

# SCENOGRAPHY



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An Indian Perspective

SATYABRATA ROUT

NIYOGI  
BOOKS

Published by

**NIYOGI BOOKS**

Block D, Building No. 77,  
Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-I,  
New Delhi-110 020, INDIA  
Tel: 91-11-26816301, 26818960  
Email: [niyogibooks@gmail.com](mailto:niyogibooks@gmail.com)  
Website: [www.niyogibooksindia.com](http://www.niyogibooksindia.com)

Text and photography © Satyabrata Rout

Editor: Arkaprabha Biswas  
Design: Shashi Bhushan Prasad

ISBN:

Publication: 2021

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Printed at: Niyogi Offset Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, India

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# FOREWORD

## WRITING OF THE STAGE SPACE

Scenography—the art of writing of the stage space from ancient Greece—is the international term for describing the visual images in a stage space. This includes costumes, props and accessories, light and any scenic element needed to tell the visual story—the supporting player of the narrative—so that the eyes of the spectator see what they are *not* hearing with their ears. The art of scenography brings together the two spectatorial senses—vision and sound—so that the spectator may experience not only the narrative movement, but also the context in which it is being performed. Scenography tells the story behind the text, just as looking at a painting tells more than its title. It is a sublime and subtle art that takes a lifetime to acquire. Each piece is a new challenge and venture into an unknown territory. There is not one method or answer, but only universal principles of art to give support to the work, and crucially the development of a personal aesthetic that will ultimately inform all the choices made. Without this personal aesthetic, it is impossible to make decision and choices. The colour of a material for a costume, the height of a wall, the roughness of a texture—everything is the result of an informed decision that is led by personal choice. And thus, fine art and scenography are close partners.

To establish this personal aesthetic is the main point of study, and it is a lifelong learning activity. How to achieve it and where to begin? At first, it seems bewildering as there are so many possibilities.

Has it to do with reading plays?—Knowing history?—Having a Fine Art vocabulary?—Is it the technical competency?—Is it different in every country?

So many questions, but the answers are relatively simple, at least to start with. All drama is about people, their joys and sorrow, their situations, hopes and desires. Writers and creators select these universal patterns and present them in the stage space so that the spectator may recognise and see them anew. The scenographer must, first and foremost, be a compulsive observer of human nature to know how to transform that reality into the heightened experience on a theatre space. But, it's no good just looking. The scenographer, the visual artist of the theatre, must develop a facility for remembering, and nothing is better than keeping a little sketch book in a bag or a pocket with a small pencil ready to note down the shape or stance of a person; the fall of a piece of cloth, the texture of a wall and all the fascinating minutiae of daily life. And then, the scenographer has to develop good organisation to actualise them to a fine art, for a multitude of drawings are useless if they can't be quickly retrieved when needed for reference. These references can then serve as the start for making the essential scale figures that are always needed when the proposed idea becomes a three-dimensional model of the performing space.

The scale model is a way of taking the actual space home in its miniature form and playing with it to try and tell the story clearly, and to let the imagination wander. This 'play time' is very crucial, where ideas have to be rigorously tested against one's personal aesthetic. There is such a long journey from conception to production, with so many people and interventions, that the scenographer has to be very sure of the quality of the scenographic proposal and at the same time, remain flexible enough to let all the other collaborators in the team

take part in the creation. Only the combination of all these seemingly disparate elements will make a coherent visual statement. And it is very important to *feel* the performing space by walking through it, looking out at where the spectators will sit, study the sightlines and find where the *strong points* of the space are sited, for that will tell where furniture should be placed.

More and more scenographers from all over the world are being concerned about the unnecessary wastes of the props and about making more sustainable sets in these days when our planet is in danger. The days of constructing large pieces of scenery and throwing away those after the production because of the high expenses of storage are nearly gone and in many productions, the performer and their costumes become the main scenographic elements. Scenic pieces that add to or enhance the performance have to justify their occupation of the space and of course, can enchant and add to the spectators' experience. Finding the appropriate props and accessories is equally important. A production should tour more and more so that theatre and stories can reach people even if they do not have an access to a formal theatre building, and this flexibility in art and feasibility in production have opened a new vista of innovation and imagination for a scenographer. Scenography, therefore, unites the performer and the stage space into a three-dimensional sculptural form. No longer do performers simply perform in front of a painted two-dimensional background that they cannot see, unaware of the environment in which they will perform. Scenography has become the composite description of this visual theatre activity and distinguishes itself from the ever-growing number of theatre consultants, who design interiors of theatres often without consulting the very people, who have to work in them. Theatre design, to many people, means buildings rather than the space in which stories of life and death are imagined and retold for generations after generations.

## LOOKING INTO THE EAST

For many years, Western theatre practitioners have travelled to the East to observe and learn the art of storytelling—how to retell, with the simplest and most dramatic means, the epic tales that resonate through so many cultures. For many decades, the influence of Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Greek theatre techniques has been absorbed into the modern-day Western theatre vocabulary.

Yukio Ninagawa in his seminal production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* showed us that Titania's bower could be evoked just with a beautiful floral silk kimono. Ariane Mnouchkine explored Kathakali dance and costume to tell the Greek myth *Les Atrides* by creating a perfect synchronicity of word and vision. Peter Brook's retelling of the *Mahabharata*, in association with the French scenographer Chloé Obolensky, was seen all over the world and her reinvented devices have become part of our visual theatre language.

In the mid-1970s, I made my first visit to India as a young designer for a production of George Bernard Shaw's *Candida* with a company comprising of actors from the National Theatre of Great Britain, directed by a Shakespearean scholar, John Russell Brown. I was sent seven weeks in advance with my ½" – 1'0" accurate three-dimensional scale model to the National School of Drama in New Delhi, where the setting—a Victorian clergyman's house backing on to a park in the north-east suburbs of London—was to be built. The costs were to be paid by the company in England. Shaw specifies very precisely exactly how the house should look, its fireplace, the stained-glass front door, the bookcases—every little detail requiring a naturalism that now we would think only appropriate for a film location. *Candida*, originally written in 1894, is a dialectic between the clergyman, a Christian socialist and a visiting poet, both of whom love Candida in very different ways. I had constructed a three-dimensional backcloth of houses and trees in an effort to make an integrated stage picture. My arrival in

the drama school in Delhi at that time was a huge shock. There were no workshops at all to construct this. There was a large yard in the open air, and one elderly man with a saw. My visit was sponsored by the British Council, who wonderfully provided me with a translator who accompanied me everywhere. But nothing could hide my dismay and inexperience. There was a great deal of staring and looking at the model, much admiration and much shaking of heads. As all this was going on, out of my control, I was looking at people passing, noticing their wonderful textiles and embroideries. In the building I saw several beautiful wall hangings and an idea came into my head; 'Why be in India trying to do what we do in London? Why not try and capitalise on the strengths of the local artists and artisans?' I hesitantly asked my British Council colleague if it might be at all possible to interpret the three-dimensional, built backcloth of North-east London as a huge embroidered textile, possibly a series of silk hangings that I had seen on the walls. Then I proposed that finding the Victorian furniture and just creating the simplest structure of the clergyman's house would suffice and do justice to the text, as the proposed embroidered backcloth would provide the description of the rest of the things.

Everyone smiled. Heads stopped shaking and within a very short time I was in a British Council car going up a steep hillside somewhere outside Delhi to a women's cooperative, where they were sewing to commission. Though the hand-sewing machines operated on the floor of a huge rooftop with little dogs running around, I saw this was wonderful work. There I met an Indian textile designer who immediately offered her services as the coordinator of the project. And so with huge excitement the work began. White silk was obtained for the base of the seven pieces that would be eventually joined together, and sample stitches, autumn colours of embroidery silks were found and I showed them how to scale up from my model. They were so skilled and inventive, it was a lesson in itself. I went up several times to see work in progress, but nothing prepared me for the

final moment when it was brought to the theatre and hung from the flies to stretch out. It was just beautiful and still remains in my memory as a great lesson I learned: Be flexible.

There are many ways to achieve and interpret the work, and it is so important to respect the interpretive artists by giving them a carefully thought out and beautiful template to work from. Look to see what the unique qualities a workshop can offer and how a real collaboration can take place, for however brilliant the concept or idea is, if it is not translated with love and care onto the stage, all will be lost. I must admit, it was slightly unnerving to see my linoleum floor covering being dragged along the road to the National School of Drama by a camel, but that was all part of an unforgettable experience and a big learning curve. I returned to London while *Candida* was performed in Delhi and then went on tour and came out again to meet it in Bombay for the end of the tour. It had done well over the months—a few things lost, a few things added, but nothing untoward. A few days later, on the way to the airport, in the long slow queue on the single road, instructed by my British Council colleague, the driver suddenly diverted and we entered a small shantytown. There was the set for *Candida* with a blue tarpaulin roof stretched across. The fireplace, the clergyman's bookcases, the front door with the stained-glass windows, the linoleum floor and a smiling family of four. Here I learned the greatest lesson of all, years before such things were spoken about in the West—nothing needs to be wasted and theatres are not exempt. Later, I received a photograph of the silk-embroidered hangings depicting Victoria Park and the houses in Hackney of North London, hanging in the atrium of the British Council in Delhi.

## LET ART BE YOUR AMBASSADOR

It is an honour to introduce readers to this book. Professor Satyabrata Rout draws together all the diverse threads of scenographic philosophy with

practical explanations of useful techniques and systems. There are clear diagrams and illustrations designed to enhance the experience of creating art that speaks to so many people and enhances their theatrical experience. We live in an age where our art and culture travel with us beyond many oceans and skies and influence our global colleagues.

The historical backgrounds and explanations of different forms of theatre and their magical effects provide an important reference point for all readers. In fact, this is almost 'several books in one'! And one of the astonishing revelations, which Peter Brook observed in his many Indian travels, is the complicity of the spectators who know what the tricks are and at the same time, enjoy the ritual of being tricked into believing the reality of what they know is fake. The Mobile Theatres of Assam set a good example to Brook's observation. Scenographers are like the greedy magpie birds that pick things up that attract them and store them and recycle them for future use. There are many instances of Indian artists, both literary and visual, bringing their own sensibility and aesthetics to plays by Brecht, Federico Garcia Lorca, Nikolai Gogol and of course, Shakespeare, and making them seem as though they truly belonged in India. It is an important part of the scenographer's work to be well read and to know the international dramatic repertoire, as discussions with directors on a collaborative project are often made up of references and quotations.

In this age, scenographers, armed with design skills and knowledge, are often taking the lead in creating productions, especially in site-specific work, or collaborating with colleagues who practise physical or other visual skills. Barriers and demarcations are fast dissolving, but with this come the challenge and responsibility for each theatre discipline to thoroughly understand the process of the other. For the visual artist, the medium is a drawing, painting and scale model, the use of colour and texture, scale and proportion. Suggestions of how to do this are well explained in this book, but of course each artist has to go on their own journey and find their

own personal signature. Practice and fluency are vital. There is a famous saying: 'A drawing a day keeps the devil away!' Finding the right medium to express the quality of the drama is another challenge, as is considering the kind of surface to work on. Indian handmade papers in different thicknesses offer many possibilities to work with inks and acrylics, and create immediate textures that can give a simple drawing a very particular atmosphere. However, one thing that I am sure about is that art speaks louder than words, even to the extent that many people over the centuries have been afraid of the power of art. When presenting a scenographic proposal, nothing is as powerful as good visual images that inspire the team and make people want to do the work.

Let art be your ambassador! As this book shows, art knows no boundaries, barriers or borders and needs no passports. It is a universal currency with different values. An Indian perspective may be the context of this book, but its rich history is a gift to the world that is hungry for all the ideas and inspirations.

Pamela Howard OBE  
London, United Kingdom

*(Prof. Pamela Howard is one of the few important scenographers who have revitalised the concept of scenography and visual design in the perspective of the world theatre. As an internationally acclaimed theatre maker, Howard has penned the most discussed book on scenography; What is Scenography? She is Professor Emeritus at the University of the Arts, London and a frequent visitor the famous Carnegie Mellon University at Pittsburgh, USA, Department of Drama. She has been awarded OBE for her service to theatre in 2008 and is the mastermind behind the SCENOFEST; World Scenography Festival in London.)*

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

With hardly any documentation available on scenography with an Indian orientation, Indian theatre has been craving for a practical treatise in this regard for quite a long time. Apart from a few interviews or memoirs of productions that pop up in the columns of a newspaper supplement or the pages of a magazine, nothing substantial has yet been brought out. Scenography, as perceived by the Western world, has largely redefined theatre by bridging the void between designers and directors. But it is a sad truth that such an ideology, which had a profound influence upon its immediate world, has not yet been re-modelled and chiselled to suit the Indian scenario. Despite having a considerable number of creative theatre makers and scenographers with international acclaim, Indian theatre lacks a proper documentation of the works of these masters; the reason lies in our artistic temperament. Even after possessing all the resources, we have failed miserably to theorise our practices till date. Among the many things that this book pioneers, the most prominent one is the analytical codification of the nature of scenography that the book offers by theorising the masterpieces of Indian theatre.

During the early 1980s, in the National School of Drama, the very term 'scenography' was missing from the academic scene altogether. Hence the students were left with nothing other than scenic design to perch on. There exists a big gulf between these two terms—while the former deals with the entire space and its visual vocabulary, inclusive of the actors and the audience, the latter emphasises on the spatial arrangement of the play and its technology. However, the similarities between the two terms can