

Outliving His Origins (*Sample*)

Realistic drama of the 19th century involved the scientific analysis of observable events in human behavior. Numerous thinkers and theatrical artists contributed to the realistic movement, but none could have foreseen its impact on modern theatre. Since realism considers the relationship between character and environment, theatrical realism sought to imitate (and theatrical naturalism sought to duplicate) those factors to create the most accurate portrayal possible of human life on the stage. This daunting task could only be accomplished through the complete unification of all theatrical elements; thus, the modern director came into being and completely changed the routine of theatre. Without realism as a philosophical movement, the modern director would not exist, but without the modern director, theatrical realism would not be possible.

Realism extends from science to art to philosophy and in all of these there is the connection between a subject and the subject's environment. The theatrical realist argues that a character's environment is essential to the character's being and advocates the most accurate portrayal of that character on the stage. Yet, as Raymond Williams explains, this portrayal is broad and the realist tradition

“offers a valuing creation of a whole way of life, a society, that is larger than any of the individuals composing it, and at the same time valuing creations of individual human beings, who while belonging to and affected by and helping to define this way of life, are also, in their own terms, absolute ends in themselves” (22).

By representing the character, and thus part of the world, as accurately as possible, realistic drama offers the audience as a whole as well as each individual audience member an opportunity to connect to the production more directly as it relates to their daily lives. The audience's emotional reaction will be more inward than otherwise if the actor portrays a character capable of living in real life rather than simply on the stage. Accomplishing this, however, requires a two-fold portrayal: 1) the physical environment of the character, i.e. his “whole way of life, a society” and 2) the internal environment of

the “individual human beings” themselves. As Brenda Murphy explains, “the realist’s investigation has two axes: One is horizontal, directed outward toward problems in the social environment; the other is vertical, boring into the individual’s inner being and examining moral and psychological motives” (26). This “investigation” that is characteristic of the realistic movement spawned from the use of the scientific method in areas beyond science.

The theatrical realist uses methods of observation that are in the spirit of the scientific method in order to justly consider and utilize these two axes. Such observation is a result of “the encroaching rationalism of the nineteenth century, the development of science and ‘historical attitudes towards society’” (Lacey 64). Auguste Comte, in particular, and his development of ‘positivism’ during the mid-19th century had a strong impact on the development of realism and the application of the scientific method to art. Comte argued that all knowledge seeks to create a better society and therefore sociology is the supreme science. He advocated sociology’s application of the scientific method, in order to “discover the causes of social problems and the remedies needed to bring about desirable change. Above all, Comte demanded that metaphysical explanations of events and behavior be abandoned in favor of material explanations based in observation and analysis” (Brockett 369). Applying this ‘positivism’ to theatre, then, involves the observation of the world in order to transfer that observation onto the stage. His ideas focus primarily on social context, highlighting realism’s political considerations: “realism in this sense is defined primarily by the ambition not only to represent but also to interpret the world politically, to show ‘how things really are’” (Lacey 65). Comte’s ‘positivism’ as applied to theatre provides the opportunity for the creation of the social environment, which includes the physical environment, the horizontal axis of realism that Murphy describes.

This physical environment requires the means by which it can be portrayed, namely through the technical elements of a production (scenery, costumes, lighting, etc.), which provide the audience with a sense of the horizontal axis of reality. These elements became more realistic in nature even before the popular surge of realism in theatre; they foreshadowed the domination of the realistic movement that would occur on stage. The box set, for example, had been used previously, but Madame Vestris “was probably the

first English producer to use this type of setting with some consistency” (Brockett 307). Her realistic stage details (“rugs were laid on the floor, knobs were attached to doors”) preceded realism as a new artistic movement; her tactics enabled her “to treat minor drama with the respect formerly reserved for the classics” rather than create a new form of drama (307). Steele MacKaye also encouraged creating a realistic space for productions: he succeeded in creating a “realistic cyclone and stampede” and attempted to create a “Spectatorium” of 25 stages to illustrate Columbus’ New World voyage (331). Murphy paraphrased MacKaye’s argument by stating, “the function of stagecraft is to assist the illusion – it is suggestive and not simply reflective” (33). That is, the theatrical elements of a production should not be presented simply for the sake of being visually accurate, but should be presented for the sake of the “whole way of life” described by Williams above.

Despite this argument for spectacle’s suggestive role, spectacle cannot act as the sole contributor to the illusion of reality. It only serves as one of the two axes of realism; that of the internal environment of the character, Murphy’s vertical axis, must also be portrayed. Henrik Ibsen’s plays, with the first published in 1850, would do tremendous work for the realistic movement in theatre, providing characters that behaved as a result of their social environment. In his plays, “internal psychological motivations are given even greater emphasis than external visual detail” (Brockett 372-373). Ibsen helped to unite the use of realistic technical elements with the realistic psychological elements of characters, a necessary combination for successful realism. These innovations, however, were limited to the text and needed the appropriate direction to be truly successful on stage.

Works Cited

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