



Holy Scenes: Sacred Spaces in Modern Theatre

Sandra Bornemann M.A., Institute of Art History, University of Bern

Ph.D. project. Supervisors: Prof. Christine Göttler and Prof. Peter W. Marx

In my Ph.D. thesis *Holy Scenes – Sacred Spaces in Modern Theatre* I shall argue that artists' reflections of 'the sacred' must be regarded as a central phenomenon of the aesthetic movement in the early twentieth century. At first, this assumption seems to be surprising because this period was mainly characterized by industrialization and secularization. Against the background of those developments, religion had lost its impact on daily life. Remarkably, some writers, artists, and theatre directors turned towards religion, however, so that one can speak of a revival of the sacred in early twentieth-century culture. Scholars from several disciplines have explained this interest as a search for stability and spirituality in times of economic, political, and social struggle. But I consider this explanation far too limited: Instead, the return to religion must be understood as a focal point of new concepts of art and society which were established at that time.

By looking at specific concepts from the period between 1900 and 1925, I shall demonstrate that the collaboration of theatre directors, stage designers, and visual artists set up various types of sacred spaces. Those innovative concepts stimulated audiences to adopt a new mode of perception because the imagination was regarded as the only power capable of perceiving the process of consecration in theatre. I consider scenic spaces that not only created an illusion of sacredness through their decoration, but also evoked a particular sacred atmosphere, and thereby inspired the audience to experience a moment of transcendence. My project thus explores the question of the extent to which stage designers combined pictorial elements with theatre architecture and new inventions of stagecraft to constitute holy scenes.

In my study, I focus on three major case studies: First, I will trace the origins of this aesthetic revival of the sacred to Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* and emphasize innovative spatial solutions by Gustav Wunderwald (1914) and Joseph Urban (1920), in which 'sacred' spaces became highly symbolic. Second, by looking at Max Reinhardt's monumental stagings of *The Miracle* (1911/1924), I shall reveal the transformation of the audience into an aesthetic community similar to those at religious services. Finally, I will analyze the dissolving of the sacred space in Bruno Taut's visionary set designs for Schiller's *The Maid of Orleans* (1921). I consider Wagner's vision of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as an interface between theatre, the fine arts, religion, and society, and as a starting point for developments that broke away into new directions of integrative artistic practices in the early twentieth century. In tracing the particular aesthetics of exemplary dramatic productions, I thus hope to not only give new impetus to the current scholarly discourse on space and performance, but also to shed new light on the dynamic cultural transfers that took place at that time.