



The Stage as Scena Mundi: Narration, Performance and Imagination

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Theatre and performance have been considered in several ways in critical discourse: while one branch of scholarship has focused on the question of the actor and his/her forms of representation, others have begun to define theatre in terms of its spatial components and its specific temporal dimensions. Following the latter line of argument, we can read Lessing's definition of theatre as a transitory form of art between painting and sculpture as an early attempt not only to define theatre by its semiotic constitution, but also to consider space as a defining component.

In this vein, it is remarkable that reflection on space was also central to the definition of Theatre Studies as an academic discipline in the early twentieth century, when Max Herrmann defined theatre – in contrast to the literary genre of drama and its representation of characters – by its spatial component: “The art of the theatre is an art of space – of prime importance is to know, precisely, the space of the imagination and the art of using it [Theaterkunst ist eine Raumkunst – in erster Linie kommt es darauf an, den Raum der Vorstellung und die Art seiner Nutzung genau zu kennen]” (Herrmann 1914, 6). Herrmann's definition focused on the spatial dimension to sharpen the distinction between theatre and drama because this allowed one to consider forms, such as ballet or the Italian *commedia*, that were not primarily based on the concept of dramatic representation. Herrmann never fully elaborated his theory of the theatrical space, but he did return to the question in 1931 in his article “Das theatralische Raumerlebnis” which distinguished four different levels of the spatial experience in the theatre: a) the dramatic space, b) the actor's space, c) the audience's space, and d) the space of the director. Most importantly, Herrmann emphasized that theatrical space – the one the audience perceives – is determined by the mutual interplay of the actor's performance and the physical space: “The great actor creates his own space, or more exactly, he transforms the actual space of the stage into a space of reality that does not in fact exist, which now determines his entire *habitus* in the aforementioned sense [[Der] bedeutende Schauspieler schafft sich seinen Raum selber oder, genauer, er deutet sich den tatsächlichen Bühnenraum um in einen tatsächlich nicht vorhandenen Realitätsraum, der nun seinen ganzen Habitus in dem vorhin gekennzeichneten Sinn bedingt]” (Herrmann 1931, 157).

As Christopher Balme has pointed out, Herrmann's definition might appear a bit dated since recent studies have focused on semiotic aspects in the broadest sense (Carlson 1989) or on performative dimensions (McAuley 1999). But Herrmann can still be credited as one of the first



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scholars to recognize the importance of the spatial dimension for the study of theatre (Balme 2008, 47–62).

Cited and Selected Literature:

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