Theory: Stagecraft

Part of a performer’s stagecraft is the awareness and use of space on stage. The best use of space is that in which the audience has the best possible relationship to the performers and the performance. It should be clear at any point during a performance whom the audience should be watching, and whether the focus, or point of concentration, is on an individual or a group. The audience’s focus is affected by the qualities affected by the qualities of the particular performance space being used and by the positions of the performers within that space. Another factor that affects the audience’s focus is where the performers direct their attention. If the performers are all looking at a particular character, so will the audience. Another stagecraft skill of the performer is the awareness of what the audience can see of the stage, that is, their sightlines. If, for example, you are performing on a stage which thrusts out into the audience, then some of the audience is seeing you from the front and some are seeing in profile. This should have an effect on your performance. The actor’s degree of awareness of the audience’s sightlines will significantly influence the actor-audience relationship.

Blocking

The act of roughly blocking out the performer’s broad moves on stage is known as blocking. Blocking may be the first stage of rehearsal and usually begins with actors and a director exploring possible moves. Of course, as the rehearsal period progresses many details of the initial blocking will be changed, added to or refined.

When you are blocking as a scene or performing consider the space around you, your relationship to the space, the other characters and the objects on onstage. This consideration of the proximity of one thing to another is known as proxemics. On stage, proxemics can reveal a lot of information to the audience. Here are some guidelines to help you with your use of space on stage.

- Move around the stage only if there is a reason. Too much movement is distracting but being too static can be boring.
- **Masking** involves one performer standing in front of another and should usually be avoided. You should also avoid delivering your lines from behind another character.
- **Upstaging** is when one performer takes the focus from another one who should have it. Do not upstage. Upstaging also occurs when a performer stands so far upstage that in order for a downstage actor to address them, the downstage actor has to face away from the audience.
- You do not need to face the front whenever you speak lines. Sometimes it may be appropriate to speak with your back to the audience – but remember to adjust.
vocally to this position. At every moment when you are on stage your attention should be on keeping the focus where it is meant to be.

- Inexperienced actors, in an attempt to face the audience continuously, sometimes cross over their feet so that they are walking sideways and they throw their bodies off balance. Learn to place your weight on the balls of your feet and move off on the back foot.
- When turning use open turns, that is, downstage turns or turns towards the audience, rather than upstage turns or closed turns.
- In scenes where many characters must enter at once, always consider the question, “What are you doing?” Your position needs to take into account your character’s motivation. Then possible entrances should be explored to achieve the best timing and placement. Sometimes it is easier to being by composing the final ‘picture’ and then working out how to get there.
- Vary the use of physical levels on stage, for example lying on the floor, sitting or standing on a piece of furniture. Physical levels help to clarify the status of the characters and make composition interesting.
- The higher the status, that is, the rank or position of a character in relation to the other characters, the larger the space the character will take up on stage and the greater his or her distance will be from other characters.
- Avoid being positioned on stage in regular patterns such as straight lines, squares, circles, semi-circles. These positions might be appropriate occasionally, for musicals and stylise theatre, but such regularity is rarely seen in life and has an unnatural appearance on stage.
Types of Stages

The proscenium arch stage

The proscenium arch stage is a traditional stage, or picture frame stage. The performance takes place behind the arch and the audience is in front of it, so there is a clear division between the stage and the audience. The wings and backstage areas are useful for storing the set (scenery), and props (objects that a performer uses on stage). The proscenium arch is well suited to giving a realistic presentation of a particular time and place. The performers play to the front of the stage. All the audience are facing the front. They have good sightlines to the action and they cannot see the backstage area. The stage often has curtains.

The arena stage

Performances on arena stages are often referred to as a theatre-in-the-round, because the audience sits around the central stage. The arrangement can be round, like a circus, or square, like a boxing ring. The actors enter through the audience and they play to all sides. There can be problems with sightlines because actors can easily mask one another. Also, the actors must be aware of the audience watching from every angle, even from behind them. The audience sees all the set changes.
The thrust stage

The thrust stage thrusts into the audience, which sits on three sides of the stage. From various positions in the audience there will be different sightlines to the action and actors must play to three sides. The audience is closer to the actors than on a proscenium arch stage. There are usually no curtains and the audience see all the set changes. The back wall can be used for scenery. Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre had a thrust stage.

The open stage

The open stage is similar to a proscenium arch stage, except that there is no ‘picture frame’ and therefore no backstage or wings. The stage is an area stretching across the width of the space, so the actors only play to the front. The back wall can be used for scenery. There are no curtains so all scene and prop changes are made in full view of the audience.
The traverse stage

The traverse stage stretches down the central length of the space and the audience is seated on either side of the stage, with one half of the audience facing the other. There are no curtains and all scene and prop changes must be made in full view of the audience.

Promenade performances

In promenade performances the audience follow the actors to different locations. There may be stages, so that the actors are separate from the audience, or the action may take place amongst the audience.

Stage Geography

A number of basic terms describe the geography of the stage, and make it easy of performers, directors and technicians to communicate effectively. Some of these terms are defined below. They apply to proscenium arch stages, open stages, and thrust stages, but do not relate as well to traverse and arena stages or promenade performances.
Upstage: the rear of the stage. This area of the stage has been known as ‘upstage’ since the days of the Victorian proscenium stages, which were often slightly raked so that the stage was higher at the back and sloped down towards the audience at the front. This design was said to aid the illusion of perspective in the scenery and also assist with the projection of actors’ voices to the back of large auditoria.

Downstage: the front of the stage

Stage left: left from the point of view of the performer when facing downstage. Also known as prompt side ‘P’.

Stage right: Right from the point of view of the performer when facing downstage. Also known as opposite prompt / ‘OP’.

Onstage: the areas in view of the audience, or on the stage.

Offstage: areas out of view of the audience or off the stage.

Above: the upstage side of an object on the stage.

Below: the downstage side of an object on the stage.

Over: the position on top on an object on the stage.

Under: the position beneath an object on the stage.

Wings: the spaces at the side of the stage that are out of view of the audience. The wings are used for entrances and exits as well as the storing of props and stage scenery.

Backstage: the area at the back of the stage that is out of view of the audience and is often used for entrances and exits. ‘Backstage’ can be used as a general term to include the dressing rooms.