Don’t Get Me Started: Staging Two Plays

To understand the staging dilemmas of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, you must first have an understanding of the physical space in which theatre was produced. While each theatre in the outskirts of London in the 16th century varied in some way or another, the basic shape and components were the same. The open air arena, called the 'pit' or the 'yard', had a raised stage at one end, with a trap door, and was surrounded by three tiers of roofed galleries with balconies overlooking the back of the stage (Gillette 41). Today, the stage would be considered a thrust stage. Upstage of the playing space was an area called the inner below which was typically curtained off and used to reveal scenes or played as an alternate location to the main action. Above the inner below was the inner above (think Juliet's balcony) that created a roofed area for below and above inner above was the Heavens. The Heavens contained various ropes and pulleys for purposes of hanging scenery and/or the means for actors to "fly.". Behind the upstage wall was the tiring house, an area used to store props, change costumes and cross over between the three lower stage entrances and get to the inner above or Heavens.

While it is unclear if form followed function or vice versa in the designing of the London theatres, having a thrust stage made it almost impossible to use sets as part of a theatrical production. A traditional proscenium stage, where the audience sits on one
side and acts as a ‘fourth wall’, allows for grand sets to be flown in and out or moved to and from the wings, which are out of view of the audience. The thrust stage allows only for scenery to be placed at a very-upstage position. A placement anywhere else on the stage would create an obstructed sight line for the audience. In terms of lighting for mood or visibility, the sun and the clouds were the only choices and given the unreliable nature of the later, lighting was never consistent. A night scene would be no more night than what a full afternoon sun would allow. Torches were used as props but no real theatrical lighting would be used until much later.

Unlike modern audiences who want more and more spectacle, Shakespeare relied on the suspension of disbelief by his audience members. Like a child listening to a bedtime story, Shakespearean audiences could listen to the story and transport themselves to the world being acted out.

It is with this knowledge that we look at the staging dilemmas of Macbeth and The Tempest in Elizabethan/Jacobean Theatre.

In Macbeth, one of the biggest issues is setting the location. Added to the constraints of a thrust stage is the fact that Macbeth takes place in a lot of different locations and Shakespeare has scenes that turn immediately from one extreme to another. For example, in act four, scene one, the action takes place around a boiling cauldron and without more than a slight hesitation moves to act four, scene two, which takes place in Macduff’s castle. Keep in mind, there was no such thing as a black out or curtains to close that would allow for a set change to take place. Everything was done out in the open, in full view of the audience.
With this in mind, it would not be hard to picture the first scene around a prop cauldron on the inner above. The apparitions could either enter at their given time from the tiring house and join Macbeth and the Witches on the inner above or they could stay upstage of the curtain, masking the inner below, and simply allow Macbeth to react to their voices. The mind’s eye would in a sense set the scene. While the audience focuses on the action above, stage hands dressed as Macduff’s staff could set a table with a few chairs and appropriate set dressings for the table, to signify an interior of a home. As act four, scene two begins, the cauldron and actors from scene one leave the inner above through the tiring house. The division of action in two places allows for the scenes to continue with little or no break.

In an example where two scenes must or are preferred to take place on the main deck, the exit doors and inner below could be used to keep the flow of action continual. Take for example, act one, scene six, which takes place outside of Macbeth’s castle and then moves to the interior of the castle in the succeeding scene. In the first scene, Lady Macbeth could be downstage left waiting with outerwear on, signifying outside, and Duncan and his party could enter from the upstage right door and the meeting of Duncan and Lady Macbeth could take place at center stage as they cross to extend greetings to one another. The transition from exterior to interior would be made by everyone exiting through the upstage left door and the curtain pulled to reveal Macbeth in the inner below. His soliloquy at the top of the scene would allow enough time for Lady Macbeth to change her costume to evening wear and then enter the stage from the door upstage in the inner below to continue the scene.
One of the other difficulties of staging *Macbeth* is the “dagger of the mind”.

Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation? (2.1.44-49)

If we believe that Macbeth is going mad, the dagger would not be in view of the audience. Macbeth is wracked with guilt from what he may do and the dagger is as he says, “a dagger of the mind”. Any trick to have it literally appear to the audience would be antithetical to the scene. Macbeth is going mad, the audience is not. A director could argue that the literal presence of the dagger intensifies Macbeth’s reaction; we are now asked to join in on the “dagger of the mind” and set our feet in Macbeth’s shoes; becoming him versus watching him. This distinction of audience as watcher or audience as character is one that would have to be consistent throughout the production. Is the audience seeing through Macbeth’s eyes a ghost of Banquo at the banquet, and therefore do they actually see the bloodied actor playing Banquo make an appearance in act three, scene four? Or are they watching Macbeth react to visions unseen by the them? Either way, consistency throughout is key.

In *The Tempest*, locations are far fewer in number than in *Macbeth*. Except for the first scene, all other action takes place on the island. The first scene however is huge: Prospero sends the tempest to his brother’s ship. When the play opens, the stage directions read, “A tempestuous noise of thunder and lighting heard”. Given that the play is being performed in the middle of the day, the noise of thunder would have to be key to setting the scene. Thunder sheets, pieces of thin metal suspended and then
snapped with a chord, may have been used to create the loud thunder sounds. The wind sound may have been created using a wind machine, a wooden drum spun with heavy canvas laying across the wooden exterior. The speed at which someone turns the drum increases the pitch and ferocity of the wind. With the wind howling and the thunder cracking, the Master and Boatswain would be seen on the inner above, as if they were at a helm’s position, reacting to the noise and assumed conditions. The helm could be reached through a set of steps flanking the sides of the inner above. The main deck would have small set dressings such as crates, sailing tackle in order for the deck to appear as the main deck of the ship. Alonso, Sebastian and the others could enter from an upstage door as if they were coming from living quarters on the ship or some ship interior. Alternatively, they could appear from the trap door in the stage as if they were coming from a storage hold below. The sound would be key. The characters would have to be directed to project, even yell, over the great tempest. Through the rest of the scene, characters would exit through upstage doors or the trap door to find refuge from the storm. Once the storm scene has been completed all other action takes place on the island.

In the scene following, Prospero could make an appearance from the inner above; looking out over the stage as if he were on a hill top or perch looking out over the sea. Miranda could appear below on the main stage floor chastising her father for what he has done. Prospero could then descend from his position to the main floor through use of the added staircases to put his daughter at ease. The position of the
inner above could continue to be a place where Prospero or Ariel could be a watchful eye or act as puppeteer.

Like Macbeth, The Tempest contains the supernatural. Prospero uses magic to create a cloak of invisibility. Even when the play is produced today, the use of a theatrical convention is used, not literal invisibility...at least not yet. A theatrical convention is an agreement between the audience and those performing or designing a production. For example, it is considered a given that if the lights go to black and when they come back on and a character remarks that there has been a change in time, we accept it. No one stands up and shouts, “Are you kidding me? It can’t be twenty years later, it’s only been ten seconds.” Blue lights on stage are an acceptable convention to creating night. A character can speak to a thousand audience members very clearly yet the character next to himself acts if he or she hadn’t heard a word. The physical cloak is the convention. We the audience agree that while someone wears the cloak, he is invisible. To simplify, we suspend our disbelief.

Whether necessity was the mother of invention or Shakespeare wanted to create a world where the audience actively participated by using their imagination is unknown. Either way, he made it work. Bill Bryson sums it up in his book Shakespeare: The World as Stage: “there was no way to distinguish day from night, fog from sunshine, battlefield from boudoir, other than through words. Oberon and Prospero have only to declare themselves invisible to become so.” He continues,

No one set scenes more brilliantly and economically than Shakespeare.

Banardo: Who’s there?
Franscisco: Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.
Banardo: Long live the King!
Fransico: Banardo?
Banardo: He.

In five terse lines, Shakespeare establishes that it is nighttime and cold, that the speakers are soldiers on guard, and that there is tension in the air. With just fifteen words he has the audience’s full, rapt attention. (Bryson 75-76)

It’s unfortunate that many modern day audiences would be less than enthused to see a show with so little spectacle. We’ve conditioned modern audiences to be detached from performances. Technology has allowed designers and directors, in less time than a short blackout, to literally go from one setting to the next; not through imagination but with hard tangible settings. Going even further, new technology such as LED walls can change a location at the blink of an eye. And while amazing to watch, spectacle has replaced story and audiences are more distant from engagement as imagination is replaced with literalism. But I digress. Don’t get me started.
Works Cited


