

LENA MÜLLER – THESIS IN PROGRESS

THE NATURAL ROOM - A RESEARCH ON STAGING SCENERY

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

ABSTRACT

My thesis will take the shape of a project report. It concentrates on the set and video design for a theatre production of Henrik Ibsen's *Little Eyolf* (1894), (premiere on 3 May 2012 at Het Nationale Toneel in The Hague).

My research assesses how in live performance, digital video technology influences the perception of space. My starting point 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, and artificial fog, I established the impression of a scene set outside, yet paradoxically also on location within a human mind rather than inside a theatre.

My aim was to create 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 experience the tension between the scale of the human frame and the scale of the space around them.

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. As this particular theatre production aimed at bringing natural and universal powers on stage, I was especially interested to see how all crafts combine together to create one entity.

Like cinema, live performance takes place in an empty black space; my fascination with this fact forms the subject matter of my designs. Looking back on the other theatre designs I made during the Master Course at Piet Zwart Institute, I will show how my research into cinematic language influences my approach as a designer.

STRUCTURE

Introduction

this is a project report

Video and theatre: an interaction of principles of representation

difference between initial concept for the design and practical outcome in collaboration

looking back at previous practise: three last designs

research into cinematic language has influenced my designs

1. Outcome: design for a theatre performance

1.1 Opening scene: description

1.2 Little Eyolf: Content of the play

2. Intermedial approach

why this production asks for intermedial approach

adaption: structure of the play in 3 big parts and 52 short scenes

use of projections

2.1 Ibsen and Nature

Earth, water, air: elements stand for violent fate that the couple is confronted with

Religion, believe: Nietzsche (Zarathustra), contemporary of Ibsen

The world of desire: every character wants someone, something they cannot get (love, to create the perfect human being, to live further in their children)

The world of a child

2.2. Multiple perspectives

'Outside' versus 'Inside'

Foreground versus Background

2d versus 3d

Text-image

Constant change of perspective: suggestion of cinematic narrative through titles, two dimensional (projection of letters on a gauze)

Depth on an endless space with figures in it, levitating in dark space, dream world, ghostly world

Background. at the end of that space: moving images of inside the human body: cells, microscopic images, xrays: as if figures are placed in a silent movie

Gauze makes life performance seem artificial, as if projected

2.3 Multiplication and repetition

Eisenstein: syntax and rhythmical examination

3. Process of design

In representing landscape and 'nature' on stage, modern theatre practice, including my own, seeks to elude or deny the romanticised version of those things or thoughts – however, we cannot do so!

3.1 Representation of nature in a theatre space

Use of moving images: clouds, X-ray, cells under microscope

Images of clouds in order to suggest an outside space is received as 'romantic', kitsch

3.2 The Sublime

4. Previous practice

in my practice, the use of video in theatre has influenced my approach to theatre design. interaction of principles of representation

4.1 Birthday Party: Shutter, Blackouts, caught in a space, two dimensional effect

4.2 Country Without Words: Separation between audience and actors, diagonal position

Conclusion

Bibliography

1.2. 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 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 a 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. When they finally speak, their voices sound as if they were played by an ancient gramophone. This first scene marks the opening of a row of 52 short scenes, always introduced in a similar way by projected titles and blackouts.

1.2. Little Eyolf: content of the play

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.