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Case Study: Exploring the Site of Performance

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Abstract

Scenic designers define and articulate a space within a space, yet we often we ask scenic design students to create hypothetical designs in lieu of materializing their designs in sites of performance. These “paper projects” reduce sites of performance to ground plans, sections, and model boxes, all of which are facsimiles of sites of performance, but not the sites themselves. Sites of performance have meaning, and those meanings are often left unexplored in students’ paper projects.

This case study foregrounds the student designer’s understanding of the site of performance when designing a paper project. What will interrogating the site of performance reveal to the student designer about the culture that built and stewards it? What decisions will the student designer make about their responsibility to that site of performance and its culture? How will they manipulate, disrupt, or follow the lead of the site of performance?

Long before designing scenery begins, the space in which the performance will take place is usually established. Be it inside or outside, in a “proper theater” or a found space, scenic designers define and articulate a space (the set) within a space (the site of performance). Yet, we often ask scenic design students to create hypothetical designs, realized primarily as scaled drawings and models, in lieu of materializing their designs in sites of performance. These “paper projects”, as they are commonly known, reduce sites of performance to ground plans, sections, and model boxes, all of which are facsimiles of sites of performance, but not the sites themselves. Sites of performance have meaning, and those meanings are often left unexplored in students’ paper projects.

In his 2008 essay *On the Pedagogy of Theatre Stage Design: A Critique of Practice*, stage designer and scholar Richard M. Isackes (2008) argues that “focusing the designer’s attention on the performance space as a site of sociocultural intersection *as a precursor to design* engages the designer in a wider discourse of artistic responsibility” (p. 45). The goal of this case study, inspired by Isackes, is to foreground student designers’ understanding of the site of performance when designing a paper project. It asks, what will interrogating the site of performance reveal to student designers about the culture that built and stewards it? And what decisions will student designers make about their responsibility to that site of performance and its culture? How will they manipulate, disrupt, or follow the lead of the site of performance? In the Fall of 2020, I taught a class entitled *THEA 450: Advanced Scenic Design* for The Pennsylvania State University School of Theatre. I centered the class around this thesis: sites of performance determine (and often limit) who gets to see, what they get to see, and how they get to see it. If you pay attention to sites of performance, they will reveal things about the cultures that built them and steward them; they will tell you what that culture values and what it does not, who holds power and who does not, and what that hierarchy of power looks like. To test this idea, I introduced the class to an image of the ancient Greek theater at Epidaurus. I asked students to study the space and to simply report their observations. They noted the way the theatre was built into the earth; they remarked on the uninterrupted vista of mountains and sky the theatre offered; they noticed that every spectator had a relatively equal and clear view of the stage. I then ask them to make inferences, based on their observations of the theater, about what was important to the society that built it. Borrowing a term from Isackes, I called this “reading the space.” They speculated that the Greeks regarded themselves as an extension of the natural world, and that seeing and being seen must have been very important them.

Next, following a prompt from Isackes, I asked the students to “read” their own School of Theatre building. Students observed that classrooms and offices built around the theatre itself reflected the centering of performance and production in this culture. Noting how performance majors were located on the first floor of the building while design and tech students occupied the upper floor, they recognized that the culture placed a high value on the

visibility of performers. Finally, they perceived a hierarchy of faculty and staff based on the size, quality, and location of their offices—larger offices, better views, and more favorable locations indicated status in this culture.

Finally, I gave the students a particular space to consider—a LORT theatre—and I asked them to do the following¹:

Research Riverside Theatre’s Stark Stage in Vero Beach, FL. Find out all you can about it. Find photos of the work that has been done inside of it. Read the space in the context of the following questions:

1. Who built this space? When? Why?
2. How do you experience this space/what is your experience of this space?
3. Who is this space for?
 - a. How do you know?
4. What is this space for?
 - a. How do you know?
5. What is the aesthetic of this space?
6. Who has power in this space?
7. How does this space function?
8. What is the spatial relationship of the audience to the performance?
9. What opportunities does this space present?
 - a. What works well in this space? Can you disrupt that? How, why, and to what end?
10. What challenges does this space present?
 - a. What doesn’t work well in this space? Can you disrupt that? How, why, and to what end?

Write something like a journal entry to yourself. Consider the space. Muse on it. Wrestle with the above questions. Submit a PDF of your “journal entry” to Canvas. I will ask you to share your findings with the class.

¹ LORT indicates that a theatre is a member of the League of Resident Theatres. According to their website, “LORT is the largest professional theatre association of its kind in the United States, with 79 member Theatres located in every major market in the U.S., including 30 states and the District of Columbia” (League of Resident Theatres, 2023). For this assignment I chose a LORT theatre with which I was very familiar, and one where students might work professionally in the future.

Here are highlights from one student's findings:

Images of the space/theatre/campus give a very wealthy vibe. Originally the theater cost \$1.5 million and was funded entirely by private donations. The exterior of the theater is very modern and very white, which implies wealth. Vero Beach, FL is one of the worst areas of wealth disparity in the country: average income of the top 1% is \$2.9 million, and the average income of the bottom 99% is \$43k. Season ticket price for best seats is \$334, season ticket price for worst seats is \$149, so the rich have the power in this space. A vast majority of cast members and staff in photos on their website are white/non-BIPOC. The interior aesthetic is very clean, modern, and fancy. It feels super-bougie, and very comfortable. This space is a proscenium theater—a cozy space with cushy chairs. It draws you in, but keeps you separated by virtue of the picture-frame-proscenium. I would love to break that 4th wall. Fuck the 4th wall. This is not the kind of space designed to swallow the audience. I want to swallow the audience. Audience equity is a struggle here; it is hard for people in the back of the orchestra or in the mezzanine to feel as thoroughly surrounded by the show as the people in the front. Heavily immersive, experimental shows would die in this theater. I have to find a way to bring the show to every audience member, to express beyond the picture frame of the proscenium. It is just a matter of how.

Based on their journal entry, I assigned the student this “paper project”:

You are going to design the set for Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*—a play by a black, female playwright about a black family set in late 1950s/early 1960s Chicago. The site of performance is Riverside Theatre. You have identified their audience as being rich and white. How might you want to disrupt this culture with your design? Can you do that without alienating the audience? Does that matter?

A Raisin in the Sun is a naturalistic play with a domestic setting, which would suggest a strong fourth wall. How will you go about dismantling the fourth wall in what appears to be a fourth wall play?

Although the scenic design the student ultimately produced for this assignment was very good (and accomplished all that they set out to do), it is not pertinent to this case study; site of performance thinking is not concerned with finished design. As stated earlier, my goal is to foreground student designers' understanding of the site of performance when designing paper projects, projects where finished scenic designs are never realized. Before engaging in site of performance thinking, the student viewed the ground plan of the theater and saw it as lines on a page describing the architecture of the space—here is the proscenium arch, there is the back

wall, and so on. After engaging in site of performance thinking, the student saw in the ground plan a vivid image of the “super-bougie” culture that built and stewards the space, and the hierarchy of power that comes along with it; “the rich have the power in this space”. They were able to read the politics of who gets to see, what they get to see, and how they get to see encoded in the space. Before any design was begun, before a play text was even chosen, the student was motivated to disrupt the status quo and break the fourth wall, as evidenced by their comments, “Fuck the 4th wall,” and “I want to swallow the audience.” It is important to note that I had a clear idea of how the student was experiencing the space/culture, and the intervention they wanted to stage, because the assignment required them to write their impressions down. Based on that information, I chose a play text for the student’s paper project designed to engage and challenge them. Practicing site of performance thinking “*as a precursor to design*” added new layers of meaning and consequence to the student designer’s paper project (Isackes, 2008, p. 45).

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About the Author

Michael Schweikardt enjoys a successful career as a scenic designer working for opera and theatre companies across the United States and abroad. He is an Assistant Professor at San Francisco State University. Essays in *Teaching Critical Performance Theory in Today’s Theatre Classroom, Studio, and Communities* (Routledge 2020), and *Text and Presentation, 2019* (McFarland 2020) demonstrate his research focus on the tension between materiality and ephemeral performances. He serves as managing editor for design at *The Theatre Times* and is co-editor of *Prompt: A Journal of Theatre Theory, Practice, and Teaching*. His work can be viewed on his website: www.msportfolio.com

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