

(Click your browser's back-button to return to main website)

## scratchings from a deep round pit

a

there is play  
there is drama  
there is theatre

play and drama are self-involving, and self-fulfilling  
neither carries the need for others to be witnesses

theatre is inconceivable from the start  
without the presence of witnesses

actors are doers - but essentially in the presence of others  
(spectators watch - as part of a crowd  
they are by definition interested in spectacle  
that which is above all to be seen  
an audience has come  
to hear and watch at the same time  
by definition the watching  
should be less important than the hearing)

play and drama define their space spontaneously  
for them space is fluid  
limited only by their immediate demands  
that space is significant to those involved as participants  
who speak and gesture  
essentially to no one but themselves  
onlookers are privileged to be afforded  
glimpses of a private ceremony  
they are not there to offer completion

actors cannot exist in such a precious ambience  
they are charged with the need  
to communicate outwardly  
to those who are not actors  
they are engaged in a public,  
not private ceremony (ritual)  
where those who are not actors  
are as significant as those who are

theatre therefore feeds on a collective figure  
the *actor-audience*  
each part of the collective  
is unreal without the other

b

for theatre to exist, there has to be a stage  
the place from which communication is essayed

(stage may mean a raised platform)

it can also be defined  
as a place for creative action  
(this article assumes the latter)

how does a space  
(adequate for play and drama)  
become a stage  
(which theatre cannot do without?)  
a stage is defined by the presence of an audience  
(the assumed presence of an audience)  
exactly how that audience gathers  
in relation to the space  
(it has come to turn into a stage)  
profoundly affects the nature of the performance  
the demands on the actor  
and the ultimate meaning of the text  
the actor is trying to define

an audience may gather  
on one two three  
or all four sides of the stage

c

1. end stage

the audience is ranged in rows on one side  
(that is in front of) the stage  
end-staging may consist  
of a simple raised platform  
or a space cleared against a wall  
with ranked seating  
or be a structure of varied sophistication  
in which stage and auditorium  
are divided from each other  
by a room-width wall  
with a central opening  
(exposed and closed off  
by the use of movable heavy curtains)  
this type of theatre is commonly called  
*proscenium (arch) theatre*  
but is also known as  
*picture-frame/landscape/fourth-wall theatre*

2. traverse

the audience is ranged on two opposing sides  
so that the stage becomes  
like a road running between them

3. I-shaped

the stage is pushed into a corner  
seeming to resemble a diamond  
with the audience sitting  
on two adjoining sides

4. semi-arena (sometimes confusingly called arena)

the audience sits on three sides  
or sometimes in a semi-circle

5. theatre-in-the-round (also sometimes called arena)  
the audience is gathered on all four sides  
the actual stage shape can be square  
rectangular circular or oval  
theatre-in-the-round can also exist  
with a three-sided audience  
with a triangular acting space

d  
each stage-shape speaks of a different relationship  
between actor and audience  
and therefore requires  
a different kind of actor  
to cope with its demands

e  
in the beginning is the word  
the word is taken in like a tablet by the actor

the meaning of the word  
dissolves within the actor  
and spreads into every limb and sinew  
awaiting transmission  
outwards towards the audience  
the meaning of the word is transmitted  
(and interpreted) by means of  
inner understanding  
intonation and projection  
of voiced words and sounds  
gesture  
movement  
direction  
through space to where the audience is

(gesture  
shifting of muscles and limbs  
within the actor's body  
whilst staying rooted to the one spot  
movement  
locomotion around the acting area)

the slightest change in any one of these factors  
alters the meaning of the words  
and therefore the impact of the whole text

actors communicate the play's meaning  
to their audiences  
by the ways they say their words  
by the ways they move their bodies  
by the use they make of the stage-space

different techniques are required  
according to whether audiences

are on one two three or four sides

those different techniques  
irrevocably affect the meaning  
of the text being delivered

f  
the truth of a play  
as intended by the playwright  
is obscured by the inevitable fact  
that each member of an audience  
can view the proceedings  
only from one viewpoint

if one person says of a performance  
*that was a good play and it meant this*  
it has to be understood  
such a person ought really to add  
*from where i was sitting*

even in an end-stage performance  
with the audience ranged  
on one side of the stage  
no two people are treated  
to exactly the same play

[movements gestures will be seen  
even by the closest neighbours  
from a slightly different angle  
and  
(even discarding what may be  
fundamental differences in their characters)  
will become invested with different significances  
a glance  
that may appear sincere to one  
may have a touch of slyness about it for the neighbour  
(seen from the slightest of different angles)  
and that alone will be sufficient  
to interpret the implications  
of that part of the script differently]

g  
each stage-shape  
requires a different use of the voice  
a different awareness of gesture  
a vastly different use of movement

techniques adequate for one  
will not suffice for the others

each stage shape  
requires a different style of actor  
with a different awareness of the relationship  
between performer and audience

h

the range of communication  
available to the actor in a performance  
can be thought of as a fan

from an end-stage  
the communicative fan  
needs only to be opened out narrowly  
for the message to reach  
all members of the audience

from the semi-arena  
the fan needs to have a span  
of up to one hundred and eighty degrees

from the round  
the fan must be able to span  
a complete three hundred and sixty degrees

i

the meaning that the actor gives to the words  
as they are spoken  
is not the meaning the words have  
when they reach the audience's ears

that meaning is filtered  
through intonation and voice character  
through the minutiae of gesture  
through the nature of the accompanying movement  
through the direction the words take  
from actor's mouth  
to the diverse ears of the audience  
through the architecture  
the stage and auditorium are set in  
through the use of staging and scenery  
through the clothes the actor is dressed in  
through the quality and nature  
of whatever lighting is used

a gesture seen from two different angles  
is not the same gesture  
the meaning of the accompanying words  
alters to the degree of that difference  
a movement seen from two different angles  
is not the same movement  
the meaning of the accompanying words  
alters to the degree of that difference

it follows that the more widespread the audience  
the greater the degree of difference  
in the sum of the theatrical acts  
and the greater the variation  
in the meaning of words

each member of the audience takes in

the narrower the fan of communication  
between actor and audience  
the easier relatively it is for the actor  
to control the slide of meaning  
from the actor's representation  
to the audience's interpretation

j  
it is a common expectation of theatre  
that directors manipulate actors  
in order to teach them  
how to manipulate audiences

at the same time actors are controlled  
by the techniques and effects  
they find themselves wrapped in  
as they attempt to communicate across the divide  
between themselves and their audiences

k  
theatre form  
is the microcosmic symbol  
of the macrocosmic *now*  
it is the closely-moulded shell  
of the relationship between actor and audience

the actor represents the desires of the powerful  
or the would-be powerful  
giving voice and body  
to the yearnings and concerns of the time  
that power trails in its wake

the actor masks the director  
the director masks the management  
the management masks  
those cultural and financial directives  
that emanate from the centres of power

audiences (seen one way) represent  
those factions of society  
sycophantic to the ideas of power

seen another they become representatives  
of all those without power  
destined to be receivers  
of the messages from on-high

l  
everything about a theatre is symbolic

the higher the stage,  
the greater the assertion of authority

low stages suggest a more liberal times  
a thrust stage  
    pushing itself out into the audience  
    with a kind of swagger  
        suggests a willingness to take on all comers  
a complete withdrawal behind the proscenium  
    suggests an authority in need of distance  
        fearful of contact  
        and wanting full use of the panoplies of power  
        to get its controlled message across  
the more confident an authority  
    the more sides it will expose to its receivers

all forms of staging though  
    except theatre-in-the-round  
        keep the sanctity of the back wall  
            the space for audiences to gawp upon  
            the space that belittles the actors before it  
            the barrier protecting  
                the dark world beyond  
                    from intruders  
                where the gods dwell  
                and the faceless slaves lurk

the back wall represents the immutable power  
    against which all else must be judged

m  
in greek theatre  
    the back wall was open to the sky  
        which was seen  
        through a rank of stone pillars  
in front were steps  
    and below that a flat circle  
the circle belonged to the chorus  
the steps to the few main characters  
the pillars and the sky beyond to the gods

in roman theatre  
    the back wall represented the city state  
    the commercial and political powers  
    through which the gods were thought to speak

in medieval theatre  
    the back wall represented the fixed world  
        between the mouth of hell on one side  
        and the gates of heaven on the other

in renaissance theatre  
    the back wall ceased to be fixed  
    machinery made it movable  
    travel made it changeable  
    the blending of god with humanity  
        allowed it illusionary powers

the wall shifted from being an architectural certainty

to a painter's paradise  
the coming of artificial lighting  
increased its chameleon's powers  
and with the growth of material needs  
and the enlarging significance of the domestic world  
the back wall went indoors  
(with fake windows  
to let the outside lighting in)  
and audiences were allowed to peek  
through the fourth wall (removed)  
into homes where heaven and hell  
still fought their battles  
in the domestic flesh  
with the gods shining their little light  
at the windows

n  
with no back wall then  
how do the gods fit in?

in the round  
people do not have the gods' back wall  
to judge the actors against  
they have people of their own kind

in the round  
there can be no absolute judgment  
relative values are built into the form  
if the gods are anywhere  
they are in the people all around  
it is the time of the internal god  
the god in everyone

the sum of the fulfilments of all audience-members  
is the god-fulfilment in all

god is what the world is judged to be  
from all three hundred and sixty degrees  
and that is the god  
the round invites participation in

o  
when the first atom bombs exploded  
their ash fanned out over the entire world  
not a person from then on  
could be free of its active workings

with that ash  
the world of the proscenium died  
the round became  
the only conceivable form  
to be trusted  
to carry the future

and in the round

the actor-audience becomes a whole person  
the actor cannot be protected any more  
and the audience can put aside subservience

the actor can step out of authoritarian garb  
and the overlit room  
in order to give voice to the diverse truth

the actor in the middle  
emanates from the people around  
their truths are there to be spoken

and the same light is shared by all

*(october 28<sup>th</sup> 1999)*

*(Click your browser's back-button to return to main website)*