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Classical and Carnivalesque Use of Performance Space

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Abstract

This article is based on aspects of my recent research at the East 15 Acting School-University of Essex, UK, which focuses on the cartography of the performance space. This relates to my practical research into the actor's chorric spontaneity within classical harmonic principles, carnivalesque chorus "invasions" into a classical stage configuration and applying comic and carnivalesque structured improvisation within and interspersed with the classical text. My historical research focuses on the Renaissance production of masques and plays at Whitehall Palace, England, through the lens of the ancient Greek theatre configuration of the *skene*, *proskenion* and *orkhestra*. In my recent practice as research, I applied the principles and cartography of the classical Greek theatre to help visualise the King's Men's transfer of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* between three early modern theatres and to aid and articulate my direction of *Tempest Masque* between contemporary theatres. I have been applying the tripartite scenography of *skene*, *proskenion* and *orkhestra* to my direction in a variety of performance spaces: end-on, three sides, or in the round, and with varying combinations in one performance. The spatial manifestation of Weimann's concept of *locus* and *platea* is given emphasis through height levels in addition to the depth of the *skene*, *proskenion* and *orkhestra* and can be summarised as the gods' appearances and descents from a heavenly realm from the upper *skene*; the protagonists/antagonists on the raised *proskenion/skene*; and the chorus or audience on the lower rounded *orkhestra*.

My methodology has included training actors to be adaptable to different configurations, structured improvisation, audience interaction and forming a chorus. My practice explores how this affects the resonance of the voice, maximum visibility, physical presence, and chorric relationships. I query the classical orientation of the audience, and their playful disorientation through ludic, thematic, and narrative frameworks towards audience/actor integration and interaction.

Keywords: Masque, early modern theatre, Shakespeare, kōmos, locus-platea, the chorus, ancient Greek theatre.

Classical and Carnivalesque Use of Performance Space

The spatial symbolism and performer trajectories of the classical Greek and early modern stage utilised height, depth and width. The ancient Greek plays and the early modern masques and plays depicted the entrance (and sometimes the descent) of the gods: the Greek theatre with the use of the upper *skene* and roof (and sometimes a crane); the masques with double-layered backdrop and shutter systems with cloud machines and platforms; and the playhouses with descents from the upper stage and trap. The Greek plays had chthonic forces (from Greek *khthon*=earth) and the underworld; the masque could transform the whole stage from hell to a heavenly realm as in Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Queens* (1609), and the playhouses had trapdoors from where hell and the supernatural could ascend in some form, often comic devils. Stephen Scully corroborates the comparison of the spatial symbolism of the early modern Globe Theatre to the fifth-century Theatre of Dionysus in Athens, "The three-tier order suggests a spatial and visual hierarchy, linking-but also separating-our collective humanity in the chorus, the individuals who shape the welfare of the community on stage, and the Olympians who oversee all from their imperious remove" (Scully, 1996, p. 62).

The English Renaissance masques presented a symbolic journey as the masquers (maskers), and sometimes the deities, traversed from the *skene* (representing a celestial or faraway place) through the *proskenion* and onto the *orkhestra* stage where the audience was acknowledged and invited to the *orkhestra* to dance. The masque genre featured antimasques where this journey was literally or symbolically reversed, bringing an "outside" subversive energy into the space, from the *platea*¹ (Weimann, 1978) to the *locus*² (Weimann, 1978). I link this with the ancient Greek *parados*³ as the moving chorus singing an entrance or exit song and their entrance and exit points between (outside of) the theatre and the *orkhestra*. This also links to my direction of *The Tempest* through the lens of a masque, in which I envision the ancient Greek *kōmos* as a mobile carnivalesque chorus that is part of the festival atmosphere before, during, and after the play, invading the stage in between the acts and only accepted in the final act. A wedding *kōmos*, "visually suggesting the happy

¹ "[In Medieval Theatre]. An area before a raised stage, providing additional acting space or accommodation for the audience" (Dictionary, O. E. (2023b) 'Oxford English Dictionary', *platea*, *n.*: Oxford University Press. Also, Platea- Greek πλατεῖα (plateῖa, "street" or piazza or town square). Plateia-the audience, stalls in a theatre, the seats on the ground floor. Also, 'the pit'.

² "The place in which something is situated or occurs. In later use also: the effective or perceived location of something abstract" (Dictionary, O. E. (2023a) 'Oxford English Dictionary', *locus*, *n.*¹: Oxford University Press.

³ Giving the etymology for "a parade ground; a public square," "pomp, show display, ostentation," and "a muster or display of troops" (Dictionary, O. E. (2024) 'Oxford English Dictionary', *parado*, *n.*: Oxford University Press.

ending (komastic occasion) that the action will eventually produce" (Lape, 2006), invites a celebration of a promised marriage, thus fulfilling the ancient principle of comedy, applied to *The Tempest*, as a series of difficulties and near tragedies that are untangled and the resolve is signified with merriment and celebratory displays.

Figure 1

Floor plan of a temporary theatre in the hall at the third masque-like play, Florimène, by Inigo Jones (1635). British Library. Reproduced with permission.

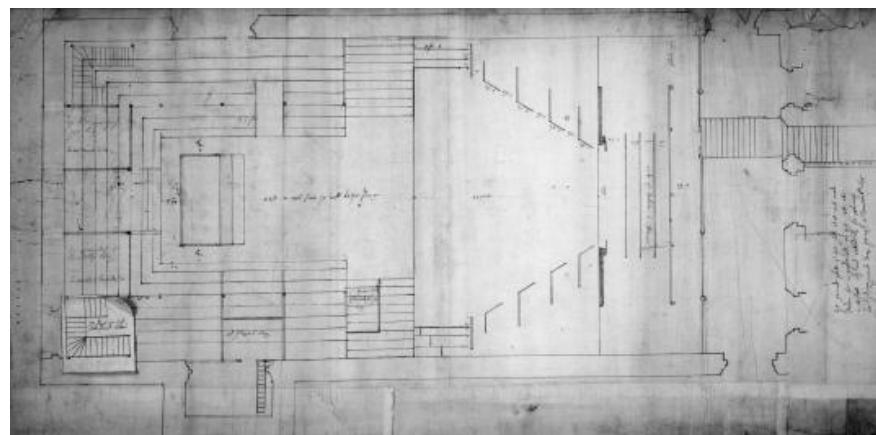
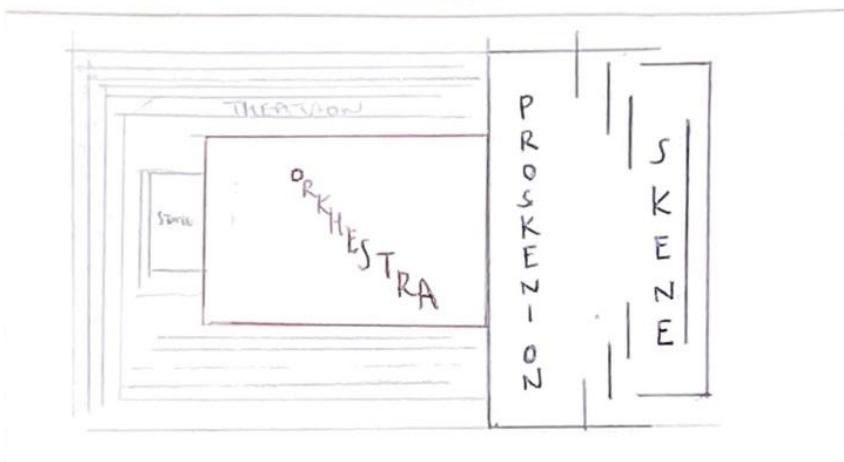


Figure 2

The skene, proskenion, and orchestra stages. Plan of the hall at the third Banqueting House, based on Florimène (1635). Drawing by Mark Turner, adapted from Jones' design above.



I find correspondence between the festive *kōmos* and the *revels*, the masque dances inspired by the exclusive carnival balls from the Italian states, into which groups of male maskers would gatecrash to dance with the ladies (aka *Romeo and Juliet*). The indoor carnival balls echoed the transition from outside to inside of the sixteenth-century English masques in which the moveable emblematic devices on floats or cars (such as the plough and the boat) (Anglo, 1968), traditionally used as outdoor, processional triumphs and

pageants, “in Stuart masques would metamorphose into the ‘set’” (Bishop, 2006, pp. 214,215). This was opposite to the sixteenth-century Italian *mascherata*, which “transferred into public space what had formerly been represented in the private sphere of the court” (Canguilhem, 2010, p. 470).

At Banqueting House, Whitehall, the masque performers (and possibly the theatre actors) utilised ‘the dancing space’ or *orkhestra* as there was no need to make more money by giving up stage space for the groundlings (Globe) or the higher-paying audience (Blackfriars). Both the masques and the plays echoed the ancient Greek comic chorus as interlocutors in their use of the *platea* as “a space produced by early modern actors at any time at which they acknowledged the actual event while performing in relation to a representational event” (Hopkins, 2013, p. 164). I have been encouraging the actors to “engage the audience, alternatively standing within the play, as a participant in the drama, and ‘outside’ the play as its commentator or presenter” (Mooney, 1990, p. 21). *The Tempest*, the most musical of Shakespeare’s plays, features a non-speaking chorus, the rabble, prompting me to explore the Greek chorus as singing, dancing, chanting and challenging the audience and main characters. Actor training has involved more specific directions/locations than end-on stage terminology (upstage, downstage, etc.), including coordinates based on a compass or clock, and the inner circle and outer circle, like Gurr’s definition “between centre stage and stage edge” (Gurr, 2017, p. 197).

Through actor interviews, Purcell clarifies the most powerful position at Shakespeare’s Globe as directly in front of the *frons scenae* and underneath the Heavens trap,

better understood not as one that necessarily grants its *characters*’ authority, but rather as the spot at which the performer can most easily command the whole space; a position on the perimeter, on the other hand, encourages actors to make appeals to specific sections of the audience, or even individual spectators, to the exclusion of others (Purcell, 2017, p. 112).

At Banqueting House, this actor’s “authority spot” mirrored in height and depth the “king’s seat” (the raised royal dais), the optimum audience position; both positions command an (almost) encompassing viewpoint to see and be seen. The centre of Shakespeare’s Globe is at the meeting point of the *proskenion* (thrust/platform stage) and *orkhestra* (‘the yard’) and between the “authority spot” and “king’s seat.” Here, the actor is at the centre of “this wooden O” and is within touching distance of the audience. This exact central spot connects to Ley’s practical research on the classical Greek staging of *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides* (Aeschylus) which established the *thymele*-base at the centre of the *orkhestra* as “the natural focus for spectators in any position in the *Theatron*” and “a focus of considerable theatrical power along a line drawn from the centre of the skene doors to

the thymele-base”⁴ (Ley and Ewans, 1985, p.78). A mirrored trajectory from the “king’s seat” establishes a meeting point in the centre of a classical theatre and the location of the altar in the Theatre of Dionysus.

The ancient Greek *agon* has formed a basis of much of my work, in which two actors (or one actor and a balancing chorus) rarely enter the centre of the stage during the challenge but rather play an ongoing “game” of balancing the stage. If we consider the acknowledgement of the king at a masque (or the acknowledgement of a priest or dignitary in the equivalent position in an ancient Greek theatre) in relation to the actor’s “authority spot” as two chorus leader positions, then the *agon* is a means towards a more fully realised shared space of the whole theatre and offers an opportunity to involve the audience narratively and ludically. I have named this location as the *Locus Communis*, explored spatially as the central position within the theatre, located between the “king’s seat” as the optimum audience location and the “authority spot” as the optimum actor location. This middle ground, like the *figurenposition* (Weimann, 1978) of the *locus-platea* conjunction, can also be applied to ludic and narrative strategies for audience participation.

If we consider the dimensions of length, width, and height, the actors can imagine themselves to be in the centre of a sphere, not just a circle and, therefore, effectively involve the audience situated at all dimensional levels. I argue that such preparation and consideration of space is essential for actors’ training for multi-space performance and the imbuing of sculptural qualities to the performer’s corporeal expression.

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⁴ Ley is referring to the altar (usually sacred to Dionysus) in the centre of the orchestra.

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