The Iconic Stage

Marvin Carlson

Semiotic analyses of theatre have often given particular emphasis to the extreme importance in this art of a particular type of sign--the icon. According to C.S. Peirce, who established this as a key semiotic term, "anything whatever, be it quality, existent individual, or law, is an Icon of anything, in so far as it is like that thing and used as a sign of it."[1] The theatre more than any other art deals in things that are like other things, offering, in the words of Peter Handke, light which is brightness pretending to be another brightness, a chair pretending to be another chair, and so on.[2] Nevertheless, this ability, one might even say this tendency, of theatre to invest pieces of reality with its particular artistic significations is not only a distinguishing feature of this art, but, as Bert States has argued in a fascinating essay on this subject, a source of particular artistic power.[3]

In every historical period there has been an interplay between iconic and other types of sign presentation on stage, but different periods and different traditions have varied greatly both in the degree of iconicity on stage and in the relationship between the icon and its referent. Indeed the stylistic differences between different theatrical traditions may often be described in terms of their differences in iconicity. The Western realistic tradition is of course highly iconic. Indeed one might define theatrical realism as an attempt to create as iconic a performance as the medium would allow. The costumes the actors wear, the properties they manipulate, the furniture they use, are carefully selected or created to approximate such objects in the world outside the theatre

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as closely as possible. In more stylized theatres, most notably those of the classic Orient, symbolization often replaces iconicity--a table represents a mountain, a flag an army, a piece of cloth a river.

Although one might say that realism is a style in which everything on stage is presented as an icon, a distinction could nevertheless be made between different types of iconic representation within a realistic production. Although theatre theorists tend to think of icons in Handke's terms "chairs pretending to be other chairs," Peirce's definition is much more general, requiring only that the icon be "like that thing" it stands for. Thus a chair painted on a canvas backdrop (a common sight in prerealistic theatre) would be as legitimate an icon as a real chair, one of States' "pieces of reality" appropriated by the theatre for its own purposes. We might thus make a distinction between the general iconic feature of similarity and the common situation in theatre where objects actually *are* the things they represent, a situation to which Kier Elam has given the name *"iconic identity."*[4]

In any theatre, even when it is highly realistic, the degree of iconic identity of different elements will vary. The one element which almost invariably involves iconic identity, no matter how stylized the production, is the actor, a human being who represents a human being. The most notable exceptions to this, shadow or puppet plays, are generally considered distinct and separate sub-genres of theatre. Predictably, iconic identity on stage is next most commonly found in those elements most closely associated with and most utilized by the actor--the crown he wears, the fan she carries, the furnishings they sit upon. In realistic drama, both contemporary and historical, the iconic identity of such items is of major importance, and on occasion has exceeded even the normal idea of iconic identity. Sometimes for purposes of publicity, sometimes for a more disinterested motive of artistic verisimilitude, directors and designers have placed on stage objects which did not simply resemble real-life objects, but were in fact the objects themselves--actual contemporary or period costumes or furniture, borrowed from homes or museums, real flowers on real tables, real food really eaten, even, when it could be afforded, real gold and jewelry on the leading ladies.

The stage element which historically has most resisted representation through iconic identity, even during the realistic era, has been the physical setting, the scenery (as opposed to properties). There are obvious practical reasons for this. Clearly the presentation of a real Louis XIV chair, or a real pearl necklace, or even a real horse presents far fewer problems than a real town square, a real forest, or even a real architectural interior. The interiors were of course what the realistic theatre favored, but in fact they were constructed the same way that town squares or forests were--from wooden frames, canvas, and paint. The doors and the pictures on the walls might be real, and great care might be taken to assure that the walls did not sway when doors were vigorously slammed, but the walls were not real walls, the room was not a real room in the same way that the chairs were real chairs. The

scenery was iconic in Peirce's general sense, but it did not participate in iconic identity.

Nor was this necessarily a shortcoming, even for the most doctrinaire of realists. Clearly a certain pleasure of theatre placing great stress on verisimilitude is appreciation of the art required to create this impression. When Belasco recreated the interior of a Child's restaurant on stage, the fascination of the audience was obviously not in seeing in total and authentic detail the interior of such a restaurant. They could, of course, walk into any restaurant in this popular chain without paying admission and have that experience. The fascination was in seeing this familiar scene recreated on stage with an indistinguishable blend of an iconic setting and properties which might be either iconic or actually be the objects represented. Part of the pleasure involved here is simply that of appreciation of the technical skill of the scenic artist, seemingly overcoming the particular intractability of theatrical scenery to the sort of iconic identity so common in other aspects of theatre production. But there is also a more complex audience response at work.

In his famous essay on psychical distance early in this century, Edward Bullough gave particular attention to theatre. Briefly, it is Bullough's contention that an apprehension of Distance is necessary to appreciate any work of art, indeed even to experience it *as* art. This apprehension may be lost if the Distance becomes too great or too small, and the theatre runs a particular risk of the latter, "owing to the material presentment of its subject matter,"[5] in other words, to its strong reliance upon iconic identity. At the same time, Bullough recognizes that particular satisfaction can be attained from this decrease of Distance, provided it remains controlled: "both in appreciation and in production, most desirable is the utmost decrease of Distance without its disappearance."[6] Even when nothing on the stage itself served to distance the audience from the reality of Belasco's setting, the fact that it *was* on a stage, displayed, or in Eco's useful term, *ostended* for its public's contemplation, provided precisely the minimum distancing Bullough demanded, and created an agreeable tension between the audience's knowledge of illusion and their appreciation of its effectiveness. However complete the stage illusion, the audience necessarily remains aware of it *as* illusion. They are aware intellectually that beyond the plate-glass windows of Belasco's restaurant setting is not a New York street but the back wall of the stage, and even more directly, they are aware physically that they are sitting in a theatre auditorium as members of an observing audience.

The production tradition that reached its high point in such masters of detailed iconic representation as Belasco is generally styled realistic and is obviously reinforced by the bourgeois interest in authenticating realistic detail and material culture, but romanticism also contributed importantly to this tradition, anticipating the attention of the realists to the exact reproduction of all aspects of contemporary life by carefully researched reconstructions of historical scenes and dedication to local color. Perhaps nowhere was this

romantic/realistic devotion to iconic production more striking or more challenging to theatrical resources than in the nineteenth century tradition of Shakespearean production.

In an actual Elizabethan performance, of course, a street scene, a forest, or a chamber would have been as far from any iconic representation of the original as the neutral settings of the French classic stage, but now Shakespeare began to be presented according to the new vision of the historically accurate setting. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century this became the main line of Shakespearian interpretation, exemplified by such major directors as Kean, Irving and BeerbohmTree in England, Daly and Booth in America, the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen in Germany, and Antoine in France.

The logistics of presenting multi-scene plays like those of Shakespeare within detailed iconic settings proved formidable indeed, straining the resources of Europe's largest and best equipped theatres and the imaginations of the finest engineers and designers aided by all manner of revolving, sliding, and elevating stage areas. Few directors since the early years of the twentieth century have attempted to return to the sort of stage filled with authentic bushes and rabbits which was a specialty of Beerbohm-Tree, although an occasional production has attracted attention as a novelty by unusual concern in this direction. The graphic decadence of the 1933 New York production of *Tobacco Road* (earning it a highly unusual run of more than seven years) was emphasized by the real dirt, weeds, and filth which covered the stage. Audiences and critics were so fascinated by the detailed duplication of a tenement facade on a New York stage of Elmer Rice's *Street Scene*, and the more recent creation of the side of a mountain for Patrick Meyers' *K2* that these settings dominated both contemporary reactions to these productions and the memories of them.

Despite a few such striking exceptions, detailed illusionistic settings of this sort have rarely been seen in the modern theatre, partly in reaction to the turn of the century excesses in such production, and partly due to a feeling that such display distracted from other and more important values of the dramatic work. Perhaps the major reason, however, has been that the evolving cinema offered a far more effective way of placing before the viewer's gaze any location in the world as desired without the problems of shifting stage scenery. The gain in flexibility and accuracy of scenic detail was considerable, even though an important sacrifice was also involved--the phenomenological essence of theatre, its physical presence. Cinema as an art is as heavily iconic as theatre, but the theatre's shifting mixture of iconicity is necessarily absent in film. There can be no physical iconic identity of actors or objects. All icons become the same--projected images of absent realities. Christian Metz makes this point clearly in "The Imaginary Signifier:"

> The perceptions that theatre and other spectacles offer to the eye
> and ear are inscribed in a true space (not a photographed one), the

same one as that occupied by the public during the performance; everything the audience hear and see is actively produced in their presence, by human beings or props which are themselves present. This is not the problem of fiction but that of the definitional characteristics of the signifier: whether or not the theatrical play mimes a fable, its *action,* if need be mimetic, is still managed by real persons evolving in real time and space, *on the same stage or "scene" as the public.* The "other scene," which is precisely not so called, is the cinematic screen (closer to fantasy from the outset): what unfolds there may, as before, be more or less fiction, but the unfolding itself is fictive: the actors, the "decor," the words one hears are all absent, everything is *recorded* (as a memory trace which is immediately so, without having been something else before), and this is still true if what is recorded is not a "story" and does not aim for the fictional illusion proper. For it is the signifier itself, and as a whole, that is recorded, that is absence.[7]

Metz' observation, perceptive as it is, still requires a certain qualification. Certainly as compared with the cinema it is true to say that public and performance in theatre occupy the same "true space," but in terms of reception it is equally important to remember that normally speaking, audience and performance do not in fact occupy the same space but two contiguous spaces simultaneously, the space of the viewer and the space of the viewed. In almost every period of theatre history the disjuncture between these spaces has been emphasized by physical means, and often by actual barriers--most commonly the raising of the actor's space above that of the audience, but also by the use of curtains, proscenium arches and frames, the "mystic abyss" of the Wagnerian orchestra pit, by all sorts of railings and balustrades, and so on. As André Bazin has observed, theatre "of its very essence must not be confused with nature under penalty of being absorbed by her and ceasing to be," and that to protect this essential division, the architecture of the stage "has varied from time to time without ever ceasing to mark out a privileged spot actually or virtually distinct from nature."[8] Although Bullough stresses that the Distance he is considering is mental rather than physical, he does remark that actual spatial distance, especially in an art like theatre, contributes to the mental process which interests him. He even goes so far as to suggest that "the actual *spatial distance* separating objects of sight and hearing from the subject" has been one of the major reasons why the arts appealing to the ear and eye have been developed in a way that potential gustatory, olfactory, or haptic arts have not.[9]

The theatre, as a particularly tangible art, has always drawn an important part of its power from its physical presence even when actors and audiences were spatially separated. During the twentieth century, when the emergence of film has by contrast called particular attention to this quality of theatre, we

have seen an unusually rich variety of productions which in fact brought actors and audience into the "same space." One may call this, as Metz does, the same "true" space, to distinguish it from the photographed space of the film, but "true" is a potentially misleading word here, since space, like any other "true" reality, can be readily iconicized by the theatre. Actors may certainly share the same "true" space as their public, even capitalizing upon those sensory connections deprecated by Bullough, as when the Bread and Puppet company comes into the audience to share food with the spectators, or when Peter Brook's *Midsummer Night's Dream* company left the stage to clasp hands with the public.

Actor and audience spaces may be shared in a quite different way, however, if the actors do not invade the audience's space but require the audience to enter the iconic space of the performance. Two important pioneers in such experiments were Max Reinhardt and Nikolai Oklopkov. For one of his most famous productions, *The Miracle,* Reinhardt in the 1920s converted the entire interiors of theatres in several cities, such as the Century in New York, into vast Gothic Cathedrals, with the audience seated in the nave. In the 1930s Oklopkov in Moscow converted the entire interior of his theatre into a hillside where the audience sat among the actors as if "encamped with the Red Army in the field."[10] In such productions, audiences most often are accepted by the actors as non-speaking sharers of the iconic space.

More recent interest in such experimentation doubtless owes much to the work in the early 1960s of the extremely influential Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, who followed Oklopkov in mixing actor and audience spaces in different ways for different productions. For *Kordian* his small theatre became a mental hospital with beds for both actors and audience and for *Dr. Faustus* the audience was seated at two long refectory tables as guests at Faustus' final banquet. In America, performances of this sort were sometimes called "environmental," a term first applied to a 1967 production of Ionesco's *Victims of Duty* at the Petit Théâtre du Vieux Carré in New Orleans where the entire auditorium and stage was converted into a living room inhabited by both actors and audience.[11] As Reinhardt and Oklopkov demonstrated, either interior or exterior space may be treated in this manner. When Peter Stein produced Shakespeare's *As You Like It* in 1977 he did not, as Irving or Daly would have done, create an iconic woodland on stage inaccessible to the audience, but brought the audience into a space which they shared with actors, containing a pond, a field of corn, and real trees, with bird calls coming from all sides.[12]

In each of these examples, the introduction of the audience into the illusory iconic space of the production emphasizes in a powerful way the tangible reality, the "thing-ness" of the theatre, especially in contrast to a medium like film, but the iconic space itself is not essentially different from that of nineteenth century realism. The pond and trees may be real, but Stein's woodland itself is not (even the birds are recorded). The furnishings in *Victims of Duty* may be real, but the living room itself is not. In short, such

productions still follow the normal practice of nineteenth century realism, utilizing iconic identity for actors, costumes, and properties, placed within an illusionistic setting. From the point of view of the audience, there is no question that either bringing actors into the public space or bringing the public into the iconic space of the performance will almost certainly bring about an important diminishing of both spatial and psychical distance, with the result that audience members may suffer the disturbance of under-distancing. That this does not happen more often is surely because the performance event still provides its own distancing through the audience's viewing of it as such an event. The proscenium arch and the familiar auditorium may have disappeared, but in each of the productions just mentioned, the audience came to a familiar structure, a theatre building, within which they were accustomed to find prepared illusions. Even when the performance sought to absorb them in its own iconic space, they remained aware that that space was in turn absorbed within the overarching space of the theatre building itself, which both contained and legitimatized this illusory world.

A more radical spatial organization occurs when this sheltering structure is given up entirely or in part, and the audience is asked to relate in some manner to real external space. In an interesting early experiment in this direction, Goethe assembled the Weimar court one evening in a small outdoor pavilion on the royal estates. The back wall had been removed and the audience were seated facing it as if it were a proscenium opening. What they observed was a wooded glade and the bend of a stream. Under these circumstances, a boat coming down the stream with lanterns and a singing oarsman seemed quite magical, as did such effects as the bobbing of other lanterns carried by actors through the woods.[13] Unlike the garden theatres of the baroque period, which sought to impose the artificiality of the theatrical imagination upon nature, Goethe's "Muse's Cottage" utilized nature for an authenticity impossible to achieve in a theatre setting.

As an interest in theatrical iconicity increased along with the growing taste for realism during the nineteenth century, the particular difficulty of representing iconic exterior scenes on a conventional stage encouraged a number of producers to offer plays as Goethe did, in actual woods and meadows. One of the first groups in England to offer such productions, the Pastoral Players, presented scenes from *As You Like It* and Fletcher's *The Faithful Shepherdesse* in the Coombe Woods in 1884-85. The resulting comments from *Era* magazine make clear the appeal of these experiments: "Not only did the mounting leave nothing to the imagination, more even than imitating reality with photographic accuracy, it was reality itself."[14] In the opening years of the twentieth century, open-air theatres offering "reality itself" enjoyed a great vogue in Europe and America. Probably the most famous of these was the German Harzer Bergtheater, founded in 1903 for the production of dramas drawn from Teutonic mythology but in fact most successful in the performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

A very different reception dynamic is involved in the apparently very similar Peter Stein and Pastoral Player's presentations of *As You Like It*, both bringing their audiences into direct contact with real natural objects, and this reception dynamic results from the difference between the simple iconicity of Stein's actual performance *space* (a theatre interior which resembled a real exterior space) and the iconic identity of the Pastoral Players' space (an actual woods ulitized as a woods). In simple iconicity, the professed aim may be to encourage the audience to forget that it is in a theatre, but in fact the more detailed and accurate the reproduction of external reality is, the more likely that an important part of the audience's reaction to (and pleasure with) the production will involve a sense of wonder at the authenticity of the illusion. An important element of almost every review of Reinhardt's *The Miracle* was the wonder felt at the seeming conversion of a theatrical space into a gothic interior. Typical was the reaction of the *New York Times* which under the headling "Scenic Miracle Wrought" assured its audiences that what they would experience at the Century Theatre was "not a mere contrivance of canvas and paint, but a solid structure of wood and iron and concrete and seeming stone."[15] As we have noted, similar reactions greeted the productions in later years of *Tobacco Road*, *Street Scene*, and *K2*.

When the drama moves out of the theatre into iconic settings such as the Coombe Woods, a quite different audience reaction may be observed. Had Reinhardt carried out his plans to produce *The Miracle* in Milan Cathedral one would hardly have expected any audience member to find any fascination in how much this interior resembled an actual cathedral. The source of pleasure here is of a quite different sort, in a certain sense almost a reversal of the source within the theatre. In the theatre, one might say, we see illusion and amuse ourselves by pretending it is reality, while in the Coombe woods we see reality and amuse ourselves by pretending it is theatre.

It is only by such pretending that we can maintain in the Coombe woods the distance from reality that makes theatre reception possible at all. Two centuries after Goethe's court entertainment, Bruce Wilshire attended an experimental theatre in New York offering a very similar phenomenological experience. Here the audience was seated in a warehouse space and the main warehouse door before them was opened to reveal the street outside, framed by gossamer curtains. The normally banal spectacle of passing traffic was converted into something strange and fascinating.

> . . . cars appeared occasionally, framed by the door, as they passed on the street directly outside. Appeared, but appeared transfigured, as if a spell had been cast over them. Details of their shape and movement, ordinarily not noticed, leapt out, as if from a numinous aura. It was as if cars were being seen for the first time.[16]

Clearly the theatrical "frame" provided by the open door, and the traditional separation of the seated public from the "scene" within this frame serve to stimulate in the audience the feeling that it is watching not reality but theatre, and everything observed becomes infused with iconicity. Once again we see that although distancing occurs in the mind, in situations where theatre and reality come dangerously close, some specific spatial framing device may be employed to prevent misinterpretation. One of the most astonishing uses of this "framing" of reality in the theatre I have ever witnessed was in Lyubimov's production of Chekov's *Three Sisters* at the Taganka Theatre in Moscow. A section of the theatre wall opens to reveal the traditionally off-stage military band playing. Then the wall behind them opens to reveal the actual outside world--the "Moscow" that was the unattained dream goal of the play's characters. The ironic contrast is staggering, since the real Moscow is revealed as no dream city, but a dark jumble of unattractive lots and low buildings against a skyline of grim apartment buildings.

I should like to consider one further refinement of iconic space which has long provided an important and rather different variation both on the theatre experience and on the means by which distance is achieved. Iconic space was, as I have already observed, a particular concern of many romantic dramatists. Victor Hugo championed the use of such iconicity in his opposition to the traditional neoclassic unities, arguing that unity of place forced the dramatist to falsify his action by placing it in incorrect settings:

> Exact locality is one of the first elements of reality. The speaking or acting characters alone do not engrave on the soul of the spectator the faithful impression of facts. The place where such a catastrophe occurred becomes a terrible and inseparable witness of it, and the absence of this sort of silent character makes the greatest scenes of history in the drama incomplete. Would the poet dare to assassinate Rizzo elsewhere than in Mary Stuart's chamber? stab Henri IV elsewhere than in that rue de la Ferronerie, obstructed with drays and carriages? burn Joan of Arc elsewhere than in the old marketplace? [17]

For the romantics, this line of argument supported what seemed to be the practice of Shakespeare, placing each scene in its proper setting, as opposed to Racine, with his famous single neutral chamber. Clearly when Hugo asserts that the poet must assassinate Rizzo in Mary Stuart's chamber and burn Joan of Arc in the old marketplace, he is insisting that scenes in the theatre must shift iconically to these locations instead of relying upon the neutral spaces of the French classic stage. One might take his advice literally however, performing a dramatization of these events in their actual historical locations instead of on stage, or in a setting like the Coombe Woods or the Harz Mountains which is "real," but which is not in fact the actual location of the

play's action. The Tell-Spiele organized in 1912 at Interlaken in Switzerland, for example, performed Schiller's epic drama in a small village and wood setting against an Alpine background which was offered, with a certain stretch of the imagination, as the authentic location for at least some of the scenes of the play.

To take a more recent example, a very popular production of the 1980s has been John Krizanc's *Tamara*, offered first in Toronto and subsequently in Los Angeles and New York. For this production, ten large rooms with connecting halls and staircases must be found in an available building (in New York, the Park Avenue Armory). These are furnished to represent Il Vittoriale, the country villa of Gabriele d'Annunzio, in 1927, and audience members are allowed to follow any one of the play's characters through these rooms during the evening, thus experiencing only that part of the total action in which that character is involved (the play's producers call it a "living movie"). Here walls, staircases, windows, rooms are represented by real walls, staircases, windows, and rooms, not by painted canvas, but one could imagine another performance of the same work actually staged in the villa of Il Vittoriale, where the physical surroundings could authentically fulfill Hugo's role of silent witnesses to these events.

"Iconic identity," seemingly a fairly precise concept, does not allow us to make this distinction, which is of considerable importance in reception. Just as we have distinguished already between simple iconicity (a flat scenic element cut and painted to resemble a tree) and iconic identity (an actual tree appearing in a signifying context), I would like to further distinguish between general iconic identity (a real forest representing a forest in a play) and specific iconic identity (the actual forest mentioned in the script, if it exists, being utilized as a setting for that play). Although general iconic identity is what we normally encounter in theatre, there is no element of theatre which has not at one time or another utilized specific iconic identity as well. The actor, the theatrical element most closely involved with general iconic identity is perhaps the element least likely to utilize specific iconic identity, since the "playing" of someone "other" seems to lie at the very basis of theatre. Nevertheless, the history of the theatre offers many examples of actors appearing as icons of themselves. The experimental tradition of the twentieth century, from Pirandello to the Living Theatre, has often employed this strategy (Robert Brustein's 1988 production of Pirandellos's *Six Characters* emphasized this by having the actors play themselves), but it is by no means a development tied to the contemporary passion for self-reflexivity. Adam de la Halle appeared as the central character in his own play, the fascinating late medieval *Jeu de la feuillée*, and Molière and his fellows appeared as icons of themselves in his *Impromptu de Versailles*. Nor is this phenomenon only a product of artistic self-consciousness or experimentation; quite striking examples may be found in less literary or artistic sources. Late nineteenth century variety entertainments often featured famous or notorious persons who

did not perform, but merely appeared to expose themselves to the public gaze. In a more traditional theatrical context appeared William F. Cody, playing himself in countless spectacles of daring deeds in the old West. Robert Darnton analyses a fascinating example of this phenomenon in an improvised entertainment among printers' apprentices in Paris in the 1730s.[18]

Performance spaces with specific iconic identity relate to their audiences in quite different ways than do other types of iconic stages. In literal examples of Hugo's physical locations which have been "silent characters" in historical events, the audience's contact with such locations seems to provide a measure of contact with the reality of the events themselves. The earliest known examples of theatrical activity were all in sites with rich historical and religious meanings. Every faith has established holy places with real or legendary associations to the great events in its development, and there is often a close connection between these observances, especially if they have a dramatic element, and the legendary or mythical events which contributed to the sanctification of this place. Abydos in Egypt, a pilgrimage site for nearly 3000 years, offered mystery plays dealing with the story of Osiris upon the very island which was honored as his place of burial.[19]

Quasi-theatrical performances were also found from a very early date at the Christian shrines in Jerusalem. The most detailed report of an early pilgrimage is that of Egeria in 381-84. At such locations as the Upper Room, the Mount of Olives and Golgotha, the faithful gathered on appropriate days to hear the gospel account of events in that place read. The recurring phrase "on the same day in the very place" indicates the importance of the setting to Egeria's experience. Some ceremonies came especially close to dramatic representation, such as the bishop reading the news of the resurrection to the congregation assembled before the tomb where the angel had presented the same words to the three Marys, or the Palm Sunday procession, where pilgrims and townspeople welcomed the bishop into the city with palm branches and songs of "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."[20]

The re-enactment of religious scenes on the site of their presumed original occurrence is still found in the contemporary world, in traditional sites in the Holy Land and in new pilgrimage locations such as Hill Cumorah in upstate New York, where since 1937 the Mormon church has presented a huge outdoor pageant on the site where Joseph Smith is said to have found the tablets establishing the Mormon faith. For many spectators attendance at such spectacles may still provide something of the religious experience felt by medieval pilgrims like Egeria, but in this more secular world, a portion of the spectators may be expected to bring a primarily historical rather than religious interest to such re-creations. In many respects the modern tourist may be considered the direct descendent of the medieval pilgrim and for both the desire to visit the place where important events actually occurred has encouraged the development of dramatic or quasi-dramatic activities in those places reinforcing their historical "reality."

The Swiss Tell-Spiele may be taken as an early example of the historical drama, frequently performed in an outdoor theatre, which can now be found in many locations in the United States. *The Lost Colony*, begun in 1937 in Manteo, North Carolina, and *The Common Glory*, begun in 1947 in Williamsburg, Virginia, were early examples of a kind of celebration of local history which has since been offered in dozens of locations, many repeating these performances every year. In a variation of the type of performance, the Sound and Light Show, the setting is no longer a silent character, but, with the aid of modern electronics, the principle indeed, the sole theatrical performer. Audiences seated before such monuments as the Acropolis, the Pyramids, or the Palace of Versailles witness a dramatization of the history of that setting, recounted by taped music and sound and accompanied by lighting changes on the monument.

The actual re-creation of historical events on the site of their occurrence has been a widespread activity during the twentieth century. The post-Revolutionary Russian theatre, probably under the influence of the great national festivals of the French Revolution, undertook such stagings on a scale never before attempted. The most famous and spectacular of these was *The Taking of the Winter Palace* on 7 November, 1920, a dramatic re-enactment of that major Revolutionary event, involving over 8000 participants. The director, Nikolai Evreinov, laid much stress on the fact that this work was "performed in the *actual place* where the historic event occurred."[21] A peak in such activities came in the United States between 1961 and 1965, the centennial of the Civil War, and in 1975-76, the bicentennial of the Revolution. Countless battles and other historical events were re-created in their original locations with actors in authentic costumes attempting to follow with varying exactness the actions of a century or two before. The re-creations ranged from major battles such as Gettysburg, Antietam, and Bull Run to more modest events such as Washington crossing the Delaware, the inauguration of Jefferson Davis, Paul Revere's ride, Anthony Wayne's cattle drive to relieve the troops at Valley Forge, Grant's homecoming to Galena, Illinois, and Lincoln's address to the New Jersey Legislature in 1861. Organizations such as the New York-based Brigade of the American Revolution provided historical advice, skilled performers, and authentic costumes to groups in many communities wishing to stage a local battle. In all of these re-creations, the boundary between theatre and reality is reinforced not spatially, as is traditionally the case, but temporally. The settings are taken to represent themselves at an earlier point in time.

As twentieth century historians have become increasingly interested in the history of the hitherto often neglected lower classes, theatre practitioners have also sought to give a voice to such subjects, and this has resulted in some specific iconic stagings not at the scenes of great battles or of the deeds of famous leaders, but in the living and working places of the people. Armand Gatti, a pioneer in such experimentation, discovered in creating a play about

a factory worker that the authentic milieu was as important to this common laborer as Hugo felt it was to the proper depiction of kings and saints. Observed Gatti:

> [W]ith this kind of subject it's mostly the *place*, the architecture that does the writing. The theatre was located not in some kind of Utopian place, but in a historic place, a place with a history. There was grease, and there were acid marks, because it was a chemical factory; you could still see traces of work; there were still work-clothes around; there were still lunch-pails in the corner, etc. In other words, all these left-over traces of work had their own language. These rooms that had known the labor of human beings day after day had their own language, and you either used that language or you didn't say anything. . . . That's why I wrote in an article "a play authored by a factory."[22]

Gatti has realized that a Hugo's "silent character" may be silent in regard to spoken language, but that a vast number of other communications are provided by physical surroundings.

Most of the scripts for performances in historic spaces, with actors and without, have been created specifically for such performances, woven out of interesting material from local history. Occasionally though, as with the Swiss *Tell* play, performances of already existing literary works have been offered in the actual or presumed sites of their action. In 1934 Reinhardt presented *The Merchant of Venice* in a Venetian square, the Campo San Trovaso, which contained a small bridge under which real gondolas passed and a picturesque house which, according to Reinhardt's research, had actually been the dwelling of a Venetian merchant in the sixteenth century. Three years later the Danish Tourist Board began sponsoring summer productions of *Hamlet* at Elsinore Castle featuring such leading English theatre artists as Olivier, Guthrie, and Gielgud. For a number of years beginning in 1962 *The Miracle Worker*, based on the life of Helen Keller, was produced on the lawn in front of her birthplace. Verdi's *Aida* has been performed in Luxor and his *Nabucco* before the ruins of Babylon. The best-known production of the Vermont Ensemble Theatre, an "environmental theatre" company organized in 1984, was their production of Wilder's *Our Town* with different acts presented in different locations around the village green of Wilderesque Middlebury, Vermont, and with staged outdoor vignettes of village life presented to the spectators as they strolled by lantern-light from one location to another.[23] Some communities, instead of formal dramatic presentations, offer more elaborate versions of the Middlebury vignettes, converting historic locations into a kind of living stage setting, where tourists may wander through period rooms or among period buildings observing inhabitants dressed in historical costume performing activities of a bygone era.

Since theatres also are structures with an historical dimension, they too have been used as icons of their historic selves. The best known example of this is Drottningholm theatre in Sweden, a perfectly preserved eighteenth century court theatre which offers to summer tourists performances of eighteenth century opera staged according to the practices of that period, with even the orchestra members and the ushers wigged and costumed to give the visitor the sensation of having stepped into an eighteenth century performance situation.

At Drottningholm, as in the case of every other example of specific iconic identity so far cited, the setting has been selected for its own specific involvement, real or imagined, in some historic event or period with which the spectator is to be brought into closer imaginative contact. In semiotic terms, the power of this sort of icon arises from the fact that it is also an index, pointing to the absent and distanced historic reality which interests the spectator. Obviously this is often the case with specific iconic settings, but it is not necessarily so. In situations where the theatre itself has been used as a setting with specific iconic identity, as it has in almost every historical period, it has normally not served also as an index of an earlier historical period, but has represented itself in the present moment. Among the examples of such works we might cite Beaumont and Fletcher's *Knight of the Burning Pestle*, Rotrou's *Saint Genêt*, Molière's *Impromptu de Versailles*, Buckingham's *The Rehearsal*, Sheridan's *The Critic*, and Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* or *Tonight We Improvise*. Since in such works the stage represents itself, not infrequently the characters appearing there also represent themselves, as we have already noted in the case of the *Impromptu* and of the modern Brustein production of *Six Characters*.

Although non-theatrical settings using specific iconic identity have often been historically oriented, they may also, like these theatrical examples, simply represent themselves as they presently exist. The already-mentioned *Jeu de la feuillée* stands as an isolated example from the late middle ages of a play whose setting is in fact the real area in which it was staged, the marketplace of the town of Arras. Renaissance court masques and similar entertainments often featured the mingling of performers and observers in a common space. In our own times, perhaps the most striking examples of specific iconic identity without the distancing effect of historical reference is in the work of performance artists who may be said to have led their audiences through the warehouse door described by Wilshire into the real world beyond. *The Drama Review*, with its strong interest in non-traditional performance, has provided the best documentation of this development, with articles on such performance artists as Jamie Leo, who has utilized his own apartment for staged events, Danny Mydlack, who organizes shows in homes in Boston, and Anne Bogart, who guides her audiences on "performance journeys" through the streets of New York.[24]

Most of these events have a social or political dimension, but their major effect is to "theatricalize" locations in the real world, and their success demonstrates that the distancing essential to the theatrical experience can be attained even without any of the traditional devices. All that is necessary is that the audience decide, as a matter of choice, to view the world about them "theatrically," a choice traditionally encouraged by such devices as framing or ostending. Aesthetician Roger Scruton, drawing upon Wittgenstein's useful distinction between "seeing" and "seeing as," states that in ordinary perception our belief in what we are "seeing" is involuntary, but in imaginative states we *will* ourselves to "see as," without the necessity of belief,[25] a modern reformulation of that imaginative process which was a central concern of the romantics, and which Coleridge most famously articulated as the "willing suspension of disbelief."

As theatre, in its continuing colonization of reality, has moved outside its traditional spaces and renounced the conventional "frames" of elevated stage or encompassing proscenium, the importance of "seeing as" has become especially clear, as has the close relationship between this process and the role of the icon in the theatrical experience. The conversion of real space into iconic space, a conversion essential for it to be utilized in theatre, depends precisely upon a person, or more commonly, a group of people choosing not merely to "see" it, but to "see it as," in Wittgenstein's terms. This is what occurs when, as Bullough observes, "by a sudden change of inward perspective, we are overcome by the feeling that 'all the world's a stage.'"[26] Although the practice of traditional theatre would lead us to expect, as even the more experimental examples in this discussion have illustrated, that the process of iconization is suggested and stimulated in the public by external "creators" of the event, it is clear that the audience itself could create such an experience. Such an activity was in fact suggested in the writings of the early Evreinov, who, a decade before he became involved with such specific iconizations of historical space as *The Taking of the Winter Palace* encouraged his readers to create theatre out of everyday life by viewing reality in this way.[27] When Evreinov called for a theatricalization of the world, he could as well be said to be calling for the iconization of it.

New York City

Notes

1. C.S. Peirce, *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1931-58), vol. 2 par. 247.

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3. Bert O. States, "The World on Stage," in *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomonology of Theatre* (Berkeley, 1985) 19-47.

4. Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London, 1980) 22-23.

5. Edward Bullough, "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle," *British Journal of Psychology* 5 (June, 1912) 97.

6. 94.

7. Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," trans. Ben Brewster, *Screen* 16 (Summer, 1975) 21.

8. André Bazin, "Theatre and Cinema," in *What is Cinema?*, vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: U of California P, 1967) 140.

9. Bullough, "Psychical Distance" 96.

10. Norris Houghton, *Moscow Rehearsals* (New York, 1936) 23.

11. Brooks McNamara, Jerry Rojo, Richard Schechner, *Theatres, Spaces, Environments* (New York, 1975) 2.

12. Michael Patterson, *Peter Stein* (Cambridge, 1981) 139.

13. Gisela Sichardt, *Das Weimarer Liebhabertheater unter Goethes Leitung* (Weimar, 1957) 62-64.

14. *Era*, 6 June, 1885.

15. *New York Times*, 16 January, 1924, 17.

16. Bruce Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity* (Bloomington, 1982) x.

17. Victor Hugo, *Oeuvres complètes*, 18 v. (Paris, 1967) 3:63.

18. Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre* (New York, 1985).

19. R.T.R. Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* (London, 1959) 65.

20. E.D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire, A.D. 312-460* (Oxford, 1982) 112-16, 123.

21. Nikolai Evreinov, *Histoire du théâtre russe*, trans. G. Welter (Paris, 1947) 146-47.

22. Armand Gatti, "Armand Gatti on Time, Place, and the Theatrical Event," trans. Nancy Oakes, *Modern Drama*, 25:1 (March, 1982) 7-72.

23. Leslie Bennetts, "Staging 'La Strada' in a Vermont Field Requires Invention," *New York Times*, July 21, 1987, C13:1. For more information on the history and practices of American outdoor historical drama see George MacCalmon and Christian Moe, *Creating Historical Drama*.

24. Jessica Abbe, "Anne Bogart's Journeys," *TDR* 24:2 (1980) 85-100; Mariella Sandford, "Danny Mydlack: Suburban Cultural Worker," *TDR* 31:4 (1987) 91-108; Trudy Scott, "The Audience of One: Jamie Leo," *TDR* 23:1 (1979) 49-54.

25. Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind.* (London: Methuen, 1974) 170.

26. Bullough 92.

27. See the essays collected in Nikolai Evreinov, *The Theatre in Life*, trans. Alexander Nazaroff (New York, 1927).