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Creativity, Scenographers and the Director – Facilitator or Smotherer? - A Case Study from a Regional Rep Theatre

Abstract

In theatre we make little attempt to define or study creativity, yet we often demand it of our students. It is hard to define but we owe them a duty to clarify what we mean. My studies examine creativity as a phenomenon embedded in a particular culture - in theatre, the culture of the 'company' and the interrelationships within it. This paper looks at what the (somewhat scant) literature perceives the director/scenographer relationship to be and then focuses in on one production at the Oldham Coliseum, using ethnographic techniques: observations of design meetings; interviews with the scenographers and director; and the production itself. Its conclusions reinforce the importance of the director–scenographer relationship as a major factor in the manifestation of scenographic creativity but find that in a 'traditional' rep there can be a real relationship of differently-skilled equals, and asks is this better for all? And if so, how can we train our scenography (and directing) students to develop that relationship?

The need for research into scenographic creativity

Creativity is obviously a social construct, but now a pervasive one – check your programme specs and assessment criteria! Each 'domain' will have its own concepts of creativity. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). But in the performing arts there is little discussion of it, it is almost taken as a 'given'. I think we have a duty to study the creative processes of the industry as closely as we can, so we can at help our students express their creativity and become fit for the industry they hope to enter.

Problems of studying Creativity

Can the literature of creativity research help us towards a definition? There is general agreement that it must involve innovation, and perhaps that the innovation must fulfill a purpose, but beyond that the researcher can easily get lost in a plethora of competing definitions.

Csikszentmihalyi insists on something that is "domain-changing", only possible for someone who is approaching the top of their field (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) (Gardiner draws from this his "ten

year rule”(Gardner, 1994)), with ‘creativity’ judged by the ‘gatekeepers of the field. Yet this obviously presents us with problems of exclusivity. Richards goes to other extreme, postulating an ‘everyday’ creativity, with small acts of personal innovation being of use in personal development (Richards, 2010). Others have sought to broaden our concepts, with Kaufman and Beghetto postulating a Pro-c, where “[a]nyone who attains professional level expertise in any creative area is likely to have attained Pro-c status” (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009). The *All Our Futures* report, chaired by Ken Robinson in 1999 (the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, 1999 provides a good introduction) suggest levels of creativity – helpful in assessing students! Preferring simplicity I will use the concept of innovative designs which fit their purpose.

There are various ways to approach the study of creativity, all of which have developed a large literature, particularly the 4 Ps: the **product** (see Cropley & Cropley, 2010), the finished design in use; the **person**, their background, education, experience and whether we attribute their success to innate talent – does creativity need a genius?; psychologists consider the mental **process** important, but a focus on this means a neglect of a wider concept of process, that which identifies creativity as happening in and being influenced by a wider social context; I find the use of **place** more useful, and, in particular, the acknowledgment that all acts of creativity are culturally sited, as expressed in the concepts of cultural creativity (see Glaveanu, 2010). Every theatre company, even every separate production, possesses its own ‘culture’ and I find it perfectly appropriate to think of each as a socio-cultural community and therefore the correct forum in which to study the creative processes of the community’s members – including the scenographers and, in particular, their relationship with their directors.

Scenographic Creativity and the Director

The Director has been central to the production of British and American theatre since the mid twentieth century, and in European theatre from much before that. The Oxford Companion to the Theatre (1972) puts it unequivocally: “Director, the person responsible for the artistic interpretation of a play ... has, in the present century achieved a predominant position in the theatre” (Hartnoll, 1972, p. 178).

Yet many would hold that this situation has changed, that the director whose wishes and demands dominate every aspect of a production is no longer the norm. Christine White, in her introduction

to the essay collection *Directors and Designers*, says “the developing technologies and the changing of the theatre spaces has meant that we now more legitimately speak of a scenographic team rather than the single director-auteur”, that “[i]t is clear that the scenographic team combine their skills and understanding of their specialisms to produce a piece of performance, the value of which is not more or less enhanced by one or other artist’s signature on the production ...”(White, 2009, Introduction).

Do we accept this? There is no doubt that the production team is usually a combination of different skill sets, with not many directors being able to carry out the minutiae of design. But the view that the final decisions (and often the initial inspiration) come from the Director is widespread. Erven tells us of a director who “understands his relationship with the designer to be one of initial inspiration, continuous critical evaluation and final approval” and that “ultimately, directors evaluate and guide these elements into a unit” (White, 2009, Chapter 2).

So how much does the scenographic creativity in a production stem from the Director and how much from the team of designers?

Theatre is, in all ways, a group activity. Alison Heffernan, the designer of the production I observed, holds this view maintaining theatre is a

... group environment.. Each individual strand would be creative in their own way.

When those sparks hit together it leads to something better, more realised, fuller ...

[and that the group] because it's responding to an environment, a venue or a location

and a script or an idea and you go on a trip together ... the individuals...and the venue

and the script would create a happening that would only have occurred under those

circumstances ... that community ... they help me to spark ...; in theatre the confluence

of all the minds in the room will create something uniquely of that moment.

Kevin as Artistic Director of the Coliseum is honest that the final choice remains his but feels he fits this model, saying

Obviously, as director, I will be a final arbiter in that collaboration. But if I've got creative people engaged in a project, I want to use those brains 'cause I think somebody will have thought of a better idea than me so I'll use it.

I was granted access to the design processes of an adaptation of Dickens' *David Copperfield* at the Oldham Coliseum, sat in on meetings and interviewed Director and Designers. It certainly leads me to the conclusion that they at least certainly did not just pay this idea lip service.

The Production

To maintain flow, the production team necessarily decided on a multi-setting design that allows the move from place to place without pause, aided by imaginative use of props of various sizes, changes in lighting and atmospheric sound effects. The overall framing set a 'non-representational' tone for the audience – neutral but not bland. The setting's road presented a 'journey' theme which was carried into the main piece of prop stage machinery, a carrier's cart with a collection of period luggage of various sizes, with more luggage piles dotted round the stage. The cart and the luggage, together with shifts in stage location, became the main mechanism for changing scene. The identification of these changes in locale was aided by the addition of suitably identifying prop motifs and lighting, which also enhanced the mood of the production. But, in emphasising emotional tones, it was the sound which stood out, mixing atmospheric sounds of, for instance, seashore with period and appropriate modern music (eg Yy Yo Ma's cello).

All in all, the production was a satisfyingly effective and clear scenographic response to the piece's problems, with a clear aesthetic. Though the production could not be thought of as 'mould-breaking' (or 'domain-changing' to draw on the vocabulary of creativity research), what was put on stage had never been seen before; it was not stock scenery, or a slightly revamped design. All the design decisions had been deliberated on long and hard.

The Design Process – collaboration in practice

Let's start with the discussions between Alison Heffernan, the Set and Costume Designer, and Kevin Shaw, the Director. Alison is a freelance, not a Coliseum employee. One must never forget the hierarchical factors in any relationship. At depth there is always the concept that Kevin is employing Alison, that he has chosen her this time and does not have to do so in future. But Alison was one of his "old trusted lieutenants"; and, as Kevin said in his programme notes, "a real expert at this sort of production." Alison and Kevin work easily together, exchanging jokes and listening intently to each other. In particular, the first design meeting spoke of a working method which was an exchange between equals. There were constant discussions, a constant exchange of

ideas. Before the meeting, through phone and email, consultations had allowed some basic decisions to be arrived at so Alison started by presenting a white card model, which formed the basis of early discussion.

Kevin notes the engraving scenes on the backcloth and the very definitely non-real trees and approves: "I like it being non-representational" to which Alison agrees, perhaps silently rather glad that the major tone of her design has not caused a problem. Kevin queries the piles of luggage and asks if they have moved away from the idea of Victorian objects placed about. Alison says she now does not want "real Victorian objects in a surreal room," and Kevin agrees: "It doesn't work with the trees does it."

Perhaps the give and take of this discussion can best be illustrated by a section of the meeting discussing the cart and its use, transformed with luggage, as the basis for various locations:

Kevin (very tentatively): At any point did you find yourself thinking the bed, were we too early to reject the bed?

Alison: No – the only thing I'm not sure about visually is the boat and I don't think the bed would have been any better. I think the cart suits our production much better than a bed.

Kevin: OK. Good. Umm, I think so too - and I'll tell you why I was thinking that ... we're rejecting a bed in order to dress a cart as a bed.

Alison: [At various points in this speech Kevin murmurs 'yes', rather not disagreeing than agreeing]

It's also I haven't drawn many of the options because many of those would be bits of luggage on the cart to make it into the things we'd like it to be which I think suits the schoolroom desk and Uriah's desk and those are times you might want to use it and I think the unit based luggage you could pile up into different configurations, which sits a lot more naturally ... and it gives us a language of luggage for the rest of the scenes as well because the opening tableau sets us up with the units we're going to use.

Kevin: (more firmly) OK. So the boat ...

[They then enter into a long discussion about how they are going to represent a boat on stage, the mechanics of how they are going to transform the cart, playing with the model, Kevin suggesting possibly an anchor, or flags etc.] Then:

Kevin: But it's, it's again, what we're kind of fighting with is how representational we want to be...

Alison: (agreeing) Mm ...

[When they fail to arrive at any definitive answer which pleases them both, Kevin, after a rather long silence, suggest, rather than get stuck they go back to Alison's original suggestion of going through the rest of the scenes.]

After agreeing their opening tableau of "cart as a cart", quite quickly they come to "Do we use 'cart' as interior of boat/house?" or do we lose it in distance. Alison pushes for the former: "interior of boat is first time we use luggage and we can do it in view of audience." Kevin quickly agrees "Yes we should do it in view of audience" and then realises they've come to a decision without realising it (or perhaps that he has been quietly maneuvered into one!) and all their agonised previous discussions have been "wasting time."

And so the basic aesthetic and its 'methodology' (most scenes built with luggage and often the cart) were decided. The discussion continued on a scene-by-scene basis, deciding to use 'narration points' while scene changes were done behind them in full audience view. Within ten minutes Kevin was wanting to make sure everything followed their basic premise, he wanted to show audience everything, especially earlier on. The mechanics of the changes are being driven by this 'premise'.

It was a true collaboration and was echoed in Kevin's relationship with Lorna Munden, Sound Designer and Jane Barrek, Lighting Designer, both Coliseum full-time employees.

Both felt they had a lot of freedom to experiment, even in the Technical rehearsal. Lorna describes part of the process:

I'd had an idea of wanting to underscore quite heavily the whole show and he talked about sound effects. [He said] "Well bring it. We'll have a go" so we started doing it ... in the few parts where I'd wanted it and we ended up with Kevin wanting even more. But I had brought down all the original tracks I'd suggested to Kevin so we ended up adding more bits that we weren't really expecting ...

Jayne had missed the white card meeting so had briefly chatted to Kevin about technical matters (eg a smoking chimney on the boat) but the Production Meeting was her first opportunity for "a quick chat about the feel of it", yet I heard no real detail mentioned then; Kevin said things like "No blackouts ever ... apart from interval and at the end..." and that the show "should just flow ... like what we were trying to do with Macbeth." There were obviously discussions with both

Director and Set/Costume Designer after that. But she still knew she was going to be able to experiment in the technical rehearsals; about the first lighting session she said "I would say it is the base states ... which I know I can work over."

But not all relationships are collaborative!

However, this collaborative freedom was not always in evidence. The Coliseum employs outside Directors. Lorna recounted relationships less productive for her as a designer:

He's picked his music, he knows what he wants his sound FX to sound like ... You're just aware that when he walks in the room he's already made his mind up; he knows what the show looks like and sounds like and so you're just creating his picture that he already has ... He's happy to try a few bits but the main body of the design is already set.

And another director

He's heard it all in his head ... "What I want to hear is this soundscape" and I go away and make it ... he's already heard it before you've made it ...

and summing it up

Sometimes if it's something ... like a show where I haven't been all that involved it doesn't really feel like I've achieved something in the same way as a show where I can really get into it and come up with a concept and change the whole show with what I'm doing.

This was echoed by Jayne who, when asked if there were ever shows which she was not really enthusiastic about:

Constantly. [She describes a director who was] hands on; he wanted to do the lighting as well [and how after a few scenes] that has ceased to be my lighting design ... That has become accommodating somebody else's.

Alison perhaps sums it up:

sometimes you get excited by it; [sometimes it's] more mundane or less is called for ... or it might be a job you feel you've done before ... it's the way I earn my living and will do any job that I'm asked to do, I'm excited about some of them to different degrees than others ... I know the ones that I feel I've done a good job on for me as well as for the result of the show and they might be shows that have stretched me ... or into areas ... And I know I've done a good job on it because I found it satisfying and stimulating and it made me be more creative because of that...

And so...

The Director / scenographer relationship is obviously one of the key factors in the creative content of a production – and scenographers, certainly, and, I suspect, the production benefit from a more collaborative approach. How can we help our scenography - and directing – students learn this?

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