Expanding the Narrative Horizons of Stage Space

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Abstract: *This paper explores the profound transformations occurring in the field of theatrical arts under the influence of media convergence, with a particular focus on how new media and technologies have reshaped and expanded the narrative space and expressive forms of stage design. By analyzing the application of diverse visual languages in scenography, the study highlights emerging trends that enrich the discipline and drive its development. Drawing on insights and case studies from four years of undergraduate training, this research investigates how stage design students can incorporate narrative logic and interdisciplinary approaches to create more open, layered, and diversified spatial experiences. The convergence of media offers boundless opportunities for innovation in both theatre and visual arts, positioning stage design to embrace a broader and more dynamic future.*

Keywords: *Stage Design; Environmental Theatre; Narrative; Interdisciplinary; Exhibition-Based Performance Design*

1. Introduction

As media convergence accelerates, the field of theatrical arts is undergoing an unprecedented and profound transformation. The integration of new media and emerging methodologies has not only redefined the spatiality of stage design but also extended the boundaries of its narrative forms. The fusion of physical and virtual elements, static and dynamic imagery, as well as digital modeling, has diversified the visual languages employed on stage, enriching its aesthetic content and signaling new developmental trajectories for contemporary scenography.

2. The Diversification of Stage Space

Every individual exists within space, and conversely, the presence of space is affirmed through human existence. The very nature and configuration of space evoke emotional resonance in those who observe or inhabit it. In stage design, spatial dynamics play a critical role. Composed of scenic elements, props, and various visual components, stage space enables designers to construct immersive atmospheres that deeply affect audience perception and emotional engagement. Space, therefore, is both a tangible and experiential entity, validated and activated through human presence and interaction.

The stage, a vital instrument in the hands of performers, serves as the primary arena for theatrical expression—an imaginative playground tailored for the actor. In contrast, the theatre building assumes a more static architectural function, akin to the enclosing "fence" that delineates the boundaries of this playground. Stripped of essential components such as direction, performance, and scenography, the theatre becomes a mere shell—an inert architectural form devoid of theatrical vitality.

The essence of drama does not originate within the theatre as a structure but is rooted in the concept of the stage. The stage extends far beyond its physical confines; it is a dynamic, communicative arena where visual dialogues, corporeal interactions, and emotional exchanges between actors and audience unfold. It is in this space that actors pour out their energy, and spectators immerse themselves emotionally, together weaving the tapestry of theatrical narrative.

Thus, it becomes imperative to reexamine and more precisely articulate the definition of the stage. It is not merely a spatial construct enclosed by the four walls of a theatre but a boundless site of emotional and imaginative convergence between performer and viewer. Regardless of how its form evolves, the stage remains the soul of drama—a sacred domain co-created by actors and audience alike.

2.1. Traditional Stage Configurations

Historically, theatrical forms and their corresponding performance-viewing spaces have evolved as inseparable twins. The theatre has traditionally provided an appropriate and structured environment for both actors and spectators. Within the architecture of the theatre, the zones designated for performance and for viewing constitute its spatial core [1].

Initial explorations of theatre space sought to disrupt the long-standing, unidirectional viewing relationship between audience and performer. These efforts primarily focused on reimagining and innovating the proscenium stage, leading to the emergence of various configurations such as thrust stages, arena stages, and immersive formats that dissolve spatial barriers between actor and spectator. Through such innovations, designers aim to foster more flexible, diverse, and interactive theatrical experiences that deepen audience engagement [2].

Notable examples from the Shanghai Theatre Academy's Experimental Theatre include The Face, Death Variations, and A Midsummer Night's Dream. In both The Face and A Midsummer Night's Dream, the audience is arranged around a central performance space. In The Face, the entire stage floor is elevated while the performance area is recessed; A Midsummer Night's Dream features elongated audience seating placed directly on stage. Death Variations is particularly unique in its use of the backstage area as a performance-viewing zone: the cyclorama is raised and the front curtain lowered, resulting in a mirrored spatial relationship.

These experimental stage formats are fundamentally driven by the desire to establish a more intimate and reciprocal relationship between audience and performer, challenging the conventional spatial segregation imposed by the proscenium arch.

2.2. New Forms of Theatrical Performance: Environmental Theatre

In recent years, spatial perception and embodied experience have increasingly informed theatrical practice. Today, stage design is no longer limited to crafting visually aesthetic environments for performance; instead, it aspires to construct holistic theatrical spaces that incorporate the audience as active participants in the dramatic event.

Richard Schechner defines the impetus for environmental theatre as "abolishing the division between stage and auditorium, eliminating all obstacles, and replacing them with a unified space—so that the theatre becomes an environment created for action and interaction, rather than a barrier between audience and actor" [3]. Schechner advocates for performance environments that facilitate rather than obstruct the relational dynamics between actor and spectator. His perspective not only reorients the spatial use of theatrical venues but also offers a radical critique of traditional audience arrangements.

In essence, Schechner's environmental theatre abandons conventional viewing models and liberates performance from the constraints of the "black box" theatre. The stage is no longer an isolated "cake" behind the curtain but an open, interactive, and multi-sensory space that injects renewed vitality into theatrical innovation.

In traditional theatres, performance typically occurs within the confines of the proscenium—between the front curtain and the cyclorama—with minimal scenic intervention extending beyond this frame. In contrast, environmental theatre demands scenographic distributions that transcend these spatial boundaries, extending into the auditorium and even outside the architectural theatre itself. This approach fosters broader material and psychological exchanges between dramatic action and the audience.

Environmental theatre dismantles the spatial barriers traditionally separating actor and audience, constructing a shared, immersive theatrical environment. This encourages a higher degree of audience involvement and engagement in the dramatic process. Sleep No More stands as one of the most renowned and successful exemplars of environmental theatre in contemporary practice.

2.3. Case Studies of Traditional and Innovative Stage Spaces

This section presents a comparative analysis of two theatrical case studies: Othello by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) as an example of traditional stage spatiality, and The Golden Dragon, a third-year studio design project, as a case of environmental theatre practice.

2.3.1. Contemporary Presentation of Traditional Stage Design: Othello

In late spring 2015, the Royal Shakespeare Company staged Othello at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. As illustrated in Figure 1, the production employed a predominantly traditional proscenium stage layout. A notable modification was the extended forestage, which projected into the audience area and was surrounded on three sides by spectators, with the remaining side connected to the proscenium arch, forming a shape reminiscent of the Chinese character "jiǎ", denoting enclosure on three sides.

This configuration imposed greater demands on the performers' physicality and expressiveness, as they had to engage audiences from multiple viewing angles simultaneously. It also presented scenographic challenges, requiring a spatial design that maintained visual coherence from three distinct perspectives. While the spatial arrangement adhered to conventional principles, the overall scenographic style leaned towards modern aesthetics, providing a fresh visual interpretation of the Shakespearean classic.

Figure 1: Othello (2015) by the Royal Shakespeare Company.(Photo by Keith Pattison © RSC.)

2.3.2. Reimagining the Classic through Environmental Theatre: The Golden Dragon

At the conclusion of the second semester of the third undergraduate year, our team was assigned a significant studio project: to reinterpret The Golden Dragon, a contemporary German play known for its diverse characters and rapid scene transitions. The play features 15 characters and 48 scenes, demanding a flexible and layered spatial strategy. After extensive discussion, our group concluded that the principles of environmental theatre were particularly suited to the play's fragmented narrative and thematic complexity.

We selected Florence, Italy, as the imagined performance setting. This city, steeped in historical resonance and distinct geographical identity, is bisected by the Arno River and ultimately opens to the Mediterranean Sea. Florence's historic center, with its open piazzas and cobbled streets, provides a rich sensory and cultural contrast to the play's protagonists—migrant laborers from distant East Asia. The time-worn pavements of Florence bear the imprints of countless lives, and in their erosion and layering, they transcend the identity of a single city, becoming cultural nodes that connect past and present.

In our scenographic proposal, we designed a linear performance path that traverses a sequence of urban streets and plazas. This spatial trajectory not only accommodates multiple narrative strands but also reveals the complex, often ambivalent relationships among characters. Initially presented as discrete storylines, these threads gradually merge through a stream-of-consciousness structure, culminating in a powerful, unified dramatic tableau. As illustrated in Figures 2 and 3, the footprints of the characters are envisioned to be embedded in the foreign cobblestones—leaving traces that become part of the memory of place.

Figure 2: Hand-drawn stage design concept for The Golden Dragon.

Figure 3: Hand-drawn stage design concept for The Golden Dragon.

Although The Golden Dragon currently remains at the conceptual and planning stage, all members of our group are deeply committed to the project. We hold high hopes that one day this creative and ambitious vision can be realized, delivering to audiences an unforgettable theatrical experience shaped by space, history, and cultural contrast.

3. The Diversification of Narrative Strategies

As a narrative art form, drama is fundamentally concerned with the representation of fictional events. Narratology traditionally identifies five core elements that constitute a narrative: time, setting, character, event, and causality. Among these, place holds a particularly crucial role—not merely as a spatial container but as a lived world shaped by specific phenomena and everyday experience. In this sense, place can be considered the essential "substance" of spatial form—a meaningful totality created by the intersection of natural and built environments, imbued with personal memory, emotional resonance, and human intention.

More specifically, place aligns closely with three of the five narrative components: setting, event, and cause. Due to the subjective nature of lived experience, individuals may form vastly different emotional responses and cognitive associations with the same physical environment. This variability endows place with narrative depth and complexity, making it an especially potent medium in theatrical storytelling.

Thus, to reconstruct a place on stage is to engage in narrative practice. Narrative is not confined to text or literature; it also resides within space, within any material condition that facilitates human action and emotional exchange.

3.1. The Evolution of Narrative in Scenic Design

Historically, theatrical design has its roots in environmental narration. In its early stages, scenography primarily served to provide a visual backdrop and enhance dramatic effect, focusing heavily on constructing a believable environment for the narrative to unfold.

From the Italian Renaissance to 19th-century Naturalism, Western scenic design aimed for heightened realism. Movements such as Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism in 19th-century Europe contributed significantly to this aesthetic, with scenic illusion becoming a dominant objective. Designers utilized props, painted flats, and lighting to simulate lifelike settings, thereby supporting audience immersion and narrative comprehension.

However, in the 20th century, such illusionism came under increasing critique. Thinkers like Hegel dismissed scenic illusion as a "stage trick." French literary figures such as Stendhal and Victor Hugo ridiculed the pursuit of realism on stage—questioning why, for instance, illusionists did not simply use real sunlight or actual trees. These critiques marked a philosophical shift: from environmental illusion to spatial narration.

In this new framework, scenic design no longer simply replicated physical environments. Instead, the spatial arrangement of the stage was reimagined to guide audience attention, establish mood, and construct multiple narrative layers within a constrained area.

A compelling example is Tom Pye's scenic design for the Young Chekhov Trilogy (Figure 4). In a limited stage footprint, Pye fluidly integrated diverse environments—interiors, gardens, forests, train stations, and riversides—into a unified and highly abstracted setting. Scene transitions were achieved through mechanized set changes and atmospheric lighting: rising and falling flats marked interior/exterior shifts; fog machines and light beams conjured outdoor scenes; and the illusion of a train's arrival was evoked through rail fragments, lighting, and sound.

Figure 4: Production still from Young Chekhov Trilogy.

This approach marked a move toward narrative space—wherein setting is not static but charged with interpretive significance, shaped by performer interaction and audience perception.

In contemporary practice, such environments are not simply illustrative but narratively generative. They are inseparable from the "where," "what," and "why" of theatrical action. More than backdrops, they become story-worlds—alive with memory, symbolism, and possibility. When deployed effectively, these spaces not only engage the senses but also influence behavior, emotion, and interpretation, thus playing a vital role in dramaturgical construction.

3.2. Case Studies from Rehearsal and Graduation Productions

3.2.1. The Red Sky

From a subjective perspective, The Red Sky—our practical theatre production—featured the least dramatic plot among our cohort's projects. The narrative consisted largely of mundane interactions within a nursing home. Nevertheless, the production was well-received by both faculty and audience, earning strong praise.

The Red Sky employed a predominantly environmental narrative approach, structured linearly with a unified scenic composition. The primary design motif was a large, crumpled sheet of paper stretching across the stage (Figure 5), embedded with eight square, semi-transparent scrims.

Figure 5: Production still from The Red Sky.

Depending on lighting cues, these scrims alternately appeared as envelopes or stationary trains, establishing symbolic shifts in space and time.

Despite the subtle narrative, the production featured 19 distinct scene transitions, each carefully crafted. Spatial cues were minimal but effective: a dining table, chess board, and chairs signaled the nursing home's lounge; two laundry poles implied the courtyard. Some scenes used no props at all—only tree shadows, moonlight reflections, and ambient sound effects such as bird calls or frog croaks. This restraint created a powerful environmental resonance, achieved through simplicity and clarity.

3.2.2. Resurrection

Directed by Zhang Xiaoming, Resurrection presented a more complex dramaturgical challenge, with rapid transitions between diverse settings: courtroom, birch forest, prison, and study. The scenic solution was to divide the stage into elevation-based zones. The front section functioned as the study, transitioning via a set of steps to a mid-level zone for the forest and courtroom, while the rear featured a narrow ramp evoking a train corridor.

This vertical stratification enabled efficient scene changes within a single spatial frame (Figure 6). The set was composed of minimalist volumetric units—platforms, steps, and slopes—working together to produce a sense of depth.

Figure 6: Production still from Resurrection.

The design embodied a high degree of spatial abstraction, or conventionality, which refers to how the relationship between humans and space (time/space) is represented and manipulated on stage.

In this production, conventionality was deliberately employed to construct psychological and emotional resonance. Through light, props, and spatial cues, distinct settings were evoked: the solitude of the study, the cold vastness of Siberia, the oppressive bleakness of prison, and the romantic melancholy of birch groves. These shifts were not merely illustrative but emotionally expressive, allowing the audience to feel the protagonist's inner turmoil and transformation. In this way, Resurrection exemplified the use of spatial storytelling to unite physical environment and emotional dramaturgy into a coherent

and affecting theatrical experience.

4. Expanding the Boundaries of Stage Space

With advancements in technology and the continuous exploration of narrative strategies by designers, the boundaries of stage space are being progressively redefined. The rapid development of contemporary technologies—such as high-definition projection and digital media tools—has dramatically expanded the possibilities for both the presentation and realization of scenographic concepts. Simultaneously, rising standards of living have nurtured a more aesthetically literate public. Increasing exposure to exhibitions and installations has familiarized audiences with spatial narratives beyond the theatre, many of which offer scenographers valuable models for study and inspiration.

4.1. Technological Advancements and Case Studies

Among the many technological innovations shaping contemporary stage design, new media technologies stand out as the most widely adopted. Their application goes far beyond projecting static images or videos onto a backdrop; they allow for an organic integration of media with performance, performers, and spatial design.

One notable example is director Suzanne Andrade's production of The Magic Flute, developed over two years with meticulous attention to animation and visual storytelling (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Production still from The Magic Flute by 1927 Theatre Company.

The stage consisted of a single, large white wall embedded with concealed entrances and exits for the performers. Multimedia projections transformed this surface into a dynamic canvas, enabling scenes of aerial flight, animated spider attacks, and other fantastical sequences. For instance, when the Queen of the Night expresses her fury, projection transforms her into a towering spider—a spectacle synchronized not only with her aria but also with the movements of a live orchestra, which had to align both musically and visually with the on-stage animations.

Blending operatic structure with theatrical expression, cinematic techniques, illustration, animation, and musical storytelling, Andrade's Magic Flute became a multidimensional, genre-crossing production. Her visual language—expressive, nostalgic, and richly stylized—allowed 1927, her theatre collective, to produce one of the most visually distinctive interpretations of The Magic Flute to date.

In a parallel but contrasting approach, Romeo Castellucci's version of The Magic Flute (Figure 8) pushed the boundaries of scenography through digital modeling.
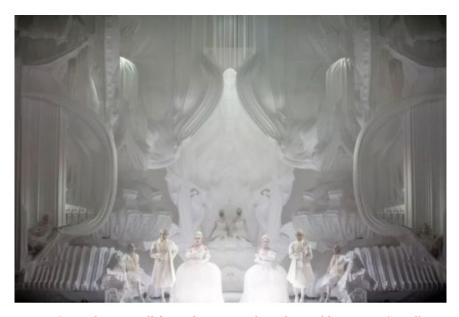
Figure 8: Production still from The Magic Flute, directed by Romeo Castellucci.

Utilizing computational design and parametric tools, Castellucci crafted a symmetrical, dreamlike world suffused with pristine whiteness and subtle tension created through tonal contrast. At its core was a meticulously sculpted artificial grotto made from polystyrene foam—an homage to the Rocaille aesthetics popular during Mozart's time.

The first act unfolded in a highly ornate Baroque space layered with intricate forms. In contrast, the second act introduced a minimalistic setting, dramatically shifting the visual tone. This contrast between acts heightened the narrative rhythm and reinforced the evolving thematic undercurrents. The artificial grotto, developed in collaboration with architect-programmer Michael Hansmeyer, represented a hybrid form: both organic and architectural, simultaneously evoking bodily interiors and classical palatial grandeur. "It reveals the extraordinary value of music," Castellucci remarked.

As Professor Wang Qianguai of the Shanghai Theatre Academy's Department of Stage Design observes, contemporary scenography has evolved into a cross-disciplinary narrative art. No longer confined to fixed styles or formats, stage design now functions as a connective tissue—linking audiences, performers, texts, and worldviews. In the age of new media, scenographic creativity is entering a new artistic paradigm of regenerative reality, one that may be tangible or intangible…[4]

4.2. Narrative Case Studies in Exhibition and Performance Spaces

The Jewish Museum Berlin, opened in 2005, offers a profound case study in spatial narrative within exhibition design. Though occupying only 3,000 square meters, the museum exemplifies how narrative architecture can evoke deep emotional and historical resonance.

Through a linear narrative structure synchronized with its curatorial content, the museum guides visitors along three distinct paths—each symbolizing a different trajectory of Jewish experience during World War II. This spatial sequencing provides a "readable" architectural journey through history, punctuated by key thematic and emotional moments.

The museum's architectural form expresses its narrative intent through points, lines, planes, and volumes. The zigzag layout mirrors the disrupted continuity of Jewish history, while maintaining harmony with its surrounding urban and historical context. The irregular, slit-like windows evoke scars in both structure and memory—wounds that speak to collective trauma.[5]

One of the most impactful elements of the museum is the installation Shalekhet (Fallen Leaves) by artist Menashe Kadishman. Composed of cast-iron masks scattered across the floor (Figure 9), the piece invites visitors to walk across it—eliciting a jarring metallic clang that simulates the unsettling atmosphere of wartime incarceration.

Figure 9: View of Shalekhet (Fallen Leaves) installation by Menashe Kadishman, Jewish Museum Berlin.

The soundscape, coupled with the tactile discomfort, brings historical terror into immediate, embodied experience.

From a scenographic perspective, this project exemplifies how spatial form becomes a medium for emotional and historical communication. The zigzag plan, fragmented windows, and sharp contrast between positive and negative space create a powerful visual and emotional rhythm. The thoughtful selection of materials—each with specific sensory and symbolic properties—further enhances the spatial narrative. Such design strategies are highly instructive for contemporary stage designers seeking to deepen the expressive capacity of scenic environments.

5. Conclusion

This study has argued that the diversification of stage space and narrative strategy has injected new vitality into the field of stage design, enriching both the form and content of theatrical performance.

By analyzing a range of case studies—from the productions of international theatre companies to the author's own undergraduate design projects, and from scenographic experiments to exhibition environments—this paper demonstrates how narrative logic from diverse disciplines can be meaningfully integrated into stage design. Such hybridization allows scenographers to construct spaces that are more open, dynamic, and multilayered.

Moreover, the rapid development of contemporary technology has had a profound impact on scenographic innovation, vastly expanding the creative boundaries of stage design. Technological integration not only makes stage environments more immersive and multidimensional but also enhances emotional resonance, strengthening the connection between audience and performance.

In conclusion, the author hopes to collaborate with fellow designers in advancing the theatrical arts toward a future defined by pluralism, innovation, and inclusivity.

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