Performance and Design

All performance takes place in reserved space. No matter what the variables in boundary, the completion of the work encompasses both the geometry of the action and the glance of a spectator. It is hard to conceive performance in the face of a silent witness, an empty room. Even the camera presupposes "another" within the space and separate from the action. Even a solo dance, alone before a mirror, presumes that the dancer is viewing his or her dance from the "other" position as choreographer. Admittedly, the boundaries change. Indeed, a social history of performance might be written as a study of the spatial configuration of groups in isolation or proximity. The concern to preserve the teaching of performance design is therefore inseparably linked to all choices of movement, delineated by place, in the process of carrying an event through its time.

To consider design either as a decoration to be hung back of the presence of actor or dancer, or as a bare platform filled with Imagination, is to limit a viewpoint to a particular and historically defined manifestation of a complex discipline. No one, for example, would presume that visual seduction or minimalism were the whole and ideal history of Art. Performance Design in one way has it harder: one has both to create contemporary structures and make over the appearance of Past Ages. Indeed, it may well be this inborn plurality which leads those who would be more at ease with some autonomy of style to seek salvation in technological ends. By this means the Naughty Art which fails to fit neatly into a Category, may be subdued in the name of a recognisable Authority.

Indeed, at times, Technology becomes the most blatantly visible "problem" to address. Observing the VAPA, who could doubt it! However, no one involved in building a ship or a house would be so foolish as to delegate all decisions of shape, size, fitness, to one group in the enterprise. Presumably plumbers plumb, electricians spark, draftsmen draft, and all operate with some form of feedback between participants. Pity the man whose house is ALL gingerbread or ALL conduiting!

So it is with Performance Design. The problems are not solved by some mix and match with a series of Rules for Ideal Staging, defined entirely by Statistics. They are more readily solved by addressing the needs of movement extending from a Text, whether of language or gesture (or most probably from the interaction of both). Decisions for a director, designer, technical crew, actor, all who finally constitute "The Performance" include a physical shape for the piece. This Shape is not static. It includes, for example, the type of step and stance permitted by a particular costume, the rhythm of motion imposed by a particular configuration of stairs, the orientation towards an audience and specific images of place. These are matters crucial to the concerns of all practitioners in Drama or Dance.

It is one of the positive advantages of the Performing Arts at Bennington that they encourage such discourse and allow interdisciplinary extensions to illuminate the topic. The active interaction between dance, drama and design may well offer a unique context for learning. It is certainly one which is hard to find elsewhere. Young actors, directors, dancers, choreographers, playwrights need to know about the places they inhabit in their work. They need to know how to formulate questions and crystalize their own needs. Most of these questions lead a long way away from limited forms of "pre-professional" training, or token coverage or the creation of a student labor force. For Designers and Technicians are not Servants to the Arts, or a support system to the Stars, unless we are tied to a model of corporate hierarchy exampled by those factories of Popular Entertainment which bring you the Soap Operas from 12 to 4 every afternoon in an unending Search for Tomorrow.

Tony Carruthers
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