

# CREATING THE PLACE

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It is usually said that a performance is a text, which has acquired a body and is transformed into a human being. But why cannot one say, for a change, "a performance is a text which has acquired a place and become an event" (Arlander 1998: 57)?

A direct physical experience creates a location in space; objective and subjective relationships with the environment are merged into each other here. This way location gives birth to a place. Place is acknowledged through experience, thoughts, and sensations. Place is the perceived meaningful centre of space. Space is abstract, lacking meaning, which is inherent in the place. Places possess different values; they are as dispersed and different as meanings and identities, which are attributed to them. A place can be experienced and imagined at different levels of space, starting from individual and ending with regional space (Lehari 1997: 47–48).

The general description of the work of a theatre designer could be summed up in the following sentence: a scenographer creates a meaningful space corresponding to the performance, which facilitates the emergence of a mentally meaningful environment. Some of the meanings are coded in the environment beforehand by the space and text used, some are provided by the director and the designer (a production's general concept, including time and place, etc.). As a designer, I am intrigued by the idea of stage space as a network of places: the places of the characters in the fictional space<sup>1</sup>, the places contained in the real space<sup>2</sup> and the places created by set design. Real and fictional worlds meet in

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<sup>1</sup> Arlander defines fictional space (*fiktion tila*) as textual space, the places of action, their transformations and meanings, and potential interpretations created onstage (Arlander 1998: 58).

<sup>2</sup> Real space (*faktinen tila*) is an actual physical place where the performance is given either in the theatre building or in the found space. Arlander extends this concept from

each aspect of theatre: as the appearance of an actor corresponds at the interior level to the character presented by him, the actual set corresponds to the fictional place (Arlander 1998: 22). Anette Arlander calls the chronotope emerging upon the contact of the fictional and real spaces the world of performance (Arlander 1998: 60).

In theatrical space the problems concerning places extend to several levels. It is possible to examine separately real space (stage, found space,<sup>3</sup> site of an open-air performance, etc.) and the places it contains, the places emerging in fictional space, and the places offered by scenography – the synthetic space that merges and changes both these spaces.

### **Fictional space**

In a dramatic text, the eloquence of the space of the characters, their physical and mental environment, surpasses their mere location, the play's place of action. Stage directions and the general description of the scene, which is not always considered an inseparable part of the text of the play (Pavis 1991: 28) form one of the potential determinants of the space. Yuri Lotman, while discussing textual space, introduces the concept of topos, "the whole space continuum of the text reflecting the world of the object becomes a kind of topos. This topos is always equipped with objectivity as space is always given to man in some form of actual completion. [---] Being a principle of organisation and position, the structure of a topos acts as the language for denoting non-spatial relationships." (Lotman 1990: 105–106.) The character's actual relationship or connection with the set may differ from the impression derived from the external picture. Onstage, non-spatial relationships may be represented as spatial ones. While creating the space of the characters of the play, the designer also creates places, which are meaningful for the characters. On the primary level, these are the places where the characters have been before, which they have experienced; positive and negative places, dangerous and safe areas. A place can be interpreted as an attribute of a human being. Places recall narratives; places exist because of narratives (Lehari

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the performance space to the surrounding environment and context. Real space also contains cultural relationships, meanings, etc., of its own (Arlander 1998: 55, 58).

<sup>3</sup> Found space is understood as a location discovered and adjusted for a particular performance, which is not a theatrical stage or a building reconstructed for performances.

1997: 58). A space is given its memory. A character/actor is provided with the experience of body and place even before he visits the space. Scenography artificially creates "a lived space"; it creates the non-existent space for the existence of the non-existent characters and writes the biography of that space.

The dominance of fictional space in a performance may refer to the fact that not much trust has been put in real space, or to the habitually accepted fact that the actor establishes the performance. The dominance of real space, on the other hand, may point to the weakness of the construction: the spaces have not been merged into each other, and the boundaries between them are rigid (Arlander 1998: 58). Real space specifies and gives detail to fictional space and, on the other hand, it creates new fiction. Fictional space tends to dominate on the traditional stage or in the *black-box*, which are characteristically neutral, since a theatre is a room between the walls of which any other space can be experienced (Arlander 1998: 24). It is from this idea that Michel Foucault proposes theatre as one possible heterotopia.

Foucault calls places (*l'espace autre*) which differ from the systems that they reflect heterotopias. Heterotopias can be described as places that comprise other places and open upon a breach in traditional time. A cemetery is a classical example of a heterotopia. Heterotopia is the arrangement of different spaces and locations that are incompatible with each other in a single real place. Theatre, where incessantly alternating places form the essence of the stage as a space, is an example of that (Foucault 1997: 352–354).

Heterotopia emerges where a gap, i.e. a heterochronism, arises in the traditional flow of time. The examples of heterotopias are museums and libraries, where times past are collected and stored in a universal archive, outside real time, which accumulates *ad infinitum* (Foucault 1997: 355). Richard Schechner gives an example of how during the Heb-Sed festival in Ancient Egypt a discontinuity occurs in the natural environment and time. For the participants, a part of the river Nile becomes a special place in a special moment of time. After the ritual, the Nile returns to its daily space (Schechner 1994: 21). Such a rite needs no actual staging of another place: for a time the Nile is flowing in fictional time-space.

In the classical theatre that Foucault obviously has in mind, fictional space is presented in a tangible physical form. But what could this space, *l'espace autre*, that opens up in the rest of heterotopias be? Landscape gardening, both the fantastic theatrical garden of the Baroque, as well as the philosophical Oriental

garden link other spaces, refer to the locations which are not here. Cemetery folklore differs from culture to culture, but as a place that is simultaneously "here" and "on the other side," it is always a part of fictional space. In society, Foucault distinguishes heterotopias of crisis – sacred or forbidden places that are reserved for the individual, who finds himself in a state of crisis and in conflict with societal and environmental norms. Ancient heterotopias of crisis comprise the seclusion of adolescent boys so that the first manifestations of their sexuality would occur "elsewhere," and the tradition of the honeymoon, which provided for the girl's first sexual experience to occur outside everyday space and at the same time not just anywhere, but in the realms of ritual space. Locations that are not situated "here," especially the train or the hotel, which served as a ritual bed, represented, up until even the mid-century, a heterotopia without geographical coordinates. Through these another space was established, they permitted an entry into fictional space; or did the places themselves turn into fictional ones? Exotic holiday villages where city dwellers can enjoy primitive life for three weeks offer them a chance to live their lives being fully conscious of fictional space, simultaneously creating the same space (Foucault 1997: 355). Foucault's other examples of heterotopias of time – fairs, amusement parks – could be supplemented with Disneyland-type amusement parks, theme- and science parks, Viking villages that stem from fictional space from folklore and artistic fairytales to science fiction and the creation of fiction by participation. Under certain conditions, heterotopias could perhaps be described as the manifestations of fictional space in the real one, as places which take us to the fictional world.

Any place can contain another world. Ritual activity transforms the place into a heterotopia. Theatre in found space works according to that principle.

Theatrical space is comprised of an uncountable quantity of different spaces. Compared to meanings offered by other heterotopias, theatre can be shaped more flexibly and directed more rapidly. Theatre is consciously making (up) its places. The acknowledgment of this trait leads us to a conclusion that is self-evident regarding other aspects of theatre: "Theatre is a temporal art." The stage automatically erases any previous traces; the ground is empty to embody a new space. Traces that remain are contextual, rather, relating to the edifice auditorium or institution, but not to the heterotopian function of the theatre. The stage neutralises itself. One of the reasons why found spaces are sought for is the excessive neutral atmosphere of the traditional stage. Found spaces already con-

tain their own networks of places (Arlander 1998: 22). Arlander as director states that no space where a performance has once taken place can remain unchanged (Arlander 1998: 58). New performance adds new layers, real space determines fictional space, and on the other hand, creates new fiction. The use of the same found space for staging different productions evokes a neutralising effect, conditioned by the new function of the space. At a certain moment, the spaces contained by each particular place may start to cancel each other out.

I would briefly relate my own personal experience in working with fictional space. The film "Something Is Rotten or All the Lie About Hamlet" (director and scriptwriter Ilmar Raag, director of photography Madis Mihkelsoo, production designer Liina Unt) was shot in the summer of 2000. I am not going to examine the film as a whole but rather focus on some aspects in designing the sets. Besides, in the analysis of the complete production, several other factors should be taken into account (dramaturgy, actors, and alas, time and money, etc.). I leave aside the specific aspects of cinematographic art. Analysing the work process in retrospective, the idea of treating sets as spaces and designing the locations as a parts of the fictional world caught my attention. The two main places of action in the fictional space were the living quarters room of Gertrud, a mature woman full of lust for life, and of Ophelia. The aesthetic concept of the Helsingör castle derived from a 17th century Dutch painting.. The real rooms, i.e. found spaces, were the first floor of the Kuressaare Castle watchtower for Gertrud's room and the *diele* of the Kuressaare Town Hall for Ophelia's room. Neither of those rooms offered an opportunity to proceed from real space; rather the opposite: the aim was to conceal the found places as much as possible, to change the opposites of public-intimate, neutral-personal, open-closed, to provide a different function, and to shift the overall time and place. The real room was rather used as a container, which had to receive a new space. The space-time was not specified as 17th century Denmark. The aim, rather, was to move the action "elsewhere," creating a conditional unity of time, which would permit for the theoretical coexistence of the town hall built in the 18th century and the castle dating from the 15th century in one and the same castle.

The location for Ophelia's room was originally planned to be the fifth floor of the watchtower, in a chamber with a low ceiling and limestone walls, which bore a stronger resemblance to the castle prison, or to a scholar's, scientist's or magician's study than to a maiden's chamber depicted on the Flemish paintings.

(Perhaps, that is the potential fictional space of a tower). This room conditioned a change in Ophelia's character from a simple adolescent girl into a book-wise young lady (the script left her role outside her relationship with Hamlet open). While the location was changed, the solution for Ophelia's room was retained on the level of fictional space. The real space caused the change of the fictional space and even later, without any direct cause, it functioned as a matrix helping to search for the next locations. Ophelia's personal places, reading nooks, etc., were transferred in an almost unchanged form.

The emergence of new places played a major role in the creation of new spaces. Fictional spaces of the characters, their memories, favourite places, and actively used areas changed the character of the space.

I was amazed by the actual transformation of real space into fictional space. The locations ceased to function as active parts of their natural surroundings and context, a castle or a town hall. On the one hand, the space could be conceived as places, emotionally and physically perceptible, while on the other hand, it was located somewhere else, outside everyday reality. The film crew obtained a psychophysical experience of the characters' world by being present in the designed space. Paradoxically, we ourselves were the creators of that illusion. The illusion, however, should break after the mechanism behind its formation is revealed. On screen, the original space can be discerned, (other aspects not solely dependent on the design play a part here), but the unintentional domination of fictional space was clearly present. Fictional space became non-transparent to the extent that the real building couldn't be seen from behind the new rooms.

### **Real space**

In the use of found space, three different approaches can be distinguished: *ready-made* space, i.e. using space as a ready-made design; space as an argument, as material, and a *fit-in* design, which uses the space as a container (Arlander 1998: 29).

In found space, the places of real space are more likely to dominate. Classical stage, like any other space, has its individual advantages and weaknesses and the designers and directors become aware of those in the course of their work. Found space is a land already full of previous texts, but still unexplored. As Ralf Långbacka recognises, the majority of the innovative theatre of the last 15 years strives out of the theatre, through street theatre and happenings to found spaces.

"Every director gets at some point caught by the fact that theatre buildings are too complete, they guide and shape the theatre too actively towards a prescribed direction." (Norri 1983: 30.) Happenings as well as street theatre differ from the rest of dramatic art by the manner in which they use space. Their work is rarely based on real space, and the fictional space that they bring along is less tense, it is rather a communication space between bodies than an intentional manifestation of fictional space. New space is not created intentionally, the room physically used (created) contains fewer layers of meaning.

One of the best examples in working directly from actual space is Richard Schechner's environmental theatre, whose practical work with space as a network of places is remarkable. Schechner's work with the production and actors begins from space or vice versa; work with space starts from actors. It is primarily oriented at real space, cognition and non-verbal presentation of that real space. He assumes that space offers itself. Actor training is focused on finding places; first, space is examined using different means and senses (listening to it, speaking to it, rubbing it, smelling it, licking it, etc.), and letting space do the same to you (embrace, hold, move, push, lift, etc.), safe places and places of danger are found and examined, the boundaries of personal areas are defined, overlapping areas are found, conflict areas and harmoniously shared areas, (Schechner 1994: 12–14). Space is structured with personal energy fields. Schechner treats space as a network of places and paths that unite them. Unfortunately, the author fails to describe to what extent he uses those paths paved by the performers, favourable and unfavourable places in the completed production. It would be nice to think that they form a basement, an invisible groundplan, like the architectural scripts of Ancient Greece, a mosaic pavement tracing the dance-steps on the theatre floor (Schechner 1994: 21).

Schechner's attitude towards the audience makes his work unique. The spectators are allowed to examine the space much like the performers do. Environmental theatre offers the audience an active role, the spectators are given an opportunity to move around, to change places, to choose to sit alone or in groups, to follow the action from above or from below, to share the territory with the actors, and to join in the performance. They are given a chance to find their own place and, by moving during the performance, create their own paths.

Schechner divides the spectators' places according to their activity levels into jumping-off places, regular places, vantage points, pinnacles-dens-hutches (Schechner 1994: 30).

This should be a whole space, an open landscape, "a global space, a microcosm, with flow, contact and interaction" (Schechner 1994: 30). In practice, Schechner admits, the participation of the audience causes several problems. As the performance takes shape, the space is gradually filled with the places of the actors, except for the part which was originally reserved for the audience in creating the environment. (The design in the environmental theatre is born in cooperation with the actors, it grows in the process of rehearsals.) The space has already been filled with other texts. The spectators enter an unfamiliar land, an area governed by other rules (a theatrical event as a special time and special place), which are now revealed. This world has been previously inhabited and this fact, unlike a shared ritual, breeds alienation. According to Keir Elam, the spectator assumes the existence of a dramatic world in his temporal and spatial context before he knows anything about it: the dramatic world is discovered *in medias res* (Elam 1994: 112). Perhaps we can speak of a fictional space, made-up places, which for the audience dominates the real space.

## **Presence**

Theatre is the sole heterotopia that stages its spaces and offers them to the spectators. Those spaces can be structured and perceived at different levels. Spectators are aware of the make-believe, they enter a fictional space. "The spectator does not "enter" the here and now of  $W_D$  – his own context, defined through indexing, remains theatrical and not dramatic – but agrees to be engrossed and to accept that a part of  $W_0$  (stage, set and actors)<sup>4</sup> can be considered as located in the fictional world." (Elam 1994: 114.)

It is the question of the design and narrative pattern, depending on the way the narrative unfolds and on its space. It is a question of the manner in which the actor and the performance communicate with the spectator, what is anticipated of him and how the space as such communicates with the spectator, how the space is activated by the presence of a human being, and whether the space

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<sup>4</sup>  $W_D$  – dramatic world,  $W_0$  – world of the spectators. – *L.U.*

encapsulates or rejects him. These processes cannot be examined separately. A communicative space emerges between the actor and spectator. The scenographic space can let the spectator in, the spectator develops a sense of presence, a sense of belonging to the place, a concern with the world of performance. Therefore the creation of a mental space, equally shared by both the actors and the audience – a mentally accessible environment – becomes more important than the physical environment. The architectural frame becomes a psychological concept forming a border that prevents the audience from entering the world of performance and yet, only this thin line makes it possible to enter this world. Crossing the border that separates us from the world of performance and the function of the place in this process are separate issues, which cannot be examined in detail in this paper.

A place requires both mental and physical presence. The context of the place in a performance is located in the fictional space, it serves its purpose when it belongs to the world of the performance, explaining the latter, relating both to the textual space and the space of the characters. Therefore, the place at the border of two worlds is productive. The place of several emphatic circles and several spaces can be considered a condition for a staged place. The merging of fictional space and real space in a specific place forms the prerequisite for the emergence of a place. Located simultaneously in the world of the performance and in the real world, it can be one of the border crossings to the other world.

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