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Source: *Perspecta*, Vol. 26, Theater, Theatricality, and Architecture (1990), pp. 135-142

Published by: The MIT Press on behalf of *Perspecta*.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1567158>

Accessed: 09-06-2016 04:13 UTC

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On Art for the Stage

Peter Behrens

135

Introduction

In the summer of 1899, Ernst Ludwig, the Grand Duke of Hessen, called Peter Behrens to be one of the members of his ambitious Artists' Colony in Darmstadt. At that time, Behrens's most compelling credential for such an invitation was a series of decorative color woodcuts. Yet, in the preceding year, he had re-oriented his work to concentrate on graphics and the crafts—book design, glass, porcelain, jewelry, furniture and rugs. Behrens's forceful manner, reinforced by the enthusiastic context of the Artists' Colony, immediately led him to two new and larger interests: the theater and architecture. Though it is in architecture that Behrens was to distinguish himself, his interest in theater was deep and abiding. Behrens made a small but indelible mark in championing an anti-naturalistic theater where the viewer experienced an intense relation to the "relief stage," a shallow stage with simple backdrops that both forced and exalted the lateral movement of the actors, thus enhancing the perception of movement within a coherent visual structure.

Behrens's first three publications all concerned the theater. In "Die Dekoration der Bühne (The Decoration of the Stage)"[†] Behrens projected the theater as a total work of art. Paraphrasing him: When the curtain parts, we should experience an overpowering image of the greatest harmony, attained through the collaboration of all the fine arts. Visually, the emphasis should be on the background. The painting should be stylized—almost, or totally, dissolved into ornament.

[†] This essay was translated for *Perspecta 26* by Howard Fitzpatrick. It was first published as "Über die Kunst auf der Bühne," in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, LIV, 78 (March 20, 1910).

[‡] Peter Behrens, "Die Dekoration der Bühne," *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, VI (May 1900), pp. 401-405.

This invocation of ornament must be understood in its historical context and in relation to the theater. The opposite of decorative elaboration, it is rather a move toward abstraction and visually expressive but non-specific milieu. It is a rejection of naturalistic illusion, in the theater as elsewhere. This first essay offers a kernel of what is shortly to be Behrens's abiding theory of the theater. Indeed, it is a more coherent position on theater than Behrens could at that moment propose for architecture, if we are to judge by the derivative and inconsistent Jugendstil theater vignettes and a design for an art gallery that accompany this early text.

Within the same year, 1900, Behrens, in Nietzschean prose and with heightened graphic style of his own design, published his small treatise on the theater: *Feste des Lebens und der Kunst: Eine Betrachtung des Theaters als höchsten Kultursymbols* (Festivals of life and art: a consideration of the theater as the highest cultural symbol).² Georg Fuchs, an author and critic resident in Darmstadt, and the noted lyric poet Richard Dehmel were important influences on this work. It was in a proposal for the ceremonial performance of Dehmel's poem, *Lebensmesse* (Mass of life) that Behrens exemplified his theories of theater, both in the staging of the mass and in the plan and verbal description of a proposed theater building that would serve Behrens's envisioned festivals.³ The essay on Behrens and the theater, also in this issue of *Perspecta*, gives an account of this moment of Behrens's most significant contribution to the theater.

136

Fuchs' *Die Schaubühne der Zukunft* (The stage of the future) of 1905 is a definitive statement of what had become the Fuchs-Behrens theater program.⁴ Through Fuchs, the advocacy of the relief stage made a significant contribution to the important *Künstler-Theater* in Munich in the last years of the decade. In this same period, Behrens found the opportunity to test, not completely successfully, his ideas in a staging of Otto Erich Hartleben's *Diogenes* at the Stadtgartenhalle in Hagen in 1909.⁵

It is in a short contribution of 1907⁶ and in the 1910 essay translated here⁷ that Behrens reviews his advocacy for the theater—emphasizing the theatrical potentials of the relief stage with a minimum of the exaggerated prose that previously had served his larger philosophical and sociological ambitions.⁸

—Stanford Anderson

² Behrens, *Feste des Lebens und der Kunst. Eine Betrachtung des Theaters als höchsten Kultursymbols* (Leipzig: Diederichs, 1900).

³ Behrens, "Die 'Lebensmesse' von Richard Dehmel als festliches Spiel," *Die Rheinlande*, I (Jan. 1901), pp. 28-40.

⁴ G. Fuchs, *Die Schaubühne der Zukunft* (Berlin/Leipzig: Schuster and Loeffler, [1905]).

⁵ Kraft-Eike Wrede, Karl Ernst Osthaus und das Theater, *Peter Behrens' Inszenierung des 'Diogenes' von Otto Erich Hartleben für die Hagerer Sommerschauspiele* (1909) (Hagen: Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum, 1984).

⁶ Behrens, a statement on the theater in Karl Scheffler, "Bühnenkunst," *Kunst und Künstler*, V (March 1907).

⁷ Behrens, "Über die Kunst auf der Bühne, *Frankfurter Zeitung*.

⁸ However Behrens never ceases to frame his considerations about art in an opposition to civilization—the perceived dominance, that is, of intellect and science over intuition and art—as in a piece close in time to that translated here: Behrens' response to a set theme on the future of our culture, "Die Zukunft unserer Kultur," *Frankfurter Zeitung* (April 14, 1909), pp. 1-2.

Today, when conversation turns to the theater, the various conflicting opinions expressed betray more than a casual interest in the subject. The alternating praise for and dissatisfaction with particular performances and the diverse preferences and criticisms voiced show, however, that there is no agreement as to the essential nature of the art which has its place on the stage. One would like to see more artistic spirit brought to the stage, but one is uncertain whether the fine arts should play a greater role, or whether the cure lies in restraint, such as in the avoidance of the decorative shortcomings which have traditionally prevailed. Reinhardt's serious and commendable direction and the 1908 Munich Künstlertheater—the best that our age has yet produced—displayed both naturalistically plastic sets, reinforced by highly refined lighting, but also often the avoidance of means by which to artistically invoke a specific locality. Only walls or curtains provided a spatial enclosure to the stage. Reinhardt's achievement is beyond doubt. Still, it seems to me, even his current work is not yet the final fulfillment of all our hopes. It may have satisfied us for a time to see, in place of the workmanlike sets of the scene painter, the touch of an artist, whether in rich elaboration or simplification. And, even though his directing also has added extraordinary freshness, originality, and genuineness, we still believe in greater possibilities. What we unconsciously hope for is not an expansion and refinement of decorative principles; rather it is more, perhaps the beginning of a style unique to the stage.

I have heard thoughtful people deny that our age can achieve a style, particularly when the concept of style is applied to the theater. Style requires a commonality of aesthetic sensibility among people, or at least a large class of people, regardless of whether that sensibility is "high" or "low." I agree that this commonality does not exist. But style is, further, the combined effect of particular elements of form joined in a common expression: unity in all aspects and in the innermost essence of the work. This unity is not imposed from without, but is governed by an internal rule structure. This unity lies in the hands of the artist and the question is whether some of these preconditions can be fulfilled in order for us to establish a new style. I think this is possible.

In terms of its resources, the art of the theater is the most manifold art. It is not a matter, as is the case with painting, of communicating a mental impression to the viewer through the rhythmic ordering of forms and colors; or of communicating to the ear via the more abstract art of music, based on the laws of harmony. Not one sense alone should be affected, since the art of the theater encompasses the full sensuousness of real life. We perceive the world and experience life only through the combination and changing perceptions of all the senses; they complement, define, and verify one another. If it were possible (which it is not) for a person to be totally without the senses except sight, he would experience the world as an incomprehensible kaleidoscope. He would not comprehend the physicality of objects, despite being able to see them, for he would not have learned their forms by touching them. He could not nourish himself, for the aroma of food would not entice him,

and his palate could not distinguish the edible from the inedible. No noise or sound could warn him, communicate with him or stir his recollection. The existence of such an individual is inconceivable. Through the sensuous diversity of its forms of expression, the art of the theater, then, has incomparably greater evocative power than any other art form, provided that it affects us through artistic means and does not have as its goal the imitation of nature. Wagner also took this view, and combined poetry, music, and painting into a simultaneous performance; he unified several art forms into a simultaneous pleasure. If one considers that even a single art form requires particular receptivity in the perceiver, how much more impossible seems the complete comprehension of several arts at once! For this reason, the theater cannot be the forum for the most varied arts, but must, despite its sensuous diversity, present only one art, namely the art of the theater.

The theatrical art cannot be understood as other than the multi-sensory performance of a poetic work by actors. These actors are the actual medium of the production; it is they who transform the poetry, who make it physically and visibly manifest—they and only they are artist and medium in one. Sets, properties, and all the resources of the modern theater are useful only insofar as they accentuate the personal artistry of the actors. A play is perfectly understandable without them, and the artistic content of the script can also be conveyed on an undecorated stage without these resources, if the actors do nothing more than act. Anyone who has had the opportunity to see a rehearsal can attest to this. One can often gain even more serious insights into the theatrical art from rehearsals, without the props, sets, and costumes so reminiscent of masquerade and diorama. It is the same as when musicians take more authentic artistic pleasure in a score or a concert than in an opera. This experience is not at all in opposition to the full sensory effect which should be achieved on the stage. It seems in bad taste to want to display several art forms at once, but the theatrical art should hardly dispense with its diversity of expressive possibilities for this reason. Just as the sound of the human voice is indispensable, so should harmony of colors between costumes and background, or the sculptural forms of the figures on stage, be indispensable.

It is just this which comprises the value of the theatrical art and the requisite sensory effect: that the vigorous presence of the figures on stage, enhanced by artistic consideration and the creative will, is heightened to a unified work, complete in itself. To be sure, the producer of such a performance must be talented in various artistic fields, and the director, whether he conceives his production alone or in consultation with other artists, must possess numerous gifts. Above all, he must have the ability, which is akin to architectural talent, to oversee the totality of the work. It is said that architecture is the basis of all art. This holds true when by the architectonic, we understand also creative, order. Among many other things, this includes the proper and balanced distribution of materials. It is on this balance—the weighing of individual factors within the plenitude of artistic fantasy to the goal of a living, organic work—that the theatrical style depends. An era in

which a pronounced intellectualism dominates will certainly find satisfaction in a performance of the written word which is underscored by language, perhaps augmented by gesture and expression. This pleasure will be little diminished by tastelessly painted flats, for such pictorial representations will not be seen as important, and will be of no interest. Or perhaps interest in the sets is aroused intentionally, and they become excessively dominant, details are invested with meaning out of the intellectual need to show historical or naturalistic authenticity. An era with a predominantly intellectual bias will otherwise not bear the stamp of a style—it will favor civilization over culture.

With regard to the question of a true theatrical style, no single form of artistic expression will be permitted to dominate. The art of the theater is not simply recitation, it is visual communication: a play must be seen. But neither is it simply pantomime, even less set design. Here, architectonic sensibility and a feeling for the proper relationship between elements is decisive. And just as the artistic in architecture is not expressed through ornament but through proportion, a careful balance according to a perceived rule structure is critical here also. And further, the human capacity to perceive momentary phenomena has definite limits. In other disciplines such as painting, the principle of the clarifying overview obtains. There are pictures which contain so much varied detail that they could easily be split into several sections, each of which would still have overabundant content. In these pictures, the essence of artistic composition is ignored. Regardless of its size, a painting is considered grand in scope and concept when it simplifies and gives order, allowing immediate comprehension of its elements.

Poetry is the foundation of theater. This we can acknowledge, but not that theater is as it were a reproduction of poetry, with the addition of appropriate gestures and locale. In its totality, it is something independent and new, a new artistic creation in its own domain. It hardly needs to be said that poetry may not be arbitrarily altered—it remains inviolable. But there is a difference between reading a play as poetry and reading it to conceive a stage production. In the latter case, a creative act comes into play, which goes far beyond the instructions of the stage directions—an act of concentration and intuition which the creation of every work of art requires. The playwright's stage directions should be seen as an aid to understanding the poetry when one is reading the work. Aesthetically they can be seen as belonging to the dramatic art form. For the performance they are without productive importance. Georg Simmel expresses very similar thoughts, ingeniously, in his essay "On the Actor": "The dramatic figure, as it appears in the script, is not a whole person, but rather only a complex of the aspects of a person which can be grasped in literature." And further: "The content of a play is projected as a poetic work to that level of the intellect whose unique nature finds its physical symbol in writing and reading. The actor conveys this existing content to the level of the visible and audible, or, if you like, from the one-dimensionality of a purely intellectual process into the three-dimensionality of full sensuousness." The play wants to transform

poetry into real life as the audience watches and listens, it wants to create a believable illusion. This intention is thoroughly valid, the question is one of how we are to define “real” and “life”; whether thereby we want to recognize a faithful likeness of our own milieu and our experiences, or whether we perceive rather another reality, which is the fulfillment of an artistic intuition. This reality, through the organic combination of its contents, gives a new beauty to another new life.

Life [in this higher sense] is movement as artistic expression: that is, it is rhythm. All art is subject to rhythm in both the narrower and broader senses. The harmonic confluence of all facets of a theatrical work to a grand, simple line is the essence of theatrical style. Only when—as required above—the performance is conceived as a single, complete work of art and one is not conscious of various art forms, and only when clarity and immediate comprehensibility are preserved, can the rhythm achieve its full effect. Thus it is necessary, as with every work of art, to simplify what occurs in the theater, to minimize, even suppress, the insignificant in order to accentuate the significant all the more strongly.

Let us keep in mind that the actor is the key. His speech should capture the rhythm of the poetry; he must speak the verses as verses, and not make them prose in order to render the content more understandable. The corruption of verse form into prose does in fact bring us closer to life, but not to poetry and even less to the essence of the work of theatrical art. The actor has an additional, artistically significant means of expressing poetry; that of gesture, in its broader meaning of action. It is likewise not simply an elaboration of the spoken word; it is art. Consider the method of Jacques Dalcroze, with which he attempts to achieve a rhythmic unity of gesture and music. Anyone who has seen performances by his pupils will recall what a psychic impression was left by the simplest movement of the limbs. Here also it is compelling structural order which unconsciously affects us so deeply. Each and every movement should be studied not for its convincing naturalness but for its sculptural value. But even more importantly, the movements of the various actors on stage should be calculated for the total effect. This is not completely within the power of the individual actors; it is the business of the director. He is the organizer and shaper, but he will only be able to carry out an idea if his actors share his conception and can submit their individual talents to his direction. The director will have created in his mind a compositional idea, a plastic concept as it were, for the structure and development of the piece. It will be a logical sequence of relief ideas which, while beautiful in themselves, above all relate closely to the poetry. If they are to make a strong impression, all movements on stage must be essentially lateral, for movement which occurs in the direction of the audience is, optically speaking, without effect. All theater depends by its very nature on this relief effect. This principle has proved its validity since the days of the Greek theater, though the tendency to employ movement in depth has at times prevailed. The intrinsic optical element of theater remains relief. In this connection I have previously espoused the relief stage.⁹

140

⁹ Behrens, *Feste des Lebens und der Kunst*.

The relief stage has a relatively shallow extension to the rear, thus its primary action takes place from side to side. In front of it is an even shallower forestage, one or two steps lower. It is unimportant whether this is called a proscenium or something else. It forms as it were the mediating transition from the house to the stage. It seems to me important in the construction of a new theater that the architectonic relationship of the proscenium to the house be expressed. The theater should be in all cases a building, an architecturally articulated whole whose center is likewise the architecturally emphasized stage. Today it is not so: the stage is a hole, a void, in which something foreign is played out, something inconsistent with the sense of space created in the house. The stage ought not to be anything but the rostrum of the house, for use by lecturers or by actors. The sides, as well as the rear wall, of the stage require an articulation which signifies an enclosed space. We do not wish to forget that we are in a building, that everything is play, image; we want to experience an illusion through art, but not a hoax; we want to be transported, but not deceived. For this reason the side and rear walls should be as architectonically evident as possible. Where the locale of the plot requires the openness of a natural setting, indicating it through an opening will suffice. One should not forget that when the focus of the artistic effect is on the arrangement of a relief this certainly requires a background with which it can achieve unity; only a space-articulating architectonic background will suffice. The surroundings of the actors are not in themselves significant, rather all interest is focused on the actors. The setting serves to sculpturally and coloristically heighten the scenes, but does not itself play a central role in the work. The side and rear enclosures no longer serve to help illustrate the content of the script in an intellectual sense, but are there only for the purely perceptual function of allowing the rhythm of the play to emerge. The same holds true for the props. The important thing about a chair is not its period or its style, but the opportunity it provides a particular character to perform the desired beautiful movement of sitting down or resting. Therefore it is better that the chair, bench, or whatever be appropriate to this purpose in that each is also a simple object, indifferent with regard to period or place of origin, yet in direct relation to the architectonic order. Then it will also be advisable in many cases to raise the stage with steps, or, when appropriate, to introduce ramps or terraces, to afford the actors the opportunity to invest their movements with symbolic value. Can there be a deeper or more palpable symbolic meaning, or one more naturally and simply expressed, than the act of ascending or descending at a certain point, or separating two characters by a barrier? Neither should costumes be selected only for style or authenticity, which in themselves are not objectionable, but they should be carefully chosen to heighten the pictorial effect of the colored relief. If the costumes are designed and arranged with this in mind, they will not have the appearance of a masquerade, but will read as necessary and harmonious parts of the whole. This is why, also with costumes, it is less the detail and more the larger picture which must be considered, and how the design of costumes can lend visual support to the movement of the figures. Most important, though, is contrast in value, as well as

in color, since the scenes must be articulated in themselves. Furthermore the color value of the costumes should on the one hand serve to differentiate the figure, and on the other hand allow the figures to form groups. The enclosure of the stage, the properties, and costumes all work together to give the artistic concept its compelling effect. When, as with Wagner's operas, the discrete effects of various art forms are not intended to be perceived, but the audience's interest is captivated by a single, rhythmically self-contained art, the experienced director has no reason to spare any means in achieving his effects. We aspire to a lively art, and it is achieved not by a reduction in expressive means, but by an intensification thereof. Even in the theater, it is not the negative but the positive which prevails, and as in all art the fruitlessness of negation is beyond doubt. Attempts which have been made, in the face of rampant tastelessness in today's theater, to outwardly simplify all means of affecting our senses, have always seemed to me especially amateurish. A stage set can only achieve a dynamic effect, in artistic terms, through creative spirit, not through crudely realistic means, such as the harsh sidelighting or downlighting of a spotlight. This currently popular contrivance of one-sided illumination is in poor taste. To be sure, it intensifies the sculptural quality of the figures, but at the same time it destroys the integrity of the image. The concentrated light from one side creates the impression that it is coming from a large space of unknown dimensions next to the stage, in a troubling contradiction to the desired spatial enclosure of the stage. The only light appropriate to the relief style is a diffuse light, whose rays parallel the viewers' line of sight.

142

I consider the concept of the relief style the most important precondition for re-establishing an art for the stage. Only relief offers the possibility for rhythm, the primal element of all art, to achieve its full and palpable effect. The vehicle of all rhythmic potency on the stage is the actor. Everything in the theater must be calculated to display, to support and to heighten his art. If in the relief style we can create a stage realm for the actor, a realm which represents but does not reproduce the world, he will not hesitate to explore the widest ranges of his creativity, and we will have come nearer to a style for the theater.