actor, standing with the body one-quarter turn toward the audience, and other rules of this type are meaningless when the audience surrounds the actors.

¹ CHAPTER 18— Directing for the Stage by Lloyd Anton Frerer, NTC, 1996

² This is another reason that I recommend for students to experience working on the thrust stage, it develops their skills and training in techniques that are usable in film and television work.

³ THE GREATEST ACTING SPACE IN THE WORLD, Stratford Festival of Canada, 2002

⁴ *Play Directing, Analysis, Communication, and Style* by Francis Hodge, Second edition, Prentice Hall, 1982

Obviously, there can be no rule about not turning one's back on the audience when almost every position on stage has the actor facing one section of the audience and turning his or her back on another section. In the proscenium theatre, the director tries to control the attention of the audience and make it easy for them to see all of the action. The director continues to control the focus of attention when staging on the thrust; however, making it easier for the audience to see the action is a whole new ball game.⁵

No stage position taken by the actor looks good from all sides; every position creates an awkward situation from the point of view of some audience members.

An actor's back facing one part of the audience is an accepted convention of this stage; but this rather extreme body position can be kept at a minimum by frequent shiftings to other body positions. When back positions must be used as the best illustration of a dramatic action, the *neutral corners* (the vom entrances to the stage where no audience is seated) can be employed effectively.

The problem of quick entrances and exits on the thrust stage is sometimes difficult because of the distance through the voms that must be traversed, but this problem can often be solved by occasional use of entrance voms as acting areas: an actor starts speaking on the way in, or stops halfway out to give an exit line. If you are working in a thrust stage with *vomitories*— that are entranceways underneath audience seating— actors can enter the acting area directly without being seen.⁶

Entrances and exits onto a thrust are most readily made from backstage and the isles, although some theatres provide for performers to enter through the audience using **vomitory** entrances— also called a vom or voms— actor entrances which cut through, or in some theatres beneath the audience seating areas— which in some theatres double as audience entrances. The word has its origins in the Roman word “vomitorium,” the entrance of the gladiators, animals and performers in the Coliseum.

Starting Points to remember for Acting and Directing on the Thrust Stage.

(RULE ONE) **The key to staging-in-the-thrust is that much more movement is required.** Therefore, directors must not allow their actors to stand in one particular position longer than is absolutely necessary. In thrust staging, the actors must change positions more often than in proscenium staging, moving and turning around as much as possible. A principles of all good composition should be kept in mind, play a cat-and-mouse game in composition, now one character pursues and the other retreats, and vice versa. Actors will frequently turn outward toward one section or another of an audience as the most natural thing to do in getting away.

(RULE TWO) Actors trained in the techniques of the proscenium theatre must now learn to sense the audience all around them, to give themselves as often as possible to all of the different sections of the audience. Ken Ruta, who was an original member of the Guthrie Theatre Company in Minneapolis— the first major thrust stage in the United States— reminds us that the actor who is so trained to “turning in,” must become comfortable with “turning out,” and make it a natural part of his acting tools. This goes the same for the actor who automatically shares the stage with his fellow actor by “opening,” as they would on a proscenium stage. Actors new to the trust stage will also favor one of the audience sections— usually the one they imagine is the “main or center” section, and play to them exclusively— as if they are on a proscenium stage.

(RULE THREE) **Few places on the thrust stage are neutral locations where a character who has no lines can stand and observe the other characters who have both the lines and the movement.** Actors who have no excuse for movement usually have two choices: They can stand in front of an aisle so they are not blocking audience view, or they can seat themselves on the furnishings of the set. The performer who is the focus of attention should be standing up so that he or she can move often, and the audience will be able to see that actor over the heads of the characters who are seated. Actors soon learn instinctively to find the aisles because they provide a good place to stand.

POWER POINT

The more intimate the scene the farther away you should be from your partner. (paraphrase of comment by Tyrone Guthrie, from Ken Ruta, original company member of The Guthrie Theatre)

⁵ CHAPTER 18— Directing for the Stage by Lloyd Anton Frerer, NTC, 1996

⁶ *Play Directing, Analysis, Communication, and Style* by Francis Hodge, Second edition, Prentice Hall, 1982

The following section is edited from Terry John Converse's *Directing For The Stage: A Workshop Guide of 42 Creative Training Exercises and Projects*, Directions: Project A— Thrust Staging (Experimenting With Nonproscenium Staging— Part 1)⁷ The underlines are mine.

Just as we can throttle our imagination, we can likewise accelerate it. As in any other art, individual creativity can be implemented by certain 'techniques.'

— Alex F. Osborn

OVERVIEW

Directors in training had better be prepared to travel well beyond the bounds of the traditional picture frame stage. Successful regional theatres such as the Guthrie in Minneapolis have been widely influential, and the increasing popularity of thrust theatres means that, more than ever, today's director needs to have staging skills in nonproscenium spaces. The intent of this project is to provide the principles for staging in thrust theatres.

Focusing on this form by no means implies that there are not other interesting nonproscenium staging possibilities; in fact the currently very popular "black box", space with its moveable seating banks is dedicated to the idea that there are numerous audience-actor spatial relationships worth exploring. Studying the thrust is the perfect training because proficiency in this space easily carries over into virtually any other form. Training for thrust space is the best possible preparation for virtually any type of nonproscenium playing space the intent of this project is to break away from the confines of the picture frame theatre. The departures from the proscenium are still heavily dependent upon proscenium principles, and without this kind of a firm foundation, the new terrain of the thrust will present one pitfall after another.

Working with thrust configurations requires a flexible playing space. The ideal working space for this project is any large open space will work, provided there is enough space, a single row of chairs can define the size and shape of the playing space. Staging a short scene for thrust is of value in itself, but an excellent way to master the nuances of proscenium and non-proscenium spaces is to *stage the same scene for two different performance spaces*.

STARTING FIRST WITH THRUST STAGING

The actors are thrust into the midst of the audience, which puts an emphasis on them instead of the scenery, but no matter how far they are thrust forward, they are still "backed" by at least some scenic reinforcement. This back wall of the thrust theatre is what allows this very new space to retain at least a hint of the older proscenium form, and this is a significant issue as far as training is concerned because making a departure into new territory is always a little easier if at least a glimmer of the old territory is still in view. The new thrust space is a big leap forward, but still in view is the familiar old back wall— a focal point of the thrust space that provides at least some of the illusionistic potential of the proscenium stage.

This is not a recommended staging approach, but imagine taking a well-staged proscenium play, scooting it away from its picture frame housing so as to transform it into a thrust configuration; chances are there would be some problems, but a surprising amount of the play would probably be stage worthy from the sides. The reason for this is that good proscenium staging is by definition three dimensional, as is thrust staging. This is why thrust tends to be the easier, and less threatening of the two. As a first stepping stone from the picture frame stage, a thrust configuration is the best choice.

TYPICAL SHAPES OF THRUST STAGES

Shapes of thrust stages vary considerably, with three of the most popular variations shown below:



GROUND PLAN CONCERNS

⁷ Meriwether Publishing, Ltd., 1995.

To think of successfully transporting a well-staged proscenium play onto thrust space is, of course, a gross oversimplification because it completely ignores the major conceptual differences between thrust and proscenium ground plans. A conventional box set for a proscenium space, for instance, certainly wouldn't work very well on a thrust stage without considerable modification because the side walls would completely obstruct the right and left seating sections.

Three Invisible Walls: Instead of a single invisible “fourth wall” on the curtain line, the thrust space assumes three invisible walls, with a closed-off fourth side (the back wall). Architectural details such as window seats and cabinets can be used along the invisible walls as long as they are low enough not to obstruct sight lines. Compared to proscenium, the three invisible walls create a much more three-dimensional effect; despite the fact that the actors in a proscenium space are typically surrounded by three-dimension scenery, the net effect is an illusory two-dimensional quality very similar to painting, whereas thrust is three-dimensional and very similar to sculpture.

Entrances: Besides walls, another major difference between proscenium and thrust spaces has to do with entrances. Proscenium entrances for the most part stay within the picture frame. In thrust theatres there are typically tunnels or vomitoria⁸ at the downstage left and right corners that allow the actors to enter and exit from ramps or steps beneath the audience. Vomitoria solve the problem of quick entrances and exits where many actors can be “vomited” onto or off the stage. In some cases the auditorium aisles are used as voms, or sometimes both aisles and voms become integrated into the staging.

Entrances, of course, can also by from the back wall area. The back wall area allows for architectural detail such as staircases and levels, which can be tremendously helpful in defining a sense of place. An important design consideration is whether or not to use one or both of the voms. If used, they create very dynamic axes that have to be carefully integrated into the ground plan. An entrance or exit from a vom is much more dynamic than the equivalent proscenium entrance or exit because the pathway is directly to or away from the world of the audience. In some case, the audience can literally feel the whoosh of air as a group of actors rush onto the stage. Sometimes, it is effective not to use any voms at all, and rely only on the rear stage entrances.

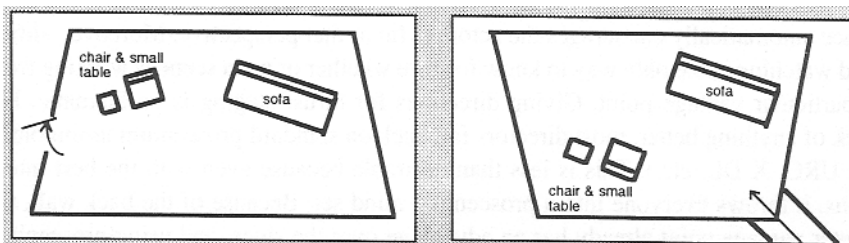
BEWARE OF THE BACK WALL

Picture a thrust theatre with three separate, equally sized seating sections. Even when there is a completely democratic distribution of seats in each section, it becomes immediately obvious that all seats in a thrust theatre are not created equal; even before a single actor steps on stage, those seats in the center section, directly facing the back wall will be felt by most audience members to be the favored vantage point. Years of experiencing theatre through a picture frame have conditioned audiences into feeling that closer to the center means better seating. Directors and designers of thrust need to be aware of this built-in bias, and do everything possible to reinforce the feeling that seating from all sides is equally interesting.

As previously discussed, the back wall is the common denominator between thrust and proscenium spaces, and this can help in making the novice director a little more at home in a very unfamiliar place. True enough, but the familiar back wall can also become a booby trap, lulling the unsuspecting novice director into thinking that staging for thrust is virtually the same as staging for proscenium. Thinking proscenium in a thrust space is the cardinal sin to commit in staging because it will inevitably lead to favoring the center section; instead of reducing, it reinforces the bias that most audience members bring with them to the thrust theatre. To treat a thrust theatre as a proscenium space is to disregard completely the sculptural potential of this unique type of stage. Favoring the center section in a thrust theatre is artistically fatal because it alienates at least two-thirds of the audience. Preventing an overemphasis on the center section often begins with the ground plan. The ground plans below demonstrates the differences between thrust and proscenium in a typical living room setting. By turning the arm chair to face the sofa, a position far more typical than the side-by-side arrangement, there is visual interest created for all three vantage points.

Had the proscenium ground plan on the left been used on a thrust stage, the message loud and clear from just the setting would be that the only good seats in the house were front and center. Using such a plan would make it extremely difficult to stage equitably among the three seating sections.

⁸ The singular of vomitoria is vomitorium, although most of the time this terminology is reduced to simply “vom” and “voms”.



Left, Typical Proscenium Furniture Arrangement., Right, Typical Thrust Furniture Arrangement

THREE VANTAGE POINTS

Think of a thrust stage as three separate, but obviously interrelated proscenium stages. In essence; in a typical thrust theatre, each of the three vantage points (the three audience seating sections) *becomes the equivalent of a proscenium theatre*. The director's ultimate staging challenge is to make the play visually engaging from all three perspectives. There will be times when a particular vantage point is truly favored over the others, but in the course of the entire performance, no single vantage point should be any better than the others overall. All this starts, as has already been mentioned, by designing a ground plan that is equitable to all three vantage points— it cannot be emphasized enough that successful thrust staging begins with a well thought out ground plan.

In rehearsals, avoid directing from the same vantage point. Sitting in the same place automatically encourages the actors to favor that perspective. Moreover, sitting and watching is the only way to know for sure whether or not a scene is working from a particular vantage point. Giving directions for thrust staging is problematic. For lack of anything better, most directors fall back on standard proscenium terminology (X URC, X DL, etc.). This is less than desirable because even with the best intentions, it throws everyone into a proscenium mind set. Because of the back wall, the center vantage point already has an advantage over the sides, and using proscenium terminology simply reinforces this bias. To counteract this problem, whenever possible the director is well advised to give directions by referring to the actual set pieces (X to the sofa, arm chair, table, etc.) instead of sticking to conventional terminology. (The director of arena is already forced to do this because there is no such thing as right and left, and up and downstage in such a space.).

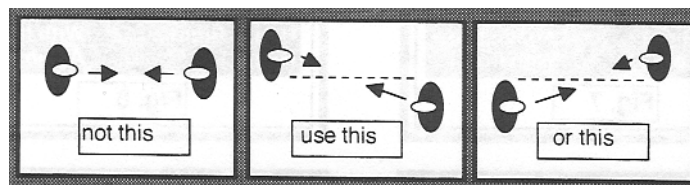
STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

House left and right function as mirror images of each other, and here the terms “with the flow” and “against the flow” become meaningful. “Flow” refers to conditioned eye movement.⁹

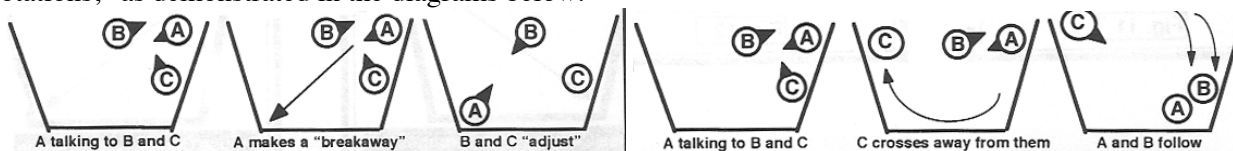
STAGING TECHNIQUES

Two actors facing each other straight on can remain relatively open in proscenium staging, but not so in thrust staging. Whenever possible, use the *shoulder-to-shoulder* technique diagramed below for basic conversations. Compared to the straight-on approach, shoulder-to-shoulder creates very little difference in the emotional effect, but it makes a very big difference in keeping the actors more open.

⁹ Before creating your ground plan and staging your scene, consider the following specifics about the differences between the right and the left (although there are no rights and lefts on the trust stage), or going “with” or “against the flow. Alexander Dean, in his legendary *Fundamentals of Directing* text (1974), argues that in general **stage right is stronger than stage left** (all things being equal). The obvious reason is that we are naturally inclined to look from left to right in reading (in traditional European texts, that is) and that we carry this inclination to all phases of observation (looking at pictures, looking at groups of people, etc.). Dean supported this by his observation of Chinese theatre, Asians read from right to left and in their theatre the more important position is stage left. Regarding “flow” psychologist H. C. Van der Meer noticed that **spontaneous movements of the head are executed more quickly from the left to the right than in the opposite direction.**



Actors staying in the same place and body position for very long on a thrust stage can create a problem in that they are apt to be closed off from a portion of the audience for too long. In thrust audience members will tolerate not being able to have a clear view of an actor a little longer than they would in proscenium because the intimacy of the space often allows them to see the reactions of other audience members who at the time are watching from a better vantage point. But even with this audience watching audience factor, it is important to shift perspectives fairly often. Two ways to accomplish this are to use *justified* “breakaways” and “rotations,” as demonstrated in the diagrams below:



Left, A Sample Breakaway. Right, A Sample Rotation

The section that follows from Mel Shapiro’s *The Director’s Companion*, Chapter Ten: STAGING ON OPEN STAGES, is an edited version, but is worth including almost in its entirety. The underlines are mine.¹⁰

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: What is an open stage?

A: An open stage has no proscenium— that archway between the audience and the stage that held the action inside a picture frame is gone. The audience usually is seated wrapped around a stage that is in the shape of a semicircle such as the Greek theatre or that thrusts farther into the audience like the Elizabethan theatre. This configuration is sometimes referred to as “three-quarter thrust.” There is also full arena, which can be a square or a circle or an oblong and is similar to a sports arena. The audience in both three-quarter and full arena is usually banked in tiers, high above the players in order to get the fullest view of every part of the action.

Q: What’s the advantage of this arrangement of the stage and the audience?

A: Having worked at both Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., for many years and at the Guthrie Theatre in its early days, I’d say the advantages are the following:

1. The picture framing of the proscenium is viewed from only one side— where everyone is seated. The arena allows events to play on stage in a much freer form. I used to like to quote Zelda Fichandler, the founder of Arena Stage, who would say, “Life is in the round.” I believe what she meant by that is that experience is open to more than one perspective. Experience also happens all around us. Staging in the arena, to quote Mrs. Fichandler again, “provides infinite variability in terms of plasticity and movement.”
2. The Guthrie Theatre was modeled and refined on its predecessor in Stratford, Ontario. The stage thrusts into the house and is platformed around a moat.

Writing about building the theatre in Minneapolis, Guthrie says:

. . . more people can be got into the same amount of cubic space if they are seated around an open stage, rather than facing a proscenium. When folded around an open stage none of them need sit farther away than the fourteenth row, approximately fifty feet from the middle of the stage. If you are going to offer the sort of program that demands the serious concentration of the audience, then it is essential that actor and audience be

¹⁰ Wadsworth Publishing, 1997. Mel Shapiro is a director, playwright, and a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. His directing credits include Broadway production of *Two Gentleman of Verona* (winner of a Tony and NY Drama Critics Award for Best Musical) original off-Broadway production of *The House of Blue Leaves* (winner of the NY Drama Critics Award for Best American Play), and Vaclav Havel’s *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* for Lincoln Center Repertory (winner of an Obie for Best Foreign Play). His recent work includes direction of John Guare’s *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* at the Signature Theater and *Taming of the Shrew* for the New York Shakespeare Festival.

brought into the closest possible mutual contract. But to my mind even more important is the fact that the proscenium stage is deliberately designed to encourage the audience to believe that events on stage are “really” taking place, to accept a palpable fiction for fact; whereas the open stage discourages “illusion” and emphasizes that a play is a ritual in which the audience is invited to participate. Finally, apart from these technical or philosophical considerations, we believed it would be a good idea to have an open stage simply because it was not the obvious conventional kind. It would stress, we felt, the experimental and pioneering character of the whole venture; it would be more of a talking point; and, by providing a more three-dimensional entertainment, would emphasize the contrast between the live theatre and movies or TV. This contrast is less marked when a play is framed by a rectangular proscenium, like the rectangular movie or TV screen.

Q: Wasn't Guthrie's interest primarily the classical theatre?

A: Yes, I believe that the philosophy that Guthrie and his designer, Tanya Moiseiwitsch had concerning their stage had a great deal to do with their feelings about classical theatre. They worked in a highly lyrical and romantic style. There were lots of armies, drums, banners, trumpets, cannons belching smoke, and great language that filled the theatre with poetry. You always felt that these spectacles were tumbling from the stage onto your lap. More important, you felt something heroic and meaningful about the grandeur of the human spirit.

Q: And scenery? How does that differ on open stages?

A: Originally, both Stratford and the Guthrie were Elizabethan models with an inner above and inner below. The great wooden floor of the stage was its most important scenic element because everyone was sitting above it, and that's what people saw. If there was any scenery, it was emblematic. A chandelier of a certain period, a table, a chair told you what world you were in. The productions were dominated by costumes. These costumes set against the dark floor were the palette that the play worked on. There was no need for literal scenery. Hence, there was no need for stage mechanics and massive set changes from Scene to Scene. The audience could imagine where it was with one or two suggestions. Arena Stage started from the same spirit, but scenery became very elaborate after it moved into its large theatre, where the stage is completely mechanized and used to spectacular effect.

Later, the use of scenery at the Guthrie changed as well because although only a wooden floor, an inner above, an inner below, and a few pieces were fine for classical plays, they did not work for contemporary plays. And as the repertoire expanded the concepts of scenery, reality, and artistic needs changed with it. *Illusion*, a word that Guthrie said he hated, was warmly greeted by him after he saw the versatility of the stage that he helped create.

Q: Are some plays better than others on the open stage?

A: That's a matter of great debate. Some directors believe that certain kinds of comedies cannot be played on an open stage because the jokes and humor need a frontal assault, so to speak. Other directors can't see how you can do a musical in the arena form:

Where do you put the orchestra?

How does the conductor cue the singers?

How many sides can you sing to at one time, given the fact that you have only one head?

Q: My own opinion is that there is no limit to the repertoire that can be successfully put onto an open stage. And as for musicals, many cities have summer musical tents in the arena form.

Q: Are there some *dos* and *don'ts* about the open stage?

A: First avoid the traps:

1. Actors bellowing the lines. Often you will see a lot of spewing of saliva from the actor's mouth as he overaspirates in an attempt to be heard. Listening to the performance gets to be like listening to instruments that can play only loud. Sound is never modulated for variation and color. The actors seem to feel that because people are sitting behind them, they have to shout, hoping that their voices carry over their shoulders. In the early days of the Guthrie, actors used to talk about “diaphragmatic pressure”: how much air they needed to take in to get the sound out. It's not necessary to produce this much sound unless the acoustics of the house are faulty.

2. "Making the rounds." This is when the actor ceaselessly roams the stage from one side to the other in order for all sides to take him in. This, of course, never happened in a Tyrone Guthrie show, but it was the house style of the Shakespeare Festival in Central Park and of many other theatres at one time. (It was also ironic that the festival miked its actors anyway, so all this staging that had the actor going from side to the other was unnecessary to begin with.)

"Making the rounds" was a solution to a problem that created a worse problem. Let's say that you are sitting in a tier facing the actor. The actor is speaking in your direction. You hear her. But then she leaves your direction and moves to the next tier. You hear her a little less. She moves farther away, facing another tier of seats, and you've lost her completely. Then she comes back in your direction. It's like a short-wave radio signal that is coming in and out with a lot of interference.

3. Playing to the critics. The director knows where members of the press will be seated opening night and aims the show in their direction. The critics do not sit just anywhere. They want the "best seats," and management wants to put them there. This knowledge tempts the director to stage the show like it's on a proscenium. You will often see productions where the audience on either side of the stage or to the extreme sides is fully cheated. I, myself, have been seated behind chairs, behind vases on tables and behind actors a good deal of the evening. Backstage I didn't recognize one of the actresses because I hadn't seen her face all evening. The press had its center seats for one night, while someone sat in my seat every night for thirty performances.

The director and the actors need to be aware of:

1. The stage in every scene has to be "shared." Usually the actors play across each other's shoulders diagonally, in very much the same way that a two-shot in a film is photographed. If you are in full arena, almost each tier gets a good view of either actor. This is very different than proscenium staging, where, if an actor moves onto another plane above you, you are upstaged. There is no way you can be upstaged in arena, unless you end up playing with your head facing one of the vomitoriums, which are the tunnels that give access to and from the stage.

In general, playing on the diagonal is one of the secrets of the Open stage.

2. In the proscenium, center stage is a favored position. It's regarded as very strong in terms of the sight lines of the house and is a natural point of visual focus for the audience. You'll notice that concerts, recitals, major songs in musicals often are played there. On a three-quarter stage, you have to find alternatives to playing major events center stage. Center often means cutting off a large segment of the house at either side.

3. The tendency to go farther upstage so that more of the house can see the actor has the effect of distancing the audience from the actor.

Q: Should the director move around a lot, checking how the show is looking from each side?

A: Yes. If you don't have in your head the spatial sense of how it's looking from each tier, which is very difficult at first, you owe it to your audience and your actors to get out of your chair and see what the show looks like from all points of view. Especially when you're doing run-throughs, sit in one section and see how the show is playing from that perspective.

Q: People say the problem with the open stage is that, depending on where your seat is, you are going to see a different show than the person on the other side of the stage will see. Is this true?

A: Let me answer this way. I find watching plays on the open stage very exciting because it's inherently a more dynamic and energetic form.

Q: What do you mean by that?

A: The open stage gives the audience a sense of watching a play in three dimensions. It is very much like watching a sports event where the ball is continually in play, and the players can go all over the court or the rink as they play the game. The open stage, especially arena, frees the action from the demand of playing to one side. I think there's just one rule about the open stage, which is to share the play with as much of the house as possible and not to exclude any section, at least not for any period of time. This doesn't mean "doing the rounds." Instead, it means finding creative ways of moving and shaping the stage action almost like a choreographer. You have to think as if you're sculpting in space with the actors.

However, you can get a different show with staging that's still rooted in a proscenium mode. Talking about three-quarter staging that she has seen, Zelda Fichandler has said, "I have noticed that plays in this form have

been designed, sculpted, directed, and acted more or less from the ‘front,’ the aesthetic weight of the rear wall finally prevailing. When I have sat on the ‘sides’ I have not merely seen the play differently, I have seen the sides of the play. That is, the experience of the play— intellectually and sensually— has been weakened. I think this is a correct observation and surely it is borne out by the pricing policy of these theatres: The most expensive seats splay out from the tongue of the stage; the cheaper seats edge around the stage toward the architectural wall at the back of it."

Q: You mean that more movement is usually the norm on an open stage?

A: I think so. Of course, the movement has to be justified, it has to be in the style or reality that you've selected to work in. But first get the scene right. Find what's going on within it and what the best way is to stage the action. After that, you will find certain adjustments that will open it up to more of the audience. You don't have to go into rehearsal hysterically thinking; "My god, I've got four sides to play to and only two actors in this scene, which is fairly static to begin with!" But after you've gotten the scene to work, it's important that you let the whole house share it. I've sat in the north tier at Arena Stage and have had a wonderful show presented to me, knowing that no one in the south tier was able to see what I was seeing because the director had left that tier out. I've also seen shows in three-quarter that were staged just like proscenium plays and left out several hundred people who were watching the show on the sides.

The glory of working the open stage is that you can open up a scene in ways that you couldn't possibly do on a proscenium, with moves, with pieces of business, with reactions that don't have to play in one direction. After I've done something on an open stage it would seem like putting it into a box if it had to transfer to proscenium. (As a matter of fact, I've experienced this.)

Q: But back to my question. Every tier is getting a different show, isn't it? In your example of the south tier at Arena, the show that those viewers got was the backs of the actors and not much of the dialogue, most likely.

A: Even in the best stagings, the show is, I have to admit, slightly different, yes. The question is "different worse" or "different better"? I've sat on the extreme sides of some of my own productions and liked them much better. Was it a different play than what another section was getting? I don't know. On the proscenium we are getting the master shot. On the open stage we can get close-ups, different angles, long shots, depending on where we are sitting and how the staging is laid out before us.

For example, two characters in a comedy scene. One of the characters has a line that is a joke. A big laugh is expected. Let's say that you've staged it so that upon telling the joke, the actor "walks out of the laugh." This is when an actor says a joke and moves away. This heightens the laugh because it's so outrageously funny for the audience to watch the actor deliver this unexpected, outrageous line and to see him walk away like nothing has happened. On a proscenium this would get a laugh. In arena, it can also get the same laugh because there is a whole tier of people watching him come their way after he has delivered the joke, behaving as though he has said nothing out of the ordinary. There is another tier watching the "take" or the reaction of the other actor who has received this joke. And if you've staged it diagonally, each actor will be getting a good shot of at least two tiers fully seeing him.

Q: Doesn't the lighting appear to be different from each side?

A: Yes, that's a disappointment. From the center it might seem like night, and from another angle, if you're sitting near the hot spots, it can look like day.

Q: What about counterpoint? Isn't it easier to control on a proscenium?

A: Because Guthrie was practically its inventor, you can be sure that counterpoint works very successfully in three-quarter. The background or the far wall is a backdrop that becomes a canvas for the director to paint against. There is also the use of the stairs around the stage and the moat for all kinds of incidental and parallel action. In the arena form, counterpoint is possible but more of a challenge. It can be like a three-ring circus that has to be focused. Aside from staging, focus can be helped by:

1. Lighting and use of levels.

One of the principles of the open stage before these theatres became so scenery happy was the minimal use of sets with a maximum of artistic economy. Lighting, in that case, served many functions, especially picking out areas where scenes were being played. The action could jump from place to place by lighting. There was no need to bring on tons of scenery to tell the story. Actors could be on a bare stage doing a scene, there could be a blackout, and the lights would come up on another part of the stage, implying another scene, another place, and another time.

Depending on sight lines, levels can be used, which denote different playing spaces for different geographic locations in the story. These levels also help with focusing action if you have a multiplicity of events taking place at the same time.

2. Action around the perimeter of where central action is occurring.

I like to think of this as a kind of visual *obbligato* or accompaniment. And just as in music, this accompanies the main action as either complementary or contrasting, as ~~discussed in the section on counterpoint~~. You'll often hear an actor say, "Is she going to do that while I'm doing my speech?" This means that the actor has just noticed that another character is moving or doing a piece of business while he's doing his speech. In the old school of acting, no one was supposed to breathe, let alone move, while the star or leading players were "acting." They didn't want to be upstaged by upstarts, which means someone else getting the focus. There are many famous stories of how actors have tripped up and foiled one another onstage. However, the director wants to keep the stage alive. She can't have a stage full of actors frozen every time the lead opens his mouth. If you are trying to counterpoint an important speech by using another action to throw down focus to it, the actor doing that speech has to know that the movement and action are there to help him, not to thwart him. But actors will be actors, and you have to make sure that that little scene used to counterpoint the main one doesn't assume epic proportions by the third performance, especially on an open stage, where it will be close to an audience of its own.

5. Sound is a very powerful instrument in arena, especially if the setting is minimal or not literal.

Sound will anchor the audience in a reality. You don't need to see rain, just hear it, to feel what the weather is like. Also, sound can travel around an arena house more effectively than it can in a proscenium house because geography isn't always that literal, either. In the proscenium a door can represent the outside of a house. In the arena there are rarely doors because they impede sight lines. Outside the house can be all around the audience. If a lion has escaped from the zoo, he is prowling around in the round, not just prowling very specifically behind a door. Again, because it's less literal, the open stage offers a wider range for the director as well as for the audience to experience events very imaginatively.

Q: How do I get to experience working on the open stage?

A: Reconfigure your classroom or workshop so that the audience is not seated conventionally. Start with a few scenes. Make sure that when the scenes are presented you have people sitting in each section. As part of the critique ask what each section missed, if anything.

Try a one-act play in either three-quarter trust or arena. Work out the groundplan, that is, where you are going to place the set pieces. Check to see that the sight ones are clear from all sides as much as possible. Stage the play.

Q: Do I have to run around the room, from side to side, as I'm blocking to make sure that everything is being seen properly?

A: Not until you've run through. Stay in one place, concentrate on the play and your work with the actors, but be aware of where your audience is going to be seated.

Q: Maybe I shouldn't be aware of the audience at all, just try to forget about it. What do you think?

A: I know directors who forget the audience, and it's not a good idea. They become the audience and see the show only from where they're sitting in rehearsal. I don't think a director has to concern himself with what the audience is going to think or feel or how it will react to the show. To that extent you don't have to think of the audience at all. But you have to be aware of where audience members are sitting and of how much of what's going onstage they can see.

CHECKLIST

Focus

Q: Where do you want the audience to look?

How long do you want the focus to be in one place?

When do you want the focus to change to another character or another place?

Counterpoint

Q: In your working counterpoint have you:

Overemphasized the secondary scene, or is the primary scene still in focus?

Maneuvered the stage action so that the audience is visually following the shifts from one scene to the other?

Made sure that the contrasts between scenes and characters are dynamic enough, or does everything seem to be blending into the same textures?

Been able to look at films, observing the technique?

Tone

Q: Have you worked the first fifteen minutes of the show so that the tone you want to set is there? In other words, will the audience know what kind of show it's watching?

Are you at the place in rehearsal where it's a comedy but nothing is funny anymore? Will inventing fresh business help?

Mood

Q: Is your staging reflecting any mood at all, or are you waiting for the scenery and lighting designer to do the job?

How important is mood to your piece?

Is your use of music and sound adequate or too much? Do they enhance the work or get in the way of it by being too obvious?

Atmosphere

Q: Are you and the actors playing the physical realities and circumstances?

How necessary is atmosphere for what you're trying to achieve?

Would eliminating it completely make things cleaner and simpler?

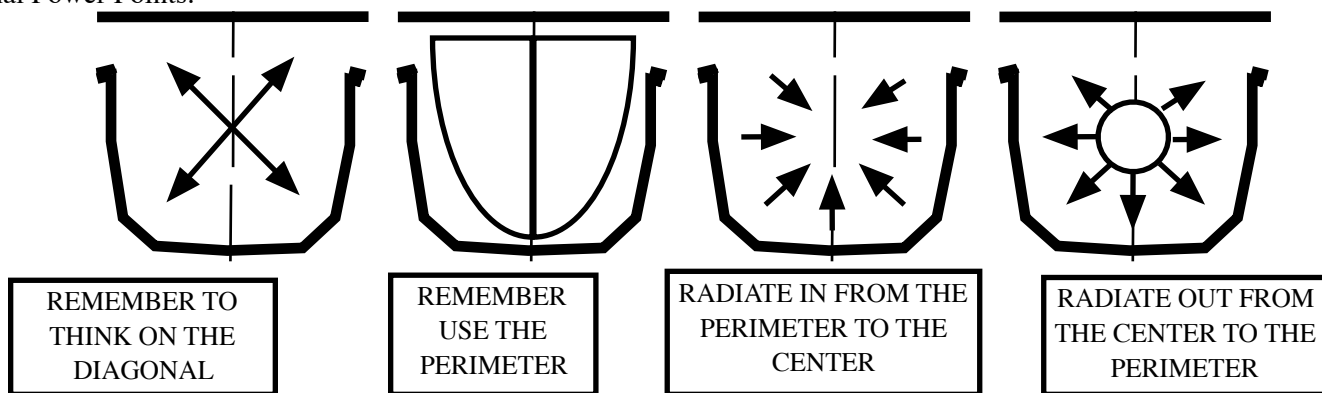
Open Stages

Q: Have you avoided bellowing actors and "making the rounds"?

How much is each side being cheated? Can you correct it?

Is there a tendency for the actors to still play on the same plane, or are they working diagonally and across the shoulders in order to open them up? Have you cured yourself of "prosceniumitis," which means that your staging is partially for the round and partially for the proscenium? Can you break the ties that bind you and free yourself from that picture frame?

Final Power Points:



The playing areas are best set up on a diagonal axis.

The two people should play over each other's shoulder to open each player to at least two tiers.

There is no "center stage." There is no "playing to the audience," as the audience is on three sides, and all sides deserve equal attention.

EXERCISES

Create an illustrated "FURNITURE MORGUE" of types of furniture and properties (most types of furniture have descriptive names, use them) that would lend themselves to inclusion on a thrust stage set. Remember the criteria needed. Look at furniture store ads, Google web sites, Ebay, scan items.

Create a “SET DESIGN MORGUE” of illustrations of scenery designs of productions created for a thrust stage and define the _____ they followed (used)

Research designs of thrust stages currently being used in the world and create a morgue. Search the web for photos.

Examine all of the photographs in this text and detail FIVE recurring “elements” or “techniques” used by the set designers or directors that are specific to the thrust stage. State the page number and position on the page of the photograph, the play title and describe the “element”