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“Setting,”

All characters and dramatic action exist and occur within some particular time and place. In our daily lives we recognize the importance of the relationship between ourselves and our physical surroundings. People have favorite places where they can be quiet and relaxed or where they can talk loudly and laugh. Every weekend many people try to “get away from it all.” For most people that phrase seems to mean changing their physical surroundings to help foster changes in their mental attitudes and feelings. Thousands travel from one country to another, changing their surroundings, their attitudes and feelings, and their life styles. Those who can’t afford to travel may change their lives by altering the pictures, furniture, records, smells, and tastes they live with day by day.

The dramatist recognizes this important relationship between his or her characters and their place in time and physical surroundings. She has the freedom to set her play in any time and place that suits her purpose. The selections she does make are therefore significant, and a good playwright does not make such choices frivolously, because the period in which she sets her play carries with it all the attitudes, customs, and moral views of the times and must affect the play itself. If the setting is 1920, the characters cannot know about television or World War II. If it is Greece in 300 BCE, we can expect the characters to be well acquainted with gods and goddesses and to believe the earth is the center of the universe.

It is impossible, of course, to separate place from time. New York in 1925 is different from Paris in 1925; Harlem is different from Park Avenue; a factory is different from a bar; and the playwright selects the place of his play as carefully as he does the time. When he chooses a specific aspect of setting, he eliminates all the other possibilities, recognizing the ideas, attitudes, and values that go with that choice. As readers or viewers, we must be aware of his choices and attempt to determine their significance. To fully understand these characters, we need to be conscious of details such as historical period, geographical location, climate and any dominant or unusual physical characters of the locale.

The playwright calls our attention to these details by several means. The most obvious clue is her choice of physical objects to be placed on stage to emphasize certain aspects of the setting. Heavy, ornate furniture, animal cages, a large stove in the middle of the room, fishnets on the wall, a view of tall office buildings out the window—all such items may draw our attention to certain characteristics of the time and place of the play.

Certain aspects of setting may be emphasized verbally through dialogue. Characters talking to one another may casually convey several significant facts about the setting. They may discuss certain objects on the stage or make frequent references to features of the surrounding area, such as the colors of the landscape, or the sounds of the night. Such aspects of the setting have been carefully selected by the playwright; when he draws our attention to the details, he does so for a reason. If nothing is said about the weather or the time of day or year, those details are not important; but if such references are made, then we need to ask why.

Setting is also important in a play because of its effect on character. Just as our own settings, or surroundings reveal a good deal about us, the setting of a play helps to explain or emphasize certain aspects of a character’s motivation or personality. A character may be similar to the setting in which he lives, gaining a part of his identity from it. For example, a man may become old and gnarled, fixed and useless, like the dead trees that surround his house.

On the other hand, a character may be unlike her setting and in conflict with it. A young, vibrant woman living in her aunt’s dark, gloomy, Victorian house might have such a conflict; indeed, the focus of the whole play might be the struggle between the woman and her environment. If the setting changes within the play, this may cause or reflect changes within the characters. If the woman moves out of her aunt’s house to an apartment in the city, her character may change accordingly, forcing us to reevaluate her personality.

Sometimes physical surroundings may even take on the function of a character in the play. The sea that continues to pound the rocky coast after all the people in the play have died may be seen as such an enduring force that it becomes a character in its own right. An attic that contains a family’s stored and forgotten articles may become that family when contrasted with strangers or younger relatives.

All these examples illustrate the close relationship that exists between people and their surroundings. The playwright uses this relationship to help create certain desired effects. He usually simplifies the relationship by selecting certain details to emphasize and ignoring others—but he is writing a play, not creating real life. We the audience must pay attention to the details he has chosen and ask what effects he is trying to create with the setting in which he has placed his characters.

“Character”

Throughout our lives most of us continually meet, relate to, and part with other people. We have developed certain rituals for this complex process, such as ways of meeting and learning about each other—exchanging names and information about backgrounds, occupations, and interests. Often, getting to know someone means assessing how he or she relates to us, what we have in common, or how we differ. There are always certain people whom we come to know more intimately than others, usually through common interest or shared experiences. We may feel sympathy or sorrow, love or happiness with these people and, from the experience, learn not only about them but about ourselves. Rituals of separation are another important part of the process of relating to each other. In some cases, we are parting only until the next day or the next week. In others, we may be moving away from people we have been close to and may never see again. Probably the most difficult kind of separation to deal with is death; this, too becomes a part of our experience with others.

For most of us the primary focus of our lives is our relations with other people. It is therefore not surprising that when we read or see a play, our major interest in is the characters. We want to know who they are, what they aretrying to do, and the significance of their experiences. Whether in a theater or in everyday life, we enjoy observing people who don’t know we are watching. This curiosity, both in our daily lives and in witnessing drama, is sparked by the desire to learn not only about these specific people, but about humanity in general, and especially about ourselves.

Similarly, the playwright watches, but she does not simply report; she interprets. She creates situations, characters and actions on stage that may parallel those occurring in daily life. She selects details and forms them into a structure that will express to others what she has perceived. The primary focus of the play, like the main focus of our lives, is on the characters. As either reader or viewer, we learn about a character in several ways, one of which is physical appearance. As we are introduced to each character in a play, we form a general impression of his personality, social status, and perhaps even attitudes. The dramatist knows that, whether accurately or not, we tend to judge people by physical appearance. She uses this tendency to create immediate characterizations, especially of minor characters, through stereotyping. In costuming, for example, a character in a dark business suit, a half-size too small, which is frayed at the cuffs, creates quite a different impression from someone dressed in blue jeans, work shoes, and a grease-stained T-shirt. Even hand props associated with certain characters—a pocket watch, a fat cigar, or a walking stick—add to the characterization.

Detailed physical features of the characters are also carefully selected by the playwright. He decides whether a character is young or old, tall or short, dark haired or blonde, and may give him prominent features such as a scar, a large nose or a limp. Physical appearance, created through costuming, makeup, movement, and the like, is an essential tool used by the dramatist to convey specific information about each character. When the dramatist calls attention to convey specific details, he does so for a reason. On stage these details are created by the director and his staff—the costume designer, the makeup artist, even the actors themselves—all taking their cues from the stage directions and dialogue. When specific directions are not given, this production team must try to create physical images for the characters that seem appropriate to the text. The same clues and directions are available to us, the readers, as we create a character’s physical appearance in our own imaginations.

In addition to physical appearance, we can gain insight into characters through what they say. A person’s opinions on certain issues, her attitudes toward herself and other characters, her biases, and her interest all may be expressed in her speeches. Keep in mind, however, that characters in a play, just as people in real life, are not always honest, wise or accurate. A character’s prejudices or weaknesses—dislike for people or a certain ethnicity or religion, a fear of growing old, extreme jealousy, an inferiority complex—may distort her perception of those around her. A possessive wife who guards her husband jealously sees any woman who even smiles at him as a threat to her marriage. If we listen only to her, we will probably never have an accurate impression of the other characters.

Certain distortions of a character’s world view may result from his lack of knowledge about a subject. A successful general may be brilliant when discussing military tactics, but he may not demonstrate the same wisdom or insight when speaking about politics or educational reform. Besides these limitations, a character may choose to lie or tell only part of the truth, depending on the dramatic context, the topic of conversation, and the other characters present. The dramatist may sometimes have a character speak in *soliloquy*, expressing his thoughts aloud as he stands alone on stage; or when a character is part of the action in a scene, he may speak directly to the audience in an *aside*, commenting on the action of the other characters. In these instances, the audience knows the character is speaking the truth—he has no reason to lie; however, at other times we must evaluate each character’s statements according to what we know about him and his relationships with other characters.

Another source of information about a character is the dialogue of other characters. Keeping in mind that they might also be deceitful or ignorant or confused, we can nevertheless learn significant facts about a character’s background or personality from what others say about her. Frequently we will find that in a play, as in everyday life, people hold widely differing opinions of a specific character. To some a wealthy woman may seem proud and haughty, while others sense that she feels insecure and fears rejection. A politician may be considered by a group of teachers and students to be a progressive supporter of education because he spoke to their university of the need for more public grants. This same politician, in the opinion of conservative voters, may be seen as their champion in the battle against costly, new-fangled educational “frills” because he expressed such views in talking with them. In using such varied opinions to gain insight into a character, we should consider who is speaking, how reliable he is, and in what context his statements are made.

Probably the most reliable means for learning about a character is observing his actions. A character may say he will do many things, or others may predict his actions, but when we actually see what he does, we can then compare his actions with his words and better evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of his personality. As either viewers or readers, we are in the unique position of being able to observe a character in many situations with numerous other people and thereby better judge him. We can observe the inconsistencies in his behavior or see him change his personality during the course of the play. The more sensitive we become, the more accurate our judgements.

“Structure”

We all have conflicts of various kinds in our lives. Some are minor; we plan to play golf, but it is raining; we want to study for a test, but everyone is going to a bar and this is the last night a favorite band is playing. Other conflicts are major: he loves her, but she doesn’t want to be tied down to one person; he wants to learn a trade, but his parents insist that he go to college.

Conflict is the basis of drama. If characters are the major focus of attention in a play, their actions, as we have learned, are the best way we come to know them. The playwright puts his characters into a situation, gives them motives, supplies their goals, sets them in conflict, allows them to act and conflicts to develop, and eventually resolves the conflicts in some way. The accumulations and combination of all these actions make up the plot of the play.

Plot shows us what characters do and what happens to them as a result of their actions. In well-written drama, the events that occur are believable, given their dramatic context, and they exist in a causal relationship to each other. Each event proceeds logically and necessarily from those which precede it. The driving mechanism of the plot, the force that propels it is conflict.

The playwright begins by placing her characters in a particular situation. Since all plays begin in the middle of action, the playwright usually supplies background information, or *exposition,* that will help us understand who the characters are and what they are trying to do. All the necessary background may be provided early in the play, or we may come to know more and more about it as the play develops (*retrospection*). We will never know everything that has happened before the play begins. The playwright could never tell us everything that has influenced even one character, nor does she need to. She selects only those details that are important to our understanding of her play; therefore, the details that she does include about background are significant.

Through exposition, we also learn what a character is trying to achieve and the reasons for his actions—in other words, his goals and motives. The action of the plot really begins with these.

Each character in the play tries to achieve something; each has a goal. For minor characters such as servants or messengers, the goals may be trivial within the framework of the play. For major characters, the goals are likely to be more complex and more significant. Motivations for goals usually become apparent early in the play. They may be influenced by events that have occurred before the play begins, or they may arise out of the action of the play itself. The range of possible motives or combinations of motives that may appear in a play is almost infinite. Motives may be defined abstractly, such as greed or power or desire for freedom, or they may be identified more concretely: a desire to climb a mountain in order to win a prize, or to desert the army to avoid regimentation or confinement. As these motives become defined in dialogue and action, the plot develops through movement of the characters towards their goals.

As the play progresses, the motives of different characters may come into conflict. For example, a wife may wish to establish strong professional relationships with other men, but her husband’s need for security prevents her. Or, two men are driven to become CEO of their firm and may try to destroy each other to succeed.

A character’s motives may also conflict with his environment. A farmer might be forced to sell his farm and take a factory job in the city. But the noisy monotony of his work and the city’s pace may conflict with his desire for a quiet life, close to nature and the land. Several motives within a character may conflict with each other. Someone finds a wallet containing $1000.00. Although it contains the owner’s name and contact information, the character may experience a conflict between greed and honesty before a resolution can occur.

All such conflicts or combinations of them may be present within a single play or a single character. As is true in most human experience, conflicts in drama are often complex and difficult to resolve. They spring from various causes that are hard to explain and may produce actions that seem erratic or unusual to someone who doesn’t understand their origins. But, as in life, all action is motivated by something, thought we may not always be sure of or agree on the causes. The result is much more rewarding if we try to understand rather than simply dismissing something or someone as “weird” or different from ourselves. Often when we try to understand a character’s motivations, we may discover something about our own.

As a play progresses and we have more contact with characters, their motives may become clearer. We may see them in various situations that make their purpose more apparent. For example, early in a play, a character may seem to be a helpful advisor, someone to whom other characters turn to for advice and help. But, later in the play, the character may use these confidences for his own gain. We can then understand his motives for appearing so compassionate and helpful earlier.

However, a character may change her motives during a play, or her motives may become less clear or more complex. Because of events that occur, she may expand, diminish, or completely alter her goals. For instance, a character may initially submerge herself in her job, trying to get ahead and achieve wealth and power. However, her involvement with work takes her away from her family, which begins to disintegrate. She is faced with the classic conflict of career vs. family. She may decide to deemphasize her career and devote time to preserving her family. As a result, her primary motivation will have shifted, and we will have gained a deeper insight into her character.

This example points up an essential aspect of the relationship of character and conflict. As conflicts arise, the character is faced with a choice or a series of choices. He must decide what to do: fight, remain passive, choose one thing or another. His choices might establish a pattern: a character might consistently select alternatives that progressively alienate him from his family, his associates, his society, or his world. His selections might reveal a shift in values, motives and goals. Each choice a character makes when confronted with a conflict is significant and provides further insight into that character.

Our interest in the plot is usually center on a certain major character or group of characters. A playwright may choose to focus attention on one or several major conflicts in one play.

The conflict faced by one character may be parallel to that of another, yet the two may act in opposite ways. Two students who intensely dislike their respective roommates are given an opportunity to change at the semester. One does so because she has become seriously depressed living in that room, and her studies are suffering. The other declines, realizing that her roommate is troubled and needs someone to rely upon and talk to; thus, she sacrifices her own well-being for the possible good of another. One character’s actions often serve as a comment onother characters’ actions. Groups of character, scenes, and even entire plots may be parallel so that one group, scene, or plot may inform us about another in the play.

Often the very arrangement of scenes within a play gives us insight into its meaning. The playwright selects the entire sequence of scenes with specific effects in mind. One might immediately follow, commenting on the prior action. A typical, contented suburban family entertaining their friends at a backyard barbeque may be placed next to a scene of a widow with three emaciated children, trying to convince authorities that she is entitled to food stamps. Serious and light scenes might alternate so that the serious scene is undercut or made ridiculous by the lighter one; following a scene in which a general talks to his staff about the glory and honor of a military career, we see a group of enlisted men drunkenly dancing in the fountain in the middle of Balboa Park. One scene might foreshadow actions that will occur later, or scenes might move progressively from humorous to serious. Scenes following one another in a logical, causal pattern could reflect an ordered view of the world. Or scenes superficially unrelated to the others may seem to be haphazardly inserted, suggesting that the world is chaotic and arbitrary. There are many possible patterns; as you read or see drama take notice of the playwright’s design of these structural elements.

Ultimately, however, we are interested in how characters try to resolve their conflicts and in what happens to them in the process. This process usually results in a resolution of the conflicts presented. The play moves from exposition through conflict to resolution.

Exposition Arrow: Slight curve Conflicts Arrow: Slight curve Resolutions

A character may achieve her goal or fail. She may achieve her goal but lose something significant or become changed in so doing. He may begin as a sympathetic character who is seeking something beneficial to himself and those around him. By the end of the play, he may have achieved the desired goal, but what he has experienced has so altered him that we no longer feel sympathy for him or identify with him. A man may work through his labor union to improve working conditions and wages for his fellow workers, but in the process, he may become so obsessed with power and control that these become the ends toward which he works. Even thought he may have accomplished his original goals, the audience, seeing his grasp of power, may well lose sympathy for him.

Generally, at the end of a play, the audience feels a sense of completion or finality to the action. Something has been decided. If the major conflicts are not resolved, there is at least the realization that they are eternal conflicts that will never be settled. A major character dies at the end of a play, still raging at the social forces that have oppressed her. Although her death is a kind of resolution for her, we understand that people will always conflict with society.

From the resolution of the conflict, an audience generally derives some sort of meaning from the play, if such meaning exists. The meaning is not a moral or a one-line statement about what the playwright meant or what his message was. Such a statement oversimplifies the artistic creation. If a play conveys its meaning as economically and as succinctly as the playwright felt possible, it would be presumptuous to try and reduce his work to one or two statements. It may be possible to isolate one particular subject or theme with a play—such as love, revenge or identity—but neither the theme nor the subject is the meaning of the play. The meaning is the experience of the play itself. We meet characters, see their conflicts, watch them interact, and observe what happens to them. That is the structure, or plot of the play, and out of plot comes the revelation of human experience. In the truth of that human experience, as it relates to each of us, lies meaning.

“Language”

“Language”

Drama and its language are not exactly like life. Our everyday language does not create a unified effect. We walk around campus, for example, listening to snatches of a wide range of conversations, hearing people repeat, hesitate, rephrase, and ramble. The dramatist, however, is highly selective in the language his characters use. Well-written dialogue is under tension—it allows the audience not only to interpret literal meaning, but to penetrate more deeply into the character or the dramatic situation. Each word or phrase is chosen to help us see character, plot, or meaning more clearly. If we concentrate on the words and their patterns as we read or hear them, we will come to a fuller understanding of the play.

A character’s language reflects her perception of the world and what she does to bring order to that world, thus revealing much about her as a unique human being. The playwright often establishes language patterns for his characters that give us significant information beyond the meaning of the words themselves.

A character who is blunt and straightforward may be a practical, no-nonsense kind of person. If her speech is full of cutting remarks and cruel jibes, she may be an insecure individual who must attack others to make herself seem stronger.

Repetition of certain words or images may form another pattern in which the dramatist reveals significant information about his characters. A materialistic character may phrase everything in terms of money and business; a morbid character may make frequent allusions to sickness and death; a character’s references to specific objects or places—such as a wedding ring, a picture, a garden, or her childhood home may form significant patterns. Once character may consistently use images referring to light, while another stresses dark images, or such references may change from dark to light during the play. All such language patterns are chosen carefully and deliberately to paint the preoccupations, desires, fears, biases, and attitudes of the characters who use them.

The misuse of words may also be a clue to character development (as well as providing entertainment.) Those who want to belong to some exclusive group may try to gain acceptance through using the slang of that group. Often such people seem only foolish because they don’t know the subtleties of the language and therefore misuse it. Pretentious characters who want to appear intelligent may try to use long, complicated words to impress their listeners. Frequently, they use the wrong word in the right place, saying, for example, “I want to live forever, to be immoral!” This kind of error is known as a *malapropism.* Sometimes a character chooses a mild sounding word, known as a *euphemism*, instead of one which might seem too harsh or direct, saying, for example, “He has gone to his great reward” rather than “He died.”

The playwright may also use language to show how characters relate to each other. A character may speak in short, precise sentences to one person and in long, complicated utterances to another. He may be very logical and rational in one conversation and appear disorganized and confused when certain other characters are present. A major character may speak in verse throughout most of the play but use prose when conversing with specific people. Language may be used in this way to distinguish among social classes, levels of imagination, attitudes, or mental states within a play. The reader or viewer must decide why the character has varied his speech patterns and what this variation tells us about him, and the other characters involved.

The tone in which a line is spoken may also provide insight into character and plot. The playwright often provides stage directions suggesting how a line should be said. In other instances, the director and the actors involved must determine the tone through context. When reading plays, we must decide for ourselves how the character would speak each line. For example, a spoiled petulant child, accused of stealing a dollar from his mother’s purse, responds, “No, I didn’t, no, I didn’t. You are always blaming things on me.” We can almost hear the whining, strident tone.

The dramatist may choose to give her characters unusual speech patterns—a lisp, stutter, a mumbling way of speaking—to evoke certain responses form the audience. Such impediments might be limited to certain kinds of situations, showing us how the character responds to stress or to other characters. For example, a man may speak normally when conversing with his family or friends but develop a stutter when responding to his domineering boss.

In drama, as in daily life, it is also important to note what a person does not say. Deliberate omissions are sometimes as revealing as any statement the individual might make. For example, a woman’s former supervisor is asked to recommend her for another position. The supervisor has little to say about his employee but speaks warmly of the woman’s family and emphasizes how much she needs the job. We learn as much from the supervisor’s omission as from his statements.

Dramatic pauses, broken dialogue, and silence may also be used to communicate meanings not as easily or effectively conveyed through dialogue alone. The playwright may indicate such breaks, or the dramatic situation may dictate it. For example, when a son, returning home from a war, sees his parents for the first time, they may silently stare at each other, but there is nonetheless real communication. Or imagine a detective story in which a woman has apparently committed suicide while her husband was in the house. The detective who comes to investigate bends over the body and, after a few moments, looks at the husband and asks: “What do you think caused your wife to commit, uh, “suicide”?” Immediately we are aware of the detective’s suspicions and to whom they are directed. The plot has been advanced, and clues have been provided about both the husband and the detective.

These language characteristics—accent, word choice, repeated images, speech patterns, poetry versus prose, tone, pauses, omissions—all combine to convey information about the characters and about the significance of the play itself. A good playwright is not wasteful. She has a limited amount of time and space and must make good use of every word or phrase she includes. Characters do not swear accidentally; they do not pause or stammer by chance. Rather, they are trying to tell us something about themselves. If we are to appreciate the art of the playwright and understand her play fully, we must listen to what her characters say and how they say it.

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“Staging”

For the purpose of our study, we have treated the basic elements of drama as isolated subjects, devoting one essay to each. But such distinctions are artificial—all these elements overlap and fuse into the play as a whole. As is evident in the essays, we cannot discuss character without touching on setting or language or talk about plot without referring to character or setting. After dealing with the parts, we must reassemble the play and perceive it if we are to appreciate what the playwright has done and to feel the power of his creations. Perhaps through examining staging we can discuss the whole play more meaningfully.

For a play to be staged successfully, it must first be well-written. The dramatist needs to have a sound working knowledge of theatre if he is to create a play that can be performed well on stage. He must be aware of the unique limitations of drama—time, space, physical requirements—as contrasted with those of other literary forms.

When a director prepares a play for production, she approaches it somewhat as you do in careful reading. She gets to know the characters, noting how they live and what their world is like. She listens to their language, observes their situations and the ironies of their actions and statements, analyzes the conflicts, and watches their development and eventual resolution.

But she cannot simply develop her personal interpretation of the play and stop there. She must create an entire production that will express her interpretation to an audience. She must *stage* the play. Whatever the director’s interpretation may be, however, she is bound by the text, and we as the audience have the right to ask what basis exists in the text for any aspect of the production. In accomplishing this goal, the director relies to a great extent on the talents of numerous other creative people, including actors, scene designers, sound and lighting artists, choreographers, voice and movement coaches, costume designers, makeup and prop artists, and stage managers in addition to a variety of technicians, carpenters, electricians, stage hands and business managers. She relies upon them to work out the details. Whatever the approach, the goal is a unified, consistent production that is true to the text of the play.

One of the key artists with whom the director works is the scene designer. Together they must create a physical set that conveys and enhances the director’s interpretation of the play. An audience usually receives its first impression of a play when it sees the set. This first impression is important in setting the mood and tone for the entire production. A stark, somber set helps create a heavy, somber mood even before any action occurs on stage. A bare stage with few stage properties forces the audience to focus on the actions and dialogue of the characters themselves. However, a busy, cluttered set may stress a particular mood or tone that communicates something about the world in which the characters live. The director and designer must make numerous other decisions such as what materials are used to build the set, whether any set changes will be done behind a closed curtain or in full view of the audience, and so forth. Whatever the style of production, such decisions must be made deliberately and for specific reasons.

Working closely with the director and scene designer is the lighting designer, whose design enhances the set and adds to the whole production. Lighting helps create mood; it emphasizes certain objects, actors or stage areas; it enhances makeup and costumes; it helps establish time of day, weather conditions, and climate. Lighting can heighten whatever effects the other elements are designed to achieve. A set depicting a dingy, shabby shack can look even dingier and shabbier through lighting. A scene set in a hot, arid desert will seem even hotter and more parched when lighting is used effectively.

In designing lighting, just as in planning the other elements, the director and designer must work from the text of the play. Often a playwright provides details in the script that indicate the desired lighting effect for a specific scene. But the lighting design must go beyond the literal requirements of the script and contribute artistically to the meaning of the whole play.

Two other important visual elements of production are costuming and makeup. Costuming especially helps create the illusion of a period or locale. Color, style, fabric, texture, ornamentation, jewelry, and accessories—all these must be carefully considered in creating costumes. Each costume should reinforce the interpretation of the character who wears it. If the leading female character wears a gown of faded blue silk, accented with a pearl necklace, these details were selected for a specific purpose. Makeup completes the visual image of each character. It can help establish age, health, social class, and period as well as suggesting more subtle aspects of personality.

Sound effects, like the visual elements, may be used to establish specific details given in the script as well as contributing to mood and emphasis. If the script calls for a gunshot, an automobile horn, the braying of a mule, or the sound of thunder, the director and sound technician must decide how these effects will be produced and what they should sound like, But, like lighting, sound effects design must go beyond such literal requirements to help interpret each scene. Music can be an important sound effect for conveying mood and emphasis and may even occupy a major position in the production.

An essential element in any production, large or small, is the acting. One of the director’s important tasks in staging a play is casting each role carefully. He must consider each actor’s physical features, voice quality, acting ability, and stage presence in deciding his or her suitability for a given role. In addition, the director must select actors who will work well together in creating the overall effect. Sometimes a definite contrast may be desired in the appearance and bearing of two characters. Such a requirement must influence the director’s choice in casting these roles Many other similar considerations must be kept in mind through the casting process. The goal is to select a cast which will, collectively and individually, express the director’s interpretation of the play convincingly to an audience.

The movement and positioning of the actors on stage, known as the *blocking,* can be an effective interpretative tool. The relative placement of the characters, their individual body positions, their relation to specific objects on stage, and the acting area that each occupies are all important factors in blocking the play. If a certain object signifies power, for example, the director may position her characters around it to show dominance or struggle for power. Since certain acting areas and body positions have greater visual strength than others, the director moves and places each actor carefully to achieve the desired balance and emphasis.

The overall effect of blocking must be considered. The arrangements and movements should not become monotonous and repetitive unless such an effect is desired for some reason. Body positions and acting areas must be varied. Too much or too little movement can destroy or weaken the effects a director is trying to achieve with other elements of staging.

Probably one of the most important functions of blocking is to show the interrelationships of the characters from scene to scene. A simple example is illustrated below. Two conflicting groups have aligned themselves on opposite sides of the stage (Fig. 1). Character Z finds himself caught between the two groups (Fig. 2). He demonstrates visually the resolution of his conflict by joining the opposite group (Fig. 3).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **A B C**  **X Y Z** | **A B C**  **Z X Y** | **A B C Z**  **X Y** |

Fig. 1 Fig. 2 Fig.3

Even more subtle and complex relationships may be expressed in part through blocking. When seeing a play, we will understand and enjoy it more fully if we observe such details and ask ourselves what the director is trying to achieve in each scene through blocking.

All the other elements of staging would, of course, be pointless without the receiver of these efforts—the audience. A good director recognizes and utilizes the double vision that audiences have in the theater. On the one hand, the audience becomes emotionally involved in what is happening on stage. They laugh when a character falls on a banana peel; they feel sad and cry when a tragic hero dies; they sympathize with the child whose parents don’t love him. Often, they may see themselves in a character, identifying his feelings and actions with their own.

At the same time, however, the audience realizes intellectually that they are in a theater watching a performance. They are aware of whetherthe seats are comfortable; they hear people around them coughing, whispering, shifting in their seats, or dropping their programs. But more important, good audience members are aware of the technical details of the production. They are conscious of the lights emphasizing some object or person; they appreciate the skill of a particular actor; they evaluate the costumes, the set, the blocking—all these judgments occur even while the audience is emotionally involved in the play. A good production and a knowledgeable audience maintain a balance between these facets of the double vision.

Sometimes a playwright may consciously use this double vision. He may try to create the feeling that the audience is looking a window or wall, watching people live their lives. Or he may consciously disrupt the deep emotional involvement in the production by having the actors mingle with the audience, talking about the make-believe nature of theater, and thus stressing the intellectual aspects of the play.

In certain respects, the theater is artificial—its participants pretend to be someone else, wear costumes and act out roles. However, it is only a more structured form of what we do in our own lives. We all, in a sense, play roles in our day-to-day living. Whether a play is realistic or nonrealistic—that is, whether it attempts to make us believe to some extent that the characters and setting are real or whether it calls attention to the fact that these are actors performing in a theater for us, we do distinguish between the world of the play and the world of our own lives. A good production makes us see how these two worlds are closely related, that one can tell us something about the other, and that we can learn about ourselves and our world through observing the characters and sharing their feelings. The play is the thing wherein we may meet ourselves.