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“Staging Style: The Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Theatrical Style”

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So what does “Style” mean?

What do you think of when you hear the word: style? Is it Fashion? Paintings? Cars? Something unique that helps sets it apart from other things like it? When applied to theater, style provides a lens to view the world of play. It can be thought of as a “how to” guide when working on a production. Throughout history there have been several distinct styles that have left their mark on Theatre: but just exactly what do these styles *do* to theatre? It was my aim to find out just how I could use these styles as a director. I wanted to see how the style would affect actors, how it factored into their process, and how it affected the piece.



Photo: Globe Theater, fda-online.com/news_detail.php?id=77689

The “Deconstruction”: The How

I chose three specific styles that I knew I wanted to work with, Absurdism, Elizabethan Style, and Naturalism. I would learn all there was about these styles: origins, basics, plays written in the style, and I would create a set of ideals which embodied that style. I then found three scenes, one for each style, that contained a very basic plot and open dialogue called a *spare scene*. Each scene utilized two actors, and we worked through the scene five separate times: a cold read-through at first, then “adding” the simplified style onto the scene, ending with a full working of dialogue with movement. The entire time we collaborated the story we wanted to tell. Actors were encouraged to talk about their thought process throughout the scene work, and were asked: How and what did the style change for you?

A “*tour de Style*”

Absurdism: Probably one of the easiest to recognize styles, apart from Realism, Absurdism is the “weird for weird’s sake” theatre that seems to be meaningless. However, this style stems from a need to speak to just that: the meaninglessness and routine of day to day life. Language is used to provoke thought: what is the meaning of life? Action in this style is used not to tell the story, but to put forth a set of poetic images that represent and speak to a greater meaning. The audience should not be thinking about what is going to happen next, but rather what is *currently* happening. Everything is heightened to a “bizarre” level in order to shock the audience into thought.



Photo: NBC’s SNL “Theater Showcase” Sketch , screencrush.com

Elizabethan: Perhaps you’ve heard of someone named William Shakespeare? This was the style of that time. Language is both prose and poetry to aid in telling the story, to get the audience to pay attention to what is being said. Emotion was to be showcased: love, hate, jealousy. Everything was life and death to these characters. The interaction with the audience was a dialogue and was not ignored like in today’s theater.

Naturalism: Coined as the “Slice of Life” theatre. The main focus here was “Why?” There was a reason for every single decision that was made: whether that be because of influences from the environment or from genes and psychology. Conflicts were not slight; they exploded. In terms of production, everything is to be as real as possible. Settings are incredibly detailed to recreate the living and breathing world around us.



Photo: August: Osage County set, stephenwolf.org

The “Constructed”: Results

Style appears to be a playground: each different style offering something different for the actor to grapple and play with. Style offered options: it offered another way of doing, another way of looking and thinking. My actors continually touched on a sense of freedom in exploration in the scene work, using the style to guide and support them.

Absurdism offered endless possibilities within reason; a statement as nonsensical as the style. Actors expressed a freedom to emote in however they were feeling, and tying those together with abstract movement allowed them to express any impulse they felt.

Elizabethan style incited a sense of urgency that my actors had never felt before. They felt the freedom to as grand and “over the top” as they would like to be, because that was the freedom offered to the Renaissance. They expressed how the language guided them through the scene, helping them to solve any problem that arose.

Naturalism helped to define the unknown in the world of the play. It helped them to figure out the *why* to things they had never thought of, and allowed them to focus on playing the “right now” of the scene.