

HOW NEW IS NEW MEDIA? THE HISTORY OF MULTI-MEDIA USAGE IN THEATRICAL PRODUCTIONS

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Abstract

This article takes as its starting point the current fascination with 'new media' and 'new form' being employed in theatre and questions just how new is new media? As a theatrical form, how recent is the inclusion of multi-media into live stage productions? Three major influential artists in the use of multi-media in theatre are investigated. These include the political theatre work of director, Erwin Piscator, the concurrent theatre of Russian director, Vsevolod Meyerhold and the work of Czechoslovakian set designer, Joseph Svoboda. The findings suggest that these artists, together with contemporary artists of today, are responding to the technological advancements of the day and exploring them within the bounds of their theatrical work. It is proposed that the employment of technology is not a means in itself but a further resource available to an artist in their desire to communicate to an audience.



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Introduction

Recently I commenced a study to investigate the role of a director in the creation of an original multi-media theatre production. In late 1999 I began the task of researching, tracking the creative development process of Arena Theatre as they moved towards the staging of *Eat Your Young* for the 2000 Adelaide Arts Festival. Throughout the study it became evident that, as well as investigating the process of the director, Rosemary Myers, it was equally as important that I examine the theatrical form of her work which features an ever increasing reliance and focus on technology.

Since taking on her position of Artistic Director at Arena Theatre in 1994, Myers has gradually developed an interest in multi-media and new technologies. Each production she has staged with the company has become technically and theatrically more adventurous. But with all this discussion of 'new media' and 'new form', I was forced to ask the question: just how new is new media? As a theatrical form, how recent is the inclusion of multi-media into live stage productions? Is this a modern phenomenon encouraged by the ever-increasing developments of more affordable technology? My search to answer these questions would take me back 75 years.

Multi-media Beginnings

Several terms are currently used for the application of technology in performance; these include multi-media, poly-media, hybrid art, multi-arts, mixed-media, screen-media, new media and work with new technology (Gough, 1999:23). In this article I will use the single term multi-media. This form of performance incorporates a range of media including stereo-surround soundscapes, choreography of bodies through space, live action and spoken text, the use of computer technology and most significantly the projection of images both still and moving in the performance space. Meaning, in this context, is communicated through the interplay of 'screen media, sound, live bodies, spoken text, space and time' (ibid.:23).

Multi-media usage in theatre, I quickly discovered, is not particularly new. The term has undergone many transformations and is defined in various ways. Ever since the technological inventions and advancements of film projection and slide images, theatre makers have been utilising these kinetic elements in their stage designs. Willett asserts that, well before World War I, film had been incorporated 'in opera houses for illusionistic purposes' (Willett, 1978:113). Innes claims experimentation and developments in theatrical convention during the first half of the twentieth century represented a new awareness of the physical resources of the stage and its relationship with the audience (Innes, 1972). Multi-media usage with a focus on projected image and text was a significant part of this development. Unfortunately research into this area is scarce. According to Braun it is difficult to reconstruct, document and analyse 'so ephemeral a phenomenon as a theatrical performance' (Braun, 1979:13).

My search has uncovered three major influences in the use of multi-media in theatre. These include the political theatre work of director Erwin Piscator, the concurrent theatre of Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold and the influential work of Czechoslovakian set designer Joseph Svoboda, who worked into his eighties as Art Director at Laterna Magika in Prague (Laterna Magika, 2002).

The Political Theatre of Erwin Piscator

Burian claims that the 'first truly significant adoption of film by theatre' can be seen in the work of German political theatre director Erwin Piscator (Burian, 1971:77). Although other directors had experimented with its usage, Willett argues that no other director up until this point had 'used film so extensively or thought about it so systematically' (Willett, 1978:113). Innes asserts that Piscator 'introduced mass-media to the stage in order to make the theatre capable of handling twentieth century issues' (Innes, 1972:2). For Rorrison, his aim was to 'be modern' and this involved competing with 'the new media, film, radio and the press', which had the ability to report events as soon as they occurred (Rorrison, 1987:11).

In 1920, Piscator started working with the Proletarian Theatre, travelling with minimal props and lights in a cart around Berlin. The work established a reputation for Piscator and featured sketches 'advocating the class struggle and support for Soviet Russia' (ibid.:10). Throughout his career his intention was always to be contemporary. The subject matter of the performances were 'present incidents or recent history . . . [with] immediate relevance and practical use . . . to inform the audience and assert a direct influence on their actions' (Innes, 1972:51). In 1924, Piscator began working at the Volksbühne, one of Berlin's leading theatres. Here he had access to a modern theatre where he began to 'experiment with projections as a means of locating plays in their historical and social context and manipulating the audience's response' (Rorrison, 1987:10).

[Piscator employed] front projection, back projection and simultaneous or overlapping projection from more than one source. In his view, slide projections were the 'literary element' . . . while film could be three kinds: instructional, dramatic or commentary-cum-chorus. Instructional film was documentary, historical; it 'extends the subject matter in terms of time and space'. Dramatic film furthered the story and saved dialogue; commentary film pointed things out to the audience and emphasised the moral. (Willet, 1978:113)

Innes claims that Piscator's use of film in theatre altered the entire nature of the theatrical event. Film 'allowed an apparent liberation from the temporal and spatial limitations of the stage and made it possible to shift viewpoints, so that the action could be extended to global scope and gained the 'epic' ability to comment on itself (Innes, 1972:4). Piscator himself states that his development of work, labelled 'epic theatre' dealt with the 'extension of the action and the clarification of the background to the action . . . a continuation of the play beyond a dramatic framework' (Piscator, 1980:75). Film was intrinsic to this overall vision.

The production *In Spite of Everything* provides a fascinating example of how Piscator's use of film and contemporary data interconnected and commented on each other. Piscator describes the interrelated effect where film, documentary footage from the archives of the Reich was combined with live action for the first time.

. . . we used authentic shots of the war, of the demobilisation, of a parade of all the crowned heads of Europe . . . These shots brutally demonstrated the horror of war: flame thrower attacks, piles of mutilated bodies, burning cities . . . live scene and film clip . . . interacted and built up each other's power and at intervals the action attained a *furioso* that I have seldom experienced in theatre. For example, when the Social Democratic vote on War Loans [live] was followed by film showing the first dead, it not only made the political nature of the procedure clear, but also produced a shattering human effect, became art, in fact. (Piscator, 1980:92-97)

Innes claims that the use of film in stage productions was 'Piscator's decisive innovation' (Innes, 1972:107). Ultimately Piscator was not interested in claiming priority; film was merely a means to an end which could easily be replaced tomorrow by further technological advancements. In his work film sequences, both existing documentary footage and sequences specifically shot for a production, 'expanded the action of the play, documented it, commented on it and even regulated the tempo' (ibid.). The actors

on stage appeared static and artificial in contrast to the expanded definition and constant movement of the filmed silent images. A new acting style, described by Piscator as 'hard, straightforward and unsentimental', eventuated as a direct result of the dominance of the screen (Piscator, cited by Innes, 1972:111). Innes believes Piscator's use of film 'enforced a redefinition of the actor's function . . . setting new standards of precision, actuality and impersonality for sound effects, movements, scenery and particularly speech'. Innes asserts that Piscator's productions were an attempt to find a means of successfully integrating the two forms of stage and screen.



Fig. 1: *In Spite of Everything*, Grosses Schauspielhaus, 1925. (Piscator, 1987)

A montage of stills used in the production: German officers, the Flanders trenches, workers demonstrating 'in front of the Brandenburg Gate in 1918 and, at the bottom, a partial rear view of Liebknecht's corpse' (a political leader of the far left who was murdered). (Rorrison, 1987:16)

The montage is mounted over an image of the theatre.

In effect, plays were turned into film scripts, sketches of action to be filled out with optical details by the director, where primary emphasis is on the efficient transmission of information or material, not on the aesthetic form. '[For Piscator,] the theatre had become uninteresting. The shabbiest film contained more topical interest, more of the exciting realities of our day than the stage' (ibid.:4).



Fig. 2: *Tidal Wave*, Sturmflut 1926 (Piscator, 1987).

A total of four projectors were positioned onto the cyclorama with the effect that the projections were much more complex than previously. The use of film, some specially shot, received mixed critical responses (Rorrison, 1987).

The Theatre of Vsevolod Meyerhold

Rorrison acknowledges that Russian director Meyerhold was also using film and multiple projection screens in his work with the Soviet October Theatre as early as 1924 (Rorrison, 1987). Piscator denied any knowledge of this: 'very little news about [Soviet] performances . . . came through to us' (1987). The possibilities of film were also making an impact on the stage presentations of Meyerhold, a director Rudnitsky (1981) claims to be in the forefront of *avant garde* theatre. According to Kiebuszinska (1988), Meyerhold not only experimented with the use of screens for the projection of slide images and text during the 1920s but was particularly concerned with how the form of film could be reflected in the form and content of theatre. This was significant in Meyerhold's use of 'the speeding up of action and in the cutting of acts into scenes 'montaged' together for effect' (ibid.:55).

It is not possible here to detail the impact and influence of Meyerhold's theatrical work. It is however important to focus on Meyerhold's concurrent experimentations with multi-media, specifically his use of slides. In 1923, Meyerhold was the first theatre director to be awarded the title of 'People's Artist of the Republic', an honour awarded at the completion of twenty-five years service in the theatre with twenty years spent as a director (Braun, 1979). Significantly in that year, in his production of *Earth Rampant*, Meyerhold began using screens for projections. Like Piscator the relevance of the play's action to familiar and recent historical events was highlighted by 'familiar civil war slogans projected on a screen above the stage during the performance' (ibid.:180). Braun suggests that 'these titles also performed a formal function, replacing the long-discarded front curtain as a means of further dividing the play up and announcing the theme of each episode' (Braun, 1969:188). This is a further example of how film influenced the presentational form of Meyerhold's theatre.



Fig. 3: *Their day*, Prague 1959.

This production, designed by Josef Svoboda, incorporated techniques from *Laterna Magika*.

Nine mobile screens were used that could disappear; each had at least two projectors.

'Svoboda's concern was the creation of new stage space, not the establishment of a locale'.

(Svoboda, 1973)

Leach (1989) claims that Popova's design of projected titles for *Earth Rampant* were amongst the most interesting and impressive that Meyerhold employed. The play dealt with an abortive attempt at mutiny by soldiers embattled in an imperialist war. The designs and lettering of the text projections include such statements as: 'Knock off the crowns of the last tsars' and . . . 'Education is the sword of revolution' . . . 'Long live the union of workers and peasants' (ibid.:108). The overall design effect and construction was entitled 'machine-photo-poster' (Rudnitsky, 1981:314}. Leach outlines how the projected slides contribute to the meaning of the performance.



Fig. 4: *The Last Ones*, Prague 1966.

Considered the most successful theatre application of 'integrated stage and filmic action. Characters from the play and related incidents were filmed and then projected in juxtaposition to on-stage action. The projection surface was the crumpled rear wall of the set.'

(Svoboda, 1973)

The modernistic lettering, in yellow and black or red and black, and the frequent changing of slogan, together with interspersed sequences of film on another screen (there were thirty-two of these altogether) add a dialectical zest to the production. The contradiction between screen action and live action, spoken words and words read . . . make for a peculiarly dynamic excitement. (1989:108)

In 1924 Meyerhold presented *Give us Europe!* (also known as *D.E.*). In this production Meyerhold employed the use of three projection screens hung over the performance area. Reminiscent of the silent film convention of the display of captions, *D.E.* witnessed a 'dialectical interplay relevant to the action' (Leach, 1989:106). A large central screen provided scene information such as a title, location and specific character comments. The two side smaller screens displayed political appeals, propaganda slogans and 'quotations from the written works and speeches of Lenin, Trotsky and Zinoviev' (Braun, 1979:189). Meyerhold's aim, again similar to that of Piscator, 'was to point out the political significance of the events on stage and to relate them to as wide a context as possible' (ibid.). Of prime concern for both directors in their use of multi-media was the work's relationship to the immediate sociopolitical context from which they were being viewed.

The Scenographic Work of Josef Svoboda

Scenographic designer for over seven hundred theatrical productions around the world, Svoboda has been regarded as one of the 'most prolific, vital and sought-after designer(s)' of Europe (Burian, 1971:xix). Svoboda's work has focused on the integration between technology and art in scenic production techniques, similar in essence to the philosophies and ideas of the 1920s' Bauhaus Theatre. Together with his design team, Svoboda forged new directions in the application of complex technical and mechanical devices that incorporated 'sophisticated lighting and projection techniques' on a large scale (ibid.). Burian praises Svoboda for his creation of a complex 'new, hybrid form incorporating actor and screened image' (ibid.:xx).

Svoboda's experiments with slide projection began in 1942, some twenty years after the ground-breaking work of Piscator and Meyerhold and, by 1943, he had begun to look at the combination of film projected image and live action (cited in Burian, 1977:18). Svoboda's philosophy of scenography is based on the premise that 'theatre is a synthetic, componential phenomenon that ideally needs balancing' (cited in Burian, 1977:25). He believed in the constant advancement of the technology of theatre. Of particular concern for Svoboda was theatre aligning itself to the advancements of technology; 'Stage technology has always dragged behind the general technical advancements of the time . . . we're still at the luna park and merry-go-round stage as far as I'm concerned' (cited in Burian, 1977:83).

Svoboda subsequently developed the *Laterna Magika*, a technical device capable of dealing with multiple projection images of slide and film. Mobile screens were employed with the live action of actors. He even incorporated a device that could redirect a projection beam to any place on the stage. The technique also involved the use of footage shot specifically for the production at hand, rather than the use of stock prints, and eventually incorporated live video action shot in an adjoining studio.

Svoboda describes the unique interplay between the forms:

The play of the actors cannot exist without the film, and vice versa — they become one thing. One is not the background for the other; instead you have a simultaneity, a synthesis and fusion of actors and projection. Moreover, the same actors appear on screen and stage and interact with each other. The film has a dramatic function.

Laterna Magika was praised at the time by theatre director, Jan Grossman, for its multifunctional ability to absorb and artistically express 'the density and dynamics, the multiplicity and contrariety of the world in which we live' (cited in Burian, 1971:85). Svoboda remains convinced by the power and possibilities of projection in theatre; he believes that, when combined with the use of lighting, projection is ultimately the future of scenery, far surpassing the possibilities of paint (ibid.:3).

So just how new is new media?

As my search has uncovered, the answer to this question is over 75 years 'new' — which, in the centuries long overall history of theatre, could be considered 'new'. The pioneering work of Piscator, Meyerhold and Svoboda has had far reaching effects on the development of multi-media usage in theatrical productions across the globe. The development is non-sequential, as artists such as Piscator claim no knowledge of the simultaneous experimentations of Meyerhold. This is in direct contrast to the work of director Bertolt Brecht who openly acknowledges the influence of Piscator and Meyerhold, particularly in his use of projected text (Rorrison, 1987).

These artists laid the ground work that has since become part of a modern tradition of theatre. Like contemporary artists of today such as Rosemary Myers, they are responding to the technological advancements of the day and exploring them within the bounds of their theatrical work. The employment of technology is not a means in itself but a further resource available to an artist in their desire to communicate a story, message or theme. The use of multi-media has affected the form of the work and the way the actors are presented on stage. This is seen in the development of a particular acting style in Piscator's work that directly relates to the screen and live action interplay. In its early development, multi-media was utilised to comment on the action of the play and place it in a wider global context. It provided an opportunity for political commentary and global perspective and became an intrinsic design feature with its own dramatic function. For artists such as Svoboda and Piscator, multi-media became a hallmark of their work and the basis of their efforts to make the work relevant, contemporary and engaging for their audiences. For contemporary artists, the focus of their work is generally not on 'newness' *per se* but on the development and progression of a form. Their contributions today will set the parameters for future artists.

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