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LANGUAGES OF FILM AND THEATRE: PROJECT REPORT

ON THE SET DESIGN FOR THE PLAY *LITTLE EYOLF* BY HENRIK IBSEN

THESIS SUBMITTED AS WRITING COMPONENT TO THE MASTER MEDIA DESIGN PROGRAMME, PIET ZWART INSTITUTE, WILLEM DE KOONING ACADEMY, 2012.

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Introduction

In my work as theatre designer I have often merged film and video in designs for live-performances. In my stage images, I have explored how cinematic principles and the conventions of theatre can interact.

This thesis is a report on the research at Piet Zwart Institute, which formed the basis of my last three set designs. For each of the designs, I will elaborate how my engagement with film as a medium has influenced my work as a theatre designer. Each project reflects on the nature of the frame and the cinema screen, merging their properties with the perspectives of theatrical space. All these projects approached the presence of the screen differently.

Firstly, a production of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (directed by Susanne Kennedy) creates the illusion of a screen by putting the actors inside a framed rectangular box within a greater, darkened space, like people moving inside a television screen. The second project is Dea Loher's *Land Without Words* (directed by Jaap Spijkers). This time an actor moves before and behind an actual semi-transparent screen, one that is also used as a canvas for painting. By placing the screen diagonally, and making it larger than any audience member could take in with one glance, the design creates an experience of depth.

I will describe in greater detail the process of the last design, for Susanne Kennedy's version of Henrik Ibsen's *Little Eyolf*. It is the only one where images are projected into the design. This design fuses elements from the previous two projects. A gauze screen separates actors from the audience; sometimes this screen forms a barrier onto which text is projected; sometimes, when the space is lit where the actors perform, it offers a window into their claustrophobic world. At the back of the space was a second screen onto which images from medical films (microbes and blown-up x-rays) and of clouds appeared, presenting perhaps the elemental aspects of the characters' experience.

Although I have used elements from film and video before, these three works together form a trio, a way of making the ideas and practices explored in the Masters course at Piet Zwart my own.

The collaboration intrinsic to theatre is essential to my working practice. Therefore my research entails analysing the results of the cooperation between different professions such as stage design, sound design, light design, directing, and acting.

1. Research and practice during the Master Course

In this chapter, I will firstly try to describe the environment in which my work as a theatre designer has developed. Although I've spent a big part of my studies, and most of my professional work in the Netherlands, the German theatre scene has always influenced and shaped my way of working. I therefore have chosen two German and one Flemish/Dutch production, which have made an impression on me, and have stayed, in my mind until now. All three productions are prominent in their designs and in the use of different media, in particular video.

I will then illustrate how my research at Piet Zwart Insitute lead to set designs for the two theatre productions *The Birthday Party* and *Country Without Words*.

1.1 Video in Live Performance

The use of video and other media has always interested me when seeing a theatre play, an opera, or a dance piece. It is curious if a video 'works', if it has a reason to exist, or if it doesn't, and then outbalances the performance of the actors because it attracts more attention. There have been attempts to classify the use of video in live performances, in order to understand the way they interact with the other elements like light, the space, and the actors.

Greg Gisekam, in his book *Staging the Screen*, elaborates the different reasons for using video in a performance. He describes performances as 'multimedia', which use video but are otherwise built around fairly traditional understandings of the role of text and the creation of character; video is then one of many apparatuses that collectively support a performance.

In my own practice, I'm occupied with the content of a performance, which leads to the choice of visual tools and languages. I'm therefore interested in those productions for which Greg Gieskam suggests the term, 'intermedia'. This refers to work where 'more extensive interaction between the performers and various media reshapes notions of character and acting, where neither the live material nor the recorded material would make much sense without the other'.[1]

The first performance I want to discuss is *Erniedrigte und Beleidigte* (*Humiliated and Insulted)* by Fjodor M. Dostojewski, which was produced in 2001 at Volksbühne am Rosa Luxenburg-Platz and Wiener Festwochen. Director was Frank Castorf, set designer was Bert Neumann. On stage, there was a four-wall, flat-roofed house, which inside was equipped like a film set: in all rooms there were cameras installed. On top of the roof, there was a back projection in the size of a billboard. On that screen, a mixture of live footage and pre-recorded images was shown simultaneously with the live action on stage.

The production is a distinct example of the 'surveillance idea', as it is illustrated by John Edward McGrath in his book *Loving Big Brother*[2], and which is practiced and diversified by a wide range of performance groups like The Wooster Group, Forced Entertainment, and Rimini Protokoll. It reflects on popular TV shows and movies, and on our day-to-day encounters with the mechanisms of surveillance. Its plausible stage construction develops a notion of a space that is neither public nor private.

Another performance, which had a big impact on my understanding of theatre, was *Kunst und Gemüse, A. Hipler. Theater ALS Krankheit,* also at Volksbühne am Rosa Luxenburg-Platz in 2004. It was presented by Christoph Schlingensief, the German film and theatre director and artist, who died in 2010 (aged 49). His work was displayed at the 2011 Venice Biennale in the German pavilion. *Kunst und Gemüse* didn't get as much attention as his later, more monumental works, but is characteristic for his way of blending film, theatre, and art installation.

A revolving stage revealed a labyrinth of references to different art works, montages of music (Arnold Schönbergs opera *Von heute auf morgen),* images and films.

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1 Giesekam, Greg, *Staging the Screen: The Use of Film and Video in Theatre (Theatre & Performance Practices)* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): (p.8).

2 McGrath, John Edward, *Loving Big Brother: Performance, Privacy and Surveillance Space* (London: Routledge, 2004).

Video was projected on two big screens, as well as onto any object passing on the revolving stage. Schlingensief asked the audience to watch the performance as if it was an art exhibition, with the only difference being that in this case the visitor didn't move along the artwork, but the other way round. Everything on stage happened simultaneously, images didn't appear to have any relationship with each other and seemed to be arbitrary. The only direct communication with the audience was created by on-screen display of texts, written by a women with the illness ASL (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), who was lying on a bed on stage, operating a laser with the movement of her eyes.

The third production I want to refer to is *Proust 1: Swann's way*, by the Flemish theatre maker Guy Cassiers and the Dutch ensemble, Ro Theater (2005). The memories of the main character were seen in video footage, projected onto a screen, consisting of loose, vertical texture. This split screen, invented by set designer Marc Warning, enabled the actors to climb through the screen, moving from present to past, and back again. With the help of projections, the production emphasised on the different dimensions of time represented in Proust's novel. Guy Cassiers believes that through different languages and different disciplines it is possible to address the senses independently, and to intensify the memoires the audience already carry inside them.[3]

[3] Merx, Sigrid, 'Swann's way: video and theatre as an intermedial stage for the representation of time' in: Ed. Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006): (p.71).

1.2 The Birthday Party

In May 2011 I designed the set for Harold Pinter's theatre play, *The Birthday Party* (1958) at Nationale Toneel in The Hague. A box of five meters wide, three meters high and four meters deep was placed in a hall of 23 meters by 15 meters big, opposite of a narrow auditorium. The box was enclosed in absolute darkness, and only lit from within. A podium raised the box one metre from the floor, though the material supporting it was invisible to the audience. The box could therefore apparently hang in space, levitating before the audience. The audience was confronted with only one contracted rectangle of light, five metres wide and three metres high; that was their view into the interior of the box. The audience saw the play only from one perspective, which was frontal, from outside the box. A shutter that periodically closed this box off was used to make scene changes.

At the back of the box there was a window and a glass door. This door and window led into another narrow room that was 1.5 metres deep. This back room was separately lit. Therefore to open the door was not to open the darkness that surrounds the box, but to enter another undefined zone. The window had a shutter that could close off the room beyond, or open up a view of it. Similarly the door was made of 'milk-glass'

that allowed a hazy view through it. In this way, the room was looked into from two sides.

Within the box, the only furniture was a sofa and a standing fan. The walls were made of wood-effect plastic strips; the floor is covered with a blue-green carpet. There was also a skylight, though one that provided no daylight. At the front of the box was another shutter, one that closes off the entire space.

My starting point for the design was photographer Jeff Wall's image, 'A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in 1947' (1990). The room is both a claustrophobic family sitting room and a theatrical space; the everyday home has become the site of a performance, but one whose meanings suggest menace and a spellbound unease. As such it seemed ideal for Pinter's combination of the domestic and the threatening.

In conversations with the director of the production, we realised early on that we wanted to evoke in our own version of Pinter's play, this same sense of cosiness and constriction, of the homelike and the hazardous. The room should be both a comfortable place (a womb) and a dark environment (a tomb). The six actors would be forced to play in as small a space as possible, forced to confront the limits of the room, just as they were bound into the constraints of Pinter's threatening games.

To realise this sense of constraint, I decided that we should place the actors within a box at the centre of the wider stage space. Against this framing of the acting space, the box itself would present an ultra-realistic interior.

The use of the constrained space of the box brought with it problems regarding the ability of the audience to see the action on stage. I christened this difficulty the 'dead angle problem', as the audience's sightlines were cut off. In normal circumstances, in a theatre play, the ability of the audience to watch the action is naturally enough central to its success. However, both the director and myself were strongly committed to the sense that this particular production needed to highlight the fact of constraint. Simply to sacrifice the use of the constricting box in order to preserve the conventions of 'set-ups' in traditional theatre therefore seemed no solution. In fact, this difficulty regarding the sightlines had the benefit of requiring the exploration of a range of creative solutions. From its usual broad shape, the auditorium was to be set out in a long, narrow and raked design, one element in the overall design of the play facing its other – the box that contained the actors. This narrow seating arrangement would give every member of the

audience a clear view of what was happening on stage. In particular, this had the additional benefit of more obviously placing the constricted space of the stage itself in a relation to the similarly limited space where the spectators would sit.

The box would also be enclosed in absolute darkness. I designed a podium which raised the box one metre from the floor, but which was invisible to the audience. This invisibility was accorded through the use of an angled mirror along the front surface of the podium. The box could therefore apparently levitate before the audience. The audience would be confronted with only one contracted rectangle of light, five metres wide and three metres high; that was their view into the interior of the box. That rectangle could itself suggest the frame of a cinema screen. And the actors would play out the play within that frame.

Pinter's play belongs to a boarding house world of the 1950s. It is set in a shabby English seaside town, a temporary and shiftless domain of people travelling through. The play's central character, Stanley, is a performer, a pianist who supposedly used to play as a beach entertainer. To a 1950s London audience, the milieu of the play already looked abject, vulgar, disreputable, and seedy. It was far removed from the fashionable West End productions of the time, solidly middle-class in outlook and still bound to the tight narrative constructions of the 'well-made play'. This world of the lodger, of boarding houses was undiscovered territory in theatrical terms, but it was also a world familiar to many. The boredom and deadness of out-of-season seaside towns was both recognisable and something foreign once put on stage within the theatre. What Pinter evokes in *The Birthday Party* is a feeling that the transient spaces of boarding-house life are in themselves Gothic and violent. The 'home' is no home at all, but a rented box; the space is shared with strangers: in this way, the boarding-house environment is a perfect symbol for theatre itself.

While researching into the visual style of the play, I worked on improving my technical range as a designer by learning the 3D-modelling software package, *Cinema 4D*. Before this project, I had always built models by hand. While I have once again constructed a model version of the set, I have simultaneously created the design in digital form. *Cinema 4D* enables me to build a virtual environment, and to quickly and easily compare the effect of using different surfaces and materials, and different colours. It also allows me to simulate the point of view available to the spectators, sharing their

perspective from any position in the auditorium. This was always going to be a huge benefit with this project, as the use of the constrained space of the box brought with it problems regarding the ability of the audience to see the action on stage.

During rehearsals it was often brought home to me that the stage design I created resembles a film set in many ways, or rather in particular the set of a soap opera. The two dimensional quality of the stage design summoned up memories of various bad TV series from the 90s. (I should add that these connections seemed to me a good thing!) With this in mind, the costumes, decor and acting style of the piece made reference to such productions.

Although this design was made for a life performance where audience and actors were situated in the same room, the set up of the space had similarities with a cinema. From the point of view of the spectator the lit rectangle of the box looked like a projected image. This effect was achieved by the constricted point of view of the audience, and by the dark empty space surrounding the box, adding a black frame to the image. In addition to that, the ratio of the boxes opening was similar to the measurements of a screen.

The impression of a cinema screen was reinforced by the use of blackouts, which submerged the entire room into total darkness of only a few seconds. After each blackout, the scene inside the box would have changed. Mostly, the changes would be only minimal, like an actor's stepping to one side, or someone entering the room. These interruptions never took place at the end of a scene, creating narrative sequences, but were instead scattered randomly throughout the play. Like this, the blackouts could be recognized as a quotation from a different language, one that is familiar to us in film and television. The effect of the blackouts was often comical, rousing associations of a sitcom-like arrangement.

By framing a scene in this way, I created the illusion of a two dimensional image in a three dimensional space. This illusion was to be outweighed by a five meters wide and three meters high shutter, lowered in front of the opening of the box marking the end of each part of the play. The motor driven shutter took more than a minute to close completely, and the accompanying sound made this process a physical reminder of the actual dimensions of the space. While the shutter was closed, the audience would hear domestic noises of cooking and shutting doors coming from behind it, suggesting the

scene would go on without them seeing it. With the lifting of the shutter, a new scene would be presented.

The quotations and elements of film and television on one hand, and the traditional theatre form of lifting a curtain to reveal a new scene on the other, alternate and contrast in the design for *The Birthday Party*. The gaze of the audience travels from an outside view onto a levitating square screen into the inside of a box where a live theatre play is in progress.

1.3 Land Without Words

During the last trimester of the first year at Piet Zwart Institute, I worked on a theatre design for the German writer Dea Loher's play, *Land Ohne Worte (Land Without Words)*, a monologue of a female writer who travels to Kabul and ends up with writer's block. The character discusses an artist's desire to relate to the world around her through a

comparison of her own work as a writer with the work of several famous painters. The play was performed in multifunctional hall measuring twenty-three metres by fifteen metres. The floor of the hall was covered in second hand white 'baletvloer' (a special surface for the stage especially used in dance performances). The set consisted of two pieces of sheet, each fifteen meters wide and three and a half meters high, placed on top of each other. Each sheet had a metal pipe on top and bottom. There was a horizontal double line of pipe at 350cm high. An extrusion in the floor with a metal grid collected the paint. This construction was placed diagonally into the big theatre hall, seperating the space for the audience from the space for the actress. The audience was invited to take a chair from a pile and choose a position in front of the sheet. A door in the bottom right corner of the sheet made it possible for the actress to move from one side of the sheet to the other.

Performance art has influenced the play's form, which was intended to be a merger of artistic disciplines. I also investigated ways of placing the audience and thereby guiding their responses – while knowing that each audience member will respond in their own way. The starting point of the design process could be 'The struggle of the artist with tool and material'. From the beginning of working on this play, I knew that the actress would use materials that would help to transform the space or her position in it; this meant in practice, that she was going to be painting even as she acted the monologue.

By entering the space of the audience one should get the impression of an exhibition space in a museum, and of the artist's studio at the same time. As the initial idea for the design was to let the actress paint during the performance, I planned rehearsals with the actress in the painting workshop of the theatre. I documented our experiments by filming and photographing the actress while she was painting. The transparent plastic material we used to paint on is fireproof and extremely strong and flexible. We made tests with different kinds of paint: high quality latex, buttermilk, chalk of champagne, birdsand, and Fluwol VV, a wallpaint that contains little latex. The experiments in the painting workshop helped me choose the paints to use and make judgements on the material and size of the sheet, as well as the distance between the actress and the audience.

The dramatic development of the text made it obvious that the actress should be able to move several times from behind the sheet to the side of the audience. With a door there, her isolation would be self-chosen. The plastic sheet could be seen the wall of the actresses studio as well as a surface to paint on.

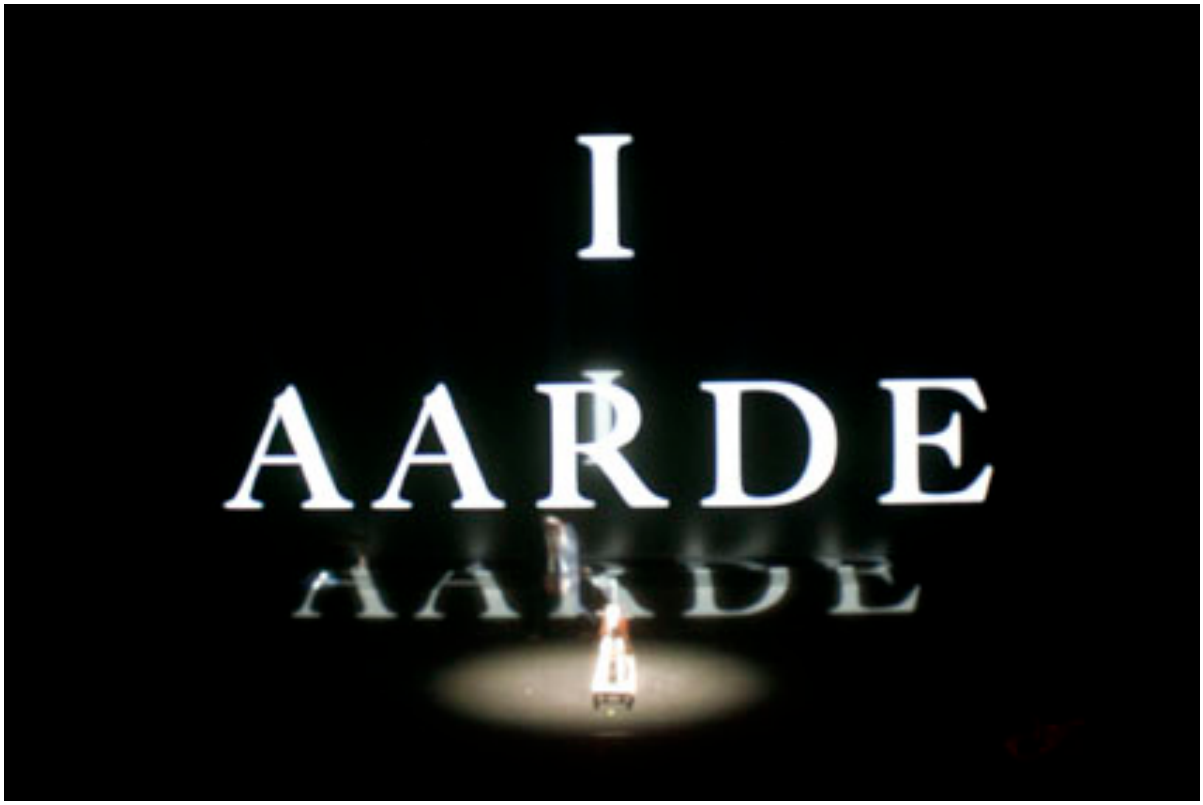
During rehearsals, questions emerged about why the sheet should be on the diagonal. My answer was that it creates a feeling for three-dimensional space and gives a depth to the design. By putting the sheet in this position, the set contrasted with my previous design for Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. There I placed audience and actors opposite of each other. The audience couldn't do anything else but look in one direction. I wanted them to forget that they sat in a bigger space. In *Country Without Words,* I wanted the spectators to be aware of the space around them. It was important that the audience would get the chance to move their chairs around. The audience should see the actress not only from the front but also from different angles.

While in *The Birthday Party,* I presented to the audience only one focus of attention by choosing a relatively small frame of an image, the transparent screen in *Country Without Words* spread diagonally from one side of the room to the other. The actress would move alongside the screen, entering and leaving the spectator's sight, and inviting them to turn their heads and follow her with their eyes. The film screen in *The Birthday Party* is an imaginary one, in the design for *Country Without Words,* the screen is physical and separates the world of the actress from the space for the audience. The story that the audience have come to hear and see, takes place not on the screen as in a cinema, but behind it. The central character, a writer, tells the audience about her inability to write. In a hypothetical exercise, she imagines being a painter, claiming that the physicality of a canvas and paint would prevent her from being lost without anything to say. She sees an advantage in being able to make an abstract painting over being bound to words, which in her opinion can never be non-descriptive. During her monologue, the character keeps moving back and forth from speaking as a writer, and taking the role of the imagined painter. In order to give this construction of the text a visible manifestation, I invented a door for the actress to move from one side of the screen, where she talks as a writer, to the other side where she is a painter. On another

level, the writer of the play, Dea Loher, takes the audience with her through the surface of the play into the very intimate place where she struggles to find a way to tell the story.

In a film, a director has at his or her disposal a range of tools to give the author a distinguished role and make it clear to the audience. For example, when hearing a voiceover, or reading a sequence of written text, the spectators of a film are aware that the author is addressing them directly. During my research for *Country Without Words,* I was looking for ways to make Dea Loher's voice audible. Placing a screen that allows the audience to look through and witness the making of the play while watching the play itself.

2. Design for the theatre performance *Little Eyolf*



2.1 Opening scene

The theatre audience find themselves seated in front of a framed dark space, with nothing visible except for a boy sitting on a white rocking horse at the centre of the stage. For the first six minutes of the performance, the boy is moving on the wooden horse, and the sound that is produced by the movement, are the only thing happening in the room. Slowly, the eyes of the spectator get used to the darkness, and they start to make out what could be the depth of the space. Then, all of a sudden, big white letters appear on a gauze situated between the audience and the stage with the word *AARDE (EARTH)*, accompanied by the ticking noise of what could be a film projector. The projected letters fall through the gauze on the floor and walls behind it, and on the rocking child. After 20 seconds, the word disappears, and the image goes back to the boy/man on the rocking horse. Then, one by one, two women and two men appear from the sides of the stage and become visible as they stop and stand spread around the boy. Again, projected letters interrupts the image, this time together with a total blackout on stage. The words *DE THUISKOMST (HOMECOMING)*, introduce the first scene of the play: Eyolf's father Allmers comes home from a walking trip in the mountains, to his wife Rita, to his sister Asta, and to his son Eyolf. But instead of moving towards each other and greet each other, the actors remain on their spots, each of them on a separate island, surrounded by a dark undefined space. In the back of the space, black and white images of oversized cells appear and move slowly along the wall. When the actors finally speak, their voices sound as if they where played by an ancient gramophone. This first scene marks the opening of a composition of 52 short scenes, always introduced in a similar way by projected titles and blackouts.

2.2 Content of the play

Henrik Ibsen's *Little Eyolf* was published in 1894, when the playwright was 70 years old. It stands as one of Ibsen's late plays (followed only by *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899)). Ibsen first came to prominence as the author of verse plays, in particular *Brand* (1866) and the epic folk-play, *Peer Gynt* (1867). However, outside his native Norway, Ibsen achieved his greatest fame with a series of controversial 'problem plays', realistic in setting, in which he scrutinized the morality of

the 19th century society (such as *A Doll's House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881) and *An Enemy of the People* (1882)). In later age, beginning with his dramas of social critique gave way to more introspective work, perhaps returning via realism to the ambitious symbolism of *Peer Gynt*. *Little Eyolf* exemplifies this new turn to interiority and to symbolism.

The play takes place in a country house by a Norwegian fjord, and describes the struggle of a couple, Rita and Alfred Allmers, after the death their nine year old son, 'Little Eyolf'. Eyolf has been crippled after a fall from a table when he was a baby. The fall occurred because the parents left him unattended while they (very likely) had sex in another room. The guilt of the injury inflicted on the child has alienated them from each other, and their relationship has become sexless and cold. Alfred Allmers has thrown himself into the writing of a philosophical text on *Human Responsibility* – though the audience infer that this 'great work' is unfinishable by him. In any case, as the play starts, he announces that he has abandoned writing it, following; it turns out, a close experience with death while out walking in the mountains. Instead he has decided that his life's work will be looking after Little Eyolf, a resolve that comes to nothing as the boy drowns that very morning.

The married couple's relationship is further troubled by the husband's intimacy with his half-sister, Asta. Both brother and sister look back with intense nostalgic yearning to the closeness they shared as children. The romantic overtones to their sibling relationship are brought up even more fully by the fact that Asta has discovered that, due to her mother's sexual infidelity, they are not brother and sister at all. Asta herself is pursued by the happy-go-lucky road-builder, Borgheim; however, she spends the play rebuffing his increasingly despondent advances. She cannot choose to be alone with Alfred, and he can only choose her in the unconsummated relationship of brother and sister – a relationship that he forces upon his jealous and possessive wife. (Though it is entirely likely that her jealousy and possessiveness emerged from his emotional aloofness.)

To add to the play's psychological complexities, the dead child was named after the boy that Asta had once wanted to be, and that her brother also desired: Asta was once herself called Eyolf, and the child that has gone was her namesake, her 'nephew', and her double, as well as the child that she and Alfred will never themselves produce.

From Rita Allmer's point of view, she doesn't really want to be a mother, and therefore gives birth to someone she feels alienated from. The child comes between the nearness she desires with her husband, her longing to be everything to him, as he is to her. The boy's lameness adds to her inward shrinking from him; shortly before he does in fact die, she explicitly wishes him dead.

These wishes are in some occult and subterranean sense picked up by an old woman who visits the Allmers' house – the so-called 'Rat Wife', a vagabond who goes from house to house exterminating vermin. In one of the play's darkest intimations, Eyolf is precisely the unwanted presence in the house that she comes to kill.

3. Developing a concept for *Little Eyolf*

The following question inspired the research for *Little Eyolf*: how can I create the experience of an outside space within a theatre? I aimed at the illusion of an open place, one that extends beyond any visible walls. At the same time, my fantasy was to create a room that represents a state of mind; actors were to be vague figures in an apparently

endless landscape of fog and air. With the help of projections, scrims,[4] and artificial fog, I wanted to establish the impression of a scene set outside, yet paradoxically that was also on location within a human mind. The theatre room would both evoke an external world and the constraints of individual consciousness.

I imagined a three dimensional space for images, combining layers of projection within an amorphous substance like fog. Rather than a conventional flat screen, I sought the illusion of depth and perspective on a nebulous body. The audience was to experience the tension between the scale of the human frame and the scale of the space around them.

The hope was that exterior space might evoke an inner landscape. Critics have long seen Ibsen's later plays as characterised entirely by mood; for all its surface realism it occupies a symbolic world.[5] Even before *Little Eyolf* had been written, the German poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal had perceived this quality in Ibsen's work: 'All these people live a shadowy life; deeds and things play little part in their lives, which are made up almost exclusively of thoughts, moods and moodiness.'[6] The projected images could be fragments of dreams and memories, fleeting embodiments of fears and desires. In keeping with Ibsen's own interests, the pictures were to be elemental: images of water in motion, or clouds cast upon the present clouds of artificial fog.

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[4] A 'scrim' is a 'gauze cloth used for screens or for filtering theatrical lighting; a screen of this material' (*OED*).

[5] To take one example among many, Inga-Stina Ewbank writes that beginning with *Rosmerholm* (1886), Ibsen uses 'metaphorical language to probe depths of mind not available to ordinary ratioal discourse' (from 'Ibsen's Dramatic Language as a Link Between His "Realism" and "Symbolism", excerpted in James McFarlane, *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Anthology* (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1970): (p. 311). More recently, Toril Moi has suggested that this famous 'symbolism' is actually part of Ibsen's attempt to explore the inner mind: 'In the late plays, characters have increasingly lost their faith in language; there is less love and more skepticism, which means that more characters feel radically isolated, misunderstood and unacknowleged' (*Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): (p. 320).

[6] Hugo von Hofmannstahl, from 'Die Menschen in Ibsens Dramen' (1891) excerpted in James McFarlane, *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Anthology* (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1970): (p. 133).

3.1 Ibsen and Nature

While discussing the concept for the design with the director Susanne Kennedy, an article by the critic Brian Johnston, opened up our understanding of the play.[7] Johnston argues that the three acts of *Little Eyolf* each explore in turn a relationship to three succeeding 'elements': that is, earth, water and sky. These elements express something of the violent fate that confronts the couple. The play takes place in a country house by a Norwegian fjord. Here the 'absolutely elemental action of death' confronts Eyolf's parents.[8] The settings described in the play consist of earth, sea, sky and fog, acting like agents of death descending on the couple. In Act II, the 'cosmic violence' that breaks down onto their lives turns into a *mental* violence.[9] Rita and Allmers tear apart and destroy each other's identities.

According to Johnston, the characters in the play 'absorb' the universe into themselves; and the universe - the huge landscape of sea, mountains, and stars - speaks through them, as if inhabiting them:

> *Litte Eyolf* is dramatized around one huge cosmic shock - the action of the cosmos that comes and grabs the child and empties the other characters' lives of meaning; forcing them, after passionate conflict, into pitiless self-examination. There are really only two actions: the death of Eyolf and the revelation that 'big Eyolf' - Asta - as Allmers sister, is 'dead' in her former identity. The consciousnesses of the main characters, Alfred and Rita, must come to terms with these two facts and their consequences involving harrowing renunciations.[10]

Johnston's insight regarding the 'elemental' structure of the play proved central to our own production. We took earth to represents sensuality, the sexual self, something that we understood as Rita's realm. Little Eyolf's death associates him with water, but also Asta and the Rat Wife both come to the Allmers' home and depart by water. In the play, the sky carries intimations of salvation, redemption, advance, progress and solution.

The play begins with Alfred Allmers returning to his family home. While he has

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[7] Johnston, Brian, "All the Dead Voices: Ibsen and Modernism" in *Modernism I Skandinavisk Litteratur* (Universitet i Trondheim, Norway, 1991): (p.1)
[8] Ibid., (p.1)
[9] Ibid., (p.3)
[10] Ibid.

been away, he has experienced an epiphany while walking in the mountains. This experience of nature as 'astonishing' and vivifying has led him to change his mind about his life. He wants to abandon his career as a would-be writer, and instead devote himself to his son. Though the audience may doubt the integrity of this vision, Ibsen suggests that it was the experience of the vastness and sublimity of nature that proves crucial to Allmers' change of direction.

In order to explore the 'elemental' aspects of the play, I want to bring in here three writers who have discussed 'the sublime'. Firstly, in an essay on Barnett Newman, the French philosopher, Jean François Lyotard writes on the subject.[11] For Lyotard, Newman's work reveals that the great original of the work of art is the creation story as set out in *Genesis*. The 'subject matter of creation is chaos', and all art inscribes the idea of a 'beginning'. For Newman creation is not an act performed by someone; it is what happens in the midst of the indeterminate.[12] Art's subject matter is immediacy, what happens here and now. Beginning entails the making of a thing, (*quod*), what there is. In the urgency intrinsic to this creative act, Newman's work belongs to the aesthetic of the sublime; for him, 'The Sublime is Now'.

In Ibsen's play, however, the moment of perceiving the sublime has occurred before the action begins. If it is a 'now', it is an immediacy that is recollected, retold in an anecdote. It occurs off-stage and occupies a 'before' that is unrepresentable on stage except through rhetoric. In adapting Ibsen's play, as we shall see, Susanne Kennedy erased all such moments of storytelling or remembrance from the play. This might return Allmers' experience to the vitality of the instant, or otherwise, as is sometimes said of trauma, manifest a failure in the possibilities of representation to comprehend an event. (Though Ibsen's play itself attempts to represent such trauma.) However, the placing of the sublime natural in the films that play through the performance, rather removes his grandiose experience of grandeur from self-description and returns it to the here and now. If there is a sublime, we see it too. Yet, of course, being film the 'sublime' is both a here and now, playing in the moment of representation, and a recording, a trace and a replacement for something that has already finished. If Lyotard informs the use of 'nature' and 'the sublime' in our production, he does so in ways that subvert his stated

[11] Lyotard, Jean-François, 'Newman: The Instant' in *The Inhuman* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988)
[12] Ibid., p. 82.

theory.

The second philosopher to influence my thoughts on the play is the great eighteenth-century theorist of the sublime, the Irish writer Edmund Burke.[13] While out walking in the mountains, Allmers' experience of nature is at the same time an encounter with mortality. In Section VII of Burke's treatise, he sets out the experiences of the sublime.[14]

Everything terrible is the source of the sublime; it is the strongest emotion, which the mind is capable of feeling. Burke reminds us that ideas of pain are stronger than ideas of pleasure. What makes pain more painful (more distressing, harder to consciously assimilate) is that it is seen as an emissary of the king of terrors – death. When nearby or pressing, danger or pain are simply terrible, and cannot give us any delight. However, modified by a certain distance, they may become delightful. Of all the readings of the sublime, Burke's might be the one most simply useful for our approach to *Little Eyolf*. At the centre of Ibsen's play is an experience so terrible, than many would rather not imagine it at all: the death of a child. Allmers' supposed contact with nature provides an experience of the 'sublime' in nature, evoking death; the audience's version of the same experience is our encounter with the unspectacular but devastating fact of Little Eyolf's drowning.

Finally, arguably there are Nietzschean overtones to Allmers' contact with nature. Solitary, he wanders the hills, and alone, experiences a heightening of perception in contact with the wildness of nature and the inevitability of death. It is unclear whether Ibsen ever read Nietzsche, although their critiques of bourgeois morality are contemporaneous.[15] In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche speaks disparagingly of the Norwegian playwright, seeing in him an old maid ('*dieser typischen alten Jungfrau*') whose idealism poisons a 'natural' sexuality.[16] Yet their points of connection lay in their work. As Toril Moi argues, Ibsen, like Nietzsche, is a sceptic; and we may detect a slightly fascistic, pompous air of self-satisfaction in Allmer's sense of himself. He has had a 'vision'; it marks him out above other mortals. However, if he is a 'superman', Allmers is a rather

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[13] Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1998).
[14] Ibid., p. 86.
[15] Moi, 2006: p. 196.
[16] Nietzsche, Friedrich, 'Warum ich so gute Bücher schreibe' in *Ecce Homo* in *Der Fall Verlag u.a.* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999): p. 307.

compromised one. He believes that he has learnt a lesson from his epiphany. It instructs him to change his life. Yet, if he forgoes literature, he does so in order to attempt to turn Eyolf into a 'work of art', his creation, a personality that he will nurture and mould.

3.2 Representation of nature in a theatre space

When reading *Little Eyolf*, the natural element that came to mind was fog. I pictured the house at the fjord, which is described as being surrounded by water, as fogbound. The house itself would all but vanish in the mist; spectral figures would appear and disappear back into the fog. This was the atmosphere of a ghost house.

There is something of a tradition regarding the use of fog in art and theatre. In the 'phantasmagoria' of the Romantic period, one technique employing 'fog' allowed images to appear and disappear. Phantasmagoria was a form of theatre, which used a modified magic lantern to project frightening images such as skeletons, demons, and ghosts onto walls, smoke, or semi-transparent screens, frequently using rear projection. The projector was mobile, allowing the projected image to move and change size on the screen. Multiple projecting devices allowed for quick switching of different images. Invented in France in the late eighteenth century, it gained popularity through most of Europe (especially England) over the next decades. The crucial figures in the development of the form were François Seraphin and Paul Phillidor. Associated with the rise of the Gothic novel and drama, it used early projecting devices to offer a fabricated realm of sensation and fright, feeding the imagination through shock.

My design would carry over some of the feelings and meanings of the phantasmagoria. Again, there would be an impression of unease, of morbid withdrawal from the world, of night, and brooding. Although an image of home, the effect would rather be uncanny, finding the *heimlich* in *das Unheimliche.*

I was also intrigued by the example of one artist who has also worked with fog or steam: that is, Olafur Eliasson. Particularly inspiring were his three projects: *Yellow Fog,* New York, 1998, and reprised in Vienna on the facade of the Verbund-Zentrale in Am Hof square in 2008; *Din blinde passager*, UTOPIA project, Arken Museum for Moderne Kunst, Denmark; *The Weather Project,* Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, UK, 2003.

Also useful as points of departure were Anthony Gormley's *Blind Light* and James Turrell's The Wolfsburg Project. In *Blind Light*, Anthony Gormley filled an eight by 10 metre glass box with a dense vapour created by oscillating ultrasonic humidifiers. Inside the box, visibility was reduced to an extent that visitors would loose any sense of direction. Stepping into an interior space, visitors would have the sensation of being on top of a mountain or at the bottom of the sea. Inside, they would encounter the outside.

Photographers that inspired me for the making of the visual material for the projections include: Gregory Crewdson, David Maisel, Bill Henson (*landscapes*), Adam Fuss (*My Ghost*). In each case what I responded to in the work of these artists was the combination of a sense of mystery and expansiveness, a relationship between an interior room and the imagination of an exterior landscape.

The idea became to combine classic theatre 'fog' with projections of moving images of clouds. This brought me to the use of gauze or shark scrim: scrim would hold back fog up to a certain amount onto the stage; projections onto gauze would be transparent and images of clouds and real fog would merge and create a three dimensional effect.

This initial concept led me to film a broad collection of footage of clouds, in all shapes, in all weather, at day and night. At this stage, the protean nature of clouds was most interesting; that they move, and change, and cannot hold their shape. Their amorphousness gives them a sense of unlimitedness, yet if they disperse too much they cease to be clouds. On a figurative level, this quality of changefulness seemed to me part of what I wanted to achieve for the *Little Eyolf* design. The characters in the play have become static, unchanging, locked into experiences of loss and longing that they cannot alter. The actor playing Eyolf trotted up and down humming the same ceaseless drum riff, or swayed back and forth on a rocking horse, always in motion, going nowhere. Into this intertia, the motion of clouds offered something like a counterpoint, a hint at possibilities beyond the enclosure of the characters' minds.

Further to this, I filmed empty branches of winter trees (as representatives of 'earth'), and moving water; again motion was central to these images, particularly of the movement of water, though also in the movement of branches.

Next to images of natural phenomena, I collected archival film material of anatomical pictures of the brain and body, drawing upon the photography of medical research: X-rays, the brain, female pelvis, Charcot's photographs of women suffering

from hysteria, brain-scan images. (For Charcot, I will make use of Georges Didi-Huberman's *The Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpetrière* (Boston: MIT Press, 2004). The first X-Ray was made in 1908, two years after Ibsen's death. These biological images were similarly in relation to the mood of the play; offering the interior of the interior, a glimpse into the human body – a view of a material self.

Working with Susanne Kennedy, several films inspired me during the research for *Little Eyolf*. I was especially interested in Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009), in so far as it shares the subject matter of a couple coming to terms with the death of a child, and also as it places their bereavement in a highly symbolic landscape.

David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* (1980) was similarly inspiring, for three reasons: firstly, it shares the anxiety felt in Ibsen's play about the birth of a child who is then felt to be monstrous or strange; secondly, as it so pervasively uses imagery of steam and fog to portray the world of Victorian London (even seeing the distorted flesh of John Merrick as solidified steam); and lastly, as it too offers a route into a dream-like landscape, a world inside the head, while being nonetheless caught up in the medicalized depiction of the body's surface.

John Merrick's body seems all out of scale – a head that passes beyond the limits of the skull, as steam expands, a flesh that expands beyond itself.[17] Thoughts of scale were present in my design as well. Our relative smallness compared to the landscape is one source of the feeling of the sublime. Here an outside world was being shrunk to the space of the theatre room, though hopefully in such a way as to bring into its limits, something vast. On the other hand, through use of blown-up microscopic images of microbes, the tiny too could resemble the huge. Scales of space and size were juxtaposed and contrasted, yet found inside the limits of one design.

[17] Rodley, Chris and David Lynch, *Lynch on Lynch* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999): (p. 103).

3.3 'Intermedial' approach

As mentioned above, my ideas for this project were in part inspired by Greg Gieskam's concept of the 'intermedial': that is (in this version of the word), works in which actor and projection are interdependent. The two are in relationship and influence each other. He contrasts this with works that use film and video as illustration, merely 'add-ons' to a play, simply there to provide distraction or (more positively) entertainment for the audience. So, for *Little Eyolf*, the way the actors play and the way the play itself is set up depended upon an interaction with the screen, the frame, the filmed image. In practice this meant the absorption of the actors into the visual concept; they became living elements within the picture. This places this theatre project in a transitional space between live drama and film.

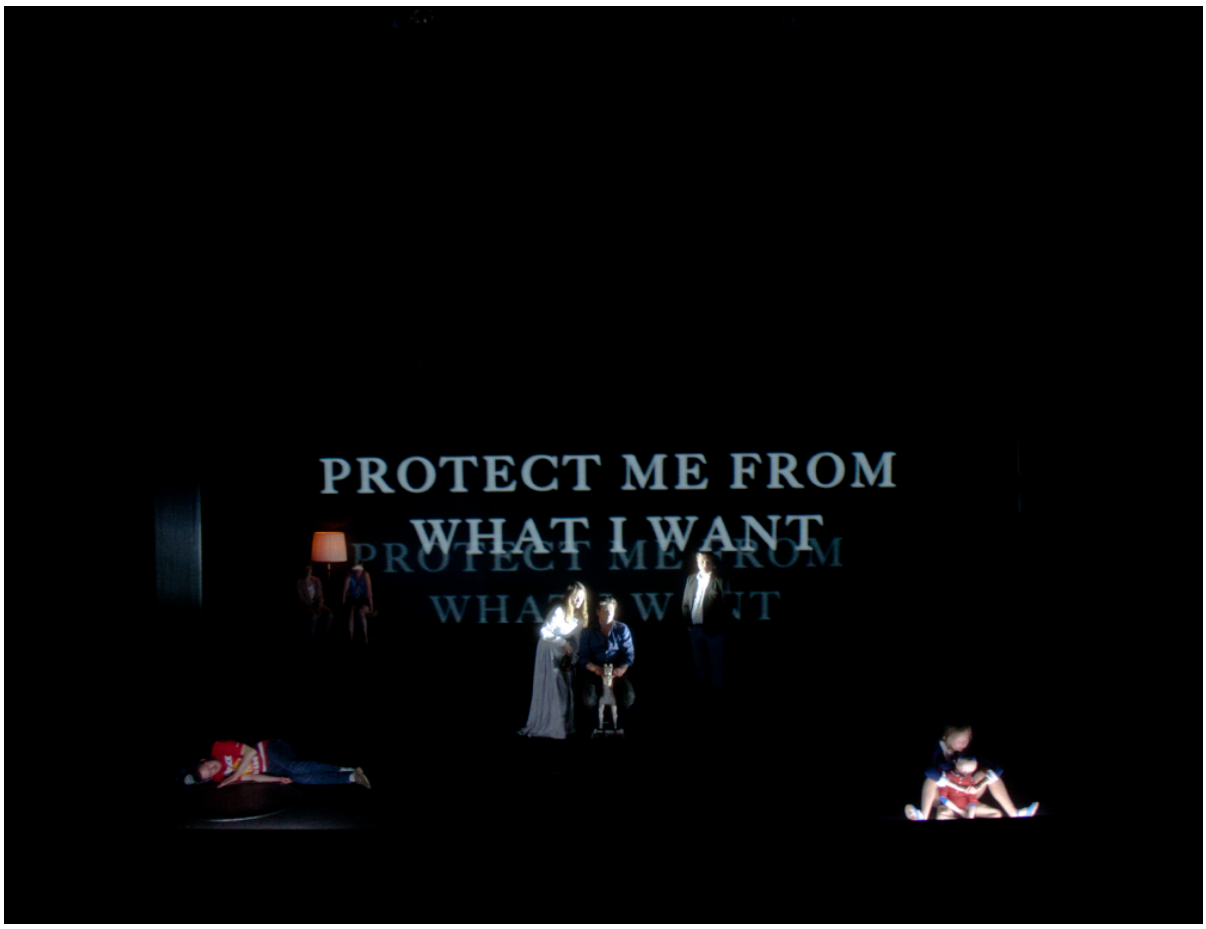
This was achieved in two ways, the fragmentation of the narrative and the withdrawal of the actors behind the screen. In adapting *Little Eyolf*, the director

Susanne Kennedy and the dramaturge Marit Grimstad Eggen took over Ibsen's traditional three-act structure and broke it up. From his text, they created within his structure a sequence of fifty-two short scenes, each of them with their own title. Their aim was to scratch off the surface of the play and remove anything anecdotal. Yet they retain fragments of the original text, and did not add any new text of their own, except in the titles. This staccato approach to the play answered something that was already characteristic of its structure. In the 1940s, Muriel Bradbrook noted of this play: 'The sentences are all short, so short that there is a feeling of disjointed ejaculation about everything that is said.'[18]

Secondly, placing the actors behind the gauze screen forced them into a kind of introversion. They were unable to make eye contact with the audience, and had to play at one remove. This suited the 'introverted' mood of the play and of Susanne Kennedy's revision of it. Only the pieces of text, which showed the darkest motives of the characters, remained. In this as in its brokenness, the adaption sought a form that would expose the subconscious or hidden self, with language as the driving energy. Into the play intrude obsessive repetition of sentences or words; language speaks the character. The result is a fragmented, polyphonic landscape of text, with no traditional dialogues, but voices from within juxtaposed with each other or merging together.

In order to find a convincing home for this internalized and introverted world, I wanted to create a space that isolates the actors. The actors played within solitude, both unable to see the audience (gazing out at the auditorium, they stare into light) and disconnected from each other. In this space the characters seem to be separated islands, every one with their own inner world. To enhance this loneliness, we chose a spare lighting, which was dreamy, disorientating and uncanny. The use of projections onto the back wall opened up the space, evoking a feeling of endlessness. At the same time they allow a view into the human body: moving X-Rays, flickering bacteria.

[18] M. C. Bradbrook, '*Little Eyolf*' from *Ibsen the Norwegian* (1948) excerpted in James McFarlane, *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Anthology* (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1970): (pp. 429-30).



3.4. Multiple perspectives

Each of the fifty-two scenes was preceded by the projection of its title onto the gauze that separated the actors from the audience. These titles played a dominant role in the adaption. When reading the script it seemed as if the titles were spoken by a voice outside of the play, the author or some other authority. The 'voice' of the titles is something between a narrator, a director, almost a character in the play in its own right, but also someone outside the play commenting on it. To translate this into the finished play, I decided to project the titles from behind the audience, onto the gauze, with a total blackout on the scene, so that nothing could be seen behind. With this tool, the projections drove the rhythm of the performance.

In thinking of this, I was influenced by some ideas of Eisenstein. In a discussion of film form in *Battleship Potemkin*, in which the townspeople send yawls to the

mutinous sailors, he writes:

> The composition is basically in two planes: depth and foreground. Alternately, the themes take a dominant position, advancing to the foreground, and thrusting each other by turns to the background. The composition is built (1) on a plastic interaction of both these planes (within the frame) and (2) on a shifting of line and form in each of these planes from frame to frame (by montage).[19]

Eisenstein describes a process by which form is found within the rhythm of the movement from foreground to depth. This can occur within one frame (here is reaching towards the use of 'deep focus' as in Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941)) and also within the relationship between shots in montage.

Similarly, I hoped to create planes of perception through the altering of perspective. At first we alternate in focussing on the screen in front of us and then on the space behind (itself multilayered in having a foreground for the family, a background in which the 'rat wife' lurks, and then a back screen on which a second layer of images are projected. This rhythmic alternation was later disrupted, as the titles began to permeate the room behind, or the actors seemed able to influence their stability (as when Allmers sways furiously on the rocking-horse, the titles jerked in time with his movements). A situation had been set up which seemed to present the absolute demarcation of perspectives; as the play progressed those boundaries weakened and were shown to be permeable and confused. In certain theatres where *Little Eyolf* played something else aided this sense of disruption, as the smoke within the framed box of the stage spread out through or around the gauze and passed out over the audience.

This effect, which wasn't planned and occurred accidentally, brings me back to the initial idea of the design for Little Eyolf: that is, fog as an amorphous element, which can't be designed or shaped. It is also an example of the qualities of live performance: in each location, on each day of the performance, it will be different.

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[19] Eisenstein, Sergei, *Film Form, Essays in Film Theory* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977): (p. 116.)

Conclusion

My last three designs played with the phenomenon of the screen. In each of the designs the screen plays a different role. But they all grew out of a fascination with the screen as the surface on which a story appears, be it through the projection of film, or by looking through it onto a stage and so into a strange and different world. Otherwise the screen can be seen as the separation between the reader and the story, like a filter that influences the way of seeing. It seems that it is central to my recent work as a theatre designer, to offer people a different way of looking at things, and perhaps in doing so to create an awareness of the space around them and of the fact that they are indeed cast in the role of viewers.

Discussing the work of colleagues while engaged on these last three designs has given me the chance to reflect upon my practice. Last summer, I came into contact with three other Dutch theatre designers who were invited with me to design the Dutch contribution to the Prague Quadrennial, a worldwide exposition for design and scenography. The work of one of the designers, Marloeke van der Vlugt, could be positioned on one extreme of the spectrum of live performances that use recorded media. Her recent production Duetten (Het Veem Theater Amsterdam, 2007) is an intimate performance installation about watching and being watched. 24 visitors and one performer played together an interactive mirror game. By shifting in their chairs, the audience was able to guide and influence the performers' movements. This was made possible by video and sensor techniques specifically created to match the needs of the production.

At the other end of the spectrum, I saw the video design of a former colleague of mine from Austria, Martin Eidenberger who now works together with an opera director. His video design for *Il Turco in Italia* by Gioachino Rossini (De Nederlandse Opera, Amsterdam, 2012) was part of a spectacular transformation of a nineteenth century

opera into a contemporary setting. At a crucial moment, the main character jumped out of a big billboard, which was set up on stage. With the help of video projection, the illusion of a painted billboard had been perfectly maintained until the main character on video started moving to the edge of the screen, and the singer jumped out from behind it.

For van der Vlugt, the screen is a contrivance that helps her to realise a theatre of pure interaction, one without narrative, and without a strong interest in the aesthetic impact of what happens on stage as an image. It is the event itself that intrigues her. While for Eidenberger, video is used as one of many devices that support the entertainment provided by a story. It is a theatre of illusion, one concerned with spectacle but nonetheless committed to a traditional perspective on the role of theatre and dramatic composition.

Although for different reasons I find both their work engaging, for me the appeal of using elements from film in the theatre derives neither from the pure interaction of audience and actors nor from the creation of a perfect illusion – though I hope elements of both these approaches are somewhere in my own work. However, for me it is the estranging impact of the screen that is most alluring, an estrangement that is visually striking and aesthetically engaging, but has also an intellectual and emotional resonance, the effect of which is to enable the audience to reflect upon the play, the space and their own relation to them. At the heart of that reflection is my own engagement with the text itself (in collaboration with the director), with the visual elements of the design in place in response to the meanings and complexities of the play.

What distinguishes the three last designs from my previous work is the extent to which my ideas affected the overall concept of the performance. The cinematic elements in the designs played a significant role in the dramaturgical approach. I was therefore more involved in creating a structure for the theatrical event, in discussions with the directors beforehand, as well as with actors during rehearsals. While earlier designs had merely provided an environment for a theatre play, in the last three projects I attempted to condition how an audience would see a play. Due to the work I have done at Piet Zwart, I've started to look at a theatre play with the eyes of a cinematographer.

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