THE FRAMING OF THE STAGE:
THE IMPACT OF THEATER ENVIRONMENTS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF
THEATRICAL FORM

Teresa M. Sarkela
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by

Teresa Sarkela

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THE FRAMING OF THE STAGE:
THE IMPACT OF THEATER ENVIRONMENTS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF
THEATRICAL FORM

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THE THESIS OF TERESA SARKELA

Sarah Brewer  
Chair  
Associate Professor of Theatre Arts  

Anthony Hammond  
Assistant Professor of Music  

Matthew O’Gara  
Director, RMC Honors Program  

Rocky Mountain College  
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ABSTRACT

Since its creation by the Greeks, theatre has been valuable in its ability to express ideas to a group of spectators in hopes of unifying them with an understanding of abstract thought as presented in a visual-physical art. The communication of ideas between performers and audiences is known as theatrical form. Theatre artists have discovered presenting ideas in specific environments affects how an audience perceives and connects with the intended idea. This has caused a multitude of theater environments to be created in relation to the degree of communication intending to be expressed with an audience. Today, these theaters primarily include proscenium, thrust, arena, found, and black box. As theatre also establishes a cultural identity among people, many specific theater environments have been built due to political and social revolution as a means to further express abstract thought and ideology in a unified environment. From these progressions, the psychology of audience engagement toward theatre performance has also undergone a variety of changes due to evolution of environmental aspects. Furthermore, aspects of technological integration into theatre have also consequentially changed the psychology of audience engagement in relation to the emphasis on spectacle for entertainment, individual interpretation rather than group dynamic, and the adaption of front-back oriented perception. This thesis will utilize historical, psychological, and theatrical texts to explain the importance of environmental elements that affect an audiences’ connection and understanding of a performance on a deliberate intellectual and emotional level, therefore allowing awareness for theatre artists to present theatrical form to its best ability.
INTRODUCTION

Theatrical form, in its most basic sense, is the message being communicated in a performance. One might call it the moral of the story, the call to action, the thesis, or the big idea. As described by theatre scholars, “Theatrical form in its simplest description is the communication of ideas between two groups: performers and audience... the presentation of ideas [that can be] either sentimentally obvious or intellectually obscure.”¹ The purpose of most, if not all performances whether in theatre, art, or music, is intended to share an idea with an audience. Many factors including the performers themselves, the dynamic of the audience, and the physical space in which they join greatly affect how theatrical form is expressed and achieved. The premise of this research will explore how specifically the physical environment in which a theatre performance takes place affects the communication of ideas with an audience by examining two key components: the historical development of specialized theaters and the psychological factors of audience engagement.

To begin with, the parameters must be established that this thesis will analyze theaters, and their accompanying history, in the Western hemisphere- specifically regions of western and southern Europe, as well as America. Historically, many factors come into play when evaluating why theaters have been built in specific ways. Political movements, such as the division of Italy into several city-states in the 14th century, led theaters to be built as permanent cultural identity structures. Changes occurring in societal mentalities also have influenced the use of theaters, using specific construction elements to reflect social class structure. Take for example the use of boxes for upper class theatre audiences beginning in the 16th century or the use of smaller, less

comfortable balconies meant to seat minorities in the 19th and 20th centuries. Even elements of literary and religious movements have greatly influenced the use and design of performance environments. These spaces today most commonly include proscenium arch, thrust stage, arena, black box, and found. While unfortunately much documentation has been lost or destroyed over the course of history, analysis will be conducted using documents that have been recorded over the past century in this study. The purpose is not to argue for or against the evolution of performance spaces, but rather to call attention to its importance and relevance to culture.

Discussion of theatrical form will pair in with more broad concepts existing in audience psychology. Because the understanding of theatrical performance on a deliberate emotional and intellectual level is a rather abstract goal, it will be discussed and analyzed as a sub-component of the psychology of spectators of art and collective identity. These areas, one that studies the individual and the other the group, will be discussed in a parameter that relates to specific concepts existing in environmental psychology. In bringing these components together, it is important to note the theory of sensory knowledge (identification and understanding of a given surrounding) as it exists in the individual spectator and collective group. Though a great deal of physical sensory assumptions factor into one’s understanding of a performance, the deeper level of emotional and intellectual engagement and interpretation drawn in an audience is what becomes most significantly related to the effectiveness of theatrical form.

Overall, the purpose of this study is threefold: to analyze how social and political movements throughout history have led to the use and creation of a variety of performance theaters in order to reflect complex ideology. Secondly, to explain how specific aesthetic and architectural elements existing in a theater can parallel a desire to engage an audience in said specific ideologies. And thirdly, explain why the proscenium performance space is historically
one of the most common theater environments though it is arguably the least effect in creating connectivity with an audience. The secondary goals aim to draw interest from those unfamiliar with theatre in a manner that, not only makes sense, but emphasizes the significance theatre has in many areas of history. Ultimately, this thesis will explore the question of to what extent a theatre environment affects an audience's achievement of understanding a performance on a deliberate emotional and intellectual level thereby fulfilling desired theatrical form between performance and audience.
THEATRE ARTS: EXISTING LITERATURE

Wagner’s Universalism and the Grecian Theatre

Despite controversy over his own political agenda, Richard Wagner has been credited as one of the fathers of unified theatre. A German composer, Wagner undertook the creation of many influential operatic works and established the theater Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, Germany during the 19th century. According to former Professor of Drama at Stanford University Martin Esslin, “Richard Wagner wanted drama to be a ‘total work of art’ combining poetry, music, architecture, design, to create sublime emotional experience and profound insight for audiences.” Upon this desire, Wagner created remarkable performances and profound documents pertaining to the importance of theatre as a significant communication form of emotional and intellectual insight and for its ability to unify audiences.

Wagner’s drive to create unified theatre was inspired deeply in the political and social ideals of theatre as developed by the Greeks. He often idolized them as creators of the “Perfect Art.” In his document Art and Revolution, originally published in 1849, Wagner praises the Grecian spirit as the purest and most capable of all the arts, specifically as expressed in drama. Grecian society utilized drama as a tool for holding public forum, expressing social ideals, and ultimately a form of art able to unite audiences in a pure brotherhood, a pure state. “With the Greeks [art] lived in the public conscious, whereas today it lives alone in the conscience of private persons … Grecian Art was a worthy and adequate expression of the public conscience.”

This reflected into his use Universalism in theatre, which united theological, philosophical, and religious ideas all in one universal, all-encompassing idea pertinent to the human spirit. Wagner

believed Universalism could only survive after omitting narrow culture and the conservative psyche in exchange for deeper, collected philosophy and spirituality.

As theatre developed through the 19th century, Wagner observed a great deviation from its original purpose. Theatre became spectacle, entertainment, and a place to be seen rather than to see. The intent of encouraging forum for the public was soon drowned out by the expectations from the audience for blood and amusement. In Wagner’s time, opera had become the rival of the original Grecian tragedy, which created in the public further desire for elaboracy, grandeur, and a way to escape public issues rather than discuss them. In 1872, Wagner completed the building of his Bayreuth Festspielhaus. It was believed that this theater was created to enhance not only the performance, but also the connectivity with audiences toward a unified and perfect expression of art. Using strong architectural and design elements, Wagner created a performance environment that accomplished his ideas of Universalism. Theatre researchers Tanit Mendes and Janet Tulloch analyze qualities of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus that sought to “restore actor-audience intimacy … Wagner wanted to create a theatre that would allow the audience” to reconnect with perfect art. All of this was in hopes to alter audience perception of theater for entertainment back toward its original, higher purpose from the Grecian ideology.

To Wagner, theatre as used to unify life, design, religion, architecture, poetry, and music could accomplish change. The composer saw the Grecian ideology as a means to lead “mankind from doubt of its own consciousness [toward its] highest godlike might” and called for a sort of social revolution; change among those who could not merely be spectators anymore. As stressed

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in *Art and Revolution*, developing and strengthening the existence of collective conscious in the public was possible in using the unifying elements of theatre.

**Specification of Theatre Design**

As a designer who initiated his career during the Federal Theatre Project, Howard Bay’s experience and insight as a stage designer bloomed during a time when theaters were becoming more architecturally experimental. Designers, directors, and architects were beginning to create performance environments meant to serve a multitude of functions (the multi-purpose auditorium), a concept Bay saw as detrimental to the quality of theatre design. Bay’s book *Stage Design* was written in reflection of the progressive nature of theater of the 1970s and also in argument of its resulting deviation from creating spaces that allowed for effective, unique communication of theatrical form.

Bay analyses the importance of understanding the association of performance and specialized performance space. Using the words of Broadway director and producer Ralph Alswang, the “theater is a creative environment for hundreds of craftsmen” therefore as a building, a theater should emphasize “the aesthetic of the creator.”6 This statement, though elegantly worded, is one Bay finds egregious in its own right. Bay called the “latest engineering” advancements used in theaters at the time over zealous “shenanigans” compared to those that could exist naturally in a theater to engage audiences. While much beauty exists in the individual architect’s exploration and creation of a theater, it becomes secondary to the importance to what shall take place in it.

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As audiences at this point in time had been conditioned to view performances in a proscenium style, front-back-perception, the construction and utilization of performance spaces changed accordingly to reclaim audiences. These changes included expanding the apron to create a thrust stage, minimizing the proscenium arch to open up the stage area behind it, and installing permanent structures (such as stairs, levels, and entrances) in the stage space.Using these existing concepts differently allowed for some ability to reconnect audiences without using spectacle and advanced technology to do so. However with some theatre artists, these adjustments were not enough to fully emphasize and achieve their desired theatrical form. “The forward looking serious drama [was found] impatiently scratching for new environments and different audience-actor blends.” This led to artists seeking out “found” spaces, including warehouses, garages, lofts, and black box theaters that could be utilized as flexible areas to experiment with audience intimacy.

Bay also emphasizes the need for specialized performance spaces past the commonality of multipurpose theaters. As he describes, the term “all-purpose theatre” would become “the nastiest phrase in the English Language.” Because some performances call for the fulfillment of unique demands, the all-purpose theater quickly exhausts itself when it is unable to meet each specified demand. There are some architectural ideas, Bay points out, that are not going to be able survive in the way artists want them to because drama itself has changed so much over the past 2,500 years. This idea causes Bay to conclude that the goal of theater architects has been “merely mummery” and that the “show the audience never sees, architectural arrogance, the fragmentation of audience [and] learning to lust after a larger and fancier showcase” is ultimately
going to be a more constant factor that affects the development of future theaters.\textsuperscript{10} Bay calls for an understanding that the association between performance and specialized performance space be one that does not separate performance and place, but blends the two together in a practical and natural manner.

**Production and Reception Existing in Audience Engagement**

Susan Bennett, a Professor of English at the University of Calgary, offers an in-depth analysis of the psychological dynamic that exists in theatre audiences during a performance. The approach she takes to this analysis is one of viewing the relationship between the production (what is being presented) and reception (how it is received). While this relationship exists not only in theatre, but also media and education, she explains the phenomenon existing uniquely to theatre is the fact that an audience must be present in order for the cultural affirmation and purpose of the performance to be realized. More specifically to theatre, the effectiveness of communicating ideas to an audience depends on many factors existing within and around the audience itself. There is a great correlation that exists in the cultural assumptions of an audience and the idea in which a performance is sharing - the audience must be willing to not only watch, but also approve the idea.\textsuperscript{11}

In terms of collective identity and audience engagement, Bennett explains that the homogeneity of response that can come from an audience can begin individually and merge collectively. “It is worth remembering the vulnerability of that unified response. That audiences generally concur as to what is a good play and what is bad merely evidences aesthetic codes as culturally determined.”\textsuperscript{12} These factors relate to Bennett’s theory that audience perception is a

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 180-181.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 155.
mix of individual, social, and environmental process. While there is a great influence of individuality existing in the psychology of a spectator of art and one’s sensory knowledge that drives the understanding and satisfaction of what is being experienced, the collective conscious that allows for deeper insight of a performance still exists in an audience.

Bennett also explores the role architectural and environmental elements play in the perception of audiences. While research has been conducted on the development of architecture in theaters, “the audience [only has been] of limited interest in these studies.”13 There is in fact a great and unexplored “reciprocal effect of architecture on the audience and its reception of the plays.”14 This impact exists not only in the performances that take place in the theater, but also that it “is a landmark as a cultural institution. It is a physical representative of the art which dominant ideologies have both created and promoted.”15 This further drives the point that theatre exists as a significant cultural and social element, which allows for audiences to be analyzed as receptors of changes in society, politics, literature, and theology throughout history.

This analysis of architectural elements and collective identity furthermore offers an explanation as to the balance that must exist between experimental theatrical forms and their effect on an audience. While artists are prone to take risks, it is the response of the spectator that has the greatest determining factor as to whether an intended idea is communicated effectively. While desiring to achieve certain connectivity with audiences, Bennett acknowledges that altering the intensity of audience involvement in a performance tends to catch audiences off-guard and eliminates their comfortable passivity from the performance. Bennett points out that in audiences that have developed a passive, “screen-auditorium” perception of viewing

14 Ibid., 128.
15 Ibid., 128.
performances, “distance remains a necessary element… so that the spectator is placed precisely in the role of voyeur.”\textsuperscript{16} She uses research by audience psychologist Ben Claim to support this idea: “Deliberate manipulation of distance is the underlying factor that determines theatrical style in this century,” therefore indicating the “various levels of engagement with the audience are central to any analysis of the audience’s experience.”\textsuperscript{17}

Audiences have certain expectations and assumptions that must be either met or challenged by the performer. As theatrical form is desired to be exchanged between these two dynamic groups, Bennett restates that “theatre cannot cause social change, it can reiterate it, celebrate it, build strength and confidence” in those involved.\textsuperscript{18} It is important that any theatre artist or performer understands the perceptions and processes existing in their audience so they can therefore communicate their intended message in the most effective way possible.

**Ideology in Theater Development**

With many ideologies existing as to how a theater bases its operation, \textit{An Ideal Theater} by artistic director of New Dramatists Todd London compiles essays from many founders of American theaters, companies, and academic institutions regarding their principle roots. The progressive ideology expressed in the development of each of these organizations highlights the importance and significance of theatre to an equally progressive society. Essay content ranging from Hallie Flanagan and the Federal Theatre Project to Julian Beck and the Living Theater are all categorized based on, what London deems, several criteria of “revolutionary ideals” existing in the development of an effective theatre organization.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 156.
The first of London’s ideals lies in democracy and diversity. As theatre became a popular national identity factor in America, it was soon looked at as not only a way to express ideas, but also a way to reach across cultural barriers. An initial impulse for those wishing to utilize theatre arts “was to celebrate cultural distinctions while searching for a common tongue… Diversity was [the] field’s originating premise.”19 The concept of democracy ties into the next ideal, which revolves around availability and access for the people. The “about us, by us, for us, near us”20 mentality accomplishes two important traits: that theatre creates a local identity and simultaneously serves as community.

The next revolutionary ideals London describes are of theatres’ collective and individual aspects. This argues for the possibilities existing in the amateur alongside the professional. While the professional may be deemed to have a route paved for their success, London argues that it is the amateur who has opportunities their counterparts may have lost. It is a sense of unity were in “the amateur theater, [artists] are connected, adventurers together- audience, writers, players, all one.”21 Taking that idea one step further, London’s fourth ideal entails reaching achievements as found within the individual and the group. The two must work in sync in order for a theater to survive. London quotes American theater director and drama critic Harold Clurman: “The individual can achieve his fullest stature only through the identification of his own good with the good of his group; a group which he himself must help create.”22

London’s fifth ideal challenges public perception of theatre: as art or as institution. When a theater is looked at merely as a building, all that lies within it becomes equipment and

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20 Ibid., 17.
21 Ibid., 18.
22 Ibid., 18.
gadgetry. While the theater is a physical place, an ideal theater surpasses those boundaries to capture and represent that which is not physical. The sixth revolutionary ideal can be complex to understand, as it encompasses the interpretation of theatre for the audience and the artist. As Julian Beck describes, an individual “must enter the theater through the world.” This entails not only the physical walls of a building one enters, but the metaphysical elements existing in the individual and the society they are a part of. As theatre serves a great mission to awaken ideas and deeper insight in audience members, audiences must have a certain sense of awareness of their own world as it is depicted within the theater.

London’s final revolutionary ideal brings all others full circle to the purpose and desire of effective theatre. “Idealism … may itself be put down as the first ideal of the art theater.” As each theater is created and integrated into its community, what sets each apart and allows for survival is its founding vision. As London elaborates, each theater “becomes its own unique self. The life of a theater is revealed by what it does artistically and by how it does it. Artistic values, then, can also be reflected in the organizational structure.” Through what is described as a “family tree [of] inspiration, vision and influence” that has explored many branches of theater foundations across America, London highlights the progressive ideologies that make theatre significant.

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23 Ibid., 19.
24 Ibid., 19.
26 Ibid., 20.
27 Ibid., 21.
THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SPECIALIZED THEATERS

Creation of Theatre by the Greeks

Richard Wagner idolized the purity of the Grecian spirit. While documentation exists of theatre beginning as early as 2600 BCE in the Indus Valley Civilization, it was the Greeks who refined it. When a new democratic constitution was introduced to Athens, it has been noted that the first performances of tragedies began as far back as 508 BCE. The Greek theatre was instilled with community, constructing it to be living Art. Their theatre encompassed audiences, enhanced group dynamic, and offered expression of ideologies ranging from emotional to social and political to theological. Theatre served as a place for issues to be faced.

The Greeks focused on the spirit of community through the performance of tragedy and comedy. People joined in an open, balanced space of great magnitude. The polytheistic belief system of the Greeks used drama festivals to celebrate gods, primarily Apollo and Dionysus, the largest of which was the Festival Dionysian. This festival lasted several days and quickly became the strongest civic opportunity for worship, debate, and presentation of new works. As democratization furthered in Athens, citizens turned to the works of playwrights, such as Euripides and Aristophanes, to gather and understand changing political and social dogmas. This community became especially important when war broke out between Athens and Sparta that lasted for over 20 years.

Though Athens lost the war against Sparta in 404 BCE, they recovered quickly and the spiritual community dynamic existing in theatre only proved stronger. In 338 BCE, a permanent stone theater was built at Epidaurus. Earlier theaters were built purely of wood and meant to be

temporary. Some scholars say that this allowed for political equality, the politician who built the theater would not be asserting himself permanently. The most famous of which were in Attica, Soros, Corinth, and Epidaurus. 29 The development of stone amphitheaters brought with it a lasting presence within what was rapidly becoming an increasingly divided plethora of political city-states.

The Greek amphitheater seated up to 15,000-17,000 people within a semi-circle seating arrangement, called the theatron. The theatron was built into a hillside, offering naturally raked or elevated seating so all of the audience was able to view the performance and natural acoustics could be used. It is believed that audiences were separated, seating political and religious leaders in the front row (preodria), and the rest of the members separated by tribe and gender in the theatron. Theater was open to all members of the public, as it was a profoundly communal occasion. It was not until the 5th century BCE that fees were suggested to be paid as admission due to the vast amount in attendance. 30 The magnitude of these amphitheaters intended to house thousands of audience members and often chorus sizes (performers) of over 50 members.

The arrangement of the theatron meant the audience surrounded an orchestra stationed in front of the performance area. The orchestra was a large circular area, estimated to be 66 feet in diameter. 31 The orchestra was the first permanent structure existing in Greek theaters. Behind the orchestra stood a structure called the skene. This building contained many elements that are common in theaters today including dressing rooms, scene storage, and areas for special effect machinery. Though clarification and information are vague, it is believed that that skene had a facade that could be utilized by a wide variety of performances. Structurally, it was two stories

31 Ibid., 48.
high with approximately three doorways used for entrances and exits, and also had wings (or areas off to either side of the orchestra called paraskenia).\textsuperscript{32}

Further debate exists over the architectural configuration of the Greek theater in relation to the existence of a performance stage. Some research indicates there was a raised platform between the skene and the orchestra. During the Classical period, evidence has been found of large raised stages in the amphitheater.\textsuperscript{33} With either interpretation, “in this democratic theatre there were no limited-view seats; and kind of 'funnel' of attention must have built up, all focusing down toward the orchestra … the same stage-picture.”\textsuperscript{34} The construction of the amphitheater further emphasized the Grecian spirit of community.

**Roman Influence and Deviation**

As the Greeks established a stable civilization in southern Europe, the Roman Empire sprouted in the Italian peninsula. Estimated to have been founded in 750 BCE, Rome proved to be a society with power comparable to the Greeks as they took initiation on developing democracy and sovereignty.\textsuperscript{35} In the midst of their advancements, the nature of theatre also underwent a certain amount of development. Though the Romans imported many aspects of Greek culture, the “new Roman aesthetic was that art should imitate Greece.”\textsuperscript{36} However, what was the Grecian spirit of beauty and integrity of community soon grew into bloodlust and violence. The further division of the public into social classes developed and was emphasized by the differing political ideologies of the Roman people.

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid
As the Roman emphasis on theatre as entertainment grew, the audiences simultaneously developed greater individuality. Collective identity turned to the self, disintegrating many aspects of unity that the Greeks had developed and thrived upon. The Roman theaters kept much of the same aspects of the Greek amphitheater. Many early theaters were temporary, built of wood by wealthy Roman politicians wishing to display their grandeur. The buildings were constructed for festivals and usually burned down after the celebrations. Out of fear of endangering public morals, Roman officials opposed the construction of permanent theaters.³⁷

The Roman theater was similar to the Greek in many aspects with a degree of alterations meant to suit the Roman audience and ideology. The scale of the theater became grander, housing more people for events such as gladiator fights and naval battles. These amphitheatres had the same strong three parts: the cavea (equivalent to the theatron), orchestra, and scaena (skene). The cavea was connected to the scaena and sat up 8,000 in smaller theaters and up to 25,000 in larger. The Romans also catered to audience comfort in the cavea, developing ventilation, providing awnings for shade, and even primitive air conditioning that used fans over cooled water buckets to blow air over the audience. The orchestra was “rarely used for staging, but instead was used for seating government officials and for the flooding required for sea battles.”³⁸ There is said to be a raised area in front of the scaena, measuring about 5 ft. tall and upwards of 100 X 20 ft. to 300 x 40 ft., called the pulpitum. The scaena was similarly used as dressing area and storage; however, in the Roman theater it had a roof over it that also extended over the pulpitum. Facades of the scaena were ornate and elaborate to reflect the political figure that supported the theater.³⁹

³⁸ Ibid., 78.
³⁹ Ibid., 78-79.
The largest difference was in the way theaters were constructed. The Romans had made
great developments in architecture and engineering that allowed their theaters to be freestanding
structures. This implies that unlike the Greeks, Roman theaters did not rely on a hillside to
provide raked seating; they could build raked seating in a freestanding structure. This brought
theater, the Roman form of mass entertainment, closer to the people. It was not until 55 BCE that
the first Roman permanent theater was built by Pompey in the capital. He insisted the theater was
a religious edifice, with statues lining the scaene. From that point on, stone theaters were
gradually built in Rome. Architecturally free standing with grand aesthetic, Roman theaters
were built to emphasis visual spectacle and entertainment.

The Roman Republic ended in 30 BCE, and the Roman Empire was then established. In
330 AD, Constantine established Byzantium as the capital of the empire and founded it as
Christian society. The influence of Christianity also brought with it a great shift in the
community spirit and exaltation of the individual. As Wagner describes, the Grecian art
emphasized "pleasure in itself; in existence, in community; but the condition…at the close of the
Roman mastery of the world, was self-contempt, disgust with existence, horror of community." By 692, ruler Justinian II legislated against theaters and the worship of Dionysus in the
Byzantine Empire. Banning the worship of pagan gods caused great alteration in the way that
theatre connected to the masses and, for the next 400 years, there was very little reason for it in
Christian Europe.

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Christian Europe, 10th-17th Centuries

As Christianity spread throughout Europe, the Church and its controlling officials recognized a need to communicate the word of God to the masses. Though theatre had been rejected for years, the church now saw opportunity to incorporate biblical messages with the presentation style of the dramatic arts. Instead of the previous comedies and tragedies, works such as the saint, mystery, and passion play began to emerge in Christian Europe, the first of which was documented in England in 1100.42

The Church however incorporated a certain amount of exclusivity to their dramatic performances. The liturgical drama, a common presentation of biblical parables, was done in Latin by clergy and choirboys in monasteries and was not open to the general public. Over the next 200 years, the development of urban centers began to have a great impact on the availability of surviving theater to the public. Architecture began to evolve from Romanesque to Gothic style, which allowed for ornate, large interior spaces to be constructed. Gothic cathedrals and large churches soon rooted, making liturgical dramas and other plays more accessible.

Liturgical dramas depended on the aesthetic and architectural features existing in the church to be staged appropriately. Commonly, scenic structures (mansions) depicting biblical tales and locals were set up inside the church to illustrate the stories within the dramas. Though the plays were performed in Latin, the use of stage area and scenery helped the general public understand the context of the performance.43 During the 13th century, dramas began to be written in vernaculars- a change that was pivotal to making theatre meaningful to the public once again.

During the Medieval Ages, cycle plays were also used to spread Christianity. These performances were very elaborate and shown to the public on pageant wagons; mobile

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performing stages. The most famous performance of this type is the Corpus Christi Festival dating back to 1476 in Spain. The use of these wagons allowed audiences to assemble in "various places and the cycle plays would be set up on a wagon which moved from locale to locale."\textsuperscript{44} Further evidence of biblical drama spreading outside of the church was the development of stationary staging set up in open township areas. This also allowed the masses to gather and view the performance in a “theater-in-the-round” manner.\textsuperscript{45} This allowed for a flexible, neutral platform staging style that increased audience engagement.

By the 14th and 15th century, theatre had once again found a valuable role in society as a means of not only relying messages from the Church, but also to connect the people. “In medieval world … God and the Devil were omnipresent spectators of human lives and the actor-audience boundary was fluid because all humans were conceived as ultimately players.”\textsuperscript{46} This utilization became increasingly important as America was first discovered and civilization was further advancing in the western world. As interest in humanism, emotion, and reason developed outside of the control of the church, the Renaissance dawned leading to furtherer artistic and literary advancement—all of which reflected in theatre.

At this time, many changes that drove the new movement of theatre development forward stemmed from Italy. Under the power of Leo X in the 16th century, theatres’ importance grew strongly in the people and in rapid technological advancement. Presented in the vernacular, theatre was an “imitation of life, mirror of culture, and image of truth.”\textsuperscript{47} Italy divided into several city states, each vying for its own identity. Therefore, wooden theaters were constructed

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 137.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 82.
as a way to establish communication centers and display the prominence of political figures funding their creation. It wasn’t until the latter half of the century when permanent theaters were established. Renaissance England focused on the literary aspects of theatre, especially with the plays of Shakespeare written in the 1500s. Italian theatre focused on modern, visual, and spatial forms. The increasing stability and appreciation for theatre was reflected in higher standards, industry growth, and, in many ways, propaganda.⁴⁸

Permanent theaters began to take the places of temporary wooden ones. The first of the era was Ferrara erected in 1531 in the Italian province Mantua, followed by the Hotel de Bourgogne, France in 1548. These early examples provide an idea of the general layout of theaters of the period. Generally, they were long, narrow rooms with curved bench seating, a platformed stage, and orchestra space (now called the pit). Ultimately the Renaissance ideal aimed to “unite actors, audience, and architecture in a physical setting.”⁴⁹ It is believed that during this time, evidence of Corinthian column arches lining either end of the stage were discovered in the Salone dei Cinquecento, built in 1565.⁵⁰

With the establishment of theaters as cultural centers, their construction was also being used more intentionally to emphasis social hierarchy and religious ideology. Pope Leo X for example, became the primary ruling figure of the Italian Renaissance, resulting in him receiving specific seating privileges being placed in the center of the audience, reflecting how he was the center of the Christian world.⁵¹ Kings, royalty, and powerful political figures were also placed

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⁵¹ Ibid., 24.
strategically in the center front audience illustrating the social hierarchy. Boxes and galleries were also introduced into the theater at this time. Boxes were private quarters that could be purchased by the elite so they could enjoy a public performance in the privacy of their own curtained room. The galleries were very similar to balcony seating areas, set aside for the middle and lower class that could afford seats rather than standing in the pit.

During this time, the distinction between public and private theaters also rose. Public theaters were outdoor performance areas, enclosed yard inns, that sat anywhere between 1500-3000. Public theaters were much cheaper to attend and still had a certain amount of social hierarchy reflected in their design with the use of boxes and galleries. Private theaters (such as Blackfriars in England, 1576) were indoor and much smaller, seating about 600-750, more expensive, and catered to private performances for the wealthy. Wealthy people were even allowed to sit on stage for the performances as theater rapidly became a place to be seen rather than to see. Court theaters also became extremely popular, specifically paring with the rise of Commedia dell'arte; an improvised, comic performance genre rising from Italy that satirized society. Royalty and nobility in particular enjoyed private entertainment because it was elaborate, ornate, and reflected their wealth. In this sense, theater began to be “political bribery, with princes buying people with entertainment.”

English Elizabethan theaters at this time also reflected similar aspects of earlier Greek and Roman theaters. They had three distinctive sections; the house (where the audience sat), the pit (previously the orchestra) and the tiring house (or scene house). Tiring houses were often three stories again used for dressing, storage, and entrances and exits. The first floor held the

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stage, the second was another playing area, and the third floor held musicians. A roof extended over the stage, and was referred to as “the Heavens” or “the Shadows.” Stages were raised platforms and some, like Shakespeare's Globe Theater, had audiences surrounding three sides of the stage. This is noted as the foremost primitive thrust stage of the century. Others had audiences completely surround the stage (a primitive arena stage) while others kept to the standard front-back stage placement.

Debatably the most important theater to be constructed during the Renaissance was the Teatro Olimpico in 1585 in Italy. Designed by Andrea Palladio, this theater reflected the Roman amphitheater in an indoor space. Curved seating for 3000 was arranged in the house and facing toward a raised stage. Encompassing the stage were elaborate statues and sculptures- early evidence of an architect's desire to “frame the stage”. The stage itself utilized another rising Renaissance element, forced perspective background painted behind the 70 x 18 foot stage. The neutral playing stage was suited for medieval theatre; now Italian influence brought more elaborate facades and a path for further incorporation of scenery.

The most significant development in theater architecture during the Renaissance was the proscenium arch. While earlier evidence arguably exists, the first revolutionary noted proscenium arch was found in Teatro Farnese, build by Giovan Battista Aleotti in Parma, Italy, 1618. The arch allowed the “audience [to view] the action through the arch, which frames the stage picture” and hides mechanisms and scenery, an “impetus of the development of greater realism in the theater.” Theatro Farnese also inspired other architects with its practical, yet

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56 Ibid., 166.
ornate construction. Open houses designed with boxes, pits, galleries, and raked seating became the traditionally built theater audience seating.

Now that storage and hiding special effects from the sight of the audience became less of a problem with the proscenium arch, further developments could be made in scenery and stage technology. Italian artists Sabastian Serilo and Giacomo Torelli were innovators in new scenic techniques that allowed for more visual interest in performances. During this century, candles and oil lamps were now common in indoor theaters due to the lack of visibility. These Italian innovations crossed into theatrical practices of the French, English, and Spanish. The demand for more advanced scenic techniques was also fueled by society’s demand for spectacle and the rise of Neoclassicism. Scenic designers were needed to reflect the neoclassical ideals of unity; meaning what was occurring in the text of the performance, the performers themselves, and the stage they were performing on needed to be in a uniform environment. Theaters, specifically in France that heavily inspired neoclassicism, soon underwent renovation to meet the new audience and artistic demand for the proscenium arch, beginning with the Petit Bourbon in Paris, and later the Theater Mairua and Hotel de Bourgogne in the 1640s.  

Meanwhile, the English Restoration began to take place in 1640 as the commonwealth and middle class rose. In the years following the Civil War of England, theaters were no longer seen as a threat to uprising or plague and reopened in 1642 after their 22-year closure as a means to return a sense of normality to society. However, due to strict monitoring from British officials in 1650, “the theater, when restored, was not the peoples’.” Government regulations were an overarching aspect of all performances in England out of fear of social upheaval. Theaters were

required licenses to operate within city limits. Public, outdoor theaters were slowly dissolved and, by the end of the Restoration, most English Elizabethan theaters were indoor, proscenium arch spaces with strong division of audiences existing in the house. The pit now had benches and seating within all theaters was raked.

An important development in theater construction that sprouted from England during this time was the stage apron. The apron took the common raised platform stage, framed by the proscenium, and extended the performance area past the arch. This divided the stage evenly in half (half of the stage behind the arch, the other in front of it). Though this later became more common in theaters, it created some deviation in audience mentality. As English theatre scholar Peter Thomson describes, the “attack on forestage [apron space] as a site of interaction [meant] the audience would occupy one room and the actors the other.”

In spite of the neoclassical ideals, the overriding ideas of Restoration Theater included symmetry, audience separation, space, elaboracy, and practicality. Toward the end of the 17th century, developments from the Renaissance allowed for moving in the “passed hybrid globalism, baroque symbols, spectacle, and toward refinement of reason” and toward further progression.

18th Century-Present

Moving into the 18th Century, two key events made great impacts in society: the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. Both caused the middle class to not only expand, but to become a more powerful force in the developments of civilization. For the first time since the degree set by the Greeks, theater became a significant source of political forum, national

Declining aristocratic power led to an increase in rationalism and demand for theaters as localized cultural centers. Forms of theatre, such as opera, were now available to the middle class as a result of rising economic stability. As theatre rose as a symbol of national identity, government regulations began to expand and attempt to establish control over the changing societies of Western Europe. Regulations, such as England’s Licensing Act of 1737, required theaters to obtain a warrant in order to produce performances. This was meant to control the vastly changing middle-class and tighten censorship in order to protect public morality.

The theaters of this time maintained Italianate Renaissance influence in their architecture and now began to weave in specific cultural characteristics. In Spain, a strong division between secular and religious plays still existed. Reflecting much more influence from the English Elizabethan public theaters, the Spanish performance Corrales were used specifically for secular performances and catered to the public. They were built in existing courtyards outdoors and had the typical audience seating of galleries and boxes. The pit area (referred to as the patio) was where the lower class could watch performances. Next to the pit was the raised platform stage opposite the entrance to the theater. The area above the entrance had raked, fine seating where government officials sat. Women, if they were in attendance, could sit on either side of this area where they could be monitored. The Corrales sat 2,000. The proscenium arch was introduced to the Spanish later in the century but only in court theaters.

During this time, there was minor yet significant development in scenic technology. The common Italianate perspective grew to multi-point rather than single, greater realism also influenced scenic practices. It is evident that the first box set (enclosed scenery that took on very

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realistic room-like qualities) appeared late in the century. Due to many theaters burning down, attempts to make more efficient lighting practices also occurred. Silk screens were used for colored lighting and it was much safer to use oil lamps instead of candles on stage. The first recorded use of oil lamps for a stage production was at Comedie Francaise, Paris in 1784. There were also several attempts by designers to hide light sources from the audience by using shutters and chandeliers above the stage.63

A notable change that happened in the development of theaters was the expansion of building sizes. The rising middle class was now more capable of attending performances. Benches were added to the pits so the lower class could now sit during performances. This change, however, caused some speculation in the audiences. “Spectators in the old seatless pits would move about and socialize. Thus, new seats were controversial- partisans had enjoyed the social ambiance of the old pit.”64 While these changes occurred within the audience, the upper class and all spectators were removed from the stage and were no longer able to sit onstage during performances. This alteration, made by Englishman David Garrick in 1759, put more power not only in the different classes, but also returned a certain amount of power to the performers.

In the 1760s, the British Colonies in North America began to greatly rebel against British control. This reflected not only in the political and social aspects of the nation, but also in the national pride associated with theaters. The first permanent theaters in the colonies were built as early as the 1600s and “closely reflected the influence of English theatre practices.”65 However, performances did not become a regular part of the society until the 1700s, with further

63 Ibid., 239.
65 Ibid., 330.
establishment of professional companies in 1750. The growing tension between the colonies and England led to crossfire over national identity as opposition to independence caused the British to tighten censorship in colonial theatre.\textsuperscript{66}

National identity through theatre continued to be a dominating element of the 18th century. It became a “tool for collective identity and self-definition” in the midst of turbulent “social development in the rest of the world.”\textsuperscript{67} The United States of America gained recognized independence from Britain in 1783, while the French Revolution began in 1789. Audiences were transitioning between “aesthetic and authentic in the emergence and stress” on cultural significance (Holland and Peterson). National identity was also sought in literary and artistic movements that reflected on the stage. Realism became an important movement during the late 18th century as it rebelled against neoclassical ideals and, instead, depicted every-day life at its rawest moments. Realism called for cohesion not only among scenic elements and performers, but also a “need to create an environment that reflected the changing makeup of society.”\textsuperscript{68}

Nationalism rose as the Industrial Revolution made further impact in society well through to the 19th century. Theatre now had larger audiences, deeper impact, and greater desire from the people to be sought out. People had better transportation and access to cultural centers. Artists, such as Y.B. Yeats in Ireland at the end of the 19th century, wanted to develop theatre that would celebrate and parallel cultural and political autonomy of their country. As a result, Yeats created the Abbey Theater in Dublin, 1904, as a “center of renaissance in Irish Drama and breeding


ground for a tradition.” The influence of these literary figures led to the creation of several new genres of theatre, including romanticism, melodrama, and the well-made play. Stemming from the desire to strengthen and define the times, these literary movements helped create identity in nations undergoing adversity. At this time, Richard Wagner was also producing operas, composing, and inspiring revived meaning of theatre to be achieved. Wagner created the Bayreuth Festspielhaus in 1882 to remind of deep spiritual value which was modeled after the Greek theatre.

Much like the century before, the 19th saw continued enlargement of public theater sizes to accompany the growing working-class audiences. The socially elite soon left the commotion and rowdiness of the playhouses for elaborate, more comfortable opera houses. In the 1860s however, the construction of the common playhouse shifted away from Italianate architecture and incorporated more practical, technological advances. Boxes and galleries were soon replaced by steel-enforced balconies, increasing the playhouse sizes vertically. At this time, it also became apparent that “remodeling older playhouses was less cost effective”, leading to the construction of new buildings. Audience comfort also became more of a priority in newer playhouses. Ventilation within the theater was increased and the benches stowed in the pit were replaced with actual seats. This small change also led to the introduction of reserved seating for productions.

Scenic elements of this time continued to drive for more historical accuracy and spectacle. To keep up with audience demands for visually interesting and unique productions, further use of technological design innovations occurred. Some of these special effects included moving panoramas, nascent forms of rear projection, elevators, flying machinery, and revolving

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70 Ibid., 360-362.
stages. Many of these innovations existed in Madison Square Garden, erected in 1879, and were considered highly advanced for this time. Arguably, the greatest technical innovation came from the Chestnut Street Theater of Philadelphia in 1816 when gas lighting was introduced to performances. Further development in lighting utilization came when Thomas Edison invented the incandescent light bulb, providing a safer, more effective method of lighting stages in 1879. One of the first known theaters to use the incandescent light bulb was the Savoy Theater of London in 1881.72

Technical advancements reflected on stage and drove the movement of realism forward. Developing primarily in the work of Russian playwright Anton Chekhov, this genre broke conventions in order to “make every feature of a performance as much like everyday life as possible… [and to] correspond to what audiences observed in their own lives.”73 Support of realism led to naturalism. Naturalism aimed to accomplish the same everyday life aspects of realism, only with further exploration of the senses on stage. Some artists rebelled against realism, believing that the “every day” viewed on stage should not be limited by the confines of the stage itself and instead immerse the audience into a slice of reality.

This mentality led to the Independent Theater Movement spanning across Western Europe. Groups from this movement beginning in 1891 include Theatre Libre in France, Freie Bahn in Berlin, and The Independent Theater in England. These artists brought with them a new approach to presenting drama. “Theater buildings derived from playhouses that had since the 18th century served to bolster the prestige of royalty [now served] a strange tendency to embrace new ideas.”74 They disregarded the typical, conventional theater, including the separation from

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72 Ibid., 392.
73 Ibid., 418.
the stage and audience created by the creation of the “fourth wall” brought by the proscenium arch.

Advances in technology and the two world wars that occurred in the 20th century also created opportunity and challenge for theatre artists to explore new ideas. Inventions, such as motion picture and radio, brought individuality to entertainment simultaneously altering the perceptions of spectators. Between drastic exploratory movements and the new technical innovations, the dynamic of western audiences shifted to a great extent. Now audiences, once talkative and engaged in theatre performances, sat silently during productions and desired the technical innovations that were seen in the movies. Audiences found that attending movies and nickelodeon cinemas were much cheaper and more accessible than playhouses and theatrical performances. Many smaller proscenium arch theaters were converted into movie theaters. Audiences were able to adapt from the front-back orientation of the proscenium stage to the front-back orientation of the picture screen.75

Theater architecture remained rather inflexible and structural, reflective to the classical, commercial audience. This, however, left some theatre artists to feel threatened, leading to minor alterations in the way performances were presented. The Kammerspiele in Germany, opening in 1906, attempted to break proscenium style separation between stage and audience by “letting architectural treatment of the auditorium carry across the stage and by keeping the stage only a small step above floor level.”76 In a more dynamic approach, some artists broke away from the traditional, greatly established proscenium stage and produced performances in alternative spaces that fit more naturally to their ideas.

In the 1920s, government subsidies aimed to grow new theater spaces as propaganda with post-war society. This is where most legitimate use and creations of thrust, arena, and found performances spaces trace to. “The dynamisms that the revolution lacked were to be found in theater.” The rise of totalitarian theaters, supported and controlled by the government, created opportunity for keeping theatre alive while simultaneously restricting artistic expression. This caused artists to rebel and the correlation between the degree of a war a country suffered and the degree of theatrical experimentation to become strikingly strong. The progressive Little Theater movement, which sprouted in America, 1912, also encouraged European artists to embrace the unconventional.

England maintained tradition and national pride, looking to their historical theatre to move past war trauma. Italy, which was far less stable, embraced the spontaneous, raucous iconoclasm of futurism. France embraced the dream-like, whimsical traits of Dadaism, which later evolved into surrealism. Russia and Germany saw the need to transcend the traditional realism and naturalism forms and assert forms that instilled different characteristics in their nations. These initial movements paved the way for greater exploration of theatrical experimentation after WWII, including Expressionism, theater of the absurd, theatre of cruelty, absurdist, and epic theater. These new dramatic forms challenged audiences as they moved into less formal, less familiar performance spaces.

Though American theatre did not experience differences as drastic following WWI, change occurred with the Great Depression in 1929. The rising costs of spectacle, touring companies, and growth of Broadway productions proved to destabilize the theatre industry

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beginning in the 1920s. Many American theaters turned to the emphasis on visual interest and spectacle in reaction to losing audiences to motion pictures. Once the Depression began, theaters found themselves struggling to survive as an industry and simultaneously meet audience demands in the depleted economy. In 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt launched the Federal Theatre Project in hopes of restarting performance arts in a recovering economy. Led by Hallie Flanagan, government funds were used to support new theatrical ventures and revitalize commercial theater outside of New York. Due to the growth of the project, minorities were also given more opportunity to establish identity through performance. The FTP paved the way for the growth of African American stock companies. Due to controversial content being presented onstage, the FTP was shut down in 1939.\textsuperscript{79}

Through the trouble and rebuilding that was necessary after the wars, theatre once again served as a radical platform politically and socially. Stemming from the “aftermath of world-wide challenge to the status quo of culture, a new theatrical era” was rapidly emerging in the 20th century.\textsuperscript{80} Following WWII, radical political movements of the 1960s reflected a “spiritually contrasting society [melded] with political radicals emerging in underground theatre.”\textsuperscript{81} Alternative theaters rose, paralleling the psychological freedom from existing hypocrisy and social restriction. These alternative or found spaces would be anything from abandoned warehouses to old grocery stores converted into performance theaters. Much of this revolution rooted in young minds, causing a series of student revolutions in Europe, 1968. The new generation of theatre artists sought to rebel against static conventions and embrace the emerging love of experimental theatre. Younger generations taking charge in theatre movements

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 443.
also allowed for embracing diversity. American Civil Rights movements beginning in the late 1950s further opened the doors for minorities in theatre. The nature of going against the cultural status quo also caused theatre artists to seek out non-commercial, alternative theatre spaces that specifically suit their ideology. The rise of alternative and amateur theatre began to blur the separation between audience and performer that had such a strong hold in the traditional performance environment.

The establishment of Off Broadway and Off-off Broadway in 1958 also created an outlet for experimental work in non-commercial spaces. As Living Theatre developer Julian Beck described: “Transformations reflected changes in American society and experimental theatre”. It popularized intimate, smaller, theater spaces and “provided viability of alternative spaces.”

These spaces also challenged audience perception, seating them in arrangements that surrounded ¾ of the stage (thrust stage) or surrounding the stage completely (arena stage). During this time, artists also began performing in found spaces - warehouses, old churches, and even streets - that became laboratories for intellectual, mischievous, unfamiliar works.

Progressive theatrical experiments began to develop a strong focus on enhancing connectivity with audiences. Opposite from the traditional execution, focus shifted to “testing structure and rhythms, altering physical circumstances, finding hesitation, [and] confusion” in a performance. One such movement during the late 60s early 70s was environmental theater. This genre made the entire theater a performance space, asserting that any separation between audience and performer was not needed. Environmentalists performed in spatial arrangements that were easily transformed into whatever the artist desired. “This kind of environmental

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84 Ibid., 514.
performance space [stood] in clear contrast to that of formal theater structures, in which the actor is removed, architecturally and scenically, from his audience...and performance space [becomes] viewed as a single, all-encompassing unit.” This is arguably how the black box theater, a flexible performance room that is often at least 50ft x 50ft, was established.

The acceptance and encouragement of alternative, experimental theatre became a catalyst for embracing diversity in the art. The collectiveness of theatre artists from different cultures, beliefs, and backgrounds challenged the barriers of social acceptance. The branching of international theater in the late 20th century allowed for cultural exchange, advancements of ideology through literature, and start of a global community of artists. These cultural exchanges also encouraged the influence of Western style theaters to expand to other parts of the world.

Today, a variety of theater performance environments exist due the progression of artists and audiences throughout history. While the proscenium stage remains the most common, other environments such as thrust, arena, found, and black box are used to engage audiences in a theatre performance. Historic social, political, and religious movements correlate in the importance of understanding the development and use of these spaces because they reflect not only in the progression of the theatre artist, but simultaneously in the audience.

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THEATRICAL FORM AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

Psychology of Spectators of Art

In understanding the effectiveness of theatrical form, it is empirical to understand the basis of audience psychology. As theatrical form is the communication of ideas between performers and audiences, it can in turn be analyzed under the scope of the psychology of spectators of art. Visual, auditory, and spoken information, though delivered in physical, measurable ways, becomes abstract as it is interpreted and experienced by a spectator. Similar to an individual interpreting music or art, the deliberate emotional and intellectual understanding one achieves during a theatre performance can only be assumed under certain definition.

To further explain the effectiveness of theatrical form, many of the same elements can be paralleled with the more familiar term “willing suspension of disbelief.” This idea is commonly applied to literature and, in a more contemporary sense, to cinema. Willing suspension of disbelief entails the “hypnotic process whereby [spectators] willingly allow themselves to be transported for story spectator to story participant.”86 In other words, an audience member is engaging in and achieving an understanding of a given work on a deliberate, more insightful level. In relation to theatrical form, artistic ideas whether “sentimentally obvious or intellectually obscure”87 are communicated between performers and audiences in hopes of attaining a like level of connectivity and involvement.

The effect a theater environment has on an audience's deeper level of thought, equating to an understanding of theatrical form, simply cannot be measured. As described by Psychology

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professors and researchers Hans Kreitler and Shulamith Kreitler, “the empirical approach to analyzing arts, mostly scientifically, [is] based on observations and hypotheses … [and] set apart from philosophical elements that cannot be concretely measured.”88 This is not to say there is not logic existing in the arts, but rather pulls into focus that a vast amount of what is produced from art is sensed, felt, or expressed. Though the nature of its study brings with it great ambiguity, analyzing the psychology of spectators of art has value in defining whether the intentions and desires of the artist are understood.

Additionally, an individual’s interpretation of art is extremely subjective. This is a singularity that has challenged many artists as they strive to find commonalities and, in most cases, accomplish specific expressional goals with their work. The interpretations, thoughts, and emotions as experienced by the artist undergo a developmental process; whether that is through creating drafts, rehearsals, or repetition of techniques. Upon completion of the process, the work is presented in an attempt to engage the spectator in understanding the abstract implications expressed by the artist. A more extensive phenomenon existing specifically to theatre, as elaborated by Bennett, describes that the audience must be present in order for cultural affirmation and purpose of the performance to be realized. “The spectators’ experience may also prove to be most revealing about the nature” of the performance.89 Following the process an artist undergoes in developing a work, the interpretations an audience gathers from its presentation provides indication as to if the goals of the artist were achieved or not.

It must also be understood that many factors affect the spectator’s perception of art. As explored by Gestalt psychology, “the whole is more than the sum of its parts or of the relations

89 Ibid., 5.
between its parts.” In a theatrical setting, this theory of multiple aspects working to present a single unified idea becomes significant. As previously discussed, the Neoclassic and Environmental movements are examples of theatre artists aiming to create a specific unity in performance. While neoclassic ideals pertained to unifying elements of the stage, text, and performer, it becomes apparent that the performances of this time attempted to dissolve disjunctive theatrical elements by creating similarity among them. In a like manner, the Environmentalist ideals aimed to unify the audience, performers, and stage. However, this unity was desired from a joining of all in an un-divided performance space. These movements further reflect the importance of Gestalt’s theory as applied to theatre, that a performance has multiple parts existing in it that make up a unified whole which effects audience engagement and understanding. Further described by Kreitler and Kreitler, “a unified whole in the spectator’s experience … and how the mutual relations among the various elements in a work of art can be understood through their role and position in the whole” is pivotal to their resulting interpretation of the work. Therefore as an audience member is able to recognize the specific aspects of a performance and the environment it is presented in, the intention is that they will be able to unify themselves to it, leading to deeper connectivity with its theatrical form.

**Sensory Knowledge and Environmental Psychology**

Given these aspects of the psychology of spectators of art, they can now be analyzed in terms of sensory knowledge and environmental psychology. As art is perceived greatly on an individual basis, understanding the processes of how one uses existing assumptions and

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90 Ibid., 8.
knowledge to interpret a specified environment can further influence the theatre artist as to how performance spaces are utilized.

Sensory knowledge entails experiencing that which can be felt or perceived primarily in a physical manner. This knowledge links our sensory qualities (sight, smell, touch, etc.) to further conclusions and understanding of the world around us. As described by Denison University Professor of Psychology and Environmental Studies Harry Heft, “sensory qualities are not mere ‘givens’ in experience … Sensory qualities have been traditionally viewed as the primitive data for perceptual experience, the elements out of which perception is constructed.”

The correlation of physical sensing to emotional and intellectual conclusion desired in theatrical form has opportunities and limitations within the assumptions of each audience member.

While significant to one’s overall experience of art, the many variables that can be individually sensed within a given environment leads to difficulty when analyzing collectivity within an audience. As Heft explores, the potential differentiation existing in individual sensory knowledge creates a certain amount of disconnect in a given environment. Specific assumptions of our environment are created based on our individual understanding of said environment. As a result, one may not be able to experience the environment and the art existing within it to its desired potential. “If it is assumed that what we experience immediately is a mental representation rather than the environment itself … we remain, at best, trapped in a precarious mental domain of guesses and hypotheses as to what the environment is like.” In other words, an individual’s assumptions and knowledge of the environment they are in creates challenge in their ability to understand that which is presented within it.

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93 Ibid., 520.
To further apply this concept, Heft analyzes the greater context of which our sensory knowledge and environmental psychology may fit into in a social and historical aspect. As discussed in the historical development of theatre arts, the evolution of society and theatre correlate greatly. Therefore, if the “changing character of our perceptual world” undergoes alteration, so will the dynamics of our “social processes.”\textsuperscript{94} It is the study of the “socio-historical dimensions that may prompt more careful consideration of [this specific] relationship.”\textsuperscript{95} It is the changes in our social processes Heft is speaking of that further alter the viability and understanding of how an individual interprets art in a larger, more collective social situation. In relation to a performance setting, it can be determined that though vastly individual sensory knowledge exists within the perception of each member of an audience, a great opportunity to alter interpretation exists in group accessibility and collective understanding of the performance environment.

\textbf{Collective Identity and Audience Engagement}

Despite all of the great individuality that exists in the psychology of spectators of art and sensory knowledge in an environment, the amassing of minds in an audience creates a collective identity that is pivotal to a theater performance. As stated by English dramatist Martin Esslin, “a good theater audience ceases to be an assemblage of isolated individuals, it becomes a collective consciousness.”\textsuperscript{96} It is this idea of collective consciousness that drives the purpose of theater performance forward: unifying people and communicating ideas.

In a behavioristic, relational scope developed by Esslin, people are unable to live alone. It is a deep need in humans to belong, to be part of a community, and is “deeply dependent on such

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 522.
collective experiences. For the identity of a social group consists of common stock customs, beliefs, and concepts of conduct.” Both collective perception and group mentality weave smoothly into the dynamic of a theatre audience. The gathering of people during a theater performance places them in the same space, in some traditional cases separated by class. In the most extreme example, the pits or orchestras used in Elizabethan and Renaissance theaters allowed working class citizens to gather and discuss, even debate, with each other topics that were presented onstage and also those that were completely unrelated to the performance. This ability to gather closely and socialize ultimately created not only collective identity, but also collective action in audiences.

The concept of collective identity in today’s audiences, however, has drastically changed from that of the original Greek and Renaissance societies. “When we are in a modern crowd, we assume we are individuals … When collected together as audience at a play, we assume individual responses.” This arguably results from the development of the proscenium arch and further in the cinema industry, resulting in “front-back orientation” while viewing a performance. From this type of perception distinct separation between the spectator and the performer occurs, further allowing for individual sensory knowledge and psychological interpretation of art to take place. In contemporary audiences, it is more common for the individual perceptions to rule over that of collected perceptions.

In a case study of reconstruction of Shakespeare’s Globe Theater, theatre researcher Andrew Gurr describes the phenomenon existing in the dynamic of the audience simply in the configuration of the Globe’s stage and pit areas. He observes that when audience members are

97 Ibid., 166.
“visible to one another and mostly on their feet, [they] respond much more actively and collectively than they do when sitting in a darkened auditorium. They behave like a crowd, not an aggregation of individuals.”¹⁰⁰ This awareness of audience members as a collective group allows for a stronger opportunity for theatrical form to be communicated because the reactions and interpretations of others further encourages deeper emotional and intellectual understanding.

This simple modification of audience seating can starkly contrast to the extreme modifications evident in the environmentalist theatre movement. As described by environmental theatre artist Brooks McNamara, alternative performance spaces make “the audience … a dynamic unit able to shift position and respond to the event with far more freedom.”¹⁰¹ However, the degree to which the environmentalist theatre artists wished to immerse audiences in collective identity was, to a certain degree, ineffective because it forced audience members together. For example, audience members were seated in unorganized manners and actors often performed uncomfortably close to most members. This level of intensity was unfamiliar to audiences conditioned to the distance existing in proscenium spaces and often became less engaged with performances. On the contrary, the thrust or arena space that Gurr describes invites audiences to engage each other, creating a natural, more cohesive dynamic to the audience.

Ultimately, collective identity as existing in theatre audiences can create a more effective platform for theatrical form to be achieved. Though many great and distinctive elements exist in the individuals’ in sensory knowledge and psychology, it is the combining of these elements in an open environment or performance space that will create impact within the audience. As analyzed by Gurr, despite modern satirical and seemingly nonsensical adversity from modern

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 161.
audiences, “the action of theater … was carefully watched by ancients, that [theatre] might improve mankind in virtue … and that the minds of men in company are more open to affections and impressions than when alone.”

Therefore when encouraged by specific utilization of a theater environment, collective identity can be assumed by means of audience engagement, creating stronger potential for theatrical form to be understood on a deeper emotional and intellectual level.

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AESTHETIC AND ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS EXISTING IN THEATERS

As evident in historical developments the structural, architectural, and aesthetic elements existing in theater environments can be utilized to reflect specific social and theological ideologies. Indicated in previous discussion, many different theater environments have developed in reflection of societal change, including thrust, arena, found, and, most commonly, proscenium. The engineering and construction of these stages all encourage very different levels of intimacy and understanding with the audiences that occupy them.

The physical closeness shared between the performers and audience parallels significantly with how a performance environment is built. The size and placement of the stage affects how theatre artists are able to utilize and engage audiences in theatrical form. Reflecting the desires of Wagner in his Bayreuth Festspielhaus Theater, as described by late Ryerson University Theatre Professor Tanit Mendes, the composer made specific requirements and worked closely with his architectural team to accomplish unity with his audiences. The first of these requirements “was that of giving and that of receiving which reciprocally pervade and condition one another. Second was the imperative that the layouts of the auditorium space enhance the viewers' optic and acoustic understanding of the artwork.”¹⁰³ Wagner saw the importance of production and reception aspects, much like that of which Bennett discusses in her work pertaining to audience psychology. Secondly, it was imperative to Wagner that the design of the theater would reflect and enhance the quality of the performances as presented in the environment.

To Wagner, this level of attention to the construction and layout of his theater would therefore create in the audience an all-encompassing, unified theatrical experience. His obsession and inspiration from the Greeks further encouraged the primal roots of theatre to be emphasized: that theatre should encourage collective identity, understanding, and a community of spiritual experience. He also wished to do away with the separation from stage and audience caused by the “barrier created by the proscenium arch.”104 Furthermore, “the ideal theatre in Wagner's mind should promote the audience members' ability to be active participants united with the performers onstage.”105 This ideology reflected in the development and advancement of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus during its creation and realization in 1872.

In other studies, engagement and connectivity can be discouraged with the utilization of a theater’s architecture and construction. For example, Mendes explores the construction of the proscenium stage. While a great achievement in western theater design and architecture, it must be noted that the arch “altered the relationship of the audience to the stage. The audience was now separated from the stage; they became passive viewers rather than actively engaged participants.”106 This similar ideology is evident in the construction of the apron in the Elizabethan thrust stage, where the stage was surround by the audience on three sides, but still maintained, to an extent, a distinct separation and orientation with its audience with the additional construction of the proscenium arch around the stage.

The belief of utilizing physical distance and intimacy with an audience also reflects greatly in the theaters of the environmentalist movement of the 1960s. The physical separation in traditional theaters was shown to condition audiences to separate themselves mentally from the

105 Ibid., 270.
106 Ibid., 264.
action on stage, enhancing individuality rather than collective identity in the performance environment. This factor was feared to detract and minimize desired theatrical form. As environmental theatre artist McNamara describes, the developments and use of found space by artists like himself is “by no means a bizarre or eccentric [intent], merely [it is] different from that seen in mainstream modern theatre architecture, continuing in its own way an older tradition about the organization of performance space.” McNamara’s intentions support the Greek ideology of connectivity with audiences, community, and collective identity.

In many historical examples it is apparent that social class structure and ideology is also mirrored greatly in the seating arrangements of audiences. The many ways that the Greek theatron, Roman cavea, and Elizabethan pit were engineered parallel to the importance of social recognition. The Elizabethan arrangement sat commoners (the middle, lower, and working classes) in the pit and uncomfortable higher balcony levels. This is due largely to the idea that the quality of the performance would have been worse from these distances and allowed for purchase at a lower cost. The better seats, more comfortable galleries and private boxes, were reserved for the upper class, nobility, and political leaders complimenting the wealth and their place in society.

Due to this separation of classes, audience engagement and experience of the performance differed among the social classes. The lower classes, who were free to move and converse with each other in the pit, proved to be more active and engaged audience members than the upper class, who enjoyed the performance individually rather than collectively. As Doctor of Sociology at Rider University Richard Butsch analyses, “this behavior represents not

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only an active audience, but a discourse through which audiences insistently constructed themselves as active.”\textsuperscript{108} This factor also carried into American audiences during theatres’ developmental period in the 18th and 19th centuries, when working class audience members used the theater as a space for public debate and discussion.

Theological ideologies can also be expressed through the construction of theaters. Gary Taylor, a Shakespearean scholar, has conducted extensive study on theological architecture, which is described as “theatre space that is built with a religious hierarchical understanding.”\textsuperscript{109} He applies the concept vertical cosmology to this architectural theory, which in simpler terms relates the idea of the ascension of heaven and hell to the placement of a stage in relation to placement of humanity in greater cosmic forces or levels. Ultimately, this use of theological architecture can be used to “produce an alternating form of perception for the audience, the first psychologically and the second a form of viewing known as ‘religious seeing.’”\textsuperscript{110} Taylor’s theory analyses the desire to emphasize theological ideas in the construction of a theater and the resulting desire to create religious connectivity with an audience.

As Mendes discusses, theological architecture can exist in a vertical arrangement. This vertical cosmology, for example, was arguably utilized by the Greeks: “the area above the stage was reserved for gods, the stage itself was inhabited by mortals, and traps in the stage led to the underworld.”\textsuperscript{111} This theory can further be supported by the Grecian use of special effects, such as the Deus ex machane (or “machine of the Gods”). This machine was used to lower actors onto the stage from behind the skene. This effect was most commonly used when, in a performance,

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 260.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 262.
gods were needed to descend onto the stage, joining the “mortal beings” in their level of the cosmic universe. This ultimately created a theological connection and perception in the audience that the theater wished to communicate. As analyzed by Brent Plate, a scholar of religion and visual arts, “this type of perception is produced by the interaction between visual culture and certain types of spiritual viewing practices.”112 The heavens drawn above and hell below, the audience could find themselves as participants on a mortal level using this type of architectural analysis. Therefore, the performance engages the audience member and “assures the audience of a place within the human community,”113 further allowing for collective identity to occur within the audience.

Theological architecture can also be enhanced by the use of ornamentation and aesthetic in theaters. According to Mendes, “visual culture … can create an environment with the potential for triggering viewer transformation or ‘religious seeing,’ whether or not audience participants are aware of such shifts in perceptions.”114 This idea reflected in the ornateness existing in many Renaissance theaters. As the Christian influences swept over Western Europe, artists saw the opportunity to express theological aesthetic by decorating theaters in certain ways. In many theaters of this period, elaborate murals are painted on the ceilings, intending to draw the audience’s eye up toward the heavens. Pristine statues were also erected to honor saints and biblical figures within the house or audience area.

These various architectural and aesthetic elements in a theater environment further serve to reflect complex ideologies, whether the audience is completely aware of them or not. As described by Becky Becker of Columbus State University, “If our knowledge of the world is

113 Ibid., 280.
114 Ibid., 275.
based on metaphorical representations of concrete experiences, it follows that embodied individuals engage more readily on an abstract level to live theatrical experience. Overall, these constructive and decorative elements hope to create within an audience collective identity and enhance the effectively of ideologies being communicated in the particular environment.

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IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The Effect of Theater Environments

Through this research, it can be determined that the extent to which a theater environment has on the effectiveness of theatrical form depends on two factors: where the stage is in relation to the audience and how theatre artists use it. Much like willing suspension of disbelief, an audience member’s understanding of a performance on a deliberate emotional and intellectual level is subjective and often immeasurable. This is evident through the analysis of an individual's sensory knowledge in relation to environmental psychology and the work of Kreitler and Kreitler’s psychology of spectators of art. The experience an audience has from a performance ultimately reveals more about the performance itself and whether desired theatrical form was realized or not.

As a theater, in its utmost roots, exists to be a cultural center and place to hold public forum, the areas where audiences interact the most become greatly important when engaging them in a unified communicated ideas. English Restoration theaters had the pit, Spanish Corrales had the patio, Greek amphitheaters had vast theatrons all meant to unite and engage audiences. Early theaters were constructed to encourage debate, discussion, and above all, collective identity by means of theatrical form. The way in which an audience is stationed in relation to the performance stage can either encourage or discourage this engagement of collective identity.

Theaters with fixed seating (mostly proscenium and thrust) are ultimately able to achieve fixed levels of intimacy with audiences. This, in turn, reveals that the extent to which theatrical form affects an audience is really determined by the artists who are communicating it. This is similar to arena, found, or black box spaces, however the degree of physical closeness desired
with the audience is flexible. The changeable and adaptable dynamics existing in these spaces may prove to reflect in greater changeable experiences of the audience.

In this sense, there is also great connection that can be drawn between the rights of society and the rights of the theatre. Theaters built with particular fixed seating arrangements can serve as means to express certain social and theological ideologies within their audience. As Richard Butsch states, “Aristocratic audience sovereignty [affirms] social order.”116 As the upper-class represented the most wealth in society, allowing them to sit within the audience in specific areas that accented that wealth served as a way to remind all in attendance of the prestige and control the upper class possessed. This has been evident in the use of private boxes and galleries in theaters, as well as the placement of those structures either close to the stage, where all could see who was occupying them, and those in the center of the house.

Theological ideologies within an audience are expressed similarly. As Pope Leo X was the center of the Roman Catholic Church, he was also placed in the center of the Roman Renaissance Theater. This further reflects a hierarchy of theology existing in the audience as it reflects the placement of the stage. As described in theological architecture, the world onstage represents the realm of humanity, with hell below and the heavens extending above the proscenium arch. If religious figures are sitting central in the same level as the morals and the stage, they are therefore the primary leaders of religious belief in the audience. This deliberate use of the environmental aspects of a theater performance space further correlates to the desire to engage audiences in deliberate emotional and intellectual understanding.

The Proscenium Stage and Modern Audiences

With the understanding that engagement can depend on the audience’s placement in relation to the stage, the effectiveness in terms of communicating ideas to an audience using the proscenium stage can be evaluated. Historically, the proscenium arch was developed as a means to emphasize the artistic value of theatre. Audiences could watch the “living picture” on the stage that was separated behind a “frame.” This type of orientation became important to the development of audiences as the cinema industry rose in place of theatre as a means of cultural gathering. Today, audiences have a strong front-back orientation and tend to expect a certain amount of spectacle as part of being entertained.¹¹⁷

Starting with its development during the Renaissance, the proscenium arch grew to be a standard element in theaters of the 14th through 20th century. Scenic techniques were able to advance because of it, allowing artists the ability to hide special effect machinery from view of the audience. Over time, the developments of sophisticated technology fueled audience demand for spectacle as entertainment. This new demand from audiences simultaneously reflected the rigid structure of the proscenium and encouraged a front-back orientation with audiences. Instead of connecting to one another during performances, audience members now were separated from the stage and able to sit passively at a comfortable distance. This arguably leads to negating the formation of collective identity in audiences and in a further manner, disconnect from theatrical form.

Despite the physical separation that is created, the proscenium stage is still effective to audiences because the stage is oriented in a way contemporary audiences are familiar with. The

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intention of some theatre artists, such as naturalists and environmentalists, is that theatre should unite audiences with performers and destroy the separation created by the proscenium. Therefore, the development of alternative performance environments has occurred since the late 19th century. However, the average contemporary audience, as described by Susan Bennett, would be unlikely to engage in performances set in alternative spaces simply because they would be caught off-guard by the intimacy of the performance. With the proscenium stage, audiences can embrace individual sensory knowledge within the environment. While it is less direct compared to alternative spaces, these familiar environments are still likely to encourage audience engagement and collectivity in order to achieve theatrical form.

The Future of Theater Environments

Understanding the evolution in audiences from the original purpose of theatre, the various environments aiming to reclaim them, and the new demands of audiences, one may ask: what’s next? Theaters still serve as cultural centers and an area to engage people in ideas. Now there must be a greater understanding existing as to how theatrical form can work in accordance to the demands of contemporary audiences in a way theatrical form can still be understood and engaging.

Audiences remain comfortable in individual, passive environments- it is more familiar and consistent to sensory knowledge. Theatre still remains a medium for cultural exchange, but is feared to have a certain amount of aesthetic degradation by catering to the passive audience. As explained with the proscenium stage, the separation of audience and performers can still achieve engagement and deliberate emotional and intellectual understanding. But as seen in alternative theaters that have evolved throughout history (found, arena, and black-box),
these environments still hold the power to engage audiences in more progressive cultural, political, social, and theological ideas. The effectiveness theatrical form has in these environments is subject to the readiness of the audience to accept them. Ultimately, it remains up to the theatre artist how to utilize the space—whether they wish to challenge audiences or engage them in familiar context.

Another great component influencing the next step for theatre is the shift and integration of technology. As evident since the Renaissance, technical advancements on the stage have shown to alter the construction of theaters and demand from the audience. As seen most commonly today in concerts and other entertainments, audiences are more connected to technology, particularly in the form of digital projection and machinery. The question rises if theatre will be an escape from a complicated, wired society or if it will demand that theatre become a more “active, visceral entertainment that takes [audiences] on a physical journey rather than a digital and voyeuristic one.”

If the advancements in technology continue to alter the level of engagement in audiences, how will theater environments remain an effective center for theatrical form to be presented? Some theatre artists fear that integrating more technology into performances will cater toward spectacle, illusion, and false entertainment that would further encourage individuality in audiences rather than collectivity. But as it has evolved throughout history, theatre constantly evolves with society. Therefore, the potential developments for “digital performance” would, in essence, just be another alternative means of expressing theatrical form. As elaborated by LaSalle College of the Arts President Stephen Dixon, the progressive nature of theatre, its

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audiences, and the development to utilize technology leaves three main determinants in theatre artists: “One: continue a modernist practice of art linked with adjustments for the contemporary era … Two: develop a unique postmodernist art built around deconstruction at its core … or Three: develop a practice focused on elaborating the possibilities of new technology.”

Theatre will always evolve: this equates to constant change in presenting performances and engaging audiences. As it moves forward, as it has done so, the theatre artist will always need to understand the social processes and utilization of theatre environments in order to allow audiences to reach an understanding of theatrical form to its greatest effect.

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WORKS CITED


