

Aesthetic and Utilitarian Considerations in Design Evaluation for Theatre Productions

Esekong H. Andrew
Department of Theatre and Media Studies, University of Calabar, Nigeria
E-mail: esekongh@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study proposes a few parameters for assessing designs for theatrical productions. As a background, it reviews the traditional functions of members of the theatrical design team and goes further to examine the technicalities of assessment of the arts via the elements of design and the principles of composition. The study takes a cursory look at conformity to aesthetic cannons, functionality of design, applicability of design to production and precision in script interpretation as the major parameters for assessment of design products for the theatre. In view of the place of the audience as a principal component of the theatre ensemble, the role of the audience as evaluator is also examined. The study concludes that design review and evaluation are necessary to ensure proficiency in theatre productions.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Utilitarian Considerations, Design Evaluation, Theatre Productions

1. Introduction

The theatre production script embodies a lot of design problems to be studied and solved by the technical director, working with his team of designers in various specialties – costume, set, props, make-up, lighting, sound and a few other areas. The end products of theatre design which, apart from sound, are mostly visual are so prominent in theatre productions that they cannot be ignored. Wilson & Goldfarb (1991) recall that design has “been the hallmark of theatre from the beginning” with some design areas becoming even “more prominent than the performers. In certain arrangement, visual aspects came to the forefront...”. Ultimately, every member of the design team contributes to the total production. But, how best can the efficacy of solutions given to theatre design problems be assessed? For assessors, connoisseurs and reviewers, the problem of evaluation of designs for theatre production is recurrent, and this paper, in the main, proposes a few parameters for assessing design for theatrical productions.

To give this discussion the necessary background, the role of the technical director in ensuring a total theatrical presentation from the technical perspective, and the different ‘traditional’ members of the theatre design team must at this point be discussed. It will also be necessary to examine the peculiarities of their assignments and working environments. It is against this background that the parameters for critiquing designs for theatre productions are generated from both aesthetic and utilitarian or functional perspectives.

2. The technical director and his team of designers

A basic concern of the technical director and all members of the design team is to solve the problems presented in the script or in a narrative, for, not every performance is script-based. Such problems could be functional, aesthetic or psychological. They may also be concerned with the emotive or expressive ideas, provided they do not deviate from the stipulations of the script and the message therein. To execute the diverse design functions, the technical director traditionally has been the main consultant who blends the design components in line with the director’s focus. Meticulously, the technical director selects a working team based on competence and the peculiarity of the job at hand. Contrary to traditional expectations, Baugh (2005) in his work on theatre, performance and technology, speculates a paradigm shift from a formal artistic and technical hierarchical arrangements and other institutional models to a theatre or performance “that resists the clarity of rules”, that may not always be achieved in a theatre building or any clearly bifurcated space for performers and spectators. He envisages a situation where clear-cut roles for artistic and technical personnel may either become irrelevant in some ‘sub-sets of performance’ or subsumed in the emerging virtual environment and consciousness. This speculation implies that there may soon be no clearly defined technical or artistic roles in theatre ensembles, and that many more specialties in other disciplines may increasingly stampede into theatre practice to collaborate in the new and wider ‘performance’ schedule. There is nothing wrong with the extending interface of disciplines for the benefit of theatre. While expecting this increasing bloom of interest, we will, for the interest of this paper examine once again the role of traditional members of the design team so as to know what to expect in assessing their productivity, beginning from designers of non-tangible forms.

The lighting designer develops the lighting plot which is a document in which all the lighting needs of a given production are contained. A plan is also drawn for the rigging of equipment, their capabilities, control systems and cues. The lighting designer sources for the necessary equipment and installs them before hand. In the course of duties, it may be necessary to study not only the architectural system of the theatre house, but also

the setting of a given production to determine the best plan and equipment to adopt. The size of the lighting team depends on the needs of the production, the structure of the performance venue and the resources available.

The sound engineer equally sources for equipment, bearing in mind the size and nature of the performance venue. If the performance is within a theatre building, there may be a need to study the acoustics and the nature of reverberation within the theatre space. The sound engineer also studies the stage setting and develops a sound plot, indicating all the needed equipment in the right capacities, the control systems and cues.

The set designer, after studying the script develops a ground plan, elevation drawing, models and work studies drawn to scale as the need may arise. A team is set up, which may consist of engineers, carpenters, upholsterers, painters, sculptors, decorators, trimmers and other sub specialists whose skills may be required in the process of production.

The props master is concerned with sourcing for, which may entail borrowing or fabricating all the properties needed for a given production. In producing hand, set or dress properties, it may become necessary to hire the expertise of various categories of artists and production engineers to help actualize the goals of a production.

The costumier, like all other designers studies the script and develops sketches for costumes needed in a production. The costumier also selects the materials to be used in costume production, which may range from fabrics and trimmings to cane, metal and other components that may be required in the course of production. The costumier in most cases also provides the accessories that accompany costumes. While tailours play a major role in costume production, it may also be necessary to use finishers and other craftsmen in the production of special costumes.

The make-up artist works directly with the performing artist to ensure that their physical appearances conform to those of the characters specified in the script. The outlook of the performers may be distorted, deformed or accentuated to achieve the desired effects. Moreover, the materials needed and their usage may call for a wide range of consultations.

Many more specialties may be needed in contemporary productions where the life of the theatre is so much connected to its technical strength. A computer scientist, knowledgeable in software applications for sound production, lighting control and special effects may be needed in some productions. Similarly, a communication engineer may be required to install devices to enhance communication between the various technical stations in the theatre.

Having known the responsibilities of the key members of the technical team in a theatre production, one can now attempt to devise the parameters for judging their performances in a theatre production. It must be stated of this point that in evaluating performances one is better placed to understand the areas of strength and weaknesses, and to proffer solutions towards enhancing productivity.

3. Evaluation based on conformity to aesthetic cannons

In evaluating the effectiveness of any design for the theatre, serious attention must be given to aesthetics and/or beauty. It is pertinent to ask a couple of questions thus: Is it beautiful? Is it aesthetically pleasing? In separating beauty from aesthetics, it is understood that design presentations do not have to be beautiful to have aesthetic value. A stage setting of a shrine, for instance, may not appear beautiful in holistic terms, but it certainly has aesthetic value, maybe in the linear character, interaction of forms or in other formalisms of design. Where the explanation that aesthetics relate mainly to the principles of beauty is accepted (Webster 1997), then a philosophical truth should be stated that beauty attaches to a work of design and is therefore discoverable and not created, and that it could be apprehended by any sensitive observer. But there seems to be no universally accepted position on cannons or principles of beauty on the theatre stage, that is, what makes a cluster of designs beautiful and the other not.

While beauty is a property that attaches to design, it contains various qualities. These qualities have been interpreted to include the elements and principles of design, which Runkle (1985) describes as the 'primary' and 'secondary qualities' of design products. He emphasizes that these elements and principles, including line, shape or patterns, colours, texture, movement, rhythm, unity, balance, thematic repetition, variation, progress and evolution jointly configure to please the eye and therefore are the physical cannons of beauty inherent in a design product.

Parker, Wolf and Block (2003) confirm this idea with a slight difference in classification. While the elements of design consist of line, scale, movement, light, colour and texture, the principles of composition include harmony, contrast, variation, emphasis, gradation, balance, movement, proportion and rhythm. In evaluating designs for theatre stage in any form, one must therefore examine the use of the elements in conformity with set principles. All these factors help to evoke genuine aesthetic experience. It must be emphatically stated that effective articulation of the elements and principles of design contributes largely to a successful design on stage. If, as Parker, Wolf and Block (2003) state, the first step in the creative process of design is to understand the interrelationship of the elements of design and principles of compositions, then it is

logical to evaluate based on this understanding.

Drawing from Runkle's argument, still, effective usage of the 'primary' and 'secondary' qualities of design products can elicit a series of reactions or evoke certain feelings such as delight, charm, grace, majesty and others, which he labels collectively as 'tertiary qualities'. These are elicited by the content and form, which must be cohesively arranged to represent an organic whole and to make meaning. While reactions may vary, it should be understood that there is a relationship between vital elements of artistic production such as colour, sound, linear patterns and texture on the one hand, and emotions on the other. Uncontrolled use of sound or colour, for instance, may startle and may even offend the sensibilities of the perceiver in the audience.

4. Functionality of design

Another major consideration in the evaluation of designs for the stage is the issue of functionality. A design cannot be successful if it does not function for its purpose. A weight-bearing riser that cannot support weight cannot be said to be successful, no matter how well decorated it might be. Lights that do not illuminate to achieve the desired effects at a given point in time cannot be said to be functional. Similarly, theatre structures that have poor sightlines, poor acoustics and insufficient means of entry and egress are obviously deficient. The issue of functionality of design is essentially practical and no amount of rationalization of defects can restore functionality. If costumes do not fit, for example, no amount of explanation can modify them. And if the performer insists on using them, they can restrict performance.

Perhaps the foremost factor that can affect the functionality of design is cost. Quite often, the designer is restricted by lack of funds to execute design ideas. In adopting an easy approach towards economizing resources, the designer may inadvertently submerge vital components of the design, thereby reducing functionality. The designer may settle for cheap options that may later become disastrous in the process of production or usage. For example, using light gauge plywood for a weight-bearing platform may be cheaper than using thicker gauge plywood, but the disaster of a heavy performer crashing through the light plywood in use may mar the whole production.

Sometimes, the designer may simply be incompetent in executing a given assignment. Untrained personnel may assume a technical duty, which may result in failure. The reason for these lapses may sometimes be related to cost and cost management, but the truth remains that using non-professionals in the various design specialties results in impairing the functionality of design.

Space may assist the practical usage of a design product on stage. Of all the component elements that are applicable to theatre design, the single most important element is space. This is one element that must be present. A play, when enacted must take place somewhere. Its performance must occur in some real, visible space, on a stage or in an area fulfilling that purpose. With regards to functionality, space can either be too small or too large. Space, as two or three-dimensional element used in the right proportion on stage can elicit cheer and exhilaration on the one hand or depression on the other hand. Issacharoff (1981) categorizes three types of theatre space namely, architectural, scenographic and dramatic space. In designing for the theatre, all three are linked. Architectural space must be adequate to support, not only the audience and other components of the physical theatre, but also to provide space for rigging of technical equipment and for acoustics. Stage space must be adequate for design configurations and for movement. Dramatic space, being space used by individual performers is defined and demarcated by the designer. Space, in which ever form, is integral to functionality because it is the environment that is moulded by designers for effect. The manipulation of space is therefore a matter for both aesthetic and functional considerations.

In evaluating design based on functionality, the issue of inter-functionality must be raised. No single design functions independently on stage. All designs – costumes, lighting, sound, set, and others – are intricately linked to produce a total effect, which is more important. The lights cannot make meaning on a bare stage except where it is so artistically desired. To make a clear meaning, there has to be a unified presentation of, say, the light on a set with props and costumed performers, and sound, all playing to a script to communicate value.

5. Applicability of design to specific production

Another issue in the evaluation of design for the stage is the consideration of the applicability of design to a given production. Designs are more successful if they are made specifically for a given production. Imposing available designs, may be templates, pulled from stock on a production may not always give the best results, yet, in a bid to cut the cost of production many technical directors approve of this.

It must be noted that operational circumstances change. For instance, a character playing the role of a king for which a costume was made in an earlier production may change in the next production, and this calls for refitting of the costume. The number of cast may increase and therefore rendering the set constructed in space for an earlier production unsuitable for the next production. Design for the stage is usually or ideally drawn from a script guiding production.

If the tradition and procedures of designing from script are followed, chances are high that designs

produced will be successful. Closely related to the issue of specificity of design is the fact that every design must fit into the total production in terms of style, and must support in driving home the overall message of the production. If a setting is traditional African, or Elizabethan or Romantic, then the costume, make-up, props and other areas of décor should be consistently rendered. Dougherty (1984), quoting Jacinto Grau's well publicized essay on scenography emphasizes that "décor was well employed when its signs were integrated with the overall staging to produce a synthetic effect". The total scenic ensemble should express a unifying emotion of the work.

6. Precision in script interpretation

This is another issue to consider in evaluating designs for stage production. The designer studies the script perhaps deeper than other members of a theatre production team. Parker, Wolf and Block (2003, p.52) suggest that the designer reads the script analytically at least three times. First for the content, second for the intent, and finally for the technical details. Reading for technical details is reading between the lines. Sometimes, the playwright attempts a detailed description of the scenario, but quite often, such descriptions are not detailed enough to capture intricate features of scenery, props, costumes, sound, lighting effects or other technical components found in every act. But the designer, reading deep deduces from the dialogue the technical needs. For instance, an actor, who is said to look out through the window, listening for sounds, implies that a window be provided and that sound be created at the right cue. A meticulous designer develops sketches for every analyzed script. The sketches guide the preparation of the final design.

In most cases, adhering to the technical work plan ensures a strong technical delivery. If a script is well interpreted in technical terms, chances are high, still, that the message in performance will be well delivered.

7. The audience opinion

The average audience member who is enlightened enough to choose to attend a theatre programme is most likely going to be able to distinguish between a good show, replete with all the technical components and a bad one. The theatre and media audience of the 21st century is composed of critiques, most of whom may not be professional, but who nevertheless have a say as patrons of the arts. The audience is a growing voice in judgment, particularly of the visual artistic elements on stage. Their ovations and exclamations are significant indicators of success on stage. In the words of Wilson and Goldfarb (1991), the performers are "buoyed up by a responsive audience and discouraged by an unresponsive one". Beeman (1993) adumbrates the role of audience as evaluator as follows:

In many theatrical events, the audience is not only a witness, but also an evaluator of events. This is most often the case when the performance is repeated for different audiences. The good opinion of the audience is indicative of the success of the event.

In circumstances where audience members are conversant with materials being presented on stage, audience evaluation is predicated on the level to which performers, including designers are able to simulate familiar objects and scenarios. At instances where the audience is not conversant with the scenario, or performance presented, Beeman (1993, p.369) maintains that evaluation is "based on a general appreciation of the ability of the performers to engage and entertain". The appreciation is based on a general knowledge of the skills required to produce artistic works at the time.

8. Conclusion

As theatre in the new century is fast becoming a technical affair, considering the wide use of technology in both indoor and outdoor theatre, a greater attention is drawn to the technical design components. Consequently, there is a higher tendency to scrutinize the quality of the technical design product. Proficiency is the watchword in an era of competition with the screen. It therefore becomes increasingly necessary to review the final product towards enhancing output. Self review begins with the knowledge of the components and also the ability to use the components creatively to make meaning to an audience with diverse minds.

In the process of design evaluation, the technical director should learn to ask self-probing questions bordering on both the aesthetic and functional diversions of design such as:

- Is the design presentable to the audience in terms of articulation and finishing?
- Will it create a lasting impact in the mind of the audience?
- Will the product serve the purpose for which it was meant?
- Is the design the best possible attempt under the condition it was produced?

Many more questions could be developed, the essence of which is to improve on the quality of productions. The dexterity of the designer is growing as his profile is rising within the theatre production ensemble. Proficiency is needed to sustain the growth and prominence and this can be sharpened by constant evaluation.

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