



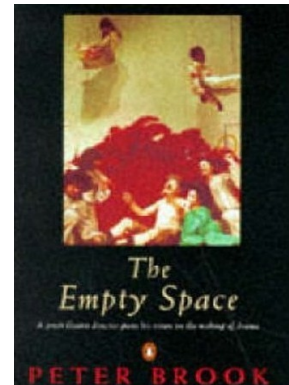
## WORKSHEET FOUR: SPECTACLE

### Exercise 1:

Choose two of your characters from your gallery (worksheet 3), and decide on a situation which brings them into conflict. Now imagine this situation in different settings. How might your chosen setting heighten a sense of tension? Write the scene.

Aristotle saw spectacle (*opsis – the visual*) as the least important of his six dramatic elements. It was, he said, the 'least artistic, and least connected with the art of poetry'. It connected too directly with the audience's emotions, and could be dangerously sensationalist. With approval, Aristotle notes that Sophocles avoided showing Oedipus blinding himself on stage.

Spectacle doesn't have to be big or grandiose. An empty space, pregnant with possibilities for the imagination to roam in, can also do the job. Says Peter Brook:



*'A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.'*<sup>1</sup>

Still, spectacle is a crucial part of the theatrical illusion. Along with other production elements such as sound, props and costume, it helps create the 'witnessed present'<sup>2</sup> that is the play, and raises important questions about what's literal and what's metaphorical in theatre.

### **Stage directions:**

Michael Wright says theatre is '*a place that contains possibilities, not realities. It's a space for imagining*'. It's not like TV drama or film, which are reproductions relayed from the past. The audience participates in the performance to create the play in the present. Ideally, they transform what they experience into an *emotional* reality in their heads.

David Mamet suggests theatre makers are 'too much in thrall to the idea of realism', which he describes as 'armour' to be discarded. A chair, for example, is not *per se* truthful or

1 Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (1968)

2 Michael Wright, *Playwriting in Process* (1997)

### Exercise 2:

Choose three characters and an object that connects them. Make it an on-stage object that they are able to handle. Write the scene. Now choose an object which is not on stage – it may be off-stage, very large, or imagined. Write the scene, and create the object as vividly as possible.

untruthful. But by being present on stage, it says something *about the play*. So we must ask:

*'What does the chair mean in the play? Does it symbolise power? Then have that chair. Abasement? Possession, and so on. [...] Each facet of every production must be weighed and understood solely on the basis of its service or lack of service to the meaning, the action of the play.'*<sup>3</sup>

He's talking here to directors, but what does it mean for playwrights? We don't usually engage with set design, sound or lighting. We tend nowadays to avoid novel-style description, and allow the director and production team full creative freedom.

That said, well-placed sound and lighting cues can be important in a playscript. A music cue at given moments can help to underline a mood, or act as a leitmotiv. It can draw attention to connections between moments in the play, acting as a structuring device in much the same way as a recurring image in a novel. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* uses sound and lighting cues in this way. This kind of imagery also works with costumes and props (eg Linda's stockings).

### **Reality and representation:**

Theatrical reality works on different levels – think of onion skins – with constant tension between them. As the audience, we're constantly juggling the inner world of the story with its representation on stage. We may also be noticing its external skin: the world of the auditorium. To complicate things further, there might even be a play within the play, or we might be seeing the whole play from within one character's perspective (Anthony Neilson's *Realism* is an example).

For a writer, it's useful to be aware of these reality shifts as a technical consideration. Vivid spectacle can draw attention to the workings of theatre and distract from the inner life of the play. If you choose to have someone killed by a bomb on stage, this may involve pyrotechnics, and the problem of how to dispose of the body. These can preoccupy the

### **Comparing Genres: Theatricality**

*'What is theatricality? It is theatre-minus-text: a density of signs and sensations built up on stage starting from the written argument.'*

Roland Barthes

*'Theatre is poetry that rises from the page and becomes human. And in so doing, it cries out, weeps and despairs. The theatre requires that the characters appearing on stage wear a cloak of poetry and at the same time, allows us to see their flesh and blood.'*

Federico Garcia Lorca

*'Theatricality relates to real life in the same way that the metaphor relates to literal language.'*

Ragnhild Tronstad

3 David Mamet, *Writing in Restaurants* (1986)

### Exercise 3:

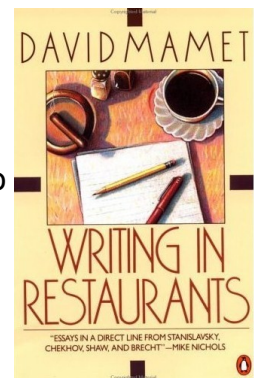
Choose three characters and decide whether they are very large or very small – you're changing the scale of the world that they're in. Decide what has just happened in the moment before the scene. Now write the scene.

audience more than the actual drama - not least because audiences seem to enjoy stagecraft: it feels like privileged knowledge. Other on-stage distractions where reality and representation conflict include nudity, running taps and cooking food!

Extreme interaction **between characters** can be extraordinarily powerful. There's greater emotional congruence between the story event and its representation, as we tend to project ourselves onto the characters, and trigger our own fears and memories. This is important if we're seeking the audience's empathy rather than analysis (see *worksheet 2*). Once again, it's important to note that these are stylistic and structural choices rather than good or bad practice.

### Settings and spaces:

Settings can be neutral, or come laden with a particular mood or expectation. A funeral parlour, for example, has a very different feel from a beach or a ballroom. One powerful way to create dramatic tension is to set up a conflict between the setting and the mood of the scene – the 'library fight' beloved of comedy, for example, or a love scene in a graveyard. Rituals with a particular expectation, such as parties or weddings, can also be interrupted in this way to create interest and tension (think of Macbeth's banquet).



Jeffrey Sweet points out that '*a play is not equally good in all spaces. In fact, a play is not the same play in all spaces.*'<sup>4</sup> The pressure cooker intimacy of a small studio has quite a different impact from formal distance of a proscenium arch theatre. Voices and gestures have a different effect, and the audience engages differently with the play. For a writer, it's useful to imagine your play taking place in a space that support its themes and mood. It might not be the space you end up with, but will help settle your sense of the play's world.

Settings can also be harnessed to create dramatic irony – when the audience knows something a character doesn't. A bomb that goes off half-way through a scene is shocking but not suspenseful, unless we see it being planted. Sometimes a set itself will incorporate literal and metaphorical tension – hanging mirror shards at head height (the National Theatre of Scotland production of Friel's *Molly Sweeney*), or sloping floors (NTS and Neilson's *Realism*).

### Further work on spectacle:

Draw a simple setting: a space with a tree or a stepladder, for instance. Think of as many scenes as possible that could take place there (thinking literally and metaphorically).

## COMING UP NEXT: DIALOGUE

4 Jeffrey Sweet, *The Dramatist's Toolkit* (1993)