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Introduction

Stage technology, machinery and special effects have always been a part of the experience of theatre and performance. Often they have been used as a means to an end: to shift and illuminate scenery, or to simulate events and actions that could not easily be presented in performance – explosions, catastrophes and meteorology, for example. But also technologies have frequently been used as ends in themselves, where the gasp of awe and amazement at their operation has been a significant aspect of the experience of performance. For example, the intense pleasure of the ‘now you see it, now you don’t’ moment as a special effect takes place; the inexplicable transformation of one location to another in the baroque theatre; the flash of ‘lightning’ and accompanying sound effects when Mephistopheles appears as if by ‘magic’ on Walpurgisnacht, have all been reported as significant moments in the history of theatre and performance. Stage spectacle and their technologies have consistently surprised, but have also unnerved their audiences providing a frisson of the uncanny, the unheimlich – the ‘other-worldly’, and unsettling sensations of the mysterious and the unexplained. These are qualities that are frequently explored as digital technologies are employed in contemporary scenography and performance. Inevitably, therefore, during most periods of both occasional and institutional performance, technology has served as an externally presented representation and celebration of human skill and ingenuity.

But complex technologies in performance may also serve as symbols of power and authority, at the simplest where the stage knows or
‘owns’ something that the spectator does not. More subtly, in the knowledge and ownership of technology, there may also dwell the colonial power of the nation, the patriarchal power of monarch, duke and state, the power of the owner of the theatre and its means of presentation. Dramaturgical power and efficacy may also reside in technology; the theatre of Greek antiquity used a mechane – a mechanised lifting arm or crane to suspend gods over the concluding action of its tragedy. Their suitably elevated status illustrated their ability to provide dramatic resolution to the drama. It is perhaps significant that possibly the oldest critical phrase of dramaturgy should refer to the use of technology in the theatre. The functionality of technology in performance is clearly expressed by Menander in the Greek theòs ek méchanês, or, as we better know it in its Latin translation, Deus ex machina – meaning ‘God from the machine’. The term is now generally used to suggest a somewhat artificial or mechanically staged conclusion to a narrative. However, I prefer Demosthenes’ version when he said apò mekanès theòs (απὸ μηχανῆς θεὸς), ‘from the machine, a god’. Menander suggests a diminution of the gods, somehow reduced in and by the technology of the machine, whilst Demosthenes’ version implies the mysterious and marvellous ability of technology to generate and materialise the gods.

From the mystery and miracle plays of the Middle Ages to the late nineteenth century, technologies have striven to realise the metaphysical truths and beliefs of religions – from the expanding universe of angels suspended in Filippo Brunelleschi’s construction in the duomo of the cathedral in Florence, to the mythic river maidens of the Rhine in Wagner’s operas at the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth. The Renaissance very consciously used presentational technologies as framing metaphors for supreme political power. Monarchs, dukes and their favoured courtiers descended effortlessly as performers into the scenic world – often presented miraculously upon a cloud or a seemingly heaven-borne chariot. As servants of the dramaturgy of court spectacle, their appearance served to banish disorder and to bring order and calm to a troubled world through their technology-assisted miraculous appearance.

It is inevitable that there has always been an important link between scientific discoveries, technical developments and their presentation and use within the theatre. For example, the urban place of performance in Renaissance Italy with all its accompanying technologies and modes of presentation formed what Marvin Carlson terms ‘the jewel in the casket’,2 the glittering showcase of authority and political
power, set within the palace or castle of Renaissance dukedoms. The seemingly miraculous scenographic and technical abilities of Bernardo Buontalenti or Inigo Jones to rid the Medici Court in Florence or the Court of Charles I of diabolic and politically subversive elements at the mere appearance of the crowned ruler illustrates the potent link between technology and spectacle, ownership and the rights of governing powers.

As power moved from the court and its places of privileged performance towards the marketplaces, town centres and metropolitan capitals during the late seventeenth and through the eighteenth century and on into the Industrial Revolution at its close, the technologies of theatre became commodified as ‘the spectacle’, a marketable and highly commercial ‘show’. Witnessing spectacle and becoming absorbed, as audience, in the scenic products of technologies developed into a significant theatrical genre. During the 1770s at Drury Lane theatre in London, David Garrick called them simply ‘entertainments’. They were a hybrid performance of very little narrative or literary content, but rich in recognisable topography, topical allusion and pictorial and spectacular presentation. Nevertheless, the technology and spectacle retained much of their earlier political power and upheld the dominant ideology of government, since most such entertainments concluded with some form of national apotheosis accompanied by patriotic songs that served to embrace the audience within the theatrical world. These entertainments represented an urban, mercantile spectacle that might be designed, constructed and delivered, away from the direct patronage of governing powers, to any who could pay the price, and the huge theatres of the metropolitan centres of the nineteenth century provided a range of prices that could accommodate all sections of society.

During the nineteenth century, theatre served as something of a showground for new industrial technologies – many encountered the products and inventions of the Industrial Revolution for the first time through the scenography of spectacular theatre. Thomas Drummond invented limelight (published in his Philosophical Transactions, 1826) to facilitate accurate trigonometric sightings for the military map-maker. But the technology of focusing an oxygen-enriched jet of burning gas upon a piece of lime quickly became public through theatre, and, in the angled brilliant beam of light striking the stage from high to one side, offered the engraver and illustrator a potent and enduring image of theatre and performance. The distillation of coal products during the 1830s led to the creation of aniline dyes, which
in turn enabled the production of fabrics of a hitherto unseen brilliance. These excited great public interest through their use in theatre costumes in the 1840s and considerably influenced the new, spectacular féerie pantomimes of the Opéra Comique in Paris and of Madame Vestris in London. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the windows of shops were being transformed, through the rapid exploitation of plate glass, into proscenium arches framing glittering displays of merchandise that offered tantalising images of fashion and lifestyle. ‘Cup and saucer’ plays and society dramas of the period turned the proscenium stage into animated window displays of furniture and accessories whilst women actors became mannequins for the latest fashions and fabrics. Hydraulic power was first displayed to the public through its use on stage in Paris in the 1860s, and many experienced incandescent electric lamps for the first time through their use in theatre in the 1880s. The spirit of display and of exhibition dominated scenographic language as much as the energy of theatre and showmanship permeated the exhibition hall and the museum.

The interrelationship, and indeed interdependence, between dramaturgy and technology is significant. Change in dramatic structure and genre has usually been mirrored by significant technical and architectural (and therefore scenographic) change. The technologies inherent in Italian Renaissance perspective scenery provided a view of the world controllable from the single viewpoint occupied by the ruler of the state. The synchronous translation and rewriting of Roman urban plays during the early sixteenth century was mirrored within the scenic opportunities that developed to present physically ordered and layered visions of urban society. The architectures of the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza (1580), the Teatro Olimpico in Sabbioneta (1588) and the Teatro Farnese (1618) in Parma each in differing ways established a form of indoor theatre that both reflected the technologies of perspective scenographies and also served to frame the viewing authority of their patrons.

Similar scenic technologies combined within the architecture of the English Restoration theatre during the late seventeenth century to create a long-lived physical exemplar of the dramaturgy and ethos of plays and of attitudes towards performance. But alongside the excitement of perspective representation and the social needs of theatre patrons there was also the need to accommodate a tradition of acting that had established itself long before the theatrical exploitation of ‘Italianate’ scenic technology. The English theatre of the late seventeenth century was therefore a tripartite building that offered, in
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The skills of the stage machinist and scenic artist during the early nineteenth century were such that their contributions became much more than the provision of apposite ‘stock’ backgrounds to the action of the late seventeenth century, or the intimate interior locations of the eighteenth-century theatre. The products of technology – the carefully constructed illusions of landscape and historical pageant – could as easily take on the role of protagonist as offer illustrations of the scenes of the drama. Whether at the service of Charles Kean and Shakespeare in the former’s reconstructions of history at the Princess’s Theatre of the 1850s, or in a theatrical reconstruction of the Crimean battle of Alma at Astley’s Amphitheatre in 1856, scenography and its technologies became leading protagonists in the theatre. The plays of Dion Boucicault were frequently structured around a narrative presentation of event and topographical circumstance that relied upon scenographic presentation and which, inevitably, used the very latest theatrical technologies. The new technologies of gaslight mantles and the electricity of the last decades of the century offered the well-made play the opportunity to explore in detail the furnishings and property-filled world of the domestic interior. The naturalism of Zola, Antoine and Stanislavski chose not to reject out of hand the 300-year-old technologies of perspective scenery. Although impelled towards change through the increase in illumination offered by electricity, they tended towards blending two-dimensional painted surface alongside three-dimensional ‘carpentered’ scenery to inject what was considered to be a greater degree of theatrical honesty. Strindberg’s preface to Miss Julie (1888) calls for real decoration and objects to replace the painted two-dimensional surfaces.6

But alongside this almost continuous presence of technologies within places of performance and their effects upon dramaturgy have been the simultaneous laments of critics, actors and playwrights that the theatre and its audience were beginning to consider scenes and
special effects as more important than the dramatic literature and the work of the actor. Spectacle, as *opsis*, after all, was quite low in Aristotle’s list of ‘ingredients’ that he indicated in the *Poetics* as being proper within the performance of dramatic tragedy. Especially in Northern Europe, this authority of antiquity was used to support a dour Protestant dislike of images, where machinery, devices, simulacro and their associated technologies might be viewed as Catholic and ‘Romish’. The status of spectacle is frequently diminished by the prefix ‘mere’. The use of sophisticated technology has been most frequently associated with spectacle, and spectacle has been consistently connected with extravagance, waste and courtly indulgence, exemplified by the Stuart court masque from 1605 to 1641. But in its commercialised and commodified form, in the sensation melodrama of the nineteenth century for example, spectacle has also been associated with cheap thrills, visual indulgence and the commercial pandering to an audience who were supposedly too unlettered to follow or understand fine dramatic poetry and diction. Perhaps also, because of the nature and strength of oral traditions in actor training, there has frequently arisen an atavistic tendency within the theatre that has focused on the primacy of the actor within the act of performance – you may rid the theatre of scene, costume, artificial light and even architecture, but you cannot remove the actor and audience. In this way, theatre histories have frequently presented the actor as being continually challenged and possibly threatened by technology and its associated spectacle. Ben Jonson reflects on the fundamental importance of the idea made manifest through the word in the face of the image-making of Inigo Jones and the Stuart masque, whilst Thomas Shadwell faced the challenges of writing poetic English within the scenographically extravagant Restoration heroic opera. Colley Cibber in his *Apology* (1740) regretted the new technology and architectural spectacle of Sir John Vanbrugh’s theatre in the Haymarket of 1702, which made it more suited to spectacle, opera and music, preferring what he considered to have been the more ‘actor-friendly’, but architecturally more restrained and probably technologically inferior, Drury Lane theatre of 1674. Richard Cumberland’s memoirs of 1806 consider the enlarged stages of both the patent theatres of London to have become viewing places of spectacle rather than playhouses for hearing (Figure 1).

But great periods of Western theatre, and indeed major non-Western theatre cultures have all made performance that represented a complex collaboration and interaction between the living and the inanimate aspects of theatre. The Nō and kabuki theatres of Japan, the Kathakali
Figure 1  Large-scale nineteenth-century popular technological spectacle – a rocking ship from J.-P. Moynet, *L'envers du théâtre: machines et décorations* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1874).
of Kerala and the sophisticated dance-drama of Bali alongside what we understand of the theatre practices of antiquity and of the Renaissance, all indicate a seamless and complex interaction of image, sound and movement that may not be represented by a neat hierarchy of perceptual importance beginning with the actor at its pinnacle. This reductive account of the operation of performance may pertain in a theatre that is driven by dramatic literature, where the words spoken by the actor represent the first realisation of dramatic text, but it is not an inevitable description of the way in which performance and theatre have operated in the past, or may operate in future. Technologies may have meanings in and of themselves, and are not simple servants to the mechanistic needs of scenic representation. They are an expression of a relationship with the world and reflect complex human values and beliefs.

Our thinking, our philosophies and modes of expression and understanding of humanity have been frequently governed by current technology and the capabilities of machinery. For example, the Renaissance understanding of the heart as a pumping device coincided with the mechanical development of water-pumping machines. The technologies of framing and placement developed in the late eighteenth century to represent landscape in the theatre conditioned our perception of the real world and, for example, generated the paradox of the landscape gardener, a Capability Brown or a Humphry Repton, using artificial (scenic) means to create a seemingly ‘natural’ environment. During the nineteenth century, the progressive and materialist science of Humphry Davy, Michael Faraday or James Clerk Maxwell generated an understanding of the world that was increasingly expressed with considerable physical certainty. Nineteenth-century science presented a world of toppling mysteries, of a more precise and more tangible understanding of the physical circumstances of existence. This science firmly believed that the application of work, money and experiment would convert the mysteries of the present into credible, tangible certainties of the future. Inevitably, therefore, technologies used in theatre and performance cannot exist in isolation from the larger issues of natural philosophy and science that, since Copernicus and Galileo, have attempted to explain the existence of the world, the behaviour of materials and objects and their relationships with humanity.

The major consideration of this book will be to consider ways in which changes in technology throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first have been reflected in the search for scenographic
identity. Significantly, this search began almost precisely at the point when the material certainty and reality of science was rejected and exploded by revolutionary theories of uncertainty and relativity that shook consciousness and precipitated cultures of modernity. When the X-ray was discovered in 1895, it defied the seeming permanence and opacity of matter; and the view of the world when first seen from the air shattered the dominance of a centre of focus resting on earth, within human limits. Einstein’s general theory of relativity of 1905 and its experimental proof during the solar eclipse of 1919 validated and further provoked a rejection of the material certainties of the past, and proposed a limited construction for the future based upon relative function. In this way, there are obvious synergies between the technologies of speed, movement and change, electricity and construction and the futurism of Marinetti and the design manifesto of the Bauhaus, which gave aesthetic primacy to the relative function of that which was being designed. More recent science, and especially issues of chance and chaos, has continued to provide a store of metaphors and perceptions of relationships that are available to understand the ephemeral and impermanent nature of live performance. We are supported in our consideration and theorisation of postmodern and post-dramatic performance by our awareness of and sensitivity to computing terms such as ‘software’, ‘interface’, ‘multimedia’ and ‘interactive’. For example, the interactive nature of the computer aesthetic gives ‘power’ to the player of a computer game to freely control point of view and to wander at will around the site of computer performance. The computer ‘audience’ is not limited to a place and a space designed to accommodate it; it inhabits a place and a space that is specific to the nature of the performed event. Of course, the development of such a computer aesthetic does not in any way account for a pervasive contemporary rejection of formal architectural ‘theatre’, but it represents an interesting and significant synchronicity.

The overarching theme of this book will therefore be to examine the interrelationships between technologies, theatre and performance and the ways in which science has offered, and indeed required, powerful alternatives to traditional modes of narrative and representation. It will explore ways in which these technologies have urged forward and indeed in some cases dominated the development of scenography, and, in more recent years, where paradoxically a conscious rejection of technologies has similarly nurtured new scenographic practice and performance. I propose to examine the vein of atavism that, in the rejection of elaborated, extravagant and ‘rich’ forms of the
more recent past, has sought inspiration in ‘poorness’, an artistic strength and purity in ancient and early modern theatre forms – Shakespeare’s Globe for example. Many twentieth-century theatre artists found parallels between a contemporary interest in the material qualities of scenography and an awareness of those qualities believed to have existed in the theatres of antiquity, in those of pre-Renaissance Europe, in the _commedia dell’arte_ and in non-Western performance cultures.

An equally important and revealing theme within the period has been the attempt to integrate the place (the architecture) and the space (the scenographic location within the architecture) to the point in some instances where it is not sensible to separate a discussion of the architecture and its site specificity from a discussion of scenography. The inability of the twentieth century to design a lastingly successful theatre building is a significant indication of uncertainty over the function of theatre as much as it is an architectural and scenographic challenge. But running strongly throughout theatrical endeavour and experiment, from the initial rejection of the material realism of the nineteenth century to the present time, and serving as a leitmotif of scenographic energy, has been an urgent investigation of the _materials_ used to make theatre and performance. A potent issue that unifies the ideas of artists as diverse as Edward Gordon Craig, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Caspar Neher, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Josef Svoboda, Robert Wilson and Robert Lepage is a concern for an examination of the ‘tools of the trade’, the nature and qualities of the materials and technologies with which art may be made. Indeed, the manifestos of laboratories, workshops, schools of theatre and experimental theatre studios throughout the period have frequently isolated this exploration as one of their principal aims. The work of these theatre artists represents, in many ways, a celebration of the ‘quiddity’ of theatrical performance, the phenomenological actuality of the smells, colours, textures, sounds, movement and embodiment of performance: in short, a celebration of the lived experience of being in the presence of performance. Inevitably, therefore, the art of that compound experience itself became the theoretical and experimental focus of the period. Their conclusions proposed an art that would be independent of dramatic literature and that would generate artistic self-sufficiency within itself. Moreover, their achievement and their manifestos have proposed a vision of theatre where there may be a seamless and creative interface between theatre, performance and technology.
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