

sentation bears a striking resemblance to a rendering. Obviously more research must be done in this field.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 See the catalog for *Contemporary Stage Design U.S.A.*, International Theatre Institute of the United States, distributed by the Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Conn.
- 2 Examples appear constantly in periodicals or see several of the interviews in Lynn Pecktal's book, *Designing and Painting for the Theater* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1975).
- 3 Darwin Ried Payne, *Materials and Craft of the Scenic Model* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976).
- 4 Nicolas Calas, *Icons and Images of the Sixties* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1971).
- 5 A phrase attributed to the art critic, Harold Rosenberg. *Ibid.*
- 6 The catalog of Charrette of Cambridge and New York carried ads for this instrument called a "model scope."
- 7 Béla Balázs, *Theory of The Film* (n.d., reprinted, New York: Dover Publications, 1970).

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## THE SCENOGRAPHER AS AN ARTIST

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In the mid-nineteen seventies the once unquestionable "verities" of contemporary esthetics have exploded like a balloon blown too full of air. All around, critics with needles and sharp pens in their hands are asking questions. It is my purpose in this, and the two following articles, to explore the position of the scenographer as an artist in our society and to ask some questions of my own. This first article deals with the Alienation of the scenographer. The second, titled Limitations, is concerned with the historical differences between the stage designer and the painter. And the third article, Communication, looks at the problems all contemporary artists face in speaking to a public.

#### ALIENATION

Alienation has several dictionary meanings. One is "not belonging, being different in nature, adverse." Another meaning is, "being separated from one's self, being insane." For the past ten years I have felt different, adverse, unable to accept an esthetic which seemed hollow to me yet was considered the proper direction for art in our time by those who gave the appearance of knowing. But now I have come to believe that the artists who paint monochromatic canvases, or who have themselves crucified or shot, or who move earth with bulldozers, or who simply pass out directions for moving objects on a wall are the ones who are alienated in both senses of the word.

As a scenographer, I cannot help feeling separated from an art world that rejects the very principles I need to function. This separation challenges me to examine my own principles in relation to the art I see exhibited and praised. I need to evaluate what I see in spite of warnings issued by critics that historically new ideas have always been laughed at and we cannot truly evaluate new art. They

say that by opposing what we don't like or don't understand we risk being inhibitors of artistic progress. This reasoning is difficult to answer. For years I have felt left out and a bit paranoid. Only recently am I realizing that I have more company than I'd imagined.

I can date the beginning of my own alienation rather precisely. It was Tuesday, October 13, 1966 at 8:30 p.m. Until that time I had thought of myself as both a scenographer and a painter. I felt a part of the community of visual artists, even when painter friends would occasionally imply that my association with commercial theatre cast a shadow over my artistic integrity. And then came the evening (it was actually several evenings) in October 1966.

The ad in the paper said, "*Nine Evenings: Theatre and Engineering*. It's art, and engineering, and a little theatrics. It's important that you attend." It promised to be marvelous, perhaps a turning point in the arts. And how fitting that it was in the 25th Street Armory where the famed Armory Show of 1913 introduced modern art to America.

In actuality, the most dramatic thing at these events, as well as the only revelation of things to come, was the really short mini skirt, straight from England, worn by many of the girls in the audience. The performances were far less interesting. Steve Paxton, a dancer, devised an inflated tunnel, lined with loud speakers, through which the audience entered. He described his work this way:

*This piece is a dance with a set. It is cast not only by those chosen as permanent population...but by those who have chosen to come and see it...With regards to air pressure and topography, this piece is not an airplane, is pretty much the opposite of an airplane, but much the rest of it is analogous.*<sup>1</sup>

Robert Rauschenberg's contribution, called *Open Score*, consisted of tennis rackets wired to broadcast a signal every time they hit a ball. The signals set off sounds and also lowered the lights in the Armory. When the lights were out, infrared lights and infrared television let every one see in the dark. Rauschenberg's program notes said: "Tennis is movement. Put in the context of theatre, it is a formal dance improvisation."<sup>2</sup>

Yvonne Rainer's piece, called *Carriage Discreteness*, featured the author directing her cast of "ten-odd performers" by means of walkie-talkies. Shades of Gordon Craig.

Other theatre designers and technicians I talked to were both bored and insulted by *Nine Evenings*. After all, theatre people have always felt responsible for entertaining an audience. To this end they have used electronic lighting and sound controls, hydraulics, and motors on a scale beyond the imagination of both the artists

and engineers in *Nine Evenings*. It was like being asked by friends to watch the child of the house perform *Swan Lake*. A few minutes of this is cute, ten minutes get boring, and more becomes an absolute insult.

Now ten years later, I can understand why I was alienated by this attempted amalgam of all the arts and science. It is because the esthetic principles stated therein, either explicitly or implicitly, have since monopolized the art world of important galleries and influential critics. In part, the principles of this esthetic do not alter or add to the historical progression of man's search for beauty; it is an esthetic of rejection. It rejects all past theory. It rejects what is termed "extra esthetic elements", in other words, any meaning or message besides the physical existence of the work. It rejects the value of entertaining or interesting an audience. It rejects both skill in execution and skill in performance. And it rejects the search for beauty in a finished object or event in favor of concept or process.

I felt almost a part of the world again when I read this perceptive paragraph by Howard Bay:

*A few words on Contemporary Art, as wisps and shards from the galleries now and then find their way on stage and lend that excruciating touch of chic to the performance. Painting, the application of paint to the canvas with a brush, wound up its history with deKooning. Since that day we have had various styles of decorative patterns and many objects that are really pieces of congealed art criticism. These products seem to be of vital interest to artists and those that sell art. These demonstration lectures in paint have been attenuated to the point of invisibility...I think we can say that the separation from human concerns in the Art Scene that matters is well-nigh complete.*<sup>3</sup>

Some time after Howard Bay wrote this, Tom Wolfe wrote *The Painted Word*, a long article (later turned into a book). The cover of *Harpers* touts the article, "Modern Art Reaches the Vanishing Point." A subtitle at the beginning of the article continues: "What you see is what they say." Wolfe's thesis, surrounded by some fuzzy art history, is that: "Modern Art has become completely literary: the paintings and other works exist only to illustrate the text."<sup>4</sup>

An immediate reaction to this article came in Hilton Kramer's next *New York Times* Sunday piece, "Signs of a New Conservatism in Taste." Kramer dismissed Wolfe's authority as an art historian but begrudgingly admitted: "...he has, alas, a very keen nose for news of our cultural life, for sudden shifts in loyalty and opinion, and a

*"It was like being asked by friends to watch the child of the house perform Swan Lake. A few minutes of this is cute, ten minutes get boring, and more becomes an absolute insult."*

ruthless grasp of the latest chic."<sup>5</sup> Kramer may see a change in taste or chic, but I believe the return to conservatism is a response to basic philosophical and psychological needs which are not being met. A trip to the Metropolitan Museum, or the Frick, quickly reveals our civilization's centuries old search for values more lasting than chic. I do not think I am being merely cantankerous when I compare the works of the past and the values they represent to what is shown in so many galleries today. I do not mean that contemporary artists must retain an interest in perspective or the representation of biblical scenes. But by rejecting all "extra esthetic elements" the artist's purpose becomes so private it disappears.

Howard Bay is neither inaccurate nor extreme when he complains of today's art reaching the point of invisibility. Consider Robert Irwin's exhibition which consisted of a piece of scrim hung across one end of the gallery, forming a simulated wall. (The scenographer makes simulated walls all the time and doesn't stop there.) According to John Russell in the *Times*:

*For some years now Robert Irwin has patrolled the frontiers of invisibility, never quite crossing them, but never quite turning his back on them either. His new piece at the Pace... suggests that Mr. Irwin has crossed these frontiers once and for all.*<sup>6</sup>

This ironic put down is not strong enough if this show is in any way related to the total history of visual creativity.

I don't blame the artist alone for what has happened. Human ambition being what it is, he can quickly see that he must reject the past if he is to be shown, reviewed, and recognized. He gets the message in review after review, like the following by John Russell: "And we should know by now that one of the marks of good new art is that it does not in the least look like older art."<sup>7</sup> While Russell's statement is partially true, he has left out the fact that until recently, new art has been concerned with communicating themes common to mankind. What enrages Bay, Wolfe, and the public is that the contemporary artist has rejected a desire to communicate any theme of interest to others. As the host at a party who will not speak to his guests, he leaves his viewers out in the cold. This was precisely the case at a recent Guggenheim Museum show:

*It is the kind of exhibition that will be of great interest to the specialized public that keeps a close watch on the esthetics of abstract art. For others, however, the exhibition is likely to be a difficult, if not indeed a baffling experience... It does not, I think, offer the eye much in the way of visual pleasure. But it offers the mind—a mind that is well stocked with information about the development of abstract art since the late nineteen-fifties—a good deal to think about. For this reason, Mr. Marden will continue to be a favorite*

*of the critics and the schools, and therefore, of the museums; and the public, whether it gets much out of this specialized interest or not, will have to resign itself to seeing a good deal more of his art—and of his imitators—in the future.*<sup>8</sup>

As a scenographer, I am dependent upon every style and artistic concept from the caveman until now. I am heir to an esthetic legacy which allows me, to the best of my ability, to express myself to others. Why has the painter rejected his legacy and grown content with a kind of artistic onanism? Aldous Huxley, seer that he was, said in a letter in 1933:

*It is deplorable that only bad painters should now undertake important and intrinsically significant subjects and that good ones should live in terror of all that is obviously beautiful, or dramatic, or sublime.*<sup>9</sup>

The condition that Huxley deplored forty years ago has progressed to a ridiculous extreme today. It is hard for me to imagine a next step other than a return to some of the truths that scenographers have husbanded through this whole period.

In other artistic fields this seems to be happening. According to a cover story in the *Times Magazine*<sup>10</sup> Twyla Tharp is an inventive choreographer whose career is blossoming. Miss Tharp started choreographing in 1966, influenced by the very artists who presented *Nine Evenings*. Her style then was "minimalism," using non-dancers. In 1967 she discovered what trained dancers could do and "she added dancing to her pieces."<sup>11</sup> In 1970 she began to use music and she allowed her dancers to be "performers." They discarded their earlier rule: "no trying to please an audience."<sup>12</sup> About this change Tharp is quoted as saying:

*You can only keep this up for so long, it's self defeating. It's hard to like people who won't like themselves. I guess that we were afraid that by softening up and becoming... accessible, we'd be selling out.*<sup>13</sup>

Miss Tharp's recent works for the Joffrey Ballet and the conservative American Ballet Theatre have been triumphs.

I chose to interpret Miss Tharp's journey as a victory for the principles that painters have rejected, and as a sign that there has been in Hilton Kramer's words, "a significant symptom of a shift in esthetic loyalties."<sup>14</sup>

If art is a reflection of our society, then amid all the complex forces at work we can begin to see why so many painters are alienated, insane. Our world seems out of control with internecine wars, revolutions, third world countries emerging with values and cultures different from our own, and governments saying one thing

and doing another. The individual feels powerless and retreats into mystical contemplation or escapes through drugs. All the while, the artist withdraws by mumbling a monologue of interest to no one.

Although what I say may seem negative and ill-natured, I think my views are just the opposite. They spring from two sources. One is an optimism, about the nature of man and the future of humanistic expression.

It seems to me that our society is now searching for things to believe in. The vogue for nostalgia and the revival of old musicals reflects a kind of desperation to re-experience a time when everything was simple. The frantic excesses of the Bicentennial Celebration also cater to this need. But however much we know in our hearts that we neither live in the twenties nor during the American Revolution, and that the world of the past has gone forever, we seem to retain the desire for a commonality in society. This seems to me the basis for our shift in esthetic direction. We can no longer be alienated in our arts or in our private lives because there are no answers to our deeper needs in catatonia.

The second source of my views is the theatre and my work as a scenographer. The nature of theatre demands communication with the public. The very exigencies of our work have limited us and thus protected us from those inward directed exercises which have alienated many painters from society. Therefore, the pressures of money and time as well as the need to please many people and to work with many people have not been deleterious to the scenographer. Rather, these pressures force him to be a social being who, today, more surely reflects the tastes of his time and the spirit of man than does the self involved artist.

## ILLUMINATIONS

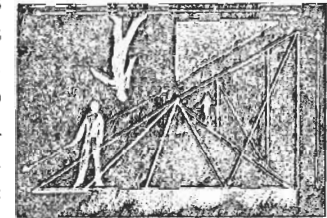
One of my first jobs when I came to New York was as ghost designer for a production by Salvador Dali and Abe Feder. Dali envisioned a ballet called *Gala* in which several men dance, then fight, and finally tear off one another's clothes, thereby revealing that one of them is a woman. She is hoisted onto a pedestal, whereupon milk spurts from her breasts and the men shower under this fountain vivant.

The set was several large framework cubes which were to be dunked into vats of some viscous liquid. In model form, Dali dipped four-inch wire cubes into a soap solution which formed beautiful bubble gems inside the cubes. When the cubes were enlarged for the stage however, a problem emerged: finding a viscous

liquid capable of forming a bubble over a four foot space, a sixteen square foot area. After the largest chemical companies failed to find a solution, (use both meanings), Dali became impatient and took his project to Italy, where the ballet was performed minus the large scale bubbles.

The confrontations between Dali and the volatile Feder are still vivid to me but the lesson I learned was that a contemporary artist's thought process is not the same as a designer's. The designer is trained to solve practical problems in his search for an esthetic result; the artist either jumps immediately to the end product, as did Dali, or concentrates on process and forgets the end result. The artist, in either case, is expressing himself with a freedom the designer has never been able to exercise.

In purely esthetic terms, for the past hundred years the painter has been attempting to work in areas where it is impossible for the scenographer to follow. The painter's major intent in this period has been to destroy the effect of looking through a window and thus, to destroy the effect of observing the natural world from a distance that allows contemplation. The painter wants to produce a new relationship between time and space, to bring the viewer into an immediate and timeless experience of the work as a whole. To create this effect, painters have developed a series of styles beginning with cubism, going through abstract expressionism, and coming now to minimalism. Each style has become increasingly abstract.



The scenographer cannot hope to bring about an experience without time because the theatre is experienced within a framework of time. The scenographer can rarely follow the painter into abstraction because the human figure on stage is never abstract.

The painter was not always as free as he is today. In the Renaissance, artists were also designers. (Raphael was among those who designed for the theatre). Artists had their specialties but were often called upon to put their hands to a variety of design tasks. They designed buildings, table silver, monuments, servant's uniforms, and weapons. And even as painters they were faced with practical problems of decorating architectural spaces of a given size and of keeping within a budget by choosing a palette of affordable colors.

When perspective became a major interest of all visual artists, (see the work of Piero Della Francesca) and the proscenium arch became a picture frame, the paintings of the time became stage designs. As Lee Simonson observed,

*The vision of the artist as painter and the artist as scene designer were virtually identical.*<sup>15</sup>

The designer's vision seems to have remained much as it was in the Renaissance. The painter on the other hand has undergone tremendous changes over the past four hundred years. Although the reasons for these changes are as complex as all the history of the intervening years, several theories have gained general acceptance.

One theory holds that oil paints freed the painter from large fresco commissions, thus allowing him to paint small, portable, private works. Another theory suggests that the disappearance of noble patrons freed the artist from working under commission. The development of photography is often cited as an agent of change because the camera has relieved the artist from the responsibility of creating a visual record of his world.

A historical explanation starts with the Industrial Revolution, which caused the breakdown of the master-apprentice relationship. With factories replacing craftsmen, young men left home to work in cities where factories were established. In the case of those whose talents led them to be artists, they no longer studied as assistants in the studio of a master artist, but now attended a new kind of school, the art academy. The academies produced far more artists than the ateliers had done because they were separated from the economic controls of supply and demand. In order to market the works of their graduates, the academies began to mount yearly shows.

The newly rich middle class bought the academy art but in the process established a standard of taste considered abominable by many artists. These artists rejected this taste and, as a reaction against it, developed the image of an artist that we recognize today. According to this image, the artist must oppose existing society and he must resist any attempt by the society to alter his own personal vision. The artist's honor depends upon his refusal to compromise his work for commercial gain.

But artists went further and dramatized their rebel status by adopting manners and dress that openly displayed their contempt for ordinary society and proclaimed their freedom from it.<sup>16</sup>

While the painter sought freedom from the middle class in order to create according to his own vision, the scenographer remained bound by the limitations of the theatre. As Richard Gilman says,

*... the theatre has for several centuries been primarily a bourgeois art or enterprise and therefore a conservative one.*<sup>17</sup>

In other words, the scenographer has been obliged to cater to the very audience which the painter has rejected.

However, it is not enough to say today that painters search for freedom, and the theatre has accepted the limitations of a bourgeoisie which is conservative. A recent commentator, Daniel Bell, has pointed out that the middle class itself, by losing its religious faith and its related work ethic, has itself turned to a search for self-expression and a desire to experience everything without limitations.

*In the cry for the autonomy of the aesthetic, there arose the idea that experience in and of itself was the supreme value.*<sup>18</sup>

Bell continues by claiming that a tension has been created because our cultural objectives of experience and release are in conflict with our economic objectives of rationality and efficiency.

There are several implications to these observations. First, if the artist and society now share cultural aims, the artist has lost a society to oppose, to push against. He is thus disarmed and his work lacks force.

Also, if Bell is correct, we have reached a point where the direction of either our cultural, economic, or political worlds, or all three, will change to relieve the tension that has developed. The shift to a more conservative taste in painting may well be a signal that we have reached such a turning point.

The theatre may also be at a turning point if it loses even its middle class audience which now prefers experiences which, because they rely on sensual perception rather than intellectual comprehension, are liberating in a more personal way.

Finally, the tension between an economy of regulations and a culture of independence is an analogue of the tension that exists for the scenographer. In the past, the artist working in a theatre that was a subsidized or commercial venture felt no pressure. But exactly as students today attempt to choose careers in which they can "do their own thing," theatre people have created a hierarchy of design jobs on the basis of how much control they have over the finished product. Theatre design is at the top of this hierarchy followed by film, TV, and commercials.

George Jenkins, who has worked extensively in theatre and film, recently described to me, with some dismay, how he had designed five complete proscenium arches to establish five theatres in a major Hollywood film. Even though they are skilled and practical artists, the director and cameraman used close-ups of the star in each of these five scenes and never once showed the arches, whose total cost equaled the cost of an entire Broadway show.

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Even that form which is least limiting, the theatre, imposes tremendous limitations on the scenographer; the scenographer must please a producer, a director, and ultimately a public; he must work within a time limit with a given budget and a given work force; he must design for an existing space; and he must fit his designs to the meaning and spirit of an author's play. It seems to me that these limitations have very often created pressures which mirror the difficulties in our cultural life.

Given the limitations imposed on the designer from without, I find it fascinating that designers have added their own limitations and continue to preach the virtues of these self-imposed regulations. In 1941 Robert Edmond Jones wrote,

*The designer creates an environment in which all noble emotions are possible. Then he retires. The actor enters. If the designer's work has been good, it disappears from our consciousness at that moment. We do not notice it any more.*<sup>19</sup>

and in 1975, Oliver Smith said,

*I do believe that there are certain cardinal rules or guidelines which apply to all expert scene design. In other words, I think the purpose of the designer is to service the director and playwright and the composer, and not to show off as an easel painter. Therefore, I think the best sets are often the simplest, least fussy, and least distracting.*<sup>20</sup>

I don't believe that Inigo Jones, or the Bibienas, or Torelli, or thousands of other designers would agree with these statements. Possibly only those designers whose work spanned the years between Jones and Smith would agree in practice. But from Josef Svaboda to the designers of rock musicals, the greatest influences on design today come from those who ignore these admonitions. Therefore, Jones' and Smith's statements represent a historical phenomenon which does not hold true for contemporary taste.

Jones designed for a literary theatre best represented by Eugene O'Neill. For a variety of reasons, today's culture is not literary or rational. As Daniel Bell puts it, today's culture is,

*...prodigal, promiscuous, dominated by an anti-rational anti-intellectual temper in which the self is taken as the touchstone of cultural judgments, and the effect on the self is the measure of the aesthetic worth of experience.*<sup>21</sup>

If contemporary culture is sensate, the ascendancy of rock light shows and the decline of the well-made play are easy to understand. One can see why opera, which is more sensual than intellectual, has gained a wider audience. Tom O'Horgan and Ken Russell have

bombarded our senses while other directors mount classic Greek tragedies in which the actors make sounds but utter no words.

The scenographer is torn between contradictory tasks. On the one hand, as a visual artist, he has always represented the sensual side of theatre. But as a designer, limited by practical considerations, he has solved these problems intellectually. In the past he has limited the sensual impact of his own work so that it would not overpower the intellectual content of the author's work. But today the audience wants visual sensation and doesn't give a damn about intellectual understanding. And in a society that values "doing your own thing," the designer's ego demands that he consider himself a creative person or even an artist, yet he is bound by numerous practical demands which go contrary to the modern conception of creation and art. Furthermore, because most designers must design plays, operas, and musicals from every age of theatrical history, the designer faces a choice between two contradictory limitations. Either he serves as curator of museum pieces by designing with regard to the original period intent of the work or he designs within the limitation of pleasing a present day audience. In the process he may either destroy the play as written or he may lose his audience.

The basic problem of the scenographer is that he is a Renaissance man, an artist, a mechanic, an inventor, a humanist. In short, he is an anachronism who must intelligently organize his many talents to function within imposed limitations. He is an anachronism in a culture which has no limits. Again, Daniel Bell:

*In the realm of art, on the level of aesthetic doctrine, few opposed the idea of boundless experiment, of unfettered freedom, of unconstrained sensibility, of impulse being superior to order, of imagination being immune to merely rational criticism.*<sup>22</sup>

Many observers of the culture, Bell included, believe we have reached a turning point. The world of sensation has proved hollow. Irving Howe has suggested that our laissez-faire culture will be no more acceptable than was an Adam Smith laissez-faire economy.<sup>23</sup>

My own view is that the scenographer, by a strange reversal, is now the new avant-garde. By being four hundred years behind the times he will now be in the forefront of a culture which will return to art created within limitations. (Hang on to your narrow neckties; they are bound to come back into fashion.) For one thing, if

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new art must rebel against existing theory, the logical rebellion against an art without limitations is an art with limitations.

I would like to predict that scenographers will be the major influence on this new culture. But unfortunately, we will probably be ignored and be forced to watch as "artists" discover truths that we have known and practiced all along.

What we can do as scenographers is to abandon our defensive posture in which we claim to be craftsmen rather than artists. We must associate ourselves with those countless masters of the past whose great works were created within limitations. We must no longer be apologetic because our work contains ideas and feelings and because we communicate to a public.

Our greatest problem in this changing culture will be the same for us as it is for all artists, to find a message of importance and of universal interest to communicate to a fragmented society.

## COMMUNICATION

Our theatre is in a transition, or crisis (depending on how we respond to events). Theatre has most recently been a form of verbal communication and is now becoming a theatre of visual and emotional communication.

While scenographers have always depended on non-verbal communication, the importance of words in the theatre has varied historically as each era has emphasized poetry, action, or spectacle. Words have also gained or lost importance when styles changed from realism to symbolism or to expressionism. There has been something like an inverse proportion in operation; the more important the words, the less need for scenery and spectacle.

Change is often painful, and for scenographers, the re-evaluation of long held beliefs is difficult on several counts. Many scenographers continue to believe that the essence of theatre is the Word. Also, some designers find that audiences today are so parochial in their experiences that they are unable to respond to some visual information. On the other hand, audiences can now be so international that they fail to identify the visual stereotypes recognized by a homogenous group. But more than anything else, as scenographers, we are troubled by the same things that are confounding all artists in this period; a fragmented society, a sense of hopelessness, and a lack of anything to say. Just at a time when all artists are suffering a communications vacuum, the playwrights and directors are turning to us and saying, "I don't have anything to say—you say it." And, of course, we have nothing to say either.

However, many social critics are expounding theories that directly affect our current concept of community and therefore explain the course of communication in the theatre.

It appears from what the experts are saying, that the conditions are not present which allow an artist to communicate to a public. There are no longer public traditions of meaning, nor a common faith, nor generally accepted myths or heroes, nor even a sense of what is real. And I believe that artists have indeed stopped communicating. They have settled, as has the public, for a culture of sensation rather than one of thought. The result is an art of the self, with no external standards, with no duty to, or interest in, the community, and thus no potential for communication.

The theories which prompt this view deal with ideas that at first seem unrelated, but subsequently fuse to give an overview of a troubled society.

One theme which recurs is the fragmentation of society. Even the units of society which were once cohesive and had a common purpose, such as a university community, have fragmented. According to the president of the University of Cincinnati there have been major changes in society and in his institution.

*... we face a new movement of populism—the fragmentation of constituencies. On our campus we have more than 500 governance and interest groups, including a variety of women's groups, a gay lib, black organizations for students and for faculty members, and a faculty council for Jewish affairs. There is a loss of consensus, of community. It was Lyndon Johnson's tragedy to plead, "Come let us reason together" at a time when the various fragments scarcely even wanted to be together. The groups go their separate ways. They don't wish to be part of the mainstream of America.<sup>24</sup>*

Many observers of our society have reached the same conclusion about the fragmentation of this society. In the arts, this has produced a communication vacuum. Art critic Harold Rosenberg writes:

*An art of objective reality untainted by parody would seem attainable only in styles shared by a society as a whole. The essential obstacle to an art of "feeling in the grand sense" is the social and psychological fragmentation reflected in the advanced art of the past hundred years, and this obstacle cannot be overcome by an intellectual act of force.<sup>25</sup>*

This same critic reviewing a show of Jewish artists says:

*If the common condition of Jews, artists and non-artists alike, is an ambiguous, or dual identity, it is a condition that is experienced*



uniquely by each individual; and cannot be expressed in common experience. Moreover, ambiguity of definition is a condition that is not confined to Jews, but is a general predicament—in this century of persons displaced from their class, their national, religious, and cultural heritage.<sup>26</sup>

Rosenberg's perception that a fragmentation of social units is connected with a loss of heritage and of identity, (which is cause and which is effect?) is a common notion. I think it is important for theatre people to consider this current phenomenon because our art is possibly the most dependent on historical continuity. From an audience's acceptance of theatrical conventions to the understanding of the stories of our plays, theatre survives on the connection between ourselves and the cultures of the past.

In an appreciation of Hannah Arendt's book, *The Human Condition*, Judith Shklar describes Miss Arendt's comparison of the classic Greek world, which was her ideal, to a contemporary society: She encapsulates society's and theatre's present predicament:

*They (the Greeks) gave economic occupations a subordinate place; we worship them. Christianity at least preserved communal and contemplative life, but the natural sciences and systematic, self-oriented doubt destroyed these and far from liberating us delivered us into the clutches of necessity. Estranged from the world of nature and history we cling to mere life, unable to grasp reality and deprived of common sense, authority, and public traditions.*<sup>27</sup>

One of the common theories put forward to explain our inability to grasp reality is explained by Maxine Greene, an educational philosopher. She quotes Daniel Bell, Hannah Arendt, George Steiner and David Hawkins in support of her contention that the most significant events of our time, being mathematical and scientific, are for the most part, beyond the understanding of a great majority of men.<sup>28</sup> Thus, society cannot even discuss those ideas which influence their lives. In fact, recent scientific discoveries involve particles so very small or events in the cosmos so far away that they are beyond the experience of man and therefore almost impossible to turn to poetic use.

Another group of observers sees our culture in the middle of a transition that is heading toward unknown territory. Alfred Kazin writes:

*Technology lords it everywhere over the old-fashioned, art educated intellectuals brought up on modernism. Technology and bureaucracy, aided by all the sciences of manipulation and propaganda, mass culture and mass emotion, make up our public drama. Billions of people are being whipped into shape at any cost to the so-called individual. as in China: or are being left to die in*

*the class wars, civil wars, merciless political wars of South East Asia; or are left to starve and die on the pavements of Calcutta and Bombay. Everywhere in the West there is panic, the most obvious slackening of will and hope and faith in anything more than the ever-more urgent whiplash of the money motive. We are under the gun.*<sup>29</sup>

And Susan Sontag is equally grim.

*... this civilization, already so overtaken by barbarism, is at an end, and nothing we do will put it back together again. So in the culture of transition out of which we can try to make sense, fighting off the twin afflictions of hyperesthesia and passivity, no position can be a comfortable one or should be complacently held.*<sup>30</sup>

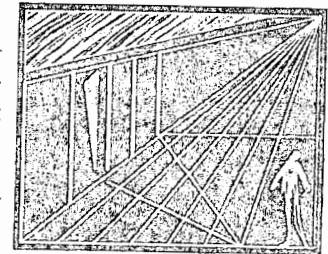
One further theory is important because it depends somewhat on all the others. Daniel Bell, in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, explains that our society has turned to forms of immediate pleasure rather than retaining Capitalism's historical process of delayed gratification. And Richard Sennett's new book, entitled *The Fall of Public Man*, is reviewed in these words:

*In mid-eighteenth century London and Paris... we even had separate modes of behavior for dealing with the public and private aspects of our lives. Away from our homes, we played public roles, dressed and spoke theatrically so as to project those roles and thus maintained a sense of civility. But in time, the rise of industrial capitalism and the ascendancy of a secular view of the world combined to undermine this public mode of behavior. The concerns of our private selves became transcendent. Hence, today we are steeped in narcissism.*<sup>31</sup>

The result of narcissism on the arts is everywhere evident. It is even legitimized in a course given by The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, described in a mailing piece this way:

*"Critical Issues of Art in the Seventies"*

*The art of the seventies seems to be generating an intense scrutiny of "forms of the Self." This manifests itself in not only the arts of sculpture and painting but also in film, photography, dance, and theatre. Strategies for exploring the self range from documentation through re-invented autobiography to the formal use of time.*<sup>32</sup>



Self involvement is only one of several symptoms of our fragmented, disheartened, and transitional society. Maxine Greene says that artists today are communicating. She believes they are reflecting the general despair and the sense of being lost that we all have. That may be so. Private depression is a heavy burden when it lasts

a whole generation and I believe we have turned to other forms as an antidote.

For the most part we have turned away from rational, lineal, intellectual, verbal forms of communication to more sensual forms. Bell's theory explains this switch while the attendance figures of ballet and opera support it. Legitimate theatre, the well-made play of ideas, has been deserted by the educated, affluent audience in favor of the more sensual entertainments of ballet and opera. Dance audiences in particular have grown each year so that New Yorkers can usually, at any given time, pick between several competing companies of excellence. The theatre-goer on the other hand, is lucky to find one or two plays of verbal excellence in any one season. Very often such plays are English imports and have limited runs because audiences will not support intellectual theatre, even with the most excellent casts.

There is one exception in today's theatre which I believe proves the rule. It used to be that a Jewish play in New York would find an immediate audience. Today, the Jewish play is being replaced by the Black play. It seems to me that theatre, needing an audience with common concerns, interests, and enthusiasm, is now able to communicate only to the one group in our society which still constitutes a community. The Jews have moved to the suburbs but the Blacks, because of external pressures, remain a geographical and psychological community able to share a theatrical experience as a group.

I imagine that unless there are drastic changes in our society, Black theatre will increase in prominence. It will be interesting and possibly sad to see what economic and sociological pressures do to Black theatre as it grows. There are already hints of difficulties in the form of exploitation films for Blacks, and of some Black theatre people who claim that the ordinary critical standards of theatre do not apply to them. There are stories of Black actors refusing to wear servant's costumes when playing the parts of servants. One hopes these are but growing pains.

Just as the written word, the printing press and the telephone have transformed our methods of communication and even man's thought processes, there are contemporary phenomena, while not as all-encompassing as the social theories cited earlier, which are, none the less, changing our culture's forms of communication. The use of drugs has contributed to private rather than shared experiences and has diminished areas of communication. I am speaking not only of the junkie nodding in a corner. He may be in a very dramatic private world. But as yet, no playwright has given a junkie wonderful things to say the way O'Neill did for drunks. Furthermore, I am concerned with what we will have to say to one another

as society uses more and more drugs to alleviate physical and psychological pain. Many forms of mania, depression, and other mental problems are now treated with drugs such as lithium. While such treatment is of huge benefit to mankind, it does take away one whole area of communication. We may get to the point someday where a character in a play no longer need suffer anguish searching for the cause of his depression. His melancholy will have a physiological cause. A modern day Hamlet will not say, "to be or not to be..." He will say, "I'd better take a pill." I wonder if that will play?

Film and television have lessened the opportunity for communicating in the arts in two ways. First of all, our fragmented society has not been approached as separate interest groups with separate media offerings. Instead, commercial interests have demanded that as many people as possible be corralled into watching the same films and programs. The result is a public which has become accustomed to mindless entertainment which offends no one but which also demands no critical or intellectual effort by the viewer. Theatre is not for them. As Rollo May puts it, the need to reach a mass audience means that on television,

*...originality, the breaking of frontiers, the radical newness of ideas and images are at best dubious and at worst totally unacceptable.*<sup>33</sup>

The second thing the mass media has done is to give us instant replay reality in our living rooms. In doing this, crucial events in our history are denied the chance to become mythic by being re-told artfully. We will never again have a Homer telling of Odysseus because our own epic stories, like the Kennedy assassinations, are recorded, frozen as they happened. Compared to the real event, any dramatization, is somehow wrong, off key, tame. When a dramatization of recent history is attempted, such as, *All The President's Men*, the whole focus of classic theatre is reversed. The main characters are off stage and we see only the messengers, the minor players. What would *Oedipus* be like if he never appeared on stage? We know what *Hamlet* would be like because Tom Stoppard has shown us.

A vacuum must be filled. We search for messages to fill our communication vacuum. It seems that no message is too odd to be given a hearing. In terms of personal and psychic fulfillment, there is a growing list of programs seeking to fill a vacuum of meaning in our society: est, Esalen, Rolfing, Transcendental Meditation, Transactional Analysis, group analysis of many sorts, Zen, Yoga, Moonies, and many other sub groups and combinations of theories. In the arts there is also a wide range of very strange performances trying to find an audience. For some time nudity and homoeroticity have

sought to satisfy what should be a universal interest. Because doing is more interesting than watching, theatrical sex has become more and more kinky. We are also treated to freak shows in which the line between performance and reality is blurred. The singer, Patti Smith, has become popular with an act reviewed in these words:

*The word "insanity" may seem a little strong; this listener hasn't been inside Miss Smith's head. But she acts crazy sometimes, and if it's an act, it's an act she plays so intensely that it's become, its own kind of reality... It was a performance "terrifying" in its intensity... At one point during one of her songs she slumped to the floor and started banging her head against the pipe organ.<sup>34</sup>*

Excesses in the arts have prompted many critics to predict that we are in a period of decadence comparable to the worst of the Roman Empire, with a similar fate in store. But there is also a move away from this path. Articles are now appearing which claim that we are returning to both political and esthetic conservatism. A lead article in the *New York Times* "Arts and Leisure" section has a headline which announces: "A Yearning for 'Normalcy'—The Current Backlash in the Arts." The author, art critic Hilton Kramer, goes on to say:

*The truth is, much of what has passed for being avant-garde in recent years has proved to be extremely boring and extremely trivial—a mere charade of the great age of experiment in the arts, and of no great esthetic merit in itself... The taste now is for clarity and coherence, for the beautiful and recognizable, for narrative, melody, pathos, glamour, romance, and the instantly comprehensible, for empathy rather than entropy—for art that is a pleasure rather than a moral contest.<sup>35</sup>*

All of these entertaining qualities that Mr. Kramer lists are evident in the public's current interest in nostalgia, in the bicentennial, and in numerous revivals now on Broadway. But unfortunately, we cannot survive on the messages of another era. The revivals may bring a breathing space from the pounding sensations of current culture but they carry no relevant communication. Alfred Kazin says:

*What are we nostalgic for? Why so many commemorations, appeals to the past, imitations of what has never really disappeared from our lives? Nostalgia is never for what we have lost, but for that part of ourselves, like childhood, that we no longer understand. Nostalgia is the effort of the too-conscious present to understand itself in the light of the unconscious past. Nostalgia is the effort to rejoin ourselves to ourselves—when the effort is in one sense, too late.<sup>36</sup>*

Another, but equally, negative explanation of nostalgia comes from Jean Shepherd.

*I think most nostalgia is a sickness. It's symptomatic of a deep cleavage in American life. It's one of the only things Americans have left in common—the past. How else can a kid from Hammond, Indiana and a kid from Brooklyn talk to each other? They have to talk about Bogart because they don't understand anything else about each other's lives.<sup>37</sup>*

So we can't go home again. As theatre designers, our stock-in-trade clichés, stereotypes, and prejudices have been taken from us. The man with the long hair is not a hippie, he's a candidate for president; the mad man is not pitiful, he's a rock star earning a million dollars a show; and the babe in the slinky, low-cut, red dress is not a whore, she's your grandmother. We remain in a communication vacuum.

Finally, the point of all this is to explain why the absence of significant verbal communication has had a profound effect on the course of scenography in the past few years. The most published and probably most imitated scenographers today have abandoned the theories of design which three generations of designers in the United States have accepted as dogma. That dogma, according to Robert Edmond Jones, was:

*A setting should not be a thing to look at in itself. It can, of course, be made so powerful, so expressive, so dramatic, that actors have nothing to do after the curtain rises but to embroider variations on the theme the scene has already given away.<sup>38</sup>*

And in Prague, in 1976, Jo Mielziner repeats:

*...the designer must be the servant of the director. Designers should not be leaders, they should be collaborators.<sup>39</sup>*

But these statements depend upon a theatre of verbal ideas in which overpowering visual effects would kill the intention of the play.

Compare Jones' and Mielziner's words with these of Ralph Koltai, the English scenographer:

*I'm interested basically in finding a concept for a production. I tend to work with directors who like me to find the concept. And I tend not to work with directors who have very strong ideas themselves.<sup>40</sup>*

And Robin Wagner speaking of Tom O'Horgan:

*He's very open and free about using anything that he feels is good. So if you come up with a seemingly crazy idea and it works for him, he wants it and you use it. He has absolutely no ego that way... someone had made a comment in an interview that I had*

a tendency to over-design and Tom's comment was, "No one can over-design for me."<sup>41</sup>

Or an article in this Journal which said:

*I think that the evidence suggests that Svoboda's work in the 1970's shows relatively more of the traditional designer than of the scenographer as he himself has embodied that term... I suggest that the cause is closely related to his lack of work with a certain kind of director, one with whom he can interact fully and freely and almost intuitively...<sup>42</sup>*

From these statements and from any number of sets we have all seen, it is clear that we have crossed a frontier in theatre. We are no longer completely bound by the old rules of scenic restraint. As scenographers we are even being prodded forward by Clive Barnes who has said that "Broadway design is scenically locked into the 1930s." He continues,

*certainly we have never seen the sort of total visual concept that can occasionally be seen in opera or dance. Wake up, Broadway! There are images out there to be captured. They are not using gaslight anymore.<sup>43</sup>*

What Mr. Barnes fails to recognize is that a conflict exists between the old theatre of ideas, of words, of humanistic principles, and the theatre of the senses, of visual supremacy, of mechanistic magic.

One spokesman for verbal communication is Barnes' co-critic on the *Times*, Walter Kerr, who writes:

*What is very clear is that words, those strangely supercharged constructs by means of which a sustained intellectual intensity is generated, are not only the original tool of the theatre they are the only remaining tool of the theatre, the one means the stage has of coping with—maybe even whipping—the competition. The stage can't compete visually; it's got to compete verbally.<sup>44</sup>*

If, as scenographers, we have only two choices; either to use restraint and be servants of the word or take command and provide visual fireworks, then our position is relatively simple. However, each production we design forces us into aesthetic decisions which are complicated by the state of our culture. Given a society, accustomed to mindless TV and sensual self-fulfillment, can we, as scenographers, offer this society productions of classic plays which stress beautiful language? Or must we jazz up the classics to interest such an audience, and thus destroy the true value of the play? On the other hand if we choose to

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"...must we jazz up the classics to interest such an audience, and thus destroy the true value of the play?"

make the visual production of utmost importance, even in a new play, what message of significance can we, as scenographers, transmit? For me, the huge, and often beautiful sets of designers, like Svoboda, are by their scale and power anti-human, and thus corroborate Maxine Greene's contention that today's art communicates the powerlessness and despair of man. In this case the unimportance of the character, dwarfed by his surroundings, serves as an additional defeat of man in his struggle against the forces of irrationality, of bigness, and of technology.

I am not an enemy of innovative and visually powerful scenography. Alwin Nikolais's work exhibits great technical skill and power, yet it is employed in the service of a traditional humanism. His advantage lies in the fact that he is choreographer, composer, and scenographer to his own works and that he is working in dance which has never been a verbal form of communication. Rather than unbalancing a work by causing one element of a production to take precedence, his work gains power through its unity and its use of technology. His art is always scaled to the size of the human body.

Few of us are fortunate enough to be playwright, director, and scenographer all at once. We work in theatre where responsibilities are fragmented. We live in a society that is fragmented, that is in transition, that is becoming more and more sensual, and that cannot even discuss the major events of its time. As scenographers, we have entered a permissive era where the old rules no longer operate. We are often asked to design classic plays and operas and in doing so are expected to use an aesthetic which has no relation to the original. As artists, we are expected to communicate and the only universal message today is despair. What are we to do?

I wish I really did have an answer that I could pronounce with conviction. But I see several directions and none of them are satisfactory. We can become museum curators attempting to foster a new appreciation for verbal theatre. We would have a hard time finding an audience. Or we can throw off the traces and work with directors who permit us to mount spectacular and sensual productions. But when we do this we seem to exclude vast areas of things that the theatre is able to say. Or, we can work intuitively, never considering the philosophical implications of what we do. If we do this, we are adrift in a meaningless activity that has lost the continuity of both history and the future. Or we can become so engrossed in technology, new lamps, new dimmers, new plastics, that like much of our culture we substitute things for what little humanity there still is in our work. It seems criminal that of all people, those in the theatre should take this course.

It is important for scenographers to realize that their new found importance and power in the theatre...

sages they are capable of transmitting. Technical theatre can command sensual and emotional messages such as fear, excitement, calm, mystery, or even sexual desire. But we cannot talk of loyalty, honor, generosity, duplicity, or greed, but then, no one seems to be discussing such things any more.

I am concerned because intellectual quests rather than sensual satisfaction have raised our civilization to whatever heights it has reached. Now that we seem to distrust our own culture and the rationalism and humanism on which it rests, I fear that we will swing too far the other way in an attempt to explore our neglected emotional and physical selves.

As audiences, and critics, such as Clive Barnes, demand more sensual productions, we, as scenographers, must recognize that our growing importance in the scheme of things comes at the expense of a theatre of ideas. For me, this is a pyrrhic victory.

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## TAKE A MEETING

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"I'm happy that you all got here today. We're all busy so we'll make this as short as possible, but I did want to get you all together so that everyone knows what is going on. We'll get together again when it's necessary. Do you all know each other? Let's see, I'll start here—Harry, Gloria, Pierre, Alvin, Jaynie, Christopher, Mac, John."

"Excuse me, Manny, before you get into something else, can everyone here get me a bio as soon as possible, we are going to start..."

"We'll get to that in a minute; first I want Harry to take over. I know he has a list of things he wants to discuss."

"Thanks, Manny. First, let me say that it is good working with you. Those of you who have worked with me before know how easy I am to get along with. Sometimes I have to say no to things you want, but remember that I'm on your side. I'm looking forward to working with those of you I don't know, and I'm sure this is going to be a pleasant experience. I'd like to start with Pierre telling us what his concept is and what this is going to look like."

"Oh, Harry. Do I really have to go first? Alright, if I must. Well, you see, when Joshua and I started to talk about this, he had some really thrilling ideas about the show—not experimental enough to empty the house, but new ideas that are really quite wonderful. I wish Joshua were here to tell you all this. So many are his ideas, and he does express himself so well. Anyhow, what we want to do is get rid of all that gloomy stuff and make this fun. This is a show about power. Of course, sometimes we have to be serious, but by having light moments we only make our serious points more effective."

"Pierre, can you give some examples?"

"Gee, Christopher, I'm glad you asked, I do tend to ramble. OK, take that scene when she comes down the stairs washing her hands. We're treating it like a dream sequence. The stairs are plastic and back-lit. Jaynie can do wonderful things with color in there. On